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The Ventriloquial Configuring of Communication: International Communication Association Presidential Addresses as Legitimizing Rituals

NICOLAS BENCHERKI
Université TELUQ, Canada
Audencia Business School, France

DOMINIQUE TRUDEL
Audencia Business School, France

Adopting a discursive perspective rooted in the Communicative Constitution of Organizations (CCO) tradition, we analyze 35 presidential addresses delivered at the International Communication Association (ICA) to show how they contribute to legitimizing the communication discipline. Drawing on Cooren's ventriloquial framework, we argue that these addresses give voice to a range of figures, from specific events and the field's "founding fathers" to a polysemous "we." These addresses assemble figures into four performative configurations that suggest a course of action for strengthening disciplinary legitimacy: cooperation, subdisciplinarity, relevance, and reflexive theorizing. Conceptualizing disciplinary legitimation as resulting from such (re)configuration provides discursive granularity to theories of legitimation. It also advances CCO scholarship by showing that ventriloquism is not only about adding figures but also about creating qualitatively different configurations and by linking microtextual analysis to broader temporal trajectories.

Keywords: Communicative Constitution of Organizations (CCO), configuration, discourse, figures, ICA presidential addresses, ritual, ventriloquism

As academia is increasingly accused of producing irrelevant or ideology-laden knowledge, scholars contend that disciplines uphold legitimacy through professional training, peer review, and collegial governance that enforces normative criteria (Butler, 2009). However, such viewpoints focus largely on what academic legitimacy is made of rather than on how it is established, transformed, and maintained over time. This question is particularly relevant in communication, a globalized discipline established at the frontiers of others, which is so fragmented that it has been deemed a "post-discipline" (Waisbord, 2019).

Nicolas Bencherki: nicolas.bencherki@teluq.ca
Dominique Trudel: dtrudel@audencia.com
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A burgeoning body of research suggests that academic disciplines are legitimized through communication and that legitimacy is the product of discursive processes (e.g., Vaara et al., 2024). Discourse performatively establishes a discipline's legitimacy by constituting its objects, delineating its boundaries, and circumscribing what can be said about them (Becher & Trowler, 2001). It is the texts we write, the PowerPoint slides we display, and the stories we repeat or create that, in turn, constrain who "we" are, what we do next, and how others behave with respect to us.

If legitimacy depends on discourse, then the discipline of communication is particularly well-positioned to meditate on its own discursive legitimation and to reflexively apply its own analytical apparatus. As Wahl-Jorgensen (2000) observes, in the case of communication, legitimacy results from the "ritual" repetition of received histories, punctuated with occasional "rebellious" reexaminations (p. 91). Discursive legitimation therefore, consists in a to-and-fro between a discipline's attachment to key people, events, institutions, concepts, and stories and a constant rearrangement of those elements in light of changing circumstances.

To study the discursive process of disciplinary legitimation, this article considers one of communication's key disciplinary rituals: the addresses of outgoing presidents of the International Communication Association (ICA). While the National Communication Association is larger in terms of membership and the International Association for Communication Research is arguably much more "international," ICA has been considered the field's most prestigious—and even hegemonic—association (Meyen, 2012). We argue that ICA presidential addresses do not merely reflect the discipline's current state, but performatively constitute and legitimize the discipline of communication.

The addresses we surveyed, reflective of ongoing debates, propose different understandings of the disciplinary nature of communication, which is alternatively deemed an interdisciplinary field, an epistemically coherent discipline, a would-be discipline, and so on. These conflicting conceptions, we argue, are themselves so many discursive attempts to legitimize the "discipline," a concept we use with reference to the institutional recognition of communication (see Becher & Trowler, 2001), which is one of ICA's primary objectives.[1] We similarly use the concept of "field" to keep in line with each address's own terminology or to refer to a less integrated conception of communication, but also to leave open the field versus discipline debate.

The tradition of presidential addresses was slowly established during the association's early days, first in the form of a more or less formal presentation during the annual conference or the yearly publication of a short "presidential letter" in the *Journal of Communication*. We look at presidential addresses from 1977 onward since that is when addresses—rather than letters concerned mainly with the association's internal business—started being published in journals, thus being readily available to us.

[1] Despite the ongoing field versus discipline debate—which we view as constitutive of the discipline itself—ICA officers frequently promote a disciplinary conception of communication. For instance, the 2025 call for papers, which is the responsibility of the president-elect, invites individuals to "critically reflect on communication studies as a discipline and ICA as an agent and site of disciplinary development" (ICA, 2024, p. 1).

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The performative dimension of ICA presidential addresses—a 20-minute plenary ritual later reworked for publication in ICA journals, most commonly its flagship *Journal of Communication*—plays a key role in the legitimation of the discipline, as we will show, despite their variable content and the different ways their respective authors approache the exercise. As Pooley (2018) suggested, presidential addresses are a form of "disciplinary talk"—that is, discourses explicitly addressing the state of the field and steering its course. To approach presidential addresses from a discursive and constitutive standpoint, we turn to an analytical perspective developed within the communication discipline itself, namely Cooren's (2012) ventriloquial approach. The ventriloquial approach points to the different "figures" (a term ventriloquists use to refer to their dummies) that speak through the voice of others and are situationally configured together into a more or less coherent whole: in our case, a legitimate discipline.

Within this perspective, presidential addresses put forward specific arrangements of figures that speak to the context in which they are produced and that identify priorities, thereby materializing specific "matters of concern" (Latour, 2008, p. 39; see also Vásquez et al., 2018). Each address may suggest new matters of concern by mobilizing specific figures and arranging them into configurations that may, for instance, prioritize some of them, position others as secondary, or downplay the importance of yet others. This perspective stresses that matters of concern materialize in discourse, which makes them available for scrutiny and comparison, including across time and space (Vásquez et al., 2018).

