Embodying both the promises and perils of our collective past and the dreams and dangers of global connectedness, the study of crowds, clouds, and community includes assumptions about central communication processes: organizing, socializing, and mediatizing. Across International Communication Association Divisions and Interest Groups we have a rich heritage of studies engaging these classical ideas and all 3 terms continue to be featured prominently in contemporary communication scholarship. This article considers the theoretical and practical ways in which our evolving conceptions and experiences of clouds, crowds, and community are challenging the communication discipline.

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“The age we are about to enter will in truth be the era of crowds.” This millennium prediction put forward by Gustav Le Bon in his 1895 classic, Psychologie des foules, could just as easily be the moniker for the millennium that took place 100 years after the publication of his treatise. Today crowds are a signature feature of our communities and the emerging communication landscape. Crowdsourcing (Estellés-Arolas & de-Guevara, 2012), crowdfunding (Aitamurto, 2011), crowd-enabled collective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012), and crowd theorizing (Benkler, 2006) are iconic community activities of “life in the digital cloud” (Chen, 2011). These new ways of relating, collaborating, and organizing are recasting scholars’ conceptions of crowd behavior from irrational activity that disrupts normative processes (Latané & Darley, 1969) or a rational collective mechanism for community change (McPhail, 1991) to a conceptualization of crowds as micro and macro problem solvers (Sunstein, 2006; Wexler, 2011). The purpose of this article is to explore the ways in which our evolving and reconfigured conceptions and experiences of crowds, clouds, and community are challenging the communication discipline, from our theoretical approaches to the ways we engage in our research, our profession, and ICA itself.

In the first section of this article I present a brief history of crowds, clouds, and community. The examples are drawn from my personal experiences living in London.
in the 1970s, my research on global organizing, and my exciting year as ICA President, culminating in our 63rd annual ICA conference in London where we had the largest crowds in our history. The three concepts, crowds, clouds, and community, have a rich heritage of meanings and have influenced theoretical and empirical study over time and across our divisions. Park (2008), for example, argues that the model of conformity and social behavior that is advanced in the classic and highly influential text *personal influence* (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955) should be placed in the context of Riesman’s and his colleagues classic text on community (1950) *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character*. Today crowds, clouds, and community continue to be featured prominently in the latest award winning scholarship (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012), special issues of journals including the *Journal of Communication* (Howard & Parks, 2012) and the *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication* (Weber, Chung, & Park, 2012), the latest textbooks (Darlington, 2014), and the most recent ICA theme volume *Communication and Community* (Moy, 2012).

The second section addresses the differences that make a difference in our evolving conceptions of crowds, clouds, and communities. My central argument is that the simultaneous loosening of boundaries and the thickening connectedness of contemporary society mean that crowds and community can no longer be usefully characterized or studied as either digitally based or analogically constituted. It is in those liminal moments when clouds connect and intersect with the broader sociocultural and historical processes of the material world where we find the central challenges and opportunities for communication researchers.

In the final section, I use the example of MOOCs, the massive open online courses that are increasingly a part of our educational landscape, to explore what it means to situate communication analyses at the intersection of the digital and the material and do research that is historically grounded and culturally imagined. The article ends with a challenge to us as scholars, as members of a vibrant intellectual community, and as part of the crowd we proudly call ICA.

**The 1970s**

**Crowds**

London crowds were the anti-apartheid protesters outside Rhodesia House, the “Rock Against Racism” festival at Victoria Park, and Vietnam War protestors gathering by Parliament house and Grosvenor Square. Public spaces were used by crowds to signify and locate public disgraces. Crowds were organized and strategically designed by formal organizations with leaders who had the communicative and material resources to find and mobilize interested parties. To study crowds meant to study the communicative dynamics, frames, repertoires of formal organizations as they brokered coalitions and incentivized collective action (Tilly, 1978).

