

Swan Song

Brett Lunceford*

In this article, the author reflects on founding the Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric, its origins as part of the Alabama Communication Association, and his role as editor of the journal for six years. After considering some of the defining moments of the journal, the author considers how this past may shape the future of the journal as it moves on to the new editor.

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It seems so long ago. It's hard to believe that I have been editor of the *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* for six years now. As I prepare to hand over the reins to the new editor, Mike Tumolo, I felt that some reflection on the past six years would be warranted. Still, writing an essay like this is something akin to writing one's own obituary, so when I considered how to approach this essay, I took as my inspiration works like Robert Oliver's "The Way It Was—All the Way" and others that tell the story of how things happened from the point of view of one of the protagonists.¹ As there is not much of a published history of the Alabama Communication Association, this may be as good of a place as any to tell that story as well. After all, without the formation of that association, the journal would not exist. But this is not just the story of the association; it is the story of this journal and this is a chance to explore where we came from, where we have been, and where we seem to be heading in the future. Even so, this is my version of the story, and others may have different ways of seeing these events.

We may as well start at the beginning, and it all started in Montgomery, Alabama. My dear friend from graduate school, John Saunders, called to tell me that Alabama needed a state association. Sherry Ford had noticed that all of the surrounding states had one, and mentioned this to John at the 2009 Southern States Communication Association convention. John went on to mobilize four of us: I was teaching at the University of South Alabama, Jason Black was at the University of Alabama, John was at Huntingdon College, and Sherry was at the University of Montevallo. The four of us would go on to become the founding members of the Alabama Communication Association.

After some discussion, we selected a date to get together and actually form the Alabama Communication Association and we decided that we would meet at John's house because it was in the

* Brett Lunceford (Ph.D. Pennsylvania State University) is the founding editor of the *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric*. He can be reached for comment at brettlunceford@gmail.com.

¹ Robert T. Oliver, "The Way It Was—All the Way": A Documentary Accounting (Washington, DC: National Communication Association, 1997). Other points of inspiration include Thomas W. Benson, "Another Shooting in Cowtown," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 67, no. 4 (1981): 347-406; Brett Lunceford, "Rhetorical Autoethnography," *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 5, no. 1/2 (2015): 1-20; Michael Pacanowsky, "Slouching Towards Chicago," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 74, no. 4 (1988): 453-67; Peter Simonson, "The Streets of Laredo: Mercurian Rhetoric and the Obama Campaign," *Western Journal of Communication* 74, no. 1 (2010): 94-126; Stephen A. Smith, "People, Power, and Realpoliticks in the Provinces," *American Communication Journal* 2, no. 1 (2000): <http://ac-journal.org/journal/vol2/Iss1/articles/smith.html>.

middle of all of us. Unfortunately, Jason and Sherry could not make it, so it was just John and I. After heading to the store and getting some fantastic steaks that we would grill for dinner, we arrived at John's house and began to study the structure of the other existing state organizations. Much of the material we found was out of date and minimal. Over the course of two days, we began to craft the bylaws that would become the framework of the organization. Well, maybe I'm being a bit overgenerous when I say "craft." What I should really say is that we proceeded to steal the bylaws we liked from other organizations to create a kind of frankenconstitution from the parts of other organizations. We were somewhat conflicted about this approach at first, but after looking at a bunch of them we realized that they were all quite similar—in many cases they were word for word copies. I called a lawyer friend of mine who explained that it was all pretty much boilerplate anyway and told us not to worry too much about it because there are only so many ways that you can say things in the form of bylaws.

I bought the domain *alabamacommunication.org* and began to craft the website. We posted the bylaws and began to sketch the first convention at Huntingdon College in Montgomery. John would serve as the first president of the organization and I would be the vice-president. We also decided that there should be a journal. However, we were in agreement that we needed to take a different approach from the standard association journal. We wanted to fill a niche that had been overlooked. John and I are both rhetoricians, so we decided that we would like to have a rhetoric journal. We were also open to the idea of having a general communication studies journal that would encompass rhetoric and social sciences, but frankly we couldn't find anyone that was interested in editing such a journal.