After reviewing existing research on communication's disciplinary legitimation, we will explain how we approach presidential addresses using a performative and ventriloquial view of communication. We will then show that each address discursively gives voice to various figures, and our analysis focuses specifically on four prominent categories of figures. The invocation of these figures is directly connected to legitimacy claims by summoning into being the discipline's collective body ("we"), by showing coherence between the discipline's past and its current concerns and actions ("founding fathers" / received histories), by highlighting communication's relevance (current events / societal change), and by recognizing the discipline's actorhood as it is embodied in a specific institution (ICA's structure and leadership). Then our analysis turns to four performative configurations of these figures, each suggesting a distinct path toward the discipline's legitimate future: cooperation, subdisciplinarity, relevance, and reflexive theorizing.

Communication's Legitimacy From Institutionalization to Disciplinary Rituals

Efforts to understand the gradual establishment of communication's disciplinary legitimacy have mostly been undertaken by the field's historians. Their work focuses on the institutions that have played a central role in communication's (re)production and legitimation, such as their flagship journals and major academic associations. Recently, Wiedemann and Meyen (2016) studied ICA's leadership, analyzing the professional trajectories of its presidents and fellows from a critical sociology standpoint.

The field's historiography also points to discursive elements that shaped communication research. One case is that of "mnemonic entrepreneur" Wilbur Schramm's endeavors to elaborate the field's "origin myth" (Pooley, 2018) by equipping communication with its "four founders": Carl Hovland, Kurt Lewin, Harold Lasswell, and Paul Lazarsfeld. Scholars repeatedly criticized such narratives, which became organizing tales

merging into a mnemonic stream that provides the field with a usable past (Pooley, 2018). Wahl-Jorgensen (2000) considers that the "founding fathers" narrative functions as a means of coping with the discipline's built-in anxieties. Their repetition amounts to a "disciplinary ritual" undergirding the field's institutionalization. Disciplinary rituals are conservative, as they both oppose and co-opt the "rebellions" that occur through reflexive attempts to question the field's history. Through their interplay, rituals and rebellions articulate the past, present, and future of the field.

This ritual view of communication traces back to Carey (1989), for whom a ritual enables the development of a community over time; it is a "sacred ceremony that draws people together in a fellowship" (Carey, 1989, p. 18). Several theoretical traditions have taken up the notion, including the communicative constitution of organizations (CCO) approach (Cooren, 2012). Considering disciplinary discourse as ritualistic, therefore, provides a constitutive lens for approaching presidential addresses and assessing their ability to performatively shape the field, beyond the addresses' thematic content.

Presidential Addresses as Performative Rituals

Advocates of a constitutive view of communication developed a rich conceptual vocabulary for understanding ritualistic "communicative events," defined as "collections of oral and written statements and speech acts . . . that cohere to yield a macro speech act" (van Dijk, 1997, p. 30). When such events are scripted, they become organizational rituals that "make present," through discourse, a variety of participants and their relationships, revealing complex forms of agency that cannot be reduced to the participants' intentions (Koschmann & McDonald, 2015). ICA presidential addresses similarly function as performative rituals that bring various figures, from founding fathers to societal change, into presence and action (Cooren, 2012).

Pentzold et al. (2023) conducted a bibliometric study of ICA presidential addresses that, they argue, "showcase the priorities and preferences of influential communication researchers" (p. 151). They describe the addresses' content and measure the circulation of similar themes. Construing presidential addresses as "disciplinary talks," they distinguish between two types of addresses: "metaviews of the field" and "targeted reflections revolving around individual interests" (p. 172).

In contrast, a performative view positions the discipline as both enabling presidential addresses through its institutional logics and perpetuating itself through them. In that sense, while addresses tend to be concerned with the field as a whole, they are simultaneously organizational. Understanding how presidential addresses configure the institutional context in which they take place and legitimize the discipline requires looking at how different figures are evoked and discursively related to each other (Cooren, 2012). Studies adopting a constitutive approach typically show how the discursive establishment of relations among figures creates configurations that constitute the phenomenon under study, including organizations, but also meta-organizations that display "organizationality," such as industries, social movements, and, indeed, disciplines (Schoeneborn et al., 2019). The capacity of such collectives to exist and act depends on how communicative events continuously establish these relational (re)configurations.

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The performative constitution and legitimation of academic disciplines have received limited scholarly attention. Wenzel and Will (2019) apply a constitutive approach to understanding how the field of corporate social responsibility was established. Regarding studying the legitimation of communication, Boivin et al. (2017) show how the institutionalization of CCO scholarship can be traced through its key academic articles, but stop short of considering them from a constitutive perspective.

Studying the Ventriloquial Configuration of Figures in Discourse

Benefiting from Pentzold et al.'s (2023) work in tracking relevant documents, we collected the 35 ICA presidential addresses published between 1977 and 2022. Our sample is incomplete, as we were unable to locate the addresses of 11 presidents from that period.[2] That said, the consistency with which our analysis led to similar results across the addresses we located (which represent 76% of all possible ones) leads us to believe the missing ones would not significantly change our conclusions.

As mentioned, we analyze how presidential addresses establish disciplinary legitimacy by drawing on research suggesting that legitimacy results not only from justification (in the rhetorical sense) but also from the way discourse and communication establish relations among the elements they invoke (Vaara et al., 2024; van Leeuwen, 2007). We specifically adopt Cooren's (2012) ventriloquial approach—which he developed in his own presidential address—that posits each text incorporates the voice of several figures and enables their dialogue. Accordingly, we focus less on the thematic content of the addresses than on how different ventriloquized figures are positioned in relation to one another.

