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Teaching Communication Graduate Students to Locate and Identify Reliable Editions of Speeches

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Locating and identifying the most accurate and authoritative edition of a text — whether it is the text of a literary work, a speech, a bill, a law or holding, or a statistical table — is an activity which most reference librarians handle routinely, although not always consciously or successfully.¹ The process in fact is fundamental to historical research in every discipline and especially important in that of speech communication. But while obtaining accurate printed editions of the texts of speeches has long been recognized as essential, the literature of communication has frequently and dramatically revealed that "published speeches cannot be depended upon to preserve the actual speech given at a particular time," suggesting that scholars (and likely their students) need to know more about the resources and processes which can be used to locate and identify reliable editions as well as to prepare new ones.²

Vague Understandings

Indeed, the vague and sometimes inaccurate descriptions of editorial studies which appear in the standard methodological guides, like those by Thonssen, Auer, Phifer, and Bormann, reveal that the objectives and principles of bibliographical and textual studies as they relate to oral texts are perhaps not more than generally understood.³ Bosmajian's analysis of inaccuracies in editions of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech is only a recent example of an editorial study which has identified the very real need to give greater attention to identifying as well as preparing textually accurate editions of our best known oral texts.

An Educational Approach

One way to encourage communication students (the scholars of the future) to develop a healthy scholarly appreciation for the importance of reliable editions of oral texts, printed or otherwise,⁴ as well as to introduce them to the basic bibliographic resources and the principles of textual study, is to have the students engage in a few editorial exercises.

This article describes an introduction to the resources and processes involved in locating and identifying reliable oral texts which was included in a graduate seminar on methods of historical research in communication. Students compared and analyzed several versions or editions of two well-known speeches and prepared a new edition of one of them as a graded assignment. These exercises were preceded by several lectures and hands-on encounters dealing with the major bibliographic resources which are useful in historical research in communication, as well as by a presentation on the use of archival materials by the Special Collections librarian. Other important bibliographic resources were identified and discussed in relation to the exercises as they progressed.

The Oral Texts

Two specific oral texts — Abraham Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address" and Newton N. Minow's "Television: A Vast Wasteland" — were selected for study by the class. Lincoln's speech provides an oral text whose brevity and compactness conceal enormous textual complexities for a scholar interested in using the most accurate and authentic edition of what Lincoln said on 19 November 1863. Furthermore, its myriad reprintings confront the student with many different embodiments of the text, none of which can be counted on to be absolutely identical.

The "Gettysburg Address" Assignment

Each student first received a set of photocopies of the five holograph copies of the speech.⁵ Students were also required to locate copies of several editions of the speech as it appeared in contemporary newspapers. This part of the assignment required students to refer to microfilm editions of the *New York Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Times* of London, and the like. The details of the holograph and newspaper texts were then compared and discussed. The class reviewed the internal and external evidence and tried to reconstruct the genealogy of these manuscript and printed texts. Finally, students provided brief (two- or three-page) analyses of the texts, indicating what they believed Lincoln actually said at Gettysburg.

Inconsistencies Revealed.

Not surprisingly, the class as a whole concluded that the standard historical edition of this oratorical classic cannot claim to document Lincoln's spoken words exactly.⁶ Even more enlightening, however, was the discovery of a popular complacency about the textual facts of the speech. One student found, for instance, that the *World Book Encyclopedia* (1987 ed.) identified the "fifth version" as the text which "perhaps represents as exactly as can be known the speech he gave" (VIII, 166). The student quite correctly pointed out that the historical evidence, in fact, indicates that the fifth version, written by Lincoln "sometime later than March 4, 1864," more likely reveals only what Lincoln wished he had said (Basler, VII, 22).

The Second Assignment

Later in the semester, the class closely considered Federal Communications Commission Chairman Newton Minow's speech before the National Association of Broadcasters on 9 May 1961. Minow's speech offered the class an opportunity to study a classic indictment of television which continues to engage the interests of a wide variety of communication scholars.

Authority and Historical Context.

The students first needed to identify the most reliable edition of the speech. This required the use of a variety of indexing sources, like the *Speech Index* and *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature*, to locate editions of the speech in contemporary sources like *Broadcasting*, the *New York Times*, *Vital Speeches of the Day*, and the like, as well as in more recent anthologies. Next, using the most authoritative edition of the speech as a "copytext,"⁷ each student prepared a new edition in a manner suitable for publication in an anthology of seminal speeches and documents on the history of communication. This edition was to include an historical introduction to the speech, with a brief discussion of the text's authority, as well as historical annotations and a textual apparatus. Although the speech apparently possesses none of the textual complexities of "The Gettysburg Address," comparison of several editions revealed textual differences which

cautioned against a complacent acceptance of any particular edition until its authority was determined.

Tracking Down References.

The students found this assignment very demanding. The majority identified the most reliable text as Thonssen's edition in *Representative American Speeches: 1961-1962*,⁸ and concentrated on providing a good historical introduction (three to five pages) and historical annotations for Minow's references to "New Frontier," "Playhouse 90," "rigged quiz shows," and the like. Most found researching and writing the historical annotations to be the highlights of the exercise. They needed to make practical use of a number of library resources like the *Oxford English Dictionary* to define "payola" and Vincent Terrace's *Complete Encyclopedia of Television Programs, 1947-1979* (New York: A.S. Barnes, 1979) to identify "The Untouchables," as well as standard histories, such as Eric Barnouw's *A History of Broadcasting in the United States* (New York: Oxford, 1966-70).