But crowds were also unpredictable, dangerous, and spontaneous entities, certainly not wise. Deindividuation, diffusion of responsibility, bystander apathy, group contagion, and panic were just some of the psychological and communicative dysfunctions we studied and worried about when crowds gathered (Buys, 1978).
However, even in seemingly anarchic crowds, for example the notorious British soccer hooligans, scholars found “rules of disorder.” March, Rosser, and Harre (1978), for example, convincingly argued that our mental images, based on television coverage of youths’ “random” violence at soccer matches, were misguided. Hooligans were not crowds who valued disorder. Rather, their collective actions were communicatively constituted as an alternative order that gave significance to their lives within a particular community, historically conditioned, and culturally determined.

Embedded within the scholarly debates regarding the rational nature of crowds, or what Borch (2006) calls the prevalent semantics of the crowd, we find distinct communication logics at play. Building upon the idea of institutional logics (Friedland & Alford, 1991), that is, belief systems that sustain different types of social relations, communication logics provide fundamental principles that guide interaction, organizing, and symbolic practices (Stohl & Ganesh, 2013). Communication logics are important insofar as they are templates for designing messages and discourse, defining the horizon of possibilities for communication, creating sets of expectations for communication practices, and shaping analyses of crowd behavior. Two communication logics traditionally embedded in crowd studies include an intergroup logic grounded in the salience of social group identity rather than personal identity (Harwood & Giles, 2005; Reicher & Potter, 1985); and a logic of aggregation (Juris, 2008) grounded in the power of assembling and the coming together of actors within physical spaces. In many studies of crowds, the contours of crowd behavior, such as the initial peaceful phase and subsequent violent phase of the 1991 Poll Tax Riots in London, were theorized to be rooted in the situated dynamic processes of self categorization and social identity (Stott & Drury, 2000).

Clouds

London clouds were a ubiquitous part of the environment in the most tangible of ways (e.g., in February 1978, 71% of the days were more cloudy than clear [http://weatherspark.com/history/28729/1978/London-England-United-Kingdom]). Clouds was also the title and organizing metaphor for Michael Frayne’s (1977) play in London’s West End. A farcical comedy about the media, the satire featured two English journalists abroad in Cuba, who see only what they want to see and make little or no attempt to communicate or engage with the local cultures. Frayn explores the ways in which mobile media, distance, and dislocation cloud our judgments and “invariably” cause diplomatic rifts between nations. In our own discipline, clouds have been metaphorically linked to critical issues facing our field. Scholars have lamented that the communication discipline is “clouded by controversy” (Bochner & Krueger, 1979, p. 199), critiqued our “clouded constructs” (Richmond & Roach, 1992, p. 98), argued that “the clarity of our vision is clouded with debris we have imported from other fields” (Dervin, 1993 p. 47), and eschewed “clouding the issue between the ideal and the material in human communication research” (Condit, 1997, p. 197). Theoretically in the 1970s the ideal speech situation was conceived as unclouded, transparent, and open. Although he later modifies his position,
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early writings of Habermas (1970) adhere to an ideal model of communicative competence in which all participants have the same opportunity to initiate and participate in discourse and are open, honest, and sincere about their intentions. In many languages expressions such as “head in the clouds,” “clouded over,” and “under a cloud” are rooted in the power of clouds to obscure ideal democratic, transparent, and open communication practices.

Community

Forty years ago community was a rallying cry for social justice advocates including the thousands of women who took to the London streets for International Women’s Day Marches. Carrying banners and placards demanding basic rights, these protestors embodied both senses in which scholars have historically framed community: the territorial and geographical notion of community, whether it be neighborhoods, workplaces, or regions, and the relational sense of community, where social connections foster a sense of belonging and social identity without reference to location. Shepherd and Rothenbuhler (2001) identify two themes related to the study of community and communication. First, traditional studies of community highlight a shared sense of fate and face that evolved from a shared communicative space and material place, what they call the “material or situated character of community.” The second theme, influenced by the works of John Dewey, is related to the goodness of communication and community. In the first case, communication is conceived as a technology that creates community, and in the second, as a theoretical and philosophical construct embedded in questions related to the possibilities of creating community (Depew & Peters, 2001).

London in the 1970s also showed the dark side of community. Issues of identity, relationship, and place were all intimately tied to the violence associated with the Irish Republican Army and Ulster Volunteer Force. Studies of speech communities (Milroy & Margrain, 1980), linguistic communities (Gumperz, 1962), and political communities (Curno, 1978) highlighted the power of communication as a process of community construction and destruction. Ethnocentrism, xenophobia, racism, and sexism were common dynamics that ripped communities apart, isolating and ostracizing individuals whose only “crime” was not being perceived as part of a particular community.