I had long been disillusioned with the way that most rhetoric journals were run. I felt that journals took far too long to be relevant to public discourse. I remember a time when I was finishing my Ph.D. at Penn State and met Barbara Warnick when we brought her in as a speaker. For those unfamiliar with her work, she has produced some excellent work on rhetoric and new media, which is one of my areas of study. When I asked her how she managed to write such works and get them into journals like *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, she replied that she always had to write as if she were a historian. In an age where Moore's Law predicts that computing power doubles every 18 months, this was unacceptable to me. I had worked in the technology sector before returning to graduate school, so I recognized how quickly things changed in the media landscape. After all, who remembers MySpace anymore? It hasn't been too long since everything went mobile. What we needed was an approach to publication that would allow for up-to-date rhetorical analysis.

As luck would have it, I had recently published a law review article with my brother who is an intellectual property attorney.² When he found out that wait times of four to six months just to get a revise and resubmit were not uncommon, he was appalled. "So it can take almost a year to even get published?" he asked. When I replied in the affirmative, he suggested that we write a paper together on the rhetoric of copyright law, an interest we both shared. We finished the article and sent it off to several journals at once. That was the first major departure I experienced. The more startling one was when I received the acceptance letter in less than three weeks. We worked with the editor who wanted to see our sources (they checked each one to make sure that the quotes were accurate) and made suggestions. They even converted our references from my preferred Chicago style to Bluebook style. This was a revelation of just how quickly one could publish if you didn't have to wait around for a print volume to come out. All of us, I am sure, have a story of an article

² Brett Lunceford and Shane Lunceford, "Meh. The Irrelevance of Copyright in the Public Mind," *Northwestern Journal of Technology and Intellectual Property* 7, no. 1 (2008): 33-49.

that gets accepted only to languish in publishing limbo before finally seeing the light of day in print years later. I certainly have some.

Thus, our first decision was to leverage the online space to speed up the process of publication. Remember that all of this was percolating in the days before such journals as *Relevant Rhetoric* and *Present Tense* had gone online. Indeed, we all seemed to have tapped into the same zeitgeist, as all of these journals hit the scene within a year or two of each other without any of us really seeming to know about each other. Because I already leased server space, it was quite easy to add another domain. I purchased the domains contemporaryrhetoric.com, contemporaryrhetoric.org, and contemporaryrhetoric.net and put the site up.

The ability to publish things quickly helped guide our mission. We wanted research that leveraged that speed. This led to a focus on current events; as John put it, we wanted “rhetoric with a pulse.” There have been attempts at this in the discipline, most notably the early issues of *Today’s Speech*. I had long had respect for *Today’s Speech* because the articles were interesting, retained their intellectual rigor, and were written in such a way that a non-specialist could read them as well. Over time, however, the journal has shifted in focus, changed its name to *Communication Quarterly*, and now functions much like any other communication journal. The very thing that made it so special had been abandoned.

We wanted this focus on accessible scholarship and public intellectualism codified into the mission of the journal from the beginning, and I wrote the mission statement to reflect this. I also carefully constructed the copyright agreement to allow the author to disseminate their work in as many venues that they saw fit. The only thing that we asked was that they acknowledge the journal’s prior publication of the work. We wanted scholarship to be useful, and to be useful it had to be available. Scholarship that remains hidden behind a paywall may be fine for tenure committees, but it isn’t much good to the general public. We wanted as many people as possible to read these articles, so we needed scholarship that was accessible, both in writing and in the ability to contribute to the public dialogue surrounding contemporary rhetorical issues. We wanted authors to provide contact information for those who may wish to discuss the article with them, and we were especially interested in catching the eye of journalists. This does happen occasionally; my essay on Second Amendment rhetoric was mentioned in *Newsweek* and a reporter from *Talking Points Memo* called me to discuss contemporary Second Amendment discourse in the Trump presidential campaign after finding the same article.³