A ventriloquial approach analyzes how agency is distributed across a range of figures that speakers invoke as motivating or constraining their action (Cooren, 2012; Nathues & van Vuuren, 2022). These figures may be persons, but also rules, documents, events, stories, organizations, and so on. A ventriloquist's art consists precisely in raising doubt as to who is speaking or acting at any given moment, the audience being confused as to whether the vent (i.e., the ventriloquist) controls the dummy or if it is not, on occasion, the other way around. A typical example is that of a clerk denying a customer's demand for a refund by stating that "the store policy prevents me from accepting your request," which amounts to expressing, through the clerk's voice, the policy's own refusal. The clerk, then, is not so much an actor as a "passer" through whom the figure's agency is expressed.

We therefore asked ourselves who or what was presented as moving or animating the author, the audience, the discipline, ICA, or the broader public and how the different agencies that expressed themselves through each address interacted with each other. The specific unit of analysis depended on each text, as performative utterances can consist of a single sentence or unfold throughout an entire story. We identified relevant passages, usually a few sentences, by asking what was being accomplished exactly and

[2] We could not locate the following addresses in the ICA archives (Annenberg School for Communication, Philadelphia): Robert J. Kibler (1977–1978), Gerald R. Miller (1979–1980), Steve Chaffee (1981–1982), Erwin P. Bettinghaus (1982–1983), James A. Anderson (1983–1984), B. Aubrey Fisher (1986–1987), L. Edna Rogers (1987–1988), Jay George Blumler (1989–1990), Margaret L. McLaughlin (1990–1991), Akiba A. Cohen (1993–1994), and Bradley S. Greenberg (1994–1995).

who or what was being invoked as a figure motivating action. We compiled these excerpts and their associated figures in a spreadsheet, resulting in nearly 200 entries.

These entries were then combined to create more analytically meaningful designations of figures, ultimately identifying four broad categories. The first is "we," corresponding to a loose sense of a collective disciplinary body. That "we" can include, for example, the people attending the conference, ICA members, or researchers. The second is that of the founding fathers / received histories, referring to the discipline's founders, as well as its past and tradition. Such references to the past often accompanied descriptions of the discipline's fragmentation or, on the contrary, its disciplinarization. Mentions of specific scholars, mostly white American men, are also frequent. Their work is usually not discussed in detail, but their names function as "talismans" that symbolize the qualities needed to confront a problem or, in Carey's (1987) terms, as an "object of ritual homage" (p. 5). A third category of figures is that of current events / societal change, designating contextual factors that require a response from the discipline. These can be related, for instance, to the place where the address is presented, to demographic shifts, or to emerging technologies. Finally, the category of ICA's structure and leadership points to the association as an institutionalized embodiment of the discipline. This figure can refer to the association's projects, executive roles, and rules, as well as its journals, to cite a few examples. As ICA is a prominent institution in the field, references to it are often connected with disciplinary legitimacy claims.

We reached these categories of figures inductively, from the analysis we present below, but also in light of existing research analyzing similar legitimizing performances, as summarized in Table 1. Similar figures had already been identified in the literature, reinforcing the validity of our findings.

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Table 1. Description of the Figure Categories and Studies That Elaborate on That Category.

Figure category	Description	Example studies
"We" (collective disciplinary body)	Loosely defined collective of scholars, such as conference attendees, ICA members, or researchers. Invoked to suggest shared norms or consensus.	Charland (1987), Fantasia et al. (2021)
Founding fathers / received histories	The discipline's historical figures and traditions. Used to evoke legitimacy or continuity or to critique fragmentation. Names function symbolically.	Basque and Langley (2018), Brambilla (2023)
Current events / societal change	Contemporary technological, demographic, or geopolitical shifts that demand disciplinary response. Often tied to the context of the address itself.	Brown et al. (2012), Wolfe (2016)
ICA's structure and leadership	The institutional authority of the discipline. Includes ICA presidents, rules, journals, and projects. Used to assert legitimacy and formal identity.	Brummans et al. (2013), Nissi (2016)

Figures within each of these categories are prominent in presidential addresses, but figures of different categories could also appear within the same address and were discursively positioned in relation to one another. For example, current events could require that "we" take action, or the founding fathers could have laid a path that ICA must follow. In doing so, the presidential address articulated these figures into a configuration, which in turn suggested specific programs of action for the discipline, such as calling for greater engagement with society or more cooperation between subfields. Those programs of action were ways of responding to the matters of concern that animated the discipline. We make no claim that the author of each address attempts to formulate a program for ICA, but merely that the way figures are configured necessarily implies a course of action forward for the discipline's legitimacy, irrespective of the author's intent. Figure 1 summarizes our analytical process.