On a much lighter note was my father’s sense of community and communication. In 1978 he visited my family in London. One day we were in a taxi and he said something in English (with a rather strong New York accent) to the cabbie, who responded (with an equally strong British cockney accent). My father switched immediately to Yiddish, the cabbie responded in Yiddish, and they proceeded to carry on a very animated conversation. “How did you know?” I asked my dad when we got out of the cab. Invoking the word lonsman, a term of endearment between Jews, connoting kinship and common ground, he smiled. “Doesn’t matter where you are in the world, your community is your community.” Globalization was not a common term in 1978, but the coming together and ripping apart of communities were certainly apparent in those autumn days in London.
Crowds

Crowds are the Occupy Movement, the Arab Spring, and the so-called “blackberry rioters” who according to media accounts used BlackBerry Messenger (BBM) to summon thousands of people across London to protest the police shooting of a 29-year-old Tottenham man (The BlackBerry riots, 2011). Crowds are also sites of self-organizing peer production and new forms of collective activities. From crowdsourcing to crowdfunding, crowds are digitally enabled, geographically and socially promiscuous, and sometimes wise. Crowds are mediated and organizationally amorphous.

The crowds of today encapsulate new forms of political, economic, and creative power. They can no longer be constrained by the notions of the past. Across the social sciences there is growing consensus that the enhanced mass collaborations made possible by the decentralized and aggregating capabilities of social media and emerging digital platforms have changed the nature of crowds. Scholarly debates have moved from discussions surrounding the rationality and functionality of crowds to the cognitive and productive capabilities of crowds (Howe, 2008). Crowds have become potential problem solvers and innovators. And although they remain a pivotal source for social change, contemporary crowds also powerfully support the status quo, maintaining pre-existing structures of power and knowledge regimes (Kelty, 2012).

The private sector is leveraging the benefits of distributed “crowded” problem solving to develop new business models. Studies have shown that crowds can save organizations money, transform research and development processes, facilitate innovation, and create a new generation of entrepreneurs who no longer work within traditional labor markets and the constraints of traditional labor contracts (see, e.g., Felstiner, 2012). In the public sector new and powerful forms of crowd engagement have begun to reconfigure collective action and are reshaping organizations in the public sphere. When tragedy strikes, we see crowds as problem solvers. In 2010 PakReport.org used crowdsourcing technology to “voice the needs” of thousands of flood victims seeking food, water, and shelter as well as help coordinate aid in the disaster (http://www.dw.de/web-platform-helps-aid-groups-locate-pakistani-flood-victims/a-5950669). In 2011 Landcare Research, New Zealand engaged citizens from around the world to help envision the future of Christchurch, a city devastated by an earthquake in 2010 (http://magneticsouth.net.nz/). The exercise generated so much participation the site eventually crashed. Whether the crowd’s solutions are workable is currently undetermined, but research indicates that when the public is engaged in the cocreation of a new idea, project, or product, the crowd’s participation makes the project easier to legitimize and promote (Wexler, 2011).

The increased complexity and capacities of contemporary crowds have not only refocused our scholarship but also elaborated communication logics. The networking logic of collective action where organizations and interorganizational connections
play a central role is woven into a richer tapestry of what Bennett and Segerberg (2012) describe as a logic of connective action. The logic of connective action is a type of deinstitutionalized networking predicated on the notion that communication is no longer bound by spatial proximity and temporality and rooted in personalization and individual agency rather than institutionalization and organizational efficacy.

Clouds
Clouds represent the ubiquitous large-scale technological infrastructure of contemporary society. They no longer only obscure, they sometimes clarify. Clouds complicate issues of communicative transparency and openness (Christensen, 2002). Digital networks enable rapid and seamless integration of information creation, dissemination, and retrieval across multiple and mobile platforms and devices. Clouds are everywhere, transcending boundaries, disembedding time and place, dislocating hierarchies, and fundamentally altering the costs, difficulty, effort, and cognitive constraints of communication (Bimber, Flanagin, & Stohl, 2012). The essential characteristics of clouds include on-demand self-service, rapid elasticity, high connectivity, mobility, and easy accessibility (Wernick, 2011). In other words clouds enable personalized (rather than organizationally directed) coordination, information sharing, and organizing.