With the domain purchased, website created, mission statement written, and a superb editorial board assembled, all we needed was content. I opened the journal with the salvo, “Must We All Be Rhetorical Historians? On Relevance and Timeliness in Rhetorical Scholarship.”⁴ This essay was part mission statement and part manifesto. Once I had finished the article and posted it, I told Rebecca, my spouse, “This is definitely going to piss some people off.” But I also figured that some people would love it. I was not wrong in either assessment. Overall, the responses I received were positive and many were excited about the prospects of a journal being run in a different manner, despite a few who were quite upset about what they saw as my denigration of historical research. For the record, I did not see it as completely trashing the idea of historical research, but

³ Ben Margulies, “Take Up Arms Against Hillary? The System’s Rigged? Does Trump Mean It?” *Newsweek*, August 13, 2016, <http://www.newsweek.com/kill-hillary-system-rigged-trump-mean-it-489792>; Tierney Sneed, “Trump Just the Latest on Hard Right to Call for ‘2nd Amendment Remedies,’” *Talking Points Memo*, August 11, 2016, <http://talkingpointsmemo.com/dc/trump-second-amendment-people-context>. The article mentioned was Brett Lunceford, “On the Rhetoric of Second Amendment Remedies,” *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 1 (2011): 31-39.

⁴ Brett Lunceford, “Must We All Be Rhetorical Historians? On Relevance and Timeliness in Rhetorical Scholarship,” *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 1, no. 1 (2011): 1-9.

rather that we needed both. I still stand by that assessment, but Mike Tumolo's thoughtful critique of my article has made me soften my approach somewhat.⁵

We had an article that introduced the journal and its *raison d'être*, but I still needed some content with which to launch the journal. I invited several people to write articles, but only three people stepped up. Mike Tumolo and his graduate student Ron Placone wrote an excellent essay on political comedy (with a nod to Diogenes) and my mentor Tom Benson wrote a wonderful piece on rhetoric and civility.⁶ I finished out the issue with an essay on the rhetoric of Second Amendment remedies.⁷ We had officially launched.

Over the next six years, we would go on to publish forty-nine articles, with this final essay of my tenure making an even fifty. I read every one of them, edited them, and formatted them. And these are just the articles that made it. There were many that never even made it out to reviewers because they were so far out of the scope of the journal (one on Isocrates that was better suited to a classical philology journal comes to mind) or just not ready for prime time. Others were sent out for review but rejected and still other manuscripts were offered a revise and resubmit but never materialized again. It was a lot of acceptance and rejection letters to write, but I am proud of the journal that we have all created together.

Along the way, we had some opportunities to try to and add a critical dimension to then-current events. For example, Andre Johnson guest-edited an excellent issue on race and rhetoric that had some fantastic essays on the Black Lives Matter movement.⁸ During the 2012 election, there was no White Anglo-Saxon Protestant in either the Democrat or Republican presidential ticket. Recognizing that religion had taken center stage, I ran a special issue on politics and religion.⁹ I have tried to solicit other guest edited issues for specific topics, but generally came up empty. Then again, the next issue will be guest edited by David Beard and Lisa Horton, so there are still those who will step up to the plate.

Other times, our format and mission allowed us to push the envelope in unexpected ways. One instance that comes to mind is the special issue I ran on rhetorical autoethnography. This started with an email from Brian Snee asking how we could pull off the blind review that we typically do when the essay is autoethnographic and based on events that are public record.¹⁰ I thought about this for a few days and finally responded that we simply wouldn't. We would run a special issue on rhetorical autoethnography. The article that I wrote introducing the special issue began as a

⁵ Mike wrote me and asked what I would think of him taking on my essay. I told him that I would love to see what he had in mind. I knew that he would provide a thoughtful, useful critique, which is the most that any scholar could ask for. True to form, he made me think of things in different ways. See Michael Tumolo, "On Useful Rhetorical History," *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 1 no. 2 (2011): 55-62.

