

Why We Need the *Journal of Applied Communications*: A Lesson From *The Andy Griffith Show*

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The expression goes that life imitates art.

But I would argue that, frame for frame, there's no creative work that mimics real life quite like *The Andy Griffith Show*. I often marvel at how the show's characters and situations lend themselves to current-day comparisons.

In this column, I'd like to suggest that agricultural and applied communicators might do well to heed a lesson from one of the show's main characters.

Those familiar with the 1960s sitcom know about the well-meaning but misguided deputy sheriff. Due to a number of mishaps with his gun, the sheriff allows him to carry only a single bullet in his shirt pocket. When the need arises, he fumbles for the bullet. Unfortunately, the need seems to arise frequently, and the disastrous outcome is always the same: The bullet is fired wildly, never reaching its intended destination.

This is where I believe a connection can be made to applied communications.

I think the applied communications set has its own version of the lone, ill-fated bullet. Its name, not coincidentally, is the "magic bullet" theory of communication, and it was a staple of early communications research.

Communication scholars Lowery and DeFleur (1995) describe the magic bullet theory of the early 20th century as a "frightening" take on the power of mass media (p. 13). According to the magic bullet perspective, the mass media exert an enormous influence over human beings: Communicators need only "shoot" individuals with a message to achieve rapid and direct changes in attitudes or behaviors.

The magic bullet perspective was relatively short-lived as a major theory due to the increasing volume and sophistication of communication research that began in the early 1900s. Empirical work soon began to paint a more realistic picture of mass media, our changing audiences, and the evolving, dynamic relationships between the two. In the wake of this research, the magic bullet theory was exposed as a gross oversimplification of the communication process. One of its major flaws was its depiction of human

beings as passive creatures who displayed universal reactions, regardless of a message's quality, reception, or intent. Most modern mass communication textbooks describe this theoretical perspective as a mere relic of social science history (DeFleur & Dennis, 1998; Folkerts, Lacy, & Davenport, 1998; Wilson & Wilson, 2001).

But I would assert that the magic bullet theory continues to play a role in applied communications. A live round remains in the metaphorical shirt pocket, ready to be discharged in a variety of settings and projects.

Consider, for example, the case of impact research, which is becoming more common in our field. We know from decades of social science research in other fields that effecting lasting changes in attitude, and certainly in behaviors, is difficult. Usually, changes occur slowly and incrementally, if at all. The purpose of impact research is to show evidence of this change. Cross-sectional research, or data collection limited to a single point in time, is unlikely to capture evidence of impact. Rather, reliable measures of impact may require multiple data collections using different research methods. Reducing this process to a single research project is tantamount to reaching for the magic bullet.

Another example can be found in the area of risk communication. Research across a wide range of risk situations shows that laypersons define risks differently from experts. The nonexpert view of risk is not less rational than the expert view, just more complex. Successful risk communication programs take time and expertise, not because audiences are irrational or "uneducated," but because of the vagaries of risk and the unique way that laypersons process risks and hazards. Single-shot risk communication or research programs are thus unlikely to produce measurable, lasting results. There is no magic bullet.

But there are deeper problems with the magic bullet mentality. It privileges communicators and disenfranchises audiences, leading to lopsided source-receiver relationships. Such relationships contradict the widely recommended and socially responsible practice of encouraging two-way, symmetrical engagement with our audiences, particularly for messages involving new technologies and unknown risks (Priest, 2005).

I wanted to address the magic bullet theory in this column not because it's the only pitfall we face in communications practice and research, but because it's illustrative of a unique need we have in our applied field. Here's the point: In 20 years of working alongside communicators and reading the literature, I have never once heard a colleague say that he or she used this theory as a decision-making tool. The magic bullet perspective has not

lingered because it's a viable theory—it has lingered because it has been largely invisible and untested.

This is why applied communicators need a forum to share and discuss professional experiences. Discussing and sharing our experiences—our successes and our failures—helps us visualize the communication process more clearly. Some of these experiences may take the form of research. Others may take the form of descriptions of some facet of our work through which we can share advice and recommendations. Weaknesses in our thinking, as well as better ways of doing things, are much more likely to be identified through this dialogue. ACE's special interest groups (SIGs) provide one such forum. The *Journal of Applied Communications* provides another.

Our *Journal of Applied Communications*

The *Journal of Applied Communications* is our forum, and it belongs to all of our SIGs. It's a proving ground for new communications methods and techniques, a vehicle for sharing the latest research, and a soapbox for speaking our minds. It's my job to ensure that content is timely, useful, and readable. I have a wonderful resource behind me in colleagues who review articles for the JAC. Some of these individuals are listed on page 13. These reviewers dedicate considerable time and expertise to the journal, strictly as a service to ACE. And, as usual, we continue to rely heavily on the detail-oriented editing and production work of Amanda Aubuchon, Carol Church, and Tracy Zwillingner at the University of Florida.

One of the new things we're doing to improve the journal is including a "So what?" box with each research article. The goal is to provide a concise statement for each research article, explaining why it's worth the time for busy communicators to read. It's our way of making applied communications research more accessible to everyone in our organization. We're committed to that goal. I want to thank my good friend, Laura Hoelscher, for suggesting, in characteristically blunt but accurate fashion, that this feature has been needed for some time.

There is something you can do to help us. I would like to request that you accept collective ownership of the JAC and take it as your job to help provide its content. We need you to submit articles that summarize your research or that suggest a better way of doing our jobs. Your article can take a number of different forms; visit <http://www.aceweb.org/JAC/jac.html> for more information about the JAC and the types of articles we seek. Or send me a note if you have something in mind or feedback you'd like to pass along to me. Please help us make the JAC a rich source of information for the ACE membership. I also want to thank you in advance for your willingness to serve as a reviewer for the JAC when your schedule permits.

I really do look forward to interacting with you throughout the year. Right now, I have to run. My favorite show is about to start. . . .

About the Author

Mark Tucker is associate professor of Agricultural Communication at Purdue University. A longtime ACE member, he is executive editor of the *Journal of Applied Communications* and chair of the academic programs SIG.

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