Contemporary clouds are ubiquitous in two distinct senses. First, the technological infrastructure is spreading throughout the world. Increasing percentages of citizens everywhere have mobile devices in their pockets, laptops in their backpacks, and desktops at their local cyber cafes. Second, clouds are ubiquitous insofar as they are implicated in virtually all aspects of social life. Clouds are increasingly part of the routine, mundane, and unremarkable features of everyday life (Bimber et al., 2012; McChesney, 2013). It is taken for granted that a wide variety of social institutions and practices are organized around them regardless of whether and how individuals, groups, or communities may or may not adopt or use specific technological artifacts. “Civilization advances by extending the number of important operations which we can perform without thinking about them,” wrote Alfred North Whitehead (1911). The transformative nature of clouds is still underway, but many consequences are becoming clear. Clouds influence crowds and community by altering material, relational, organizational, and cognitive expectations regarding what is, what can, and what cannot be possible. Clouds reduce the costs of communication and complicate the meanings of connectivity and disconnection.

We have clearly learned a great deal from research that has focused on how the affordances and use of specific “cloud” technologies matter. For instance there is a significant amount of research differentiating the civic consequences of platforms such as Facebook as opposed to Twitter (Youmans & York, 2012), the organizing capabilities of Google+ compared to Reddit, (Wyatt, Bier, Harris, & van Heur, 2013) and the ways in which digital repositories can aggregate contributions and make crowds wise (Surowiecki, 2004). But as Jackson (2007) observes, with increasing digitization communication itself becomes more fluid and promiscuous, moving
rapidly, indiscriminately, and porously across technological boundaries. Thus, the distinctions among different types of media sources are no longer as useful as they were in the past. For example, when protestors at Occupy Wellington were asked how they found out about the protest (a standard question used in studies of crowds for more than 30 years, see e.g., Fisher, Stanley, Berman, & Neff, 2005), responses moved seamlessly, sometimes creatively, at times confusedly, across technologies. Personal relationships and networks were intertwined with multiple digital and analogic media (Ganesh & Stohl, 2013).

Clouds are context not tools. They are woven finely into the fabric of our global community in a manner that transcends patterns of use and nonuse, a context that some such as Shirky (2008) and Benkler (2006) suggest brings greater opportunity for democratic institutions and stronger communities. Others, such as Foster and McChesney (2011), argue that a clouded context is a dystopian hell in which “the internet’s unholy marriage to capitalism” leads to a dissolution of our communities and to what Turkel (2011) describes as “the illusion of companionship without the demands of a relationship.”

Community

Contemporary notions of community are complex, multidimensional, and in flux. No longer bound by time and space, communities may be virtual and/or material, real and/or imagined, collocated, and/or dispersed. Communities game and shame, include and exclude, building social capital and dismantling social barriers. Community connections not only keep people healthy but also can make people ill (Moy, 2012; Williams, 2006). For many communication scholars community operates as a root metaphor for organizational communication itself (Jenkins, 2012). Iverson and McPhee (2008) discuss communities of practice as constituted by mutual engagement, shared repertoire, and the negotiation of joint enterprise, describing foundational aspects of organizing and communicating in the process.

Communities are networked; grounded in an increasingly pervasive mobile IT infrastructure (Hampton & Wellman, 2003). They embody a complex interplay among local attachments, distant connections, and geographically distributed activity. Thus it is not surprising that organizational communication scholars increasingly rely upon a community ecology perspective to help unpack the interconnected (both analogic and digital) resources and interorganizational relationships that comprise local and global organizing (Monge, Heiss, & Margolin, 2008). In a similar vein, studies of hybrid location-aware mobile games such as Encounter, a game widely played in the Former Society Union and the Russian-speaking diaspora, illustrate the ways in which social relationships developed within online gaming communities may be leveraged for civic engagement, a sense of belonging, and mutual support that change the nature of local community experience (Shklovski & de Souza e Silva, 2012).
Contemporary communities challenge prevailing notions of membership and connectedness as well as raise issues regarding the normative and ethical issues grounded in networked communities. For example, the dynamics of community policing are quite positive when conceptualized in terms of traditional community, that is the cop on the block who develops personal and transparent relations with people who reside in a bounded geographic space (Seagrave, 1996). However, they become far more troublesome when thought of in the context of communities enmeshed in clouds. In that context, community policing raises issues of clandestine activity and surveillance that are much more difficult to control (Wall & Williams, 2007).

