

## CRITIC AT LARGE

### What We Have Here Is ... the International Communication Association

By CARLIN ROMANO

Dresden, Germany

The most famous act of communication — or failure of communication — in the history of this iconic 800-year-old city began on February 13, 1945.

In three waves of attacks, British and American bombers dropped nearly 4,000 tons of bombs on a city whose residents hoped their town's fabled Baroque beauty, art, and architecture, and putatively minor connection to the Nazi war effort, would protect them from just such a pasting.

The firebombing many now simply call "Dresden," as they speak of "Hiroshima" or "Pearl Harbor," killed between 25,000 and 125,000 people. What explains the vast discrepancy in the death toll? At the time, hundreds of thousands of refugees from the East, fleeing the advancing Russian Army, packed the city. More enduring mist in the fog of war.

Sitting this summer in Dresden's sparkling new International Congress Center, with its spectacular view of the Elbe and restored marvels of the Altstadt, one leafs through the 286-page program of the annual International Communication Association conference — the first in Germany since 1977, with hundreds of scholarly sessions and nearly 2,000 attendees — and finds not a single panel on "Dresden."

Too painful and unmentionable for locals? Too irrelevant for communication scholars? Too amorphous in a field whose dominant empirical, social-science side prides itself on upfront methodologies, graphs, surveys, measurement, and the attendant instruments of scientism? Who wants to broach a subject so murky that posterity can't distinguish between 25,000 and 125,000 people-units? Does the American Philosophical Association hold panels on "The Metaphysics of Boston" when it alights there? (No.) Does the MLA highlight Philadelphia literature when it meets in that city? (Well, yes.)

"Usually, ICA conferences do not really deal very much with the specific culture, tradition, and history of the spot chosen," explains Wolfgang Donsbach, professor of communication at Dresden University of Technology, director of its communication department, and former president of ICA (2004-5), who brought this year's meeting to town. ICA planners, Donsbach says, never even discussed having a panel on the bombing.

"People tend to present the work they are working on anyway," Donsbach continues, "and they're not making choices on what to present by the specific site selected." To his mind, it sufficed that ICA put on an exhibition about Dresden's identity. For Donsbach, who comes from near Mainz but has taught at Dresden for 13 years, the muted attention felt right.

"I think Dresden is focusing far too much on its history and on February 13th," he says evenly of his fellow Dresdeners, particularly older residents upset by their town's fall from historical grace during both World War II and the subsequent German Democratic Republic, "and it's time to give that a rest." A top international expert in public-opinion research, Donsbach quips,

"Twenty percent of Dresdeners believe in God, but everyone believes in the Frauenkirche" — Dresden's recently restored cathedral and symbol of the city.

ICA at Dresden looked forward, sideways, upward, and down — everywhere except back into the nightmare of its host community. Founded more than 50 years ago by American researchers and now a group of more than 3,500 members in 65 countries, ICA brings together research on an astounding array of subjects. One-sidedness in Korean news. The nuances of Indian marriage advertisements. The image of Morocco in international media. Sexual content in African-American situation comedies.

Many presentations come in tight, staccato 15-minute bursts, with hypotheses and conclusions projected in PowerPointese. In its early years, empirical social research dominated ICA. Panels at ICA sometimes boast catchy titles like "Campaign Causal Attribution: Group Randomized Design, Longitudinal Analysis, and Theory Testing."

In recent years, newer groups among the association's 21 divisions, such as "Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies," have reflected growth in what the old guard calls a "cultural studies" or "interpretive" approach. Young American scholars, Donsbach finds, appear headed in an interpretive direction, while their European peers turn more empirical. A former president of the World Association for Public Opinion Research, he has turned his tools on ICA and detected that average annual-conference registrants attend sessions in 3.5 divisions — like participants at other academic conventions, they tend to stick to their own areas.

