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ABSTRACT

Despite large rural areas, the United States is basically an urban nation, particularly since the extensiveness and variety of communication networks, rather than open spaces, determine the true degree of urbanization of a region or community. A region is urban to the extent that its interpersonal and media channels are developed. The metropolitan city, with its diverse groups of people, occupations, and ideologies, is urban only if these diversities are interrelated and interdependent through communication networks. An individual's urbanism is determined by the degree to which he participates in and responds to communication messages. American cities are becoming increasingly "de-urbanized," not only because of departures of businesses and families, but also because of the insularity and isolation of those who remain. This isolation is caused largely by feelings of instability and insecurity. The great problem of cities is to increase public participation in the communication networks. The city colleges can play a major role, with their unique opportunities to provide a more urban outlook to their students through varied curricula and adult education programs.

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OUR DE-URBANIZED CITIES AND OTHER OBVIOUS PARADOXES

--An Outsider's Contributions to an Action Caucus of the SCA

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OUR DE-URBANIZED CITIES AND OTHER OBVIOUS PARADOXES  
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Eugene F. Shaw

Federal agencies, foundation research grants and college courses, all bearing the urban label, have proliferated in this country during the past few decades--and for good reason. The interest in supposedly urban problems and urban projects accurately reflects the obvious: the United States is an urban nation.

But newly created urban agencies often undertake to ameliorate only neighborhood difficulties and to encourage community self-help rather than to inaugurate and maintain specifically urban projects. The funded urban research tends to investigate ghetto areas and social and behavioral problems within a metropolitan sector but neglect for the most part, or at best only peripherally study, urban problems as such. And the variety of courses flourishing under the urban banner and sheltered by various departments within a university almost invariably concentrate merely on the designated discipline's subject matter in a city setting rather than focusing on the urban realm according to the particular science's specialized perspective.

Since all this may sound like doubletalk, I hasten to add that I distinguish between 'city' and 'urban,' as anyone does who feels comfortable speaking about the "urban farmer" or agrees that, indeed, it is obvious that the United States is an urban nation--despite the fact that this country's several urban corridors and other American cities, large and small, are separated from each other by miles of

rural land worked by many a farmer, often an urban one.

Concepts have a way of influencing thought and behavior, as we all know, and the terms we use in naming persons, objects, events, even gatherings like an action caucus, affect our perceptions of them, as well as our attitudes toward and involvement in them. I note with great satisfaction that the purpose of this assembled caucus is the "development of a model mission statement for the departments of speech communication located in urban settings." Not, you will observe, merely in city settings (but that may well be what is intended by the phrase), though, as I hope to convince you shortly, the phrase "located in urban settings" to describe speech departments is tautologous.

I would not waste your time with a semantic quibble. The distinction I am advocating has ramifications for policy even of speech departments located in Missoula and Morgantown and surely for all speech departments of state institutions that are dependent for their budgetary appropriations on legislatures controlled by rural interests.

#### Urbanism from a Communication Perspective

Several years ago I attempted to explicate and define the concept of urbanism. It had occurred to me that urbanism, though often incorporated into scientific models and hypotheses in numerous disciplines, lacked intersubjective agreement on the specifications of its referent even among researchers in the same field. In reviewing the literature, I found the term urbanization, for example, denoting two basically contrary but paradoxically not unrelated phenomena--a process of concentration and a process of radiation. The first (e.g., 3, p. 92) views urbanization as a centripetal movement, whether of people them-

selves, their skills, invented processes and institutions, that makes a city a locale of increasing number and diversity of peoples, occupations, services, techniques, organizations and associations--not to mention conflicting ideologies and competing traditions, contradictory values and contrary norms. The other (e.g., 9) identifies urbanization as a centrifugal force, whereby the social, cultural and psychological traits initially peculiar to city life are further developed within a city and extended beyond the city's limits. In either view, of course, urbanism is the result of urbanization. But whereas the first must logically then restrict urbanism to cities (urbanization is "the process which makes the city," 7, p. 312) and find conceptual difficulty with the phrase "the urban farmer," the latter considers that term not only meaningful but also significant and could proceed to investigate the degree of urbanism in the countryside as well as within the city itself and would find it useful to distinguish among cities by means of their measured urbanism.