Addressing the changing context

There are clearly great similarities as well as differences between the crowds, clouds, and communities of both eras and we need to be careful not to overdraw the distinctions nor minimize the differences. A fundamental change between the years I lived in London in the 1970s and 2013, however, is the simultaneous loosening of boundaries and the thickening of connectedness made possible by contemporary clouds. My colleagues and I (Bimber, Flanagin, & Stohl, 2005) have argued that this difference has important theoretical as well as practical implications. The change in boundary constraints can be seen in (a) waning distinctions between public and private spaces; (b) hybridity and emergence of new organizational forms; (c) blending communication logics situated across time and space; and (d) blurring differences among interpersonal, organizational, political, and mass communication. This does not lead to the end of formal organizations as some suggest (Shirky, 2008) but rather to the interpenetration of centralized and institutional action and decentralized entrepreneurial activity. Today we see new types of partnerships, new kinds of identities, and new conceptualizations of membership.

What do these changes mean for ICA? How do we position ourselves as a research community to enable and facilitate scholarship that more fully addresses communication in a physical material world whose structure is shaped by digital cyber ligaments?

First, I would not suggest that blurring boundaries and the ubiquitous clouded environment mean that the future of our ICA community depends upon the collapse of distinctions among our divisions and that we all should now become the Communication and Technology Division. Rather, in light of the changing communicative context it is time for us to reconsider our divisional structure, the subdivisions within our own departments, the curricula we create, and the job descriptions we write. Boundaries that are too tightly drawn inhibit collaboration, impede theoretical development, and constrain the contributions we make as a discipline. Peter Monge argued in his 1998 presidential address that the “processes of globalization are too complex, too intertwined, and too wide ranging to yield meaningful results via isolated, independent research” (Monge, 1998, p. 149). Today
we are a new generation of scholars, a generation who no longer debate the existence of globalization but rather take the dynamic tensions embedded in the interpersonal, group, organizational, media, and community interfaces for granted. Yet we still find ourselves organized as if interpersonal communication is discrete from mass media, organizational communication is distinct from media institutions, and political communication is separate from communicating about ethnicity and race.

To address the hybridity and complex connectivity of contemporary communication processes, how empowering it would be for ICA to leverage the expertise and diverse resources embedded within ICA to support and promote the growth of intellectual communities that transcend divisional boundaries, cross national borders, and connect across disciplines. Not only would our research become more compelling and our questions and empirical findings of greater relevance to other academics and the public at large, but our views of what it means to be ethically engaged scholars would be broadened.

Second, I am not suggesting that the ways in which crowds and communities appropriate specific new technological affordances do not matter and that our discipline should abandon the study of affordances and effects. We need integrative theories of uses and effects to help us frame and understand, for example, what I see as a fascinating but somewhat frustrating organizational irony. ICA is an organization whose members, as Larry Gross suggested in his presidential speech last year “should be among the first to recognize and embrace the possibilities these new technologies afford” (Gross, 2012, p. 925). ICA is also an organization committed to the complementary goals of (a) greater conference accessibility for members who are unable to attend due to funding constraints, political barriers, immigration laws, and (b) an organization pledged to develop sustainable practices. (Note: Travel to our annual conference is the major source of our carbon footprint.)

Yet despite these overlapping goals and despite many efforts and resource expenditures, ICA has had very little success building on capacities of clouds and creating a virtual conference that engages members of our community. The answers to this dilemma cannot be found only in the tools themselves, but rather in the interplay among political economy and the reward structure of higher education, the affiliative networks and interpersonal dynamics of our crowd, the history and the evolution of our discipline, the hybridity of communication logics organizing public opinion as well as issues associated with media use and affordances.