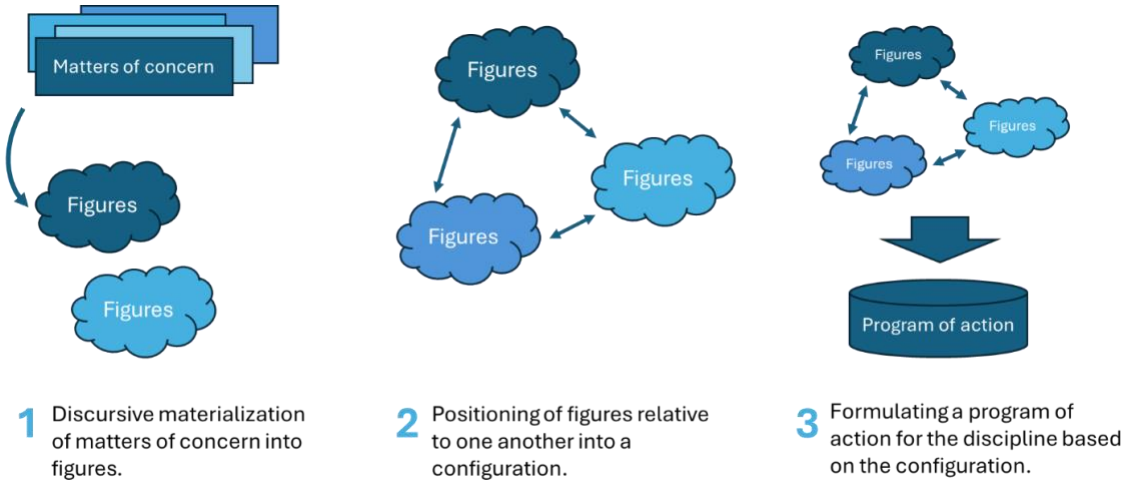

Figure 1. Describing what is accomplished through discourse in ICA presidential addresses.

Identifying the connection between configurations and the programs of action they hint at was done in line with literature suggesting that performativity arises not from single elements, but from the configuration as a whole (e.g., Jolivet & Vásquez, 2011). Given the scope of our analysis, we did not verify whether those courses of action were actually followed, except to the extent that subsequent presidential addresses mentioned them. Following this analytical strategy, we identified typical configurations of figures that call for similar action and, therefore, point to a comparable path toward disciplinary legitimacy. These configurations are described in the next section, where we present our analytical results.

Configuring a Legitimate Discipline

We present our analysis of four presidential addresses, selected to exemplify at least one occurrence of each of our four analytical configurations. These four addresses are also well distributed over time; some have historical significance (Brenda Dervin as the first woman president of the ICA, Richard W. Budd's speech at the first ICA conference held outside North America), and they equally showcase the voices of men and women. We also include an address from a non-U.S. scholar (Claes de Vreese, based in The Netherlands) to reflect ICA's continuous efforts to internationalize its membership and leadership (a topic that is also central in Linda Putnam's address). After reproducing key passages from each text, our analysis starts by identifying the figures they feature and explaining what they accomplish in the context of the address. We then examine how these figures are related to one another and assembled into a configuration. In a last section, we consider the program of action that the figures, assembled into a configuration, offer to the discipline: In other words, what must communication do to legitimately respond to the situation that the figures create for it?

A complete list of addresses, along with the main configuration each exemplifies, is presented in Table 2.

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Table 2. List of Presidential Addresses and Their Configuration(s).

President	ICA year	Main configuration	Secondary configuration
Budd	1977	Cooperation	
Williams	1979	Relevance	
Rogers	1981	Cooperation	
Krippendorff	1985	Cooperation	Reflexive theorizing
Dervin	1986	Subdisciplinarity	Relevance
Tompkins	1989	Subdisciplinarity	
Fitzpatrick	1992	Subdisciplinarity	
Wartella	1993	Relevance	Cooperation
Berger	1996	Cooperation	
Deetz	1997	Relevance	
Monge	1998	Relevance	Cooperation
Giles	1999	Relevance	
Putnam	2000	Reflexive theorizing	Cooperation
Cappella	2001	Relevance	
Gallois	2002	Subdisciplinarity	Relevance
Bryant	2003	Cooperation	Relevance
Craig	2004	Reflexive theorizing	
Donsbach	2005	Cooperation	
Nussbaum	2006	Relevance	
Rice	2007	Subdisciplinarity	
Livingstone	2008	Cooperation	Relevance
Buzzanell	2009	Relevance	Subdisciplinarity
Zelizer	2010	Subdisciplinarity	Reflexive theorizing
Cooren	2011	Reflexive theorizing	
Gross	2012	Relevance	
Stohl	2013	Reflexive theorizing	
Heinderyckx	2014	Subdisciplinarity	
Vorderer	2015	Relevance	
Jordan	2016	Subdisciplinarity	
Ang	2017	Relevance	
Gardner	2018	Cooperation	Subdisciplinarity
Moy	2019	Relevance	Reflexive theorizing
Flew	2020	Relevance	
de Vreese	2021	Relevance	
Oliver	2022	Relevance	Reflexive theorizing

Note. Year corresponds to the ICA conference; most addresses were published later on.

ICA 1977—Richard W. Budd, Rutgers

The emerging question of concern is, what is the overarching framework upon which our field is built? I am in agreement with Mark Knapp (1976) that the divisional structure of

> the International Communication Association provides little help in addressing the question. The now eight divisions of the association are more products of historical accident and concurrent research interests, than they are representative of any thoughtfully developed taxonomy of the discipline . . . But as an association, we collectively represent those scholars who boldly moved to stake out the domain of human communication as our own. It is therefore incumbent upon us—indeed it is our only justification for existence as a discipline—to provide a full synthesis from which we can begin to derive a comprehensive theory of human communication. (Budd, 1977, p. 29)

Ventriloquized Figures

A first set of figures Budd (1977) ventriloquizes is ICA's structure and leadership. His opening question is cast as a tension between the ICA's rigid divisional structure and the search for a unified "framework" of communication. In legitimizing his critique of the divisional structure, he enrolls his immediate predecessor, Mark Knapp. Along with Knapp, Budd (1977) invokes several founding fathers—Schramm, Lasswell, Berlo, and Klapper—but gives particular prominence to Lippmann, author of "the unsurpassed grand theory of human communication" (p. 30). This pantheonization contrasts with a more negative appraisal of a singular "historical accident"—that is, the divisional development of ICA, which is contrasted with the received history of the field's success and founding fathers. Throughout his address, Budd (1977) constructs a complex collective identity characterized by an ongoing process of fragile soul searching. For instance, he writes, "Strangely enough, we know mostly what we are not. We are not traditional speech, we are not classical rhetoric, we are not 'nuts and bolts' journalism, or at least we do not wish to be identified with those fields" (Budd, 1977, p. 30). His "we" does not yet know itself: "We know mostly what we are not." That fragmented identity and ontological anxiety are bound to an ongoing process of boundary work that would eventually point to both what "we" are and what communication is.