Even among those who espouse this latter view of urbanism, there is no consensus what the characteristics are that make up the distinctive culture of a city, which is assumed to affect its own inhabitants as well as those in outlying areas and beyond. A host of psychological and social traits have been suggested and disputed about as necessary and sufficient conditions for urbanism to appear, forcing one exasperated authority to exclaim that "the urban concept represents confounded variables and in fact complex systems of variables which have yet to be unscrambled" (2).

My systematic analysis of the many proffered definitions of urbanism and descriptions of urban life discovered, beneath the seeming

contradictions and different terminologies and emphases of approach, a basic underlying set of properties and relations denoted by the term urbanism and suggested that they could properly be accommodated and comprehended by a higher-order concept: communication! Indeed, they implicitly demand it. Accordingly, I translated the most accepted features--most pertinent attributes--into communication terms and defined urbanism as "a continuing public participation in multiple and diverse but interconnected institutionalized information networks, producing, cumulatively, an extensive range of frequent, heterogeneous messages."

The scope and purpose of this paper require neither my rehearsing the argument that led to this formulation nor providing a formal elaboration of the elements incorporated into it.<sup>1</sup> What the definition insists upon is the multiplicity and variety of communication networks as the necessary and sufficient conditions of urbanism.<sup>2</sup> Thus, a region is urban to the extent that it has extensive public communication channels, both interpersonal and machine interposed, that transmit a broad spectrum of political, economic and cultural messages. A city is urban to the degree that its diverse organizations and associations of individuals are organically interrelated and functionally interdependent by means of communication networks. And a person's urbanism is determined, not by his spatial surroundings, but by the volume and variety of the messages he processes and the frequency he participates, whether actively or passively, in a wide range of communication networks. An urban person need not be a resident of an urban region nor, for that matter, are all inhabitants of an urban region or of a city urban.

This conceptual definition of urbanism does not represent an idiosyncratic view. Durkheim (1, Book II, ch. 2) years ago spoke of the 'moral density' that is a feature of interaction in a city. More recently, Meier, who regards the city as "a megastructure built to accommodate message exchanges" (4, p. 1) has been working on a communication theory of urban growth (5). Webber has been urging for more than a decade that urbanism be viewed "not as buildings, not as land use patterns, not as large, dense, heterogeneous population aggregations, but as a quality and as a diversity of life that is distinct from and in some measure independent of these other characteristics." He believes that it can be "most profitably conceived as a property...of the amount and variety of the information received" (8, p. 88).<sup>3</sup> My definition merely synthesizes the insights of several authorities on city life.

#### Communication and the De-Urbanization of Cities

The pivotal importance of communication in a city may be readily grasped when the implications of the cooperation and control problems inherent in the structure of a city are sketched.<sup>4</sup> The functional interdependence of the various institutions, organizations and individuals within a city is due in large part to the occupational specializations and divisions of labor that mark non-agricultural activities. Transactions among these specialities are mandatory, if only the economic aspects of city life are considered. But, of course, in a city all spheres of life, political, social, economic, become more clearly differentiated, which in a rural culture coalesce, are less compartmentalized and more diffusively controlled by a minimum

number of leaders. Rights, obligations and activities regarding these city interests become more delimited and defined, since role assignments in all these areas tend to be contractual rather than ascriptive. Detailing these correlative rights and duties increases the amount of communication a rationally oriented community requires in order to function, if not always efficiently, at least with a modicum of continuity and order.

City people, moreover, generally assume more roles and with greater frequency than rural dwellers, because of the segmentation that penetrates all aspects of city life, leading to a multiplication of secondary-group associations. The consequent utilitarian interactions are borne largely by exchange of messages. Further, the increasing stratification of the city's population also reinforces the modal character, impersonal and utilitarian, of the messages between persons of distinct statuses. And the multiplicity of his status sets and role sets exposes the city dweller to more conflicting and even contradictory messages than are ordinarily received in a rural setting.

