
ARTICLES

Remembering the Legacy of Dale E. Brashers and His Contributions to Health Communication

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On July 5, 2010, Dale E. Brashers, head of the Department of Communication at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and key figure in the field of health communication, passed away in his university office. He was 50 years old.

The impact of this loss is still expanding, rippling through the field and the vast network of people who knew him as colleague, mentor, or friend. For some, his death was no less painful than losing a parent, so special was this man to them. Equally severe is the loss to the field of health communication, in which Brashers was a central and highly visible figure. His scholarly contributions, applied clinical work, mentorship of junior health communication scholars, and leadership in our national and international professional organizations all helped advance our discipline, broadening its reach and increasing its visibility among the health sciences. Although Brashers held some interest in groups and argumentation (Jacobs, Brashers, & Dawson, 1996; Meyers & Brashers, 1999; Meyers, Brashers, & Hanner, 2000; Rintamaki & Brashers, 2010), he is best known for his methodological research and theoretical advancement of uncertainty management. For these reasons, the 100th issue of *Health Communication* was dedicated to the memory of Dale E. Brashers. We honor his contributions to health communication in the pages that follow, paying tribute to his many works and the legacy he leaves behind.

Dr. Dale Brashers earned his bachelor's and master's degrees in 1987 and 1988, respectively, from the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. He began his doctoral work at the University of Oklahoma, but soon followed his advisor, Sally Jackson, to the University of Arizona, where Brashers earned his doctorate in 1994. He began his academic career in 1993 at Ohio State University, moving to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign five years later. Brashers received tenure at Illinois in 2001 and later became full professor in 2008. During his time at Illinois, Brashers alternately served as Director of Graduate Studies, associate head of the department, and finally head of the department, the position he held at the time of his passing.

At a time when specialization often implies fragmentation in academic expertise, Brashers was a remarkable example of a well-rounded, comprehensive scholar. Early in his career, Brashers demonstrated mastery of skills that are fundamental to rigorous scholarship. In a series of online tributes and discussions about Brashers following his passing, Susan Morgan (Professor, Purdue University) and Walid Afifi (Professor, University of California-Santa Barbara), among many peers in Brashers's doctoral program at the University of Arizona, fondly recalled how Brashers translated complicated assumptions and implications that are embedded in various statistical designs into clear and often entertaining examples and narratives. They also noted that for Brashers, statistics were never simply analytical methods employed by plugging numbers into software programs; rather, for Brashers, methods offer a conceptual lens through which one can view the world with structure and logic.

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Brashers's methodological sophistication became the hallmark of his early research. Along with his advisor, Sally Jackson (Chief Information Officer and Associate Provost, University of Illinois), Brashers challenged common practices in message effects research, illustrating how contemporary procedures reflect a "deep, unexamined conceptualization of treatments and their effects, grounded not unreasonably but neither felicitously in our methodological training" (Brashers & Jackson, 1999, p. 471). Brashers worked closely with Jackson to examine and advocate for appropriate research practices for message effects (Jackson & Brashers, 1994a, 1994b; Jackson, O'Keefe, Jacobs, & Brashers, 1989). In Jackson and Jacobs's (1983) provocative article on generalizations in communication research, they recommended changes in research practices to include (a) use of multiple methods in experiments that employ concrete messages to represent abstract message categories or to carry abstract message treatments, (b) treatment of individual messages as a source of uncontrolled variation in estimates of treatment effects, and (c) attention to the quality of individual message samples from the categories of interest. Based on these arguments, Brashers and Jackson further elaborated on the importance of research design and analytical options. They recommended treating replication as random effects in statistical analysis because (a) the common practices of treating replication as fixed effects would inflate the type I error rate and (b) replications in communication studies are often viewed as random variations representing categorical characteristics (Jackson & Brashers, 1994a, 1994b). Their recommendations for message replication were widely adopted practices in later communication research on message effects; however, Brashers and Jackson raised continued concerns that many contemporary studies still fail to adopt appropriate statistical models that best support researchers' claims (Brashers & Jackson, 1999).