Budd's focus is primarily inward. His mention of a "taxonomy of the discipline" (Budd, 1977, p. 29) refers to an ICA-supported project, beginning in the late 1960s, to develop such a taxonomy. However, Budd (1977) also ventriloquizes current events and societal change, although such events matter only insofar as they connect to ideas and theoretical development of the field. Budd's address is also remarkable for the absence of discussion of the location of ICA's conference, in Berlin, the first one organized outside North America.

Configurations

Budd's (1977) presidential address could be described as corresponding to the cooperation configuration. It ventriloquizes ICA's history and founding fathers against the association's rigid structures, which are reduced to an "accident." His call for fewer divisions and for letting go of unnecessary methodological sophistication ("scientism") is therefore not only his preferred course of action but also the logical outcome of the discipline's evolution. Because "we" have failed to fully engage with our own disciplinary history, "we" lack a coherent identity (except in knowing who we are not), and we are unable to formulate integrated theoretical developments. Budd's address operates a complex discursive *mise en abyme*: not only are the ventriloquized figures (Knapp, the founding fathers, "our" identity, etc.) woven one

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into the other but so is the problem he introduces, which concerns both the discipline's institutionalization and its theoretical foundations. This weaving can itself be read as a form of cooperation between figures. By voicing figures the way he does, and positioning history as requiring fewer obstacles between "us" and our theoretical aspirations, Budd stresses an overarching problem and a solution: cooperation.

ICA 1986—Brenda Dervin, Ohio State University

> Feminist scholarship has reaffirmed the need for looking at the magnitude of gender differences as well as the significance of these differences. Feminist scholarship has provided for the assessment of female conditions outside of the patriarchal order, for example, the assessment of female mental health in terms other than male. Feminist scholarship has brought to awareness the importance of hidden aspects of the female experience, such as incest, harassment, and abuse. (Dervin, 1987, p. 110)
>
> In a sense, we had to become mature enough to have an ideological battle. And being mature enough while the battle was being fought, we began to read the work of the proponents of the various "sides" and then publicly began incorporating concepts from other "sides" for the value they offer in addressing our riddle. (Dervin, 1987, p. 111)
>
> Feminist scholarship offers us the opportunity to collectively participate in two kinds of extremely important learnings and inventings: One is how to give voice to those who have been silenced; the other is to give silence and hearing to those who have been voiced. (Dervin, 1987, p. 114)

Ventriloquized Figures

A prominent figure in Dervin's (1987) address is the fieldwide "we," which includes all "sides" in a future public agonistic conversation among communication scholars. Notably, Dervin positions herself as part of this "we" and is careful not to claim to be a feminist scholar (and thus an outsider), but rather a researcher in the field of communication. She is not speaking as a feminist scholar; rather, feminist scholarship speaks through her. The repetitive invocation of "feminist scholarship"—eight sentences in a row begin with "feminist scholarship" (Dervin, 1987, p. 110)—presents it as an active agent in its own right, never tied to any named scholar. The "us" Dervin discursively constructs, as an extension of her own rhetorical self, is also animated by feminist scholarship, which is presented as an autonomous force taking possession of communication. In listing all that feminist scholarship has done to us, Dervin is also showing that "we" are possessed by feminist scholarship.

Dervin (1987) does not mention specific events, but can still be considered to ventriloquize current events and societal change to the extent that she invokes transhistorical realities such as incest, harassment, and abuse (p. 110). By not giving specific examples, these issues appear as stronger figures—timeless and pervasive—on whose behalf feminist scholarship speaks, through Dervin, and become concerns that "we," as communication scholars, should share.

Configurations

Dervin's (1987) address performs two configurations, that of subdisciplinarity and that of relevance, as it depicts communication as a young, "ragamuffin" field that has yet to benefit from feminist thinking, but that also has the most to benefit from it. By positioning herself as part of the discipline through her use of the "we" pronoun, and showing what feminist scholarship has contributed to issues that are dear to "us," she shows that communication has much to gain from engaging with that research field. In that sense, she sees in feminist scholarship a way for communication to be relevant and address crucial issues. While Dervin (1987) clearly advocates for feminism in communication, she does so as a communication scholar concerned that her field has yet to benefit from feminism and that many voices remain unheard.

ICA 2000—Linda Putnam, Texas A&M University

> To provide guidelines for coming together, I present a cursory overview of some critical moments in our recent history—periods of ferment, fragmentation, and legitimacy—and then apply three constructs—multiple and shifting voices, oppositional discourse, and connecting—to advocate alternative relationships among scholars in the field. Given the setting of this conference, I also employ insights from Latin American scholarship to illustrate key issues in this address. (Putnam, 2001, p. 39)

> The concern for legitimacy has pushed us to articulate the scholarly focus of the discipline; strengthen connections with other fields; understand the realities of university politics; and position communication studies as central, important, and high quality (Shoemaker, 1993). This quest and the desire to make an impact in the world has also led to linking communication scholarship with public policy and integrating our specialties with cognate disciplines. Certainly, our presence in interdisciplinary circles has enhanced the image of the field and called attention to communication research and scholarship; however, it also intensifies and reifies fragmentation through developing more sophisticated specializations. (Putnam, 2001, p. 40)