What I am suggesting is that although the crowdsourcing of the Oxford English Dictionary in the 19th century, so vividly described in The Professor and the Madman (Winchester, 1998), and the 21st-century digital crowdsourcing of Collins dictionary (http://venturebeat.com/2012/08/01/collins-dictionary-now-crowdsourcing) are not equivalent (although I am sure professors and madmen are still involved), they are indeed different. But the difference does not lie in the different tools the contributors used to input their suggestions to the editors of the dictionaries. The difference lies in the context. As media historians Carey (1989) and Marvin (1990) powerfully
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demonstrate, technological infrastructure, what today are the clouds, shape and reshape the context in which our communication logics and protocols evolve.

We have barely scratched the surface in the knowledge we can gain in tracking the artifacts and the effects of Twitter feeds and utilizing the increased computational abilities we now have to generate and analyze “big data.” But in order to materialize their promise we must continue to develop theory and conduct research that more fully embraces the historical continuities, sociocultural incongruities, organizational ambiguities, and ethical uncertainties that arise in a global context of loosening boundaries and thickening connectedness.

Robert Darnton’s (2010) book Poetry and the Police: Communication Networks in Eighteenth Century Paris is a fascinating example of the nuanced communicative continuities and disjunctures that can be unpacked when we view communication technologies as part of, not separate from the crowd’s historical, political, cultural, and organizational milieu. He carefully chronicles a police crackdown and the subsequent arrests of a relatively young group of 14 students, clerks, and priests in 18th-century prerevolutionary France. These men were accused of writing and passing on short verses filled with commentary about social life. Their messages were repeated over and over again by the crowds in the marketplace, the taverns, and the shop floors. Darnton’s analysis illustrates that “the information society existed long before the Internet” (p. 130). Messages went viral long before “life in the cloud” and in ways that threatened the power structure, as vested interests, such as the Prime Minister of Turkey suggest Twitter does today (Hutchinson, 2013). Further, despite the horizontal, peer-to-peer architecture facilitating the inclusion of new voices, most messages were composed and initially passed along “by those already belonging to the elite, or at least affiliated with prominent positions in society” (Darnton, 2010, p. 145). Indeed, despite what seemed to be crowd-enabled networking and messaging that invited personal and individualized rather than formal and organizational framing, when it came to coordination, organizational connections and identity still mattered—a duality we are just beginning to think about and reconcile in contemporary theories of crowds and community (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Castells, 2009).

But perhaps the most powerful legacy of the story is Darnton’s observation that midcentury Paris was not yet ready for revolution. What was significant is that the very acts of transmitting and receiving these short pithy verses built communication and semantic networks from which arose a common consciousness in public affairs, a context which enabled what eventually coalesced into a revolution. Now clearly, the French revolution is more than the story of a new form of communication just as the stories of our crowds and communities today are more than just stories of Facebook or Twitter. But, at the same time, as Darnton so eloquently shows us, we cannot tell the stories without them.

My argument then is that crowds and community can no longer be usefully characterized or studied as either digitally based or analogically constituted. It is in those liminal moments when clouds connect and intersect with the broader
sociocultural and historical processes of the material world where we find the central challenges and opportunities for our discipline today.

Consider for a moment the vociferous debates and high-level policy discussions going on in universities, corporate headquarters, NGOs, governmental commissions, and the global media about Massive Open Online Courses, better known as MOOCs. These courses are indeed massive; the crowds have included as many as 160,000 participants. “Open” references the global community’s open access and potential for unlimited participation, “Online” differentiates this distance education initiative from those of the past. In the mid 18th century, for example, distance learning was predicated on the postal system. A second generation utilized radio, film, and television. The UK Open University in London, for example, started in 1971 with televised education courses to their students (Daniel, 2012). Today MOOCs operate in the clouds. They utilize interactive technologies in audio, text, and video. Finally, “course” represents a liminal moment—the transition from the boundaries of place and space that previously constrained and defined not only classrooms, but university life, education, and the institutions and the communities they serve. MOOCs are a place between; they operate in the material and digital intersection of crowds, clouds, and communities.