These different occupations, roles and statuses merely aggravate the already diverse outlooks and approaches to life that fundamentally stem from the varied cultural origins of a city's population. All these must somehow be taken into consideration in the communication transactions that do occur so that coordinated behavior is achieved and deviant behavior is anticipated and controlled. This provision is met by use of more general, abstract and, at times, more complex symbols and messages that emanate from sources who assume responsibility for engineering cooperation and managing behavior--or, at least,



who hope to achieve acceptance for or compliance with their views and goals.

So it is that ramifications of a departure from the simple social structures in a more traditional society that made feasible a single group's embracing all aspects of an individual's life involves problems not only of cooperation but also of control. These latter come to be handled by complex authority structures. As authoritative agencies and functions multiply, communication among the power sources and with individuals and organizations do likewise. The resulting messages of necessity are usually formal and impersonal intone, rational and secular in appeal. Hence, unlike rural cultures which utilize their environment and impose order on it principally by manual and mechanical skills, cities rely predominantly on communicatory ones to reach the same objectives of mobilization and coordination, in a different environment, to be sure, and regarding a different kind of order.

I have dwelled, I'm afraid, on the obvious. We all recognize a city's dependence on communication structures and the superior advantages a person with communication skills has in a city. This is, of course, the reason for this year's action caucus. What needs emphasis here, however, is the increasing de-urbanization of American cities.

I refer not merely to the exodus of industry and businesses from the major cities and the flight of upper middle-class families to exurbia--critical losses for the urbanism of any city--but also to the growing isolation and the enclave formation of those who stay and of migrants who replace those who depart. Multiplicity, density and heterogeneity remain the characteristics of cities, and of the

communication networks of the cities. What is changing is the patterning and structuring of these networks: their limited assessibility and availability, at least as perceived by much of the city's population; and the gradual unlinking of the different stratified networks, both horizontal and vertical, that by crisscrossing social, political, economic and cultural levels should function to integrate social classes and the otherwise segmented communities within a city.

Certain shopping districts by day, for example, and recreational and social areas by night are perceived off-limits by a frightening number of fearful citizens. Some of the restrictions are self-imposed by the bigoted and the intimidated ignorant who stop participating when certain minority-group members join the particular network. And newcomers to the city often supplant the more urban replaced only in number and not in participation in the public networks of the city.

Abruptly cast into a city's environment of multiple and strange diversity, they experience a cultural shock, an urban shock, and must undergo the difficult process of urban acculturation. The plight of these migrants is sometimes eased by their finding, in the midst of the seeming city havoc, some stability and security among familiar surroundings--the city replica of their village in the South or on the islands or abroad--the relatively segregated subcommunity of the city, whose members serve as temporary caretakers for the newcomer while he or she adjusts to city ways. But cohesion within the traditional group may be so formidable that the effects of the newcomer's tentative attempts to participate in the city's public life may be minimal, and even his participation may be extremely limited for months and even years. In this sense, he leads a less urban life in the city

than does the person in the suburbs and in the countryside whom he has replaced.

This, as I see it, is the great urban problem of our cities and the unique opportunity of city-based universities and speech departments: to help increase public participation in the multiple and diverse communication networks that constitute the life of a city.

#### Urbanism and the University's Triad of Functions

The college campus has always been one of the most urban areas of any city fortunate enough to have one locate within its boundaries. And with the recently more liberal admission and hiring policies the student body and faculty are even more heterogeneous, more urban, than at any time in history.

City colleges and universities should be instrumental in decreasing the urban disparity among the various segments of a city's population. On campuses, communication lines are open to the past--to the great Western and Eastern traditions; and to the distant present--to civilizations and cultures the world over; and to the future--to the social, cultural, political, economic leaders of tomorrow, the students themselves. A university's humanistic, scientific and professional curricula and its adult education programs help to increase not only the urbanism but also the urbanity of anyone enrolling in them. And for this assembled group I need not delay on the peculiarly central role of speech departments, whether located in cities, suburbs or villages, in the urbanization of a state and its cities. The confidence that comes with speech skills and the attention that is won by persuasive articulation make for a more active participation in public networks. The development of such skills is among the valued contri-

butions of speech communication. But knowledge too about communication networks, including group and mass media channels--their structuring and operating characteristics, similarities and differences among them, advantages and limitations of each--should also be possessed by any truly urban person, so that his public participation may be productive and personally satisfying and not lead to frustration and cynical apathy.