Brashers cautioned and encouraged fellow researchers to uphold rigorous standards of proof and research claims through a refined understanding of research design and analytical methods (Brashers & Jackson, 1999). While he believed that passion and curiosity are the foundations of productive academic careers, he equally believed that a firm grasp of research methods, including both quantitative and qualitative approaches, is essential for solid scholarship. In addition to his outstanding work on quantitative design, Brashers demonstrated equally nuanced understanding and skillful execution of qualitative research designs and analysis, many of which have received national and international awards (e.g., Brashers, Neidig, et al., 1999; Brashers, Neidig, et al., 2000). His consistent publication record on methodological issues, including survey development (Brashers, Haas, & Neidig, 1999), coding schemes for naturalistic narratives (Meyers & Brashers, 2010), and assessment for social support interventions (Goldsmith & Brashers, 2008), illustrates the ease and savvy with which he

utilized a wide array of methodological tools in his research. To Brashers, different methods provide different and often complementary lenses for examining phenomena, the application of which can add to the sophistication of research findings. As such, he encouraged all of his advisees to take as many methods courses as they could, including through the last semester of their doctoral programs while completing their dissertations.

Brashers' most influential and well-known work centered on his investigation of communication's role in the management of health and illness, particularly for people living with HIV. For the past several decades, uncertainty reduction theory (URT) has been a dominant theoretical framework for understanding how people manage illness (Babrow & Kline, 2000). It contends that uncertainty is a primary source of stress during illness, so that communication best serves patients when it provides information to reduce uncertainty. Through a programmatic line of research, Brashers challenged the paradigm of URT and reconceptualized uncertainty as a more complex, multifaceted phenomenon. His work shows that uncertainty can arise from a myriad of social, personal, financial, and medical factors (Brashers et al., 2003; Martin, Stone, Scott, & Brashers, 2010); that seemingly desirable outcomes, such as dramatic improvements in health, can produce uncertainty (Brashers, Neidig, et al., 1999); that different forms of uncertainty vary in intensity over the course of an illness (Brashers, Neidig, Reynolds, & Haas, 1998); and that patients may sometimes wish to maintain or increase uncertainty, such as when uncertainty allows for the maintenance of hope (Brashers, Neidig, & Goldsmith, 2004). Brashers coordinated this work to serve as the basis for a new theory of uncertainty management, which proposes that (a) individuals appraise uncertainty for its potential for harm or benefit, (b) such appraisals are associated with both positive and negative emotions, and (c) these appraisals and concordant emotions motivate people to engage in a variety of predictable behaviors to manage uncertainty (e.g., Brashers, 2001; Brashers et al., 2000). Thus, information seeking may be a dominant strategy in some cases, whereas information avoidance may be a dominant strategy in others (Brashers, Goldsmith, & Hsieh, 2002). The theory has now been extended to explain how social support from health care workers, peers, family, and friends can facilitate or hinder uncertainty management (e.g., Brashers et al., 2004).

People always came first for Brashers, both in his personal life and in his scholarship. Many of Brashers's colleagues were also his closest friends and important collaborators in his later research. Daena Goldsmith's (Professor, Lewis and Clark College) normative approach to social support and uncertainty (Goldsmith, 2001, 2004; Goldsmith & Fitch, 1997) was a natural fit to Brashers's framework in situating individuals' interpretation and management of their illness events in social contexts. Together, they worked to

underscore the central role of communication in conceptualizing social support, arguing that “enacted social support is a communicative phenomenon and so attempts to increase, improve, and evaluate it should take into account the socially situated, meaningful, and rhetorical nature of communication” (Goldsmith & Brashers, 2008, p. 321). In their edited book, which originated from a conference they hosted at the University of Illinois that brought together leading scholars in the field, they proposed that “communication processes are a link between personal, social, cultural, and institutional factors and various facets of health and illness” (Brashers & Goldsmith, 2009, p. 1). Together, along with Daniel O’Keefe (Professor, Northwestern University), they conducted several large-scale projects funded by the University of Illinois and the National Institutes of Health to examine the effects of social support for persons living with HIV, highlighting the development of coping skills as a pathway through which social interaction and identity variables have positive and negative effects on health and psychological outcomes (Brashers, 2001). Their work underscored that support seekers and providers need to be aware that successful stress management involves the coordination of complex goals and actions (Brashers et al., 2004) and the accomplishment of illness-related tasks (Goldsmith, Brashers, Kosenko, & O’Keefe, 2007). They also clearly demonstrated the critical contribution of communication scholarship in interventions that aim to improve quality of life through social support and/or illness management (Brashers & Goldsmith, 2009).

