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EDITORIAL

“Is this Ella Fitzgerald?”: My Reflections of James C. McCroskey
Matthew M. Martin

Editor’s Note: This essay reflects the final in our five-part set of essays on the career of Communication Research Reports founding editor, James C. McCroskey. In these previous essays, Levine and Park (2017) offered the opening essay in our series, with a professional and personal rememberance of a scholar deeply impactful on both of their careers. Hickson (2018) commented on McCroskey’s formal and informal mentorship styles, and how others might understand the critical importance of offering oneself to one’s peers. Park, Oh, and Ryu (2018) explained the unique impact of McCroskey’s research on communication scholarship in South Korea, and Frymier (2018) reminded us of McCroskey’s impact as a core scholar for instructional communication research. In this final essay, we reached out to current West Virginia University Department of Communication chair Matthew M. Martin for his thoughts. As McCroskey spent most of his career at WVU (including a 25-year stretch as the department chair, from 1972 to 1997), inviting the current chair of that department for a closing commentary seemed most fitting. We hope that these five essays serve as a memorial to a scholar whose career and influence extends far beyond his publication record.

KEYWORDS: James C. McCroskey; West Virginia University; Communication Apprehension; Elephant

The Buddhist parable of the blind men and the elephant involves numerous blind men, each feeling a different part of an elephant and offering their own description, descriptions that are not overly similar. Each man believes his description is correct, and the men fight among themselves. Each man provides some correct information in his description, but no man is able to provide a true, complete

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description of the elephant. The moral of the story is that people tend to view their experiences as the truth while discounting other's experiences that provide either differing or unsupporting evidence and hence should recognize that their interpretation of something likely is partially accurate while biased by their own experiences.

Jim McCroskey is the elephant (I think he actually would enjoy knowing he is the elephant in the room). In previous essays, former students, friends, and colleagues offered their descriptions of a part of James C. McCroskey. Each of these individuals offer their memories or experiences with Jim, along with their views of his contributions to the communication studies discipline. Another handful of individuals could have been invited to write essays about James C. McCroskey, and we would have been exposed to a handful of different views and stories. I recognize that there are people reading this essay who are thinking to themselves “The essay I would write about this person would definitely give a different view, and it might not be so complimentary.” Noted—the elephant is quite large.

For those of us interested in instructional communication or in source/receiver characteristics (e.g., credibility, communication traits), Jim is on the Mt. Rushmore of Communication Scholars. Undeniably, he was a prolific scholar and highly influential in promoting the study of communication studies as a social science. Here are a few of my own descriptions of the elephant.

Jim loved arguing and debating. One could say he had a contentious, dominant, and animated communicator style (Norton, 1978). His roots in communication studies go back to high school debate. Chances are he is currently debating someone. Jim spent his academic career researching how to be a more effective and appropriate communicator. To learn more about his early years, one could still read Jim’s 1966 dissertation Experimental Studies of the Effects of Ethos and Evidence in Persuasive Communication on his Web site (http://www.jamesmc-croskey.com/).

Jim loved research. He loved talking research. He loved planning studies. He loved collaborating. He loved mentoring. He loved looking over printouts of results. I cannot think of anyone who would get more excited about reviewing a printout (and I believe the instant results that are now available on one’s computer screen would slightly decrease his enjoyment due to how much he relished the anticipation of looking at the paper printouts at the end of the day).

Jim loved talking. If Jim was quiet, something was wrong. I benefitted from spending thousands of hours talking (i.e., listening) to Jim. I learned quite a bit about how to become a better teacher from listening to Jim. My knowledge of, and appreciation for, our discipline also increased from the many stories and experiences he shared. Those of us who miss hearing Jim’s voice can still hear him talk about communication apprehension, instructional communication, and communibiology on CommuniCast (http://www.communicast.info/mccroskey/).
Jim loved the communication studies discipline. He was proud to be a communication scholar. He worked extensively to increase the acceptance and credibility of communication studies locally, nationally, and internationally. I found Jim to be quite inclusive of people and of all traditions of communication studies. Unquestionably, some could recall messages from Jim that were not inclusive, but I believe he was actually more open-minded than most I have experienced in our discipline. Jim was also respectful of the history of our discipline; for those that believe that it was Jim’s belief that he was the first to study communication apprehension/anxiety, I invite them to read one of Jim’s (McCroskey, 2009) last publications, “Communication Apprehension: What Have We Learned in the Last Four Decades” (http://www.jamesmccroskey.com/publications/236.pdf).