Ventriloquized Figures

By stating, "Given the setting of the conference," Putnam (2001) acknowledges that the address took place in Mexico and ventriloquizes ICA's structure and leadership as they pertain to the organization of the conference, as well as the current events in whose context her address occurs. She presents these figures as imposing themselves on her ("given"), but also as central to her own conception of communication research throughout the speech, which aims to critically reconstruct the field's intellectual history, thus also positioning herself in tension with the discipline's received history (p. 39). In revisiting this history, she argues that the field is now establishing its legitimacy, including vis-à-vis other disciplines and with respect to societal stakeholders. In light of this maturity, Putnam (2001) suggests, "We need to adopt another type of discourse, one that privileges multiple and shifting voices and that embraces diversity rather than seeking to eliminate, ignore, or integrate opposing views" (p. 41)—mobilizing a "we" that she presents as mature

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enough to espouse a Bakhtin-inspired plural view of academic voices and specifically to include several Latin American voices, something unusual in the field, both then and now. Ventriloquizing these voices implicitly challenges the contours of the "we," pointing to an inherited exclusion rooted in the discipline's history. The inclusion of these voices seems nevertheless difficult to achieve since it raises doubts in relation to a concern for legitimacy that is built into Putnam's (2001) argument. If it can be achieved, however, it may help communication make a greater contribution to the broader society, again hinting at its potential to engage with current events, though only if fragmentation can be overcome, a challenge linked to ICA's structure and leadership.

Configurations

Putnam's (2001) address corresponds to the configurations of reflexive theorizing and cooperation, as it uses the current conference setting to emphasize the context-dependent nature of communication and encourage more attention to Latin American research. The current context and ICA's structure (in choosing Mexico as the conference site) are thus presented as legitimating a broadening of the discipline's "we," even against the discipline's history. For Putnam, the field's newfound maturity and legitimacy make it ready to adopt a new theory of discourse, one that is more polyphonic and will enable it to reach across disciplinary boundaries and integrate a wider range of "voices" and to engage with various external stakeholders. Putnam is therefore offering a theory of voice that, at the same time, constitutes an invitation toward greater cooperation.

ICA 2021—Claes de Vreese, University of Amsterdam

> This is *not* a standard presidential address. There is *nothing* normal about the situation the world is currently in . . . The pandemic has *challenged* the members of our association. And the association itself. The ICA is built upon a community that *meets and interacts*. From the moment in March 2020 where we flipped the Australia conference to an online conference, and all the way to today, where we [were] supposed to meet in Denver, Colorado. It is just 15 months. It seems like *forever*. (de Vreese, 2022, p. 1)

> We represent a field, Communication, that can both help understand the impact of and role of media and journalism in these societal dynamics. How media and communication can contribute to not only sustaining power, but also to change. We can and do contribute to discussions about *Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Access*. We need to do that not only in our work, but also in how we organize our field. In the past year, we have made important steps towards making the ICA and our community a space that offers more commitment to IDEA. But we need to do more. We can turn to inspiration from our students, our early career community, and our IDEA committee members, to learn how we can bring about organizational change. But we also need to ask ourselves how we can contribute to this agenda in society at large. How we ask our questions, the parts of the world we study, how we listen, and share our knowledge, matter. We are generating a wealth of knowledge that we can put to use. (de Vreese, 2022, p. 2)

Ventriloquized Figures

de Vreese's (2022) "we" is a carefully constructed one. It is mostly developed in a long paragraph in which the pronoun is repeated 15 times. That "we" is for sure a diverse and open collective since the paragraph is about fostering inclusion, diversity, equity, and access, or IDEA, which is a well-known organizational framework. As such, the "we" and ICA's structure and leadership are ventriloquizing one another: "We" is animated by IDEA as a project and as a set of values that are materialized within ICA, including through a formal committee. The repetitive use of the possessive marker "our" ("our association," "our community," "our students," etc.) suggests not only agency over ICA's structure and leadership (whose actions could be steered by its members), but also that this act of possession—a "we" that owns an association, a community, and so on—constitutes the organization. That "we" is also presented as animated by current events and societal changes, namely the pandemic, which "we," as stewards of the communication discipline, could help explain, but that also threatened the very existence of that "we," which only existed through meetings and interactions. In that sense, current events are not only what drives the association and the discipline but also the way its members shape ICA so that it reflects the diversity needed to face adversity.

Configurations

In de Vreese's (2022) address, which corresponds to the configuration of relevance, disciplinary legitimacy derives from the capacity to produce relevant knowledge in uncertain times and to act on societal issues (the pandemic, but also "democratic backsliding," the power of big tech, etc.), including through reshaping ICA itself so that it is more caring for those affected by the pandemic. While the different figures he mobilized ("we," ICA's structure and leadership, current events / societal change) presupposed and ventriloquized one another, current events and societal changes are the topical focus, but also the main source of actions and, when ICA and its members are able to respond to them, of disciplinary legitimacy.

Four Configurations for the Discipline

Our analysis shows that while the same figures recur across addresses, they are assembled differently into configurations—which are not watertight categories—that legitimize distinct paths forward for the discipline. This variability aligns with previous research pointing to ICA presidential addresses as personal "targeted reflections" (Pentzold et al., 2023). The addresses we surveyed are in fact quite different, as the above excerpts show. Despite these differences, a CCO/ventriloquial approach allows us to zoom out from the details of each address to highlight the commonalities between addresses adopting the same configuration. We present below our four analytical configurations in more general terms.