Brashers recently extended his work on the coordination of information management in his collaborations with John Caughlin (Associate Professor, University of Illinois). Drawing on Caughlin’s earlier work on functions of information management (e.g., identity management and relational maintenance; Caughlin, 2003; Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997) and Brashers’s conceptualization of illness management as a coordinated accomplishment among multiple parties (Brashers et al., 2004), the two produced an innovative set of award-winning publications on individuals’ production and evaluation of HIV-disclosure messages. By highlighting the dilemmas and challenges in managing multiple, potentially conflicting or competing goals, this research highlighted the importance of particular message features used when making important health disclosures. Specifically, the impact of and reaction to potentially stigmatizing disclosures can be influenced by the nature of the message used for disclosure; as such, this research identified specific features of messages that may lead to varying recipient evaluations (Caughlin et al., 2008, 2009). Their findings provide valuable guides for HIV-disclosure management and have great potential for generating a normative model of effective disclosure.

When reviewing Brashers’s extensive research lines, one quickly notices the applied nature of his work, much of which was grounded in his compassion for marginalized,

underserved, and/or stigmatized populations. For a scholar who first started his career focused on complex discussions of statistical models, Brashers did not view his participants as mere numbers. Many can attest to witnessing Brashers’ concern and emotion over the participants in his research on people living with HIV. When Brashers shared stories in class about these men and women and the struggles they endured, including many who have passed away over the years, tears would swell in his eyes. He was pained by their struggles and wanted to develop solutions for them. As such, his research program included not only intellectual exercises on theory development, but also translation of research findings into interventions to help people newly diagnosed with HIV to develop key communication skills (e.g., effective self-disclosure, physician–patient communication, self-advocacy, and information management) to best cope with their illness (Brashers, Haas, Klingle, & Neidig, 2000; Brashers, Haas, Neidig, & Rintamaki, 2002; Brashers, Rintamaki, Hsieh, & Peterson, 2006).

It is noteworthy that Brashers helped acquire considerable funding for his research efforts, including grants from his home institutions, the Ameritech Foundation, and the National Institutes of Health (the grants for which he was the primary investigator, collaborator, or faculty mentor total nearly \$4.5 million). Brashers also received considerable recognition for his research efforts, both within the field and at his home institutions. In addition to numerous Top Paper awards, Brashers was awarded the *2001 Young Scholar Award for Outstanding Early Career Research* by ICA. He also received the *2001 Golden Anniversary Monograph Award* by NCA, which recognizes the impact of his research on uncertainty management and is awarded to the most outstanding monograph in the field of communication published in the previous year. Also in 2001, in recognition of his remarkable productivity, Brashers was named the *Helen Corley Petit Scholar of Liberal Arts and Sciences* at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Brashers received the *Dennis Gouran Article Award* from the NCA Group Communication Division for the best published article in 2002. In 2004, Brashers received the *Distinguished Article Award* from the NCA and ICA Health Communication Divisions, which recognizes the most outstanding article from the past five years. The same year, he was honored as a *University Scholar*, the highest honor the University of Illinois bestows upon its faculty for outstanding research, teaching and service. Finally, Brashers held the title of David Swanson Professorial Scholar since 2008, an honor about which he was extraordinarily proud, as it was named after his late friend and former department head, David Swanson (Chamberlain, 2010).