⁶ Ronald A. Placone and Michael Tumolo, "Interrupting the Machine: Cynic Comedy in the 'Rally for Sanity and/or Fear,'" *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 1, no. 1 (2011): 10-21; Thomas W. Benson, "The Rhetoric of Civility: Power, Authenticity, and Democracy," *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 1, no. 1 (2011): 22-30.

⁷ Lunceford, "On the Rhetoric of Second Amendment Remedies."

⁸ See Julius Bailey and David J. Leonard, "Black Lives Matter: Post-Nihilistic Freedom Dreams," *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 5, no. 3/4 (2015): 67-77; Catherine L. Langford and Montené Speight, "#BlackLivesMatter: Epistemic Positioning, Challenges, and Possibilities," *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 5, no. 3/4 (2015): 78-89; and Mark Orbe, "#AllLivesMatter as Post-Racial Rhetorical Strategy," *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 5, no. 3/4 (2015): 90-98.

⁹ My introduction to this issue can be found at Brett Lunceford, "Rhetoric and Religion in Contemporary Politics," *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 2, no. 2 (2012): 19-29.

¹⁰ Brian J. Snee, "Cyber-Storming the Castle," *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 5, no. 1/2 (2015): 21-28.

standard five-page introduction but quickly evolved into a twenty-page method piece when I realized that we were sailing in some less-charted waters.¹¹ The articles were likewise non-traditional, which I found invigorating and refreshing. I can honestly say that I had never before thought of the rhetorical aspects of picking out a wedding dress!¹² The entire structure of the journal allows one to take chances that people would not have been able to do otherwise, both as an editor and as an author. As one twitter user wrote, “Just read @BrettLunceford’s piece on Rhetorical Autoethnography. What about Rhetorical Performative Autoethnography? Too far?”¹³ My response: “@brownsugarfx keep pushing the boundaries and we’ll find out!”

As we move into our seventh year, it feels like we finally have the training wheels off. The Alabama Communication Association has held six successful conferences, provided numerous students with their first conference presentations, created opportunities for top graduate student award winners to attend SSCA, and has been recognized at the regional and national levels for its work to connect communication scholars all over Alabama and beyond. There have also been many changes; only one of the original four people behind the organization are even still in Alabama, and none of us are in leadership positions.

Still, what I think sets the ACA apart from other state associations is the vision that we had for the journal. We never saw the *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* as merely a state journal, and the range of authors and depth of the editorial board attest to this as well. The scholarship that we have produced has been excellent and I am pleased that these articles can be found both in the traditional scholarly databases and freely available online. I have used these articles in my classes and in my own research. I have nominated several of them for awards, with one earning the author the Scholar of the Year award from the National States Advisory Council.¹⁴ My editorial board members and ad-hoc reviewers have been stellar. We have accomplished much in these six years, and a fair amount of this success comes from the fact that we were not afraid to take risks, to potentially fail and fail hard. John and I joked that this could all go down in flames like the Hindenburg, but at least we would be able to say that we gave it our best shot. We had started something—with the organization, with the journal—and not very many people get the opportunity to do that. I feel blessed to have had such extraordinary people believe in the journal and come along for the ride. I am very excited to see how the journal continues to grow and evolve under the new editor’s leadership and I am glad to be leaving the journal in such good hands.

¹¹ See Lunceford, “Rhetorical Autoethnography.” These waters were not completely foreign, of course, as there was already a considerable amount of work on autoethnography—specifically in the work of Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner. Still, there was much less on rhetorical autoethnography, so I felt some obligation to justify how autoethnography and rhetorical criticism could work together. For more on autoethnography in general, see Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner, “Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, Reflexivity: Researcher as Subject,” in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, 2nd ed., 733-68 (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000).

¹² Jennifer Burg, “Say Yes to the Text,” *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 5, no.1/2 (2015): 42-49.

¹³ MC AC, Twitter post, November 4, 2016, 9:19 p.m., <https://twitter.com/brownsugarfx/status/794725804353716224/photo/1>.

¹⁴ John H. Saunders, “Disaster and Memory: How the Tragic Erasure of Mnemonic Devices Affects Personal Memory,” *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 5, no. 1/2 (2015): 29-36.