1) *The cooperation configuration*: This first configuration, mostly present in earlier addresses, focuses on fractures within the field and the need to find a common theoretical program. It commonly makes many references to the founding fathers / received histories category of figures to suggest that the pioneers were hoping for an integrated discipline and that we have departed from that ideal. On their part, fingers are typically pointed at the ICA's structure and leadership, which reproduce artificial boundaries between subfields that should, instead, work hand in hand. The fault

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may also be attributed to a "we" that unwittingly reproduces a division between forms of knowledge, all the while striving for greater disciplinary integration. As we saw, Budd (1977) recommends adopting a broader perspective by revisiting the work of some of the discipline's pioneers. Rogers (1981), for his part, emphasizes the complementarity of the empirical and critical traditions of communication research, which were not separated until local institutional pressures created distinctions where there is no need for them. Krippendorff (1985) articulates a dialogical perspective to help the discipline transcend its divisions, which he attributed to the way "we" tend to categorize knowledge. Wartella's (1994) address urges that "we" bridge the "fault lines" between professional/academic communication and journalism/speech, which are also attributable to institutional divisions. In doing so, Wartella enrolls founding father Wilbur Schramm as a precursor to her proposal.

2) *The subdisciplinarity configuration:* Some presidential addresses, mostly delivered between 1985 and 1992, and again in the late 2010s, promote specific communication subfields or traditions. Presidential addresses in this configuration tend to oppose ICA's structure and leadership (and, more broadly, disciplinary boundaries) to current events such as technological or societal changes that require we adopt an overlooked perspective on them. Depending on the way the pronoun "we" is used, the author may speak as a member of the communication discipline advocating for a broadening of its boundaries or a member of a subfield promoting an underdog approach to the broader community. Founding fathers / received histories also play a part in legitimating such claims. For instance, Dervin (1987) references the 1983 "Ferment in the Field" special issue of the *Journal of Communication* to illustrate that feminist scholarship was unpopular at the time. For his part, Tompkins (1991) alludes to McLuhan's and Ong's references to Joyce's work, in attempts to legitimate literary research as part of communication studies. Heinderyckxs' (2014) discussion of whether older people are "digital migrants" or "digital progenitors" and Jordan's (2016) question of whether media use defines the experience of children both offer examples of the way current events are made relevant, as they are framed as crucial to understanding a generational shift in relations to new technology.

3) *The relevance configuration:* Between 1993 and 1999, and again between 2011 and 2022, several presidential addresses warned that communication would become irrelevant if it failed to address pressing current events such as globalization (Deetz, 1997; Monge, 1998), aging populations (Giles, 1999), and dwindling trust (Flew, 2021). These addresses tend to indicate that "we" have a responsibility to the broader community that is affected by those events, either as "a professional society or as researchers and teachers" (Deetz, 1997, p. 118), stressing that "we should be up there front-row-center" (Giles, 1999, p. 170). The outward-focused concern for current events is contrasted with efforts geared toward legitimizing the discipline and its institutionalization, including through ICA's structure and leadership. These addresses tend not to refer to the history of communication, instead invoking recent societal changes or the authors' own experiences to justify the urgent need for our discipline to produce relevant knowledge.

4) *The reflexive theorizing configuration*: Another configuration involves using the state of communication theory to theorize about its evolution and transversal issues. Reflexive theorizing

rarely comes alone and is typically presented as a way of making the discipline relevant or to enable greater cooperation for disciplinary integration. In that sense, it tends to mobilize all figures. The collective "we" typically refers to the community of communication researchers dealing with a problem that the author's theory contributes to solving (including dealing with current events). This was the case in Krippendorff's (1985) address, which presented its model of dialogue as answering a problem of disciplinary integration. Founding fathers / received histories typically do not actually refer to the discipline's pioneers, but rather to prior debates within the discipline and even to prior ICA presidents' addresses (thus also pointing to ICA's structure and leadership). The current address is presented as responding to their various invitations or admonishments. For instance, Cooren (2012) built on Craig (1999) by referring to him as an ICA past president, to propose his own ventriloquism theory as a potential "metamodel" of communication across subfields. However, these references are not directly used to encourage readers or listeners to cooperate, but rather to make a case for the author's theorizing and stress its relevance to a broader audience.

Discussion and Conclusion

Being ICA members ourselves, we have had occasion to discuss with a few past ICA presidents. They described how stressful it was to write and deliver their address, and a common reflex was to ask their predecessors for advice and to read their addresses for inspiration. It is therefore not surprising that presidential addresses across time ventriloquize the same categories of figures, although each address configures them in its own way, answering to specific matters of concern. In this sense, the ritual performance of disciplinary legitimacy resides not only in participating in the same event but also in the way that speech is composed. The ritual also consists of asking for advice from predecessors, thus making each address the ventriloquist of the previous ones, albeit one that is only partially faithful, ensuring both continuity and change in ICA's ongoing storytelling and in the discipline.

That is why some presidential addresses seemed odd or surprising: They did not replicate some of the ritual figures that make up the genre. This is the case with Phillip K. Tompkins' (1991) address, which advocates for recognizing the contribution of literature to communication studies. While we could analyze it in the terms of our framework, Tompkins' (1991) ode to the work of James Joyce clashes with the usual references to disciplinary signposts. Frederick Williams' (1979) address also stands out. It attempts to predict technological change as it would happen by the year 2000 and may sound closer to a work of futurology or science fiction than a presidential speech. Its spot-on predictions also make one wonder if it is not a time traveler's report.

