

Thanks—And Some Parting Thoughts on Communication

As my term of office comes to a close, I want to express my gratitude for the opportunity to serve as your president this past year. Throughout my extensive travels I have encountered enthusiastic, dedicated geographers working not only to advance our discipline but to make a better world. It has been an uplifting experience. I want to express special thanks to my fellow AAG Councilors and Executive Committee members, and to the superb staff in our Washington office. The intelligence and commitment of these individuals is inspiring.

Writing these columns has been a great privilege. Every month I can tell when the newsletters begin arriving in people's mailboxes because of the flurry of emails I receive. My thanks go to all of you who have taken the time to read these missives. I have tried to touch on issues that I think bear serious reflection, and I appreciate the thoughtful replies I have received.

Before signing off, I want to raise one more issue I believe to be of some importance: the communication of geographical research. This is not a simple or straightforward matter, as different forums and circumstances require different kinds of communication. Moreover, we certainly do not want to discourage specialized research exchanges at the frontiers of intellectual inquiry, even if they are largely impenetrable to a wider audience. Yet at times I wonder if our work might receive broader dissemination if we made a priority of presenting it in ways that are both effective and engaging.

Our most important form of communication is the written word, and our discipline includes some wonderful writers. I worry, however, that more of our writings than necessary are inaccessible or uninteresting to a broader audience. My concern here is not necessarily the average "person on the street" (although there are times when we should write for that audience). Instead, I am thinking of those educated, thoughtful individuals

who have some interest in the problems we are addressing, but who are not necessarily drawn to our writings. This includes everyone from scholars in other disciplines to readers of serious books, periodicals, and newspapers focused on the issues of the day.

The turn toward theoretical introspection in parts of our discipline has brought important insights; but at times, in our effort to situate our work within the thicket of relevant theories and literatures, we allow the fundamental questions driving our research to get pushed to the background. Theoretical specificity is vital, of course, but I am not convinced that we always have the balance right—or even that we



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have to sacrifice theoretical subtlety in order to maintain our focus on the key questions we are seeking to elucidate. Outside of narrow research circles, people tend to think in terms of issues and problems, not generalized concepts and literatures. If we want to reach a broader audience, the issues and problems that motivate our research should be front and center in our writings, even as we bring in different literatures and theories to explain what we are doing.

More generally, the trend toward greater specialization across the discipline has worked against the kind of storytelling that can engage a broader audience. The idea of geographers telling stories might seem like a quaint relic from another era, but people are drawn to stories. Environmental historians have been reaching out to broader audiences by relating provocative, interesting stories about places and regions. Not all geographic inquiries lend themselves to a narrative approach, but when they do, we should embrace the opportunity. Storytelling need not come at the expense of intellectual rigor, and it can

help us reach out beyond the confines of our own discipline.

Presentations are also important modes of communication, and I have long felt that geography's visual orientation gives us an advantage. New technologies keep making it easier to develop and display the maps and other geographic visualizations that are critical to so much of our work. Yet I cannot

resist offering one comment about the growing use of PowerPoint. This tool can be extraordinarily effective, but the ease of creating PowerPoint slides has its disadvantages, too. I have become particularly concerned about PowerPoint text slides. Not everything can or should be neatly bracketed into three or four

bulleted points, and when great blocks of a speaker's text appear on PowerPoint slides, it may well discourage thoughtful listening. As long-standing leaders in the visualization arena, geographers would do well to model the best, most exciting possibilities of visual communication in our presentations while avoiding the dumbing-down of public exchange that can ensue when careful listening is replaced by bulleted reading.

This last point may sound like a personal pet peeve (it's my last chance!). Even if you disagree though, my goal is to stimulate some serious reflection about the approaches we take to communicating our scholarship to others. The matter is certainly not trivial. Geography is poised to grow and flourish—and to have a profound impact on the world—but this will happen only by means of lively, effective, and thoughtful communication. ■

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