Yet Donsbach credits factions at ICA with staying friendly. At the session on German news sites, Jürgen Habermas, Germany's distinguished philosophical patriarch and a paramount communications theorist in his work on deliberative democracy, sat in a blue short-sleeve shirt in the third row, chin in palm of hand, soaking up data about scoops by German news sites.

In light of the ironies around every ICA corner, the good-will element counts for much. At one session on "International Collaboration Among Communication Associations," representatives of the rival International Association for Media and Communications Research, as well as some of the 18 or 19 national associations of communication research, met to discuss whether they could communicate — at least enough not to schedule overlapping events. One participant suggested it would be wonderful "if we could all speak in one voice" on issues such as proper European Union policy. "That's a very big 'if,'" the woman leading the discussion replied merrily. Several speakers expressed fear that excessive cooperation would result in repetitive information and overflowing e-mail boxes.

*Too much communication!*

Another irony is that even when ICA operates outside its North American home base every few years, its only language of presentation is English. "ICA grew out of an American association," Donsbach explains. "Sixty-nine percent of the members are American. So in the beginning it was no issue." As ICA internationalized, officials reconsidered, but realized simultaneous translation could cost the organization "hundreds of thousands of bucks." The English-only rule endured. ICA has, however, gestured to multilingualism in other ways. Submissions to its journals can't be rejected only because of inadequate English. If the research merits publication, someone cleans up the language. Submissions for ICA's book awards can be in any language.

Might the gut reason behind this year's silence about 1945 lie in ICA's lingering "American-ness"? Donsbach sticks to his earlier analysis, though he concedes that the perceived politics of ICA's members has also evolved. "In the beginning at IAMCR," Donsbach says, referring to the rival group in which he was once more active, "ICA was always something like 'CIA.' You know, the academic friends of CIA." As a joke? "No, they took it seriously. That was the time of the cold war." Americans who participated in IAMCR, he explains, tended to be left-wing internationalists.

As the sessions rolled on, however, and an ICA first-timer slowly fathomed the program's concerns, a unifying connection between the empiricists and the interpretive types emerged. Communication scholars focus far more on successful communication than failure to communicate. Many papers look at one technology — cellphones, the Internet, TV, newspapers — and measure the consequences of its relative success. Another type of research scrutinizes all sorts of communication in a specific institutional context, such as the medical world. Judging by ICA's program, few scholars start with communication failure and probe its cultural implications.

Take politics. Many current international crises involve the diplomatic decision of A not to talk to B. The United States won't talk with North Korea unless four other countries join in. Ditto, more or less, for the United States and Iran. Israel and Hezbollah communicate by missile. Is there a timely subject here? Yet "Diplomatic Noncommunication" didn't seem to be on anyone's agenda. And, *pace* Donsbach, it's clear ICA's program committee can spot a good hook from a distance when the hook is upbeat. A "high density" panel with 15 presenters on the meeting's fourth day addressed "The Football World Cup and Global Popular Culture," an event partly played out in nearby Leipzig. (Next year expect a paper, "Zidane and the Profane: Head Butt as Procrustean Internet Mythos.")

A modest proposal would be to establish a 22nd ICA division, "Failure to Communicate." Its members could pledge to rent *Cool Hand Luke* once a year. Yet the 21st century's lasting academic genius will be the wiz who eliminates simultaneous sessions at conferences (through some combo of cloning, stem-cell research, and free DVD's of missed panels). We don't need more.

Better to urge that members of the other 21 divisions try harder to recognize "Failure to Communicate" as part of their subject. Here, in a city where temperatures once hit 1,500°C, one might have discussed how Russian military intelligence could have reported that trains stuck in Dresden's main station contained German troops, rather than refugees from the East. Here, where officials cremated in the Altmarkt 6,865 people not already vaporized, one need only look around to get the point.

*Carlin Romano, critic at large for The Chronicle and literary critic for The Philadelphia Inquirer, teaches philosophy and media theory at the University of Pennsylvania.*