Searching Exhaustively.

On the other hand, the exercise also provided an opportunity for the more resourceful students to attempt an exhaustive search for the most authoritative text of the speech. One student went so far as to try to obtain through interlibrary loan a recording of the speech produced by the Pacifica Tape Library in 1961 which she identified in the *National Union Catalog*. The library has since purchased the recording. I hope to use it in future editorial exercises.

An Appreciation for Textual Authority

While the rigors of this exercise made it very clear to most of the students that they were perhaps not destined for careers as bibliographers or editors, each nonetheless developed from firsthand experience a practical knowledge of the uses of specific bibliographic resources and an appreciation for the kinds of problems which must be considered and solved in order to identify or provide the most accurate and authoritative edition of an oral text. Coincidentally, a few students noted that they started to pay closer attention to the textual introductions, footnotes, and apparatuses in the books used in other courses. One even remarked that she asked an instructor about his reasons for using one particular text instead of others. Clearly, these students had developed a basic appreciation of textual authority. They were no longer indifferent to the texts which they were required to use. The development of this textual awareness in future communication scholars, more than anything else, made the introduction to editorial studies worthwhile.

References

¹Randolph G. Adams, "Librarians as Enemies of Books," *Library Quarterly* 7 (July 1937): 317-331, and G. Thomas Tanselle, "Bibliographers and the Library," *Library Trends* 25 (April 1977): 745-762, relate several instances of librarians' carelessness about the selection of reliable printed texts. Both Adams and Tanselle, however, like Arthur Brown in "The Text, the Bibliographer, and the Librarian," in *Otium et Negotiant: Studies in Onomatology and Library Science Presented to Olof von Feilitzen*, ed. Folke Sandgren (Stockholm: Norstedt and Soner, 1973), pp. 23-31, believe that librarians are in a unique position to instruct their clients to identify reliable texts.

²Haig Bosmajian, "The Inaccuracies in the Reprintings of Martin Luther King's 'I Have a Dream' Speech," *Communication Education* 31 (April 1982): 107-114.

³ See Lester Thonssen and A.C. Baird, *Speech Criticism: The Development of Standards for Rhetorical Appraisal*

(New York: Ronald Press, 1948); J. Jeffery Auer, *An Introduction to Research in Speech* (New York: Harper and Row, 1959); Gregg Phifer, "The Historical Approach," in *An Introduction to Graduate Study in Speech and Theatre*, ed. Clyde W. Dow (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1961), pp. 52-80; and Ernest G. Bormann, *Theory and Research in the Communicative Arts* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1965). The most recent methodological guide which treats historical research, Rebecca B. Rubin, Alan M. Rubin, and Linda J. Piele's *Communication Research: Strategies and Sources* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1986), paraphrases Phifer (p. 55) as follows: "Editorial studies focus on the translation of an old source or prepare newly discovered sources for publication (for example, such studies might include analyses of yet unpublished translations of orators' speeches, or of writings that describe a new area of communication research in another country)" (p. 58). In fact, the standard methodologies, including Phifer, imply that some of the most inaccurate editions of oral texts might be those most well known, most quoted, and most reprinted. That the Rubin, Rubin, and Piele guide is intended for a wide undergraduate audience will likely only further cloud the general understanding of the basic objective of editorial study — to provide the most accurate edition of an oral text.

⁴Bosmajian ("The Inaccuracies," p. 114) notes that not even the recordings of King's speech are identical: "Two of King's sentences have been edited out" of the Twentieth Century Fox Records' recording.

⁵Facsimiles of the holographs were conveniently available in David C. Mearns and Lloyd A. Dunlap, eds., *Long Remembered: Facsimiles of the Five Versions of the Gettysburg Address in the Handwriting of Abraham Lincoln* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1963).

⁶ Because the objective of an historical edition is to preserve documentary evidence, Roy Basler's edition of Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address" in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953), VII, 16-23, provides transcriptions of the five holographs and reprints a copy of the *New York Times'* edition of the speech. The historical editor does not attempt to reconstruct a single edition of the oral text of the speech by emending any one particular version with authoritative evidence from others.

⁷"Copytext," used here as it is understood in literary editing, refers to the version of the text which appears "to offer a better basis for the edited text than any other," that is, the version which is more authoritative in its details, although not necessarily flawless. [See Philip Gaskell, *From Writer to Reader: Studies in Editorial Method* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), pp. 2-10.] The copytext of an oral text is the version which more closely resembles what was actually said.

⁸Lester Thonssen, in *Representative American Speeches: 1961-1962* (New York: H.W. Wilson, 1962), notes that the text of his edition was "furnished by Tedson J. Meyers, administrative assistant to Mr. Minow" (p. 64). Of the various editions of Minow's speech which the class discovered, only Thonssen's acknowledged its source of authority. Comparison of this edition and others with a recording of the speech which became available after the exercise revealed that none of the printed texts was accurate or reliable and that a new edition needs to be prepared.