Jim loved being chair of West Virginia University. For 25 years, some might describe his management style as a benevolent dictator. It would not be accurate to say that all members of the department and the university community during those 25 years appreciated (or liked) him. Many did. I believe that Jim sacrificed personally and professionally to make our department at WVU stronger. What I know is that without Jim’s arrival in Morgantown in 1972, there might not be a communication studies department at WVU. For those interested, or unable to sleep, one can read about the history of our department (Davis, 1998; https://communicationstudies.wvu.edu/files/d/bf757732-b79b-48d1-addb-2bd23fcdd25d/1358108097-3.pdf).

Jim loved his family and his students. At times, the elephant was actually a giant teddy bear. Unfortunately, although likely common to too many of us, Jim spent more time bragging to me about his children and his former students than to them directly. Jim was extremely proud of both. Jim loved watching his students grow and playing a role in their development. And while one may think that Jim only cared for his students in academia, Jim maintained many relationships with former undergraduate and graduate students who selected nonacademic careers. Jim truly believed in the value of applied communication and that students who studied communication would benefit in their personal and professional lives.

Well, that is my description of the elephant. I was fortunate to see parts of James C. McCroskey that likely were not shared with most. There are many stories I could share that need to be told in a different place (possibly in a lobby bar at a conference). We’ll laugh at many of the stories, and just possibly we’ll hear a deep guffaw in the distance. Jim will always be part of the Department of Communication Studies at WVU and a seminal scholar of our discipline. You are missed, Jim, but your impact will never be extinguished.

Notes

1. I put James C. McCroskey in italics here because many people only know Jim from this essay, his articles and books, his conference presentations or speeches, brief interactions, and/or stories they have heard over the years. Any and all of those sources provide some information about the map of James C. McCroskey, e.g., as Alfred Korzybski once said, “The map is not the territory.”
2. Jim’s Web site is full of useful resources. Measures he created (and helped create) are available here and are free for researchers and teachers to use.

3. Once upon a time, one could just not click one’s mouse and run a factor analysis or a SEM—or for that matter, a frequency of a variable. One would have to type in command codes using a large computer called a mainframe (if you were lucky enough to have access to one). One would then have to wait a period of time, sometimes hours, to then go pick up a paper printout that was usually printed at a special building on campus. I lived during these days, but Jim told me stories of a time even earlier when researchers used something called punch cards. He was always wistful when he talked about punch cards.

4. An exception was when Jim was attending WVU basketball games. Jim had season tickets, and his seats were in the front row under the home team basket. I was fortunate enough to go with him to numerous games. Jim liked arriving early. Once in his seat, Jim would pull out his large set of headphones and listen to the game on the radio. I never considered engaging Jim in interactions during the game—there was always time for talking later.

5. CommuniCast was a product from a WVU alum, Dr. Jason Wrench. He interviewed numerous scholars about their research. While I believe most of the podcasts available are from several years ago, I believe these podcasts are valuable resources, allowing researchers, teachers, and students to hear influential scholars give their own unfiltered take on their research.

6. Many readers of this essay will not read this footnote, and even many of those who read this footnote will not go read Jim’s article that I reference. For those people, a main point of the article is that while Jim is strongly associated with communication apprehension, the study of communication anxiety and apprehension have deep roots in our discipline.

7. I started at WVU in 1994, and over the years, many high-level administrators and senior faculty members shared their adventures involving Jim and our department. While Jim was not beloved by all of them, they all recognized that Jim built a department (that was near extinction when he arrived in Morgantown) into one of the strongest departments at WVU, one that is often recognized for its outstanding teaching and research.

8. In the early 1970s, Jim created a Master’s in Instructional Communication program. Thousands of teachers in West Virginia earned this degree. In the 1990s, Jim, along with Dr. Virginia Richmond, created a Master’s in Corporate and Organizational Communication. Jim loved being in the classroom (i.e., another opportunity to talk) and sharing with these working professionals what is known about communication based on research. Students were riveted and had great admiration and respect for this titan of communication studies.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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