Pentzold et al. (2023) affirm that presidential addresses are "historical testimonials that arguably do not promise unknown discoveries" (p. 153). However, examining our material reveals that, beyond differences in format and specific genre, ICA presidential addresses articulate complex sets of figures. While we categorized them into four groups, these figures vary from address to address, depending on context, and include more-or-less famous scholars, ICA officials and fellows, and also principles, theories, contexts, events, and neighboring fields. In other words, ICA presidential addresses are disciplinary rituals that mobilize different matters of concern that are presented as important to the discipline and its various stakeholders. In addition to choosing current-day examples of each category of figures (e.g., current events

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may vary from the advent of the Internet to population aging), presidential addresses also innovate in the way they assemble figures into specific configurations. This is done by positioning some of them as requiring a course of action and opposing others (e.g., the founding fathers opposing ICA's divisional structure) while allowing a response to the problems posed by yet others. Each configuration implies a different path forward for the discipline: cooperating across traditional boundaries, acknowledging the contribution of a subfield, producing relevant scholarship, or finding an overarching theory to unite the field. Again, for analytical simplicity, we reduced them to four ideal configurations, but as our analysis shows, they often occur simultaneously, and we can imagine that others could be proposed in further research.

Furthermore, other rituals could be examined. For instance, ICA presidential candidates' statements could be a fascinating corpus to explore, as they tend to explicitly address the state of the field and appeal to ICA members.[3] A CCO/ventriloquial approach could yield insights into comparable legitimizing configurations that would add to or nuance our findings. What matters, we suggest, is that, as disciplinary discourse, ICA presidential addresses are less characterized by the content of the argument they present than by the figures they mobilize and the way those figures are configured.

This study makes several contributions to scholarship. First, our analysis shows that presidential addresses establish legitimacy by adapting figures to meet new contexts and by reconfiguring them. In this way, we can understand discourse as the weaving of assemblages between people and events across time. To make this observation, though, we had to look at past documents and observe how the same categories of figures kept resurfacing, similar to Basque and Langley's (2018) discussion of the way organizations stage their founders. Legitimacy results from this weaving, adding a temporal element to current communicative views of legitimacy (Cnossen & Bencherki, 2023; Vaara et al., 2024). Our study thus stresses that the ventriloquial performance of legitimacy is not only about voicing, today, figures that matter to the audience but also to invoke figures that resemble those that have been voiced in the past, thus juxtaposing figures in a way that creates continuity in storytelling and implies that the current communicative event (such as a presidential address) is part of the lineage of similar events: It shares concerns they had expressed or calls for similar action. Researching discursive legitimacy may therefore require more than a snapshot in the present, also looking at how legitimacy was similarly performed in the past.

That said, our analysis also suggests that although similar figures may continue to be mobilized, the way they are configured has evolved over time. The configurations of cooperation, subdisciplinarity, and relevance followed one another as hegemonic until the early 2000s. After that, a new configuration, reflexive theorizing, became more common until the COVID-19 pandemic brought the issue of relevance back to the forefront. This indicates that the discipline evolves not only by embracing new concerns but also by assembling them into new relationships through discourse. Thus, a performative perspective on continuity and change reveals that disciplinary evolution corresponds to how figures are reconfigured, pointing to the relational ontology of communication (Cooren, 2012).

Another contribution this study makes is methodological. By putting more emphasis on how people talk and write, rather than on the referential content of their discourse, our research highlights the value of

[3] We are grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for this very insightful suggestion.

a constitutive understanding of communication for analyzing contemporary texts and speeches and also for exploring historical documents such as presidential addresses. We thus extend van Leeuwen and Wodak's (1999) discourse-historical approach, showing the relevance of historical material for communication scholars dealing with their own questions (such as disciplinary legitimacy) and not only historians. In a sense, our study can be understood as embodying, in itself, a call for greater cooperation. Indeed, it combines the methods of language and social interaction, theories of organizational communication, and the data sources of the communication historian. This is all the more true as communication is becoming a "postdiscipline" and is at risk of scattering into specialized corners of knowledge and falling short of offering a reflexive account of itself and of dealing with the planet's grand challenges (Pooley, 2018).

Our study also expands scholarship on constitutive views of discourse and communication, especially CCO, as it answers common criticism pointing to its inability to analyze discourses in their broader context (Wilhoit, 2016). We have demonstrated that a constitutive perspective can effectively explain how crucial past events and critical current contexts are manifested through discourse in documents, including both recent and older, perhaps more historical, texts. This manifestation matters because it suggests a path forward for the discipline. In this perspective, discourse not only occurs in history but also creates its historical context by assembling people, events, and ideas—whether past, present, or future—into configurations that legitimize the discourse itself and call for specific collective action.

In addition, our analysis suggests, through the notion of configuration, that CCO's notion of ventriloquism is not only a matter of quantitatively adding more voices to support what the speaker is saying (e.g., to make a claim more authoritative; see Benoit-Barné & Cooren, 2009). While Cooren (2010) uses the concept of configuration to refer to specific assemblages of figures, our study specifies that each configuration also makes a qualitative difference: Depending on who or what is being joined together, a different form of legitimacy is claimed and a different program of action suggested as a way forward.[4]

A final contribution of our study to CCO scholarship is highlighting that the processes revealed by the theory affect not only the formation of organizations today but also the formation of the organizational past. In that sense, our study clarifies that, at each point in time, an organization's past is also (re)created to legitimate current action (see also Dudink et al., 2025). This connection links the study of the performativity of discourse and communication with the growing literature on time and temporality in organizational studies (see Hernes & Feuls, 2024). Our data suggest that ICA past presidents adapt to a changing discipline and its ever-evolving circumstances as they exercise their authority through their addresses. By invoking various figures through mentions, citations, and *mise en abyme*, ICA presidents enable the association's and the discipline's past to continue mattering today, as it is also in the name of that past that they enjoin fellow members to cooperate, acknowledge an overlooked subfield, produce relevant research, or adopt a common theory. In doing so, they also give communication a history—one that keeps the discipline relevant to current and future challenges while never losing touch with its traditions.

[4] We wish to thank one of the anonymous reviewers for noting that our study makes this contribution to CCO scholarship.

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