MOOCs seem to be everywhere, and growing at an astonishing rate. Between January and June 2013 MOOCs have been a major feature story in news outlets across the globe from France’s La Monde to the New York Times, Spain’s El Pais to Japan’s Asahi Shimbun, Singapore’s The Strait Times to Germany’s Die Zeit. News reports and governmental white papers reported that The World Bank is supporting MOOC initiatives in several African nations, The European Commission is backing large pan-European MOOC projects, and MOOCs are being developed and offered by hundreds of institutions for hundreds of thousands of students across the world (deWaard et al., 2011). Australia has recently developed its own MOOC reaching 20,000 participants from 100 countries and in April 2012 Hong Kong University launched a MOOC course, the first offered in China. There were 17,000 students enrolled (Sharma, 2013). MOOCs are big business and are getting bigger every day. The crowds of students are getting larger, the MOOC community is growing, and we, as a discipline, are implicated in all its complexity.

From a communicative perspective MOOCs are hyperlinked geographically promiscuous crowds coming together to form learning communities across time and space. MOOCs operate in a liminal space, defined by Turner (1967) as a period of transition when collective experiences occur in breaks in the cultural flow. MOOCs occupy a place betwixt and between, being in the middle and midst of change.

The received wisdom is that MOOCs are a powerful digital tool leveraging the scale and scope of technology to a degree that was never before possible. The digital celebrants, as Mansell (2012) describes those who are exceedingly optimistic regarding the effects of emerging technologies, believe MOOCs are a tool that will revolutionize higher education, bringing a new and efficient business model to the university and inaugurating a new era of educational democracy. MOOCs will enable
the public to have greater agency, choice, and voice. Curriculum and assignments can be individualized and learning can be personalized. The global community not only becomes a powerful educational market but also the community can take advantage of the wisdom of crowds through auxiliary developments like “MOOCes”—massive open online course evaluations. Other crowd-sourced functions can replace existing expensive staffing and inefficient work processes. For the celebrants the MOOC revolution is the pedagogical equivalent of the “Facebook revolution” in the political arena.

Opposing the celebrants are the digital skeptics for whom MOOCs are also powerful tools, but ones that perpetuate hierarchy and class differences. For the skeptics MOOCs represent a supersized reproduction of status difference already institutionalized in higher education, crowding out nonelite institutions of all kinds: community colleges, polytechnical colleges, and folk universities just can’t compete. MOOCs, they argue, will replace professionals (professors) with technicians (teaching assistants) who merely have to use the tools in the ways proscribed by cyber designers, distant and disconnected from the pulse of the crowds (Liyana-gunawardena, Williams, & Adams, 2013). MOOCs consolidate even more power in the hands of already powerful organizations whose self-interests are represented in an increasingly commercialized, co-opted, and capitalized internet (Qiu, 2013). MOOCs prioritize the “bottom line” devaluing education, leading to a less informed, not more informed, citizenry.

What unites these opposing positions is a perspective that ascribes singular, powerful, and identifiable effects to MOOCs as digital tools. But, as with the French Revolution and the Arab spring, MOOCs are more than the story of technology, they are an interactive story of crowds and clouds (the blurred boundaries between private and public, the interpenetration of institutional and entrepreneurial activity, the hybridity of organizational forms) and the sociocultural historical conditions in which higher education is embedded. By mapping MOOCs onto the liminal landscape of crowds clouds and communities, we move the conversation beyond the effects of tools and by doing so gain greater purchase in the debates and policy criteria and decisions being made. We also gain a better understanding of the tensions and the powerful communicative dynamics that indeed may make MOOCs revolutionary or alternatively simply another expensive fad in long distance education left on the “dust heap of history.”

If we ground our analyses in this liminal space and ask why MOOCs are happening now, we will find very different answers and pathways for analyses depending upon where we look. In the western world, where universities have existed for more than 1000 years, the global economic crisis has put tertiary education systems themselves at risk. In many parts of Europe and the United States, for example, the state is withdrawing funding and universities are looking for more efficient, less expensive ways to continue to expand and maintain their position in society. We hear a great deal of managerial discourse about branding and efficiency. The backlash is not about the technology per se, but is grounded in a more generalized concern in a context of clouds.

