

Critical Commentary

AltNCA Comes to UDC: How Should Academic Associations “Fight for Humanity”?

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Taking UDC’s 2018 conference theme as a prompt, I put together a panel asking participants, “How Should Academic Associations ‘Fight for Humanity’?” after organizing alternative accommodations for NCA’s (National Communication Association) 103rd convention because of a boycott of Texas, the host state. Immigration activists and the State of California were boycotting Texas anti-immigrant and anti-LGBTQ laws, respectively. As organizing this alternative convention moved forward, and indeed, at the convention itself, I found myself asking the same questions that inspired UDC’s founding three decades ago: What is an academic association for? How can an academic association politically mobilize through a union of radical scholars to work for justice, equity, and peace? This essay engages these questions and asks UDC members to build a solidarity network to support each other in the fight for humanity.

Key context

On July 8, 2017, Reform Immigration Texas Alliance (RITA) asked the National Communication Association (NCA) to boycott Texas because of its anti-immigrant law SB4 that targeted sanctuary cities in letters addressed to the NCA president and the Critical and Cultural Studies Executive Board. Citing the extreme racism and anti-immigrant nature of SB4 that deputizes local law enforcement officers to act as ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) agents, RITA asked NCA and “all organizations of good conscience” to “refuse to come to Texas until SB4 is repealed.” RITA approached thirteen other large associations scheduled for conferences in 2017. At the same time California banned funding for state business, including academic travel to Texas due to the HB3859 bill that discriminates against LGBTQ families by allowing child welfare providers to deny services to LGBTQ family members and provides legal cover for sending foster children to anti-LGBTQ conversion therapy.

NCA refused to honor these boycotts. Consequently, members wanting to honor the boycott used Facebook and Google Docs to organize accommodations outside of Texas. We called our group “Alt.NCA,” and found alternative accommodations in floating cabins across the Texas state line in an Oklahoma state park. With tepid official sanctioning from NCA, and due to the enormous impact that the travel conditions would have upon members’ time, health and ability constraints, eliciting a mass body of resistance was virtually impossible. Instead, six NCA members (four faculty and two graduate students) signed up and commuted four hours a day in carpools, round-trip, to and from the conference site.

What is the mission of scholarly associations?

Five of the six of the boycotting scholars served in leadership roles in divisions in 2017 (Critical and Communication Studies, and the Cross Examination Debate Association); in these roles we represented our divisions at the Legislative Assembly (LA), where the very mission of our organization was debated. Some LA members introduced resolutions supporting diversity, inclusiveness, equality and peace. Others, however, argued that communication scholars are not “activists,” but are, instead, “professionals,” implying that scholars should not get involved in political issues surrounding our work. Consequently, the floating contingent asked our colleagues what NCA is for if not for using communication research and teaching to create a more fair, equitable, and peaceful world? Doing so would serve NCA’s mission as an organization “dedicated to fostering and promoting free and ethical communication” that “supports inclusiveness and diversity among our faculties, within our membership, in the workplace, and in the classroom... [and] supports and promotes policies that fairly encourage this diversity and inclusion” (“What is NCA?” 2018). Too narrowly interpreted, however, NCA “advances Communication” as a discipline, in the first and last instance and creates a false opposition between discipline and politics (“What is NCA?” 2018).

I characterize this position as “false” because, firstly, disciplinary work is always already political (Schmidt 2001), and secondly, NCA can put the professional expertise of its members to work for democracy and social justice. On this last point, NCA officially embraces social justice as one of its academic and professional pillars through the following symbolic articulations: the 2015 founding of the new “Activism and Social Justice” division, the 2016 conference theme of “Communication’s Civic Callings,” and numerous policy resolutions, including the 2017 credo “Resolution Regarding State Legislative Limits on Diversity and Inclusion.” For members of Alt.NCA, these symbolic moves have not translated into any material gains. Thus, our Alt.NCA experiences recall the conditions and quandaries surrounding UDC’s founding, when a group of ICA (International Communication Association) members decided that reform of that association was futile and that the creation of an entirely separate one was warranted. UDC understands that the professional is political and takes as a founding assumption the need to change the system to realize the promise of democracy and to serve humanity.

Moreover, regarding the political and the professional, the Union for Democratic Communications (UDC), takes a both/and approach. UDC seeks to advance the “critical study of the communications establishment” and the “development of democratic communications systems locally, regionally and internationally” (“About the UDC” 2018). Our mission statement further specifies that through “conferences, activism, scholarship, and other activities, UDC seeks to... Advocate for the creation of structures to promote democratic communications [and to] work with other progressive organizations to facilitate the production and distribution of democratic communications” (“About the UDC” 2018). Thus, UDC’s position on taking action to produce a democratic society is clear. UDC’s bylaws describe a similar mission:

The Union for Democratic Communications is an organization that seeks to promote progressive systems that advance the broadest collective participation in the decisions that affect our lives. It is only through such democratic communication structures that we can overcome cultural hegemony and contribute to building a world based on economic justice, equality, and peace.

UDC’s founding document makes explicit the connection between building democratic systems and serving Communications. The purpose of both projects is to build an economically equitable, socially just, and peaceful world. Thus, the 2018 conference theme, “The Fight For Humanity,” conveyed our enduring

mission. As a member of both NCA and UDC, the point of this essay is not to lambast NCA and praise UDC, but to challenge us as UDC members to ask ourselves if we are achieving our mission, some thirty-five years later. As older communication associations like NCA (founded in 1914) take an ambivalent stance on democratic and social justice activism, I ask UDC members to consider whether our association serves as a productive refuge for scholar-activists seeking solidarity with others who seek to radically change the system through our research, teaching, and activism. The “Trump Age of Cruelty” (see Levina and Kumi 2018) continues and intensifies aggressive policies that benefit the wealthiest, attack marginalized communities, public education and the public good, harbor aggrieved violent white masculinity, and above all, degrade our humanity. Thus, I ask: What should our purpose be as an academic organization? How can our conferences and association “overcome cultural hegemony” and realize a “world based on economic justice, equality and peace” as our bylaws have long challenged us to do?

Given that UDC was formed by a group of critical scholars, tired of reforming ICA, what can Alt.NCA’s “floating caucus” do to build the “broadest collective participation” in a moment that feels newly urgent and like history repeating itself? How can UDC support these 6 scholars and each other?

Solidarity Network NOW!

I want to suggest that we build a solidarity network. In some ways UDC is already this, a network of scholars who are friends and mentors; we provide advice, co-author publications, and hire each other. Building on that academic, professional solidarity -- how might we engage in political solidarity? If, for example, a colleague experiences harassment in the media or on campus, or by a co-worker, how can we as UDC members support the targeted member? How can we use media (social and otherwise) to support each other and build that support out beyond our UDC membership? How can we create a network to act on the advice given by UDC member and floating caucus member, Dana Cloud regarding what to do when attacked by right-wing political agents (Cloud 2017)? I invite further discussion of ways to realize a solidarity network for radical communications scholars.

References

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