Despite his many and demanding research lines, Brashers always put enormous effort into supporting and mentoring advisees. Many of Brashers’s advisees were drawn to him because of the applied, compassionate nature of his work, with several of his advisees subsequently developing

research trajectories that examined social issues facing marginalized populations. For instance, Stephen Haas's (Associate Professor, University of Cincinnati) work on same-sex couples' relationship maintenance while coping with HIV has received several prestigious national awards. Similarly, Jennifer Peterson's (Assistant Professor, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee) research centers on social support and family experiences when women, particularly mothers, have HIV. Haas's and Peterson's dissertations were the winners of the ICA and NCA Health Communication Dissertation of the Year Awards in 1999–2000 and 2002–2003, respectively. Both Kami Kosenko's (Assistant Professor, North Carolina State University) investigation on HIV prevention for transgender individuals and Erica Bauer's (postdoctoral fellow, Center for Complex Chronic Care) investigation on HIV disclosure and stigma within church communities were awarded predoctoral fellowships from the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH). Haas and Peterson received the same fellowships during their doctoral programs, with Brashers serving as the faculty sponsor for all four NIH fellows. Brashers also served as a faculty sponsor to Laura Hickman's (medical scholar, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign) NIH MD/PhD fellowship, investigating HIV prevention communication in families affected by HIV. These fellowships serve as testament to Brashers's exceptional mentorship and advisory skills, as few faculty members could otherwise so consistently produce students who garner such prestigious awards.

Brashers always was a great supporter of his advisees, providing encouragement to them when they explored challenges that piqued their intellectual curiosity or offered new professional opportunities. For instance, when Lance Rintamaki (Assistant Professor, University at Buffalo, The State University of New York) was offered a postdoctoral fellowship in general internal medicine and health services research through the VA Health Care System and Northwestern University, Brashers encouraged him to do so as a means of acquiring advanced clinical training and experience with health care systems, despite how few communication scientists were familiar with this training mechanism at the time. Rintamaki's research on social stigma in individuals' health experiences mirrors his mentor's proclivity for tackling social issues and communication-centered, translational research, which Brashers believed is well matched with the clinical training offered through such programs. Other young health communication scientists soon followed suit under Brashers's guidance, scientists such as Joshua Barbour (Assistant Professor, Texas A&M), Tim Hogan (Research Scientist, Center for Complex Chronic Care, and Research Assistant Professor, Loyola University Chicago), and Erica Bauer. Tim Hogan, for instance, received his PhD in library and information science, but worked with Brashers and followed Brashers's advice into this postdoctoral route, which has enabled him to lead large-scale studies meant to

clarify the roles of information and information technology in the trajectory of long-term illnesses.

Similar to the less conventional paths of those pursuing postdoctoral fellowships, Brashers offered Elaine Hsieh (associate professor, University of Oklahoma) support and encouragement for her research on bilingual health communication at a time when little theory existed in this area. Brashers's theoretical framework on multi-party coordination and management of information and identities was influential in her model conceptualizing interpreter-mediated interactions. Many other advisees, including Karen Sodowsky (Assistant Professor, Valdosta State University), Courtney Moriarty (Assistant Professor, College of Mount Saint Vincent), and Regine Rucker (Adjunct Professor, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign), also have adopted Brashers's theoretical framework in conceptualizing interpersonal interactions and information management in their analyses of health behaviors across contexts (e.g., mass communication, public health, family communication).

Brashers's engaged scholarship also was reflected in his service to the discipline and general community. He assumed a number of positions in the International Communication Association (ICA) and National Communication Association (NCA), serving at both divisional and association levels. Some of his divisional services included serving as chair for the Rhetorical and Communication Theory Division, Health Communication Division, and Student Section. His association-level services included serving on the NCA Research Board, NCA Legislative Council, and various ICA/NCA award committees. In addition, he regularly served on the editorial boards of many communication journals, including *Human Communication Research*, *Communication Yearbook*, and *Communication Theory*, among many others.

Brashers was equally committed to serving the communities in which he lived. He served as a communication trainer for the Tucson AIDS Project during his doctoral program. His services as support group leader at the AIDS Clinical Trials Units at The Ohio State University Hospital also inspired and strengthened his research program. Despite his many campus responsibilities, he made time to serve on the executive boards of many local organizations in the Urbana-Champaign region, including the Mental Health Center of Champaign County, Greater Community AIDS Project, and Harm Reduction Resources.

In sum, Dale Brashers was an extraordinary figure in the lives of his students, his colleagues, his communities, and the field of health communication. His passing was a shock to us all and a terrible loss, yet his presence is very much alive in the work of his students and colleagues. Though time will eventually smooth the signs of his passage and his identity may be lost to younger generations of scholars, his legacy will endure as it is assimilated into the vast and expanding library of human knowledge.

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