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For example, the German Sociological Association (GSA) is boycotting the Center for the Development of Higher Education’s rankings system. This change in institutional practice, they argue, is being “guided by principles of the entrepreneurial university and private enterprise” (http://isa-global-dialogue.net/german-sociologists-boycott-university-rankings/) — the very stuff clouds facilitate. In other parts of the world such as China, where there has been a dramatic increase in the development of institutions of higher learning in the last few decades, MOOCs represent a new way to gain resources and capacities to meet the demands that they have created, a way to gain greater institutional legitimacy and connectivity (move up in those world rankings), not to necessarily preserve the past. In parts of the world with a history of colonialism, MOOCs and increased connectivity are framed quite differently. The African Virtual University (founded in 1995) describes MOOCs as “Yet, another wave in cultural imperialism from the ‘North’ and the ‘West’ crashing across borders, washing over (or possibly washing out) local educational institutions, cultural norms, educational traditions and indigenous content” (Rivard, 2012).

We can only begin to understand MOOCs if we situate them at the intersection of the digital and the material, where they are historically grounded, and culturally imagined. It is in this liminal space where the pragmatic and ethical communication implications of MOOCs can be best explored. A first set of issues, for example, are related to voice. Does the hybridity of collaborations among universities, academic entrepreneurs, corporations, and NGOs open or close spaces for public discourse? Should/can ICA develop a policy towards MOOCs as some have asked? A second set of issues addresses questions of engagement. Does the high level of interactivity of what are described as C-MOOCs promote student and teacher commitment and engagement or unravel it through what scholars describe as the “paradox of connectivity” (Leonardi, Treem, & Jackson 2010)? Are MOOC professors simultaneously the most and least accessible teachers in history? There are also questions of community development. Do the very attributes that make crowds wise (independence, diversity of opinion, and decentralization) minimize cohesion, solidarity, and responsibility, thus also discouraging student crowds from engaging in collective action to protect and empower themselves as they have in the past? Do the high-level communicative demands of MOOCs (both in terms of sophisticated technologic platforms and international language proficiency) limit the opportunity to the already privileged in developing countries? These are just three areas and a few examples of questions where we as communication scholars can uniquely contribute to current debates about public policy, engage broad-ranging social issues, and utilize our collective expertise. We must not shy away from our responsibilities as global citizens in a world where crowds may sometimes be wise but deliberative discourse is always essential.
Challenging conclusions

We live in a volatile and perhaps revolutionary time. In 2013 crowds and clouds were gathering on the streets of cities and villages across Asia, Latin America, Europe, North America, Africa, and the Middle East. At the very time of my presidential address we were witnessing in Turkey those same liminal spaces produced at the nexus of crowds, clouds, and community. Age-old sociocultural processes imbued with logics of intergroup communication, collective action, connective action, and aggregation came together in a public space where action was grounded in the material world but whose structure was shaped by digital ligaments. Communication scholars are uniquely positioned to help unravel and explore the implications of these events. Consider a *New York Times* editorial from June 8, 2013:

... public space, even a modest and chaotic swath of it like Taksim, again reveals itself as fundamentally more powerful than social media, which produce virtual communities. Revolutions happen in the flesh. In Taksim, strangers have discovered one another, their common concerns and collective voice. The power of bodies coming together, at least for the moment, has produced a democratic moment, and given the leadership a dangerous political crisis. (Kimmelman, 2013)

I can think of no better or exciting discipline to be a part of at this time in history. We are at the center of the changes in our global community. In the most profound and mundane ways generations of communication scholars have responded to the central challenges facing society. Our theories, our methods, our content, and our practices are positioned to move seamlessly between the analogic and the digital, the historical and the contemporary, across interpersonal and organizational domains, and within and across cultures. Whether we tweet or use the latest social media platform, our clouds, crowds, and community have been altered in fundamental ways and yet remain connected to our rich disciplinary traditions. It is in the spirit of celebrating our past, our present, and the future of our ICA community that I will end this article. A message grounded not in a 21st-century communicative form but an 18th-century one, not 140 characters but 17 syllables, not American-centered but Japanese, a Haiku.

*Communication*

Our community’s promise

A very wise crowd.

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