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# How Scholarship Matters

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# How Scholarship Matters

## **Disciplines**

Communication | Critical and Cultural Studies | Social and Behavioral Sciences

## **Comments**

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# Epilogue

## HOW SCHOLARSHIP MATTERS

BARBIE ZELIZER

Most scholars would say that they engage in intellectual work for the sheer joy of it, yet underlying a fierce curiosity about the efforts of the mind rests a humble hope that our scholarship will not perish when we are no longer around to remind others of its relevance. This volume asks us to consider concepts in cultural studies. In particular, it assesses the basic impulses of the work of James Carey in the context of those who claim its influence on their own scholarship. It is a smart, timely, and useful effort to delineate the setting in which Carey's ideas might and do live on. It is also a clear testament to him, and to those he taught and mentored, that the offerings compiled here come from some of the most renowned and respected scholars in the field.

It is, then, with a large dose of humility that I attempt a task first mandated to Carey himself. This book began while he was still alive, and its epilogue was to have been his place to voice his assessments of the articles collected here, to say whether they got things right or wrong or moved in directions he had not anticipated. I can do no justice to that task, so I will instead take my comments on a different path, envisioning Carey's scholarship through the prism of Raymond Williams's keywords project and considering the chapters compiled here as illustrative of a collective critical moment, one that

necessarily moves an academic community from honoring a deeply venerated individual and scholar and his terms of intellectual inquiry to positioning his work in context after he is gone. What that movement signifies about the health and durability of academic inquiry is central to understanding both the role of individuals as motivators of the collective and the resilience of the collective to journey on once the individual is no longer among its members.

The questions, then, raised here are central: How have Carey's scholarship and key terms of inquiry fared over time? Are they still productive, and if so, among whom, to what extent, and on which grounds?

## On Keywords and James Carey

Keywords offer a fertile place to begin in taking stock of a field, and they have emerged as useful tools for doing so at certain moments or in response to certain critical incidents.<sup>1</sup> This book, organized as an extended conversation about some of the keywords that were central to Carey's work, builds on the commonsensical relevance that keywords have accrued in our culture. Providing a kind of shorthand to central, complicated, and controversial ideas, examinations of keywords have moved with astonishing ease and rapidity into our understanding of the world, appearing in places as varied as information retrieval, computer networking, and citation analysis. Though they date to work in semantics produced during the late nineteenth century,<sup>2</sup> their popular usage today draws most directly from the cultural critic Raymond Williams (1983), who argued that keywords mark the collective edges of consciousness by which a collective decides what matters.

As Williams saw his project, the relationship between culture and society could be seen in an encapsulated form in the key terms by which the people of a given time period referenced their world. The keywords he selected—a mere 131—embodied a set of conceptual supports for the time span of one of his seminal books, *Culture and Society* (1958). While working on that volume, Williams compiled a list of terms that he realized were central both to understanding the cultural formations of the time and to anticipating their development over time. Though the list was originally planned as an appendix to *Culture and Society*, it was instead published nearly twenty years later as an independent collection of reflective essays on words. Published in 1976 with only 110 entries and updated in 1983, *Keywords* offered a glossary of the cultural terms that mattered to the time period under question. Many of those original terms still stand, although only forty-one of them were transported into *New Keywords* (Bennett, Grossberg, and

Morris 2005), which took Williams's experiments with words and transposed them, with alterations, onto the contemporary moment.

If faced with the task of identifying the keywords central to scholarship, many scholars might find their names affixed to only a handful of such terms, but the list of topics for this volume about James Carey covers virtually all of communication's core. They are worth listing: history/temporality, radical pedagogy, space, religion, community/communication, culture, popular culture, oral culture, ritual, identity, professionalism in journalism, democracy/power, ethics, empire/globalization, the public, technology. The prescience and scope of these terms is breathtaking; one might argue that Carey anticipated some of the broadest contours by which communication would confront its own evolution as a discipline.

Placed in this volume in three groups of essays, whose titling I will take up later in this epilogue, the keywords that Carey brought to life mark many of the impulses on the underside of communication's default setting. In helping us to orient more effectively and fully toward the messiness that had generally eluded a field that widely adopted more direct and readily replicable models of communication, Carey's keywords function much like an alternative guide to the field. His is the guidebook that we pick up on a second trip to the bookstore before embarking on a journey to a new location, amid hopes that its specialist walking tours, low-budget offerings, or particularistic orientations toward a given place might offer some additional element to that provided by the more conventional mainstream guides.

Carey's mapping of the field, of course, was much more than an alternative guide to the terrain. It allowed scores of scholars to look anew at communication and find contingent, contextual, and evolving answers to the questions their investigations produced. Additionally, unlike the myriad often forgettable tomes that clutter the bookstore's travel section, Carey's guidebook enjoys a durability and persistence that speaks to a resilience of the alternative view, making one wonder about all the forces that consciously and unconsciously helped to keep it alternative. As Catherine Warren reminds us in this volume, Carey's 1975 comment—that the ritual view of communication “has not been a dominant motif in American scholarship”—remains the case today.

But how resilient or marginal has Carey's view actually been, and against which forces has it wrestled most effectively? Which of its aspects have survived more heartily than others and among which parts of our academic community? Through which terms are we able to discern what is most valuable about what has remained?