Others at this caucus are addressing themselves more authoritatively and discursively to the traditional triad of teaching, research and community service relative to the unique contributions of speech departments to urbanism, especially in a city setting. On this subject I shall allow myself only a few remarks, including a most urgent injunction: Be wary of allowing this triad to be sundered into a trichotomy. Though conceptually distinct, each member of the triad empirically should display much overlapping. The best mix of the three, ideally, would exhibit perfect correlation. That is, they would not be a mix at all. For what is researched should be what is taught and what is being taught and researched should in fact be the unique service that a university, or any of its departments, performs for society and its diverse communities.

And it is the urban problems and not a community's difficulties that need to be studied and investigated according to the unique viewpoint of the speech discipline and by the special competence of its socially conscious faculty. Community difficulties, with all their urgent immediacies and within their circumscribed, narrow limits, should perhaps be better left to municipal, state, national or private agencies, who can devote their full time concentrating on them. The

older sciences have been quite instructive in revealing the truth of the seeming contradiction that because of their successful history is now an obvious paradox: In the long run, there is nothing so practical as theory. But if the academic departments of the newer scientific disciplines don't adhere to that tested adage and keep to theorizing--and, of course, testing--it will not get done. And without a guiding, well-articulated theory, there can only be blind and dumb groping in the field, even by those difficulty-solving agencies.

Permit me to suggest one example of such theoretically-oriented research area that seems to me consonant with the professional interests and expertise of speech communicators.<sup>5</sup> Only one example, for I do not wish to tread where others shortly will fearlessly venture.

Most of us are aware of the disparity between the rhetoric of the streets and the political, legal, economic, even mass-media rhetoric carried over the formal city channels, often when these public networks deliberately attempt to tailor their messages for a distinctive linguistic sub-group. What about the dysfunctional effects of these rhetorical differences? The ensuing misunderstanding and distortion? The resulting discouragement and inhibition to participate, even only passively, in these networks? Let's pursue this point a bit further and a bit more specifically. Are the constraints placed on the language of newscasting--e.g., the use of 'alleged' to report a possibly criminal act or identify a suspect--conducive to accurate decoding by most listeners? Accurate, and libel-free, encoding is not here in question, but effective diffusion of information is. Are public policies, municipal ordinances, even sewer assessments reported, explained, detailed by newscasters in a way that others

in the city besides the more urban listeners will comprehend them? How can technical or expediently concise symbols be made part of the functional vocabulary of a city, not yet a single verbal community?

Answers to research questions like these would contribute to communication theory and at the same time serve a community's urbanism.

As for the more narrow meaning of "community services," these, I repeat, should be closely linked to, form a common bond with, instruction and investigation, like the clinics of the most respected dental schools and speech-therapy departments in the nation. Student engagement in community-service projects must be a learning experience. Faculty interest and involvement in them ought to transcend their uniqueness and temporality. Otherwise we fail our students (even when we reward their work with high grades) and also the communities and the entire state we presume to serve.

\* \* \*

The task assumed by this caucus is not an easy one, and its successful accomplishment is not obviously assured. But the guidelines, it seems to me, are obvious, though freighted disconcertingly with many a paradox. Their untangling and resolution should make for some interesting, urbane and, hopefully, productive caucus sessions.

Thank you for inviting me to this very urban assembly.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>For an extended explication of urbanism, see my paper, "Urbanism as a Communication Variable." This paper (6) is being prepared for publication.

<sup>2</sup>Three of the generally accepted demographic characteristics, or pre-conditions, of the city--size, density, heterogeneity--are incorporated in the definition, though they refer not to the population but to communication networks and messages. The definition thereby recognizes the empirical origin of urbanism, just as the term itself shows its semantic derivation.

<sup>3</sup>Webber chooses to employ the term 'urbanity' to include what I am denoting by 'urbanism.' But urbanity, it seems to me, refers exclusively to the quality of participation, not to its quantity and heterogeneity.

<sup>4</sup>This and the next three paragraphs are substantially reproduced from my paper, "Urbanism as a Communication Variable."

<sup>5</sup>The choice of my example was determined and developed in conversations with my colleagues in UNC's School of Journalism, Professors Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, whose helpfulness is hereby acknowledged.

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