

DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION



Barbenheimer: The Internet sensation that stole headlines and made its way into the classroom

Barbenheimer, the portmanteau for *Barbie: The Movie* and *Oppenheimer*, captured headlines this summer.

But how did two films that were seemingly polar opposites get grouped into a suggested double-header and become so inextricably linked? At face value, the only thing they share is a premiere date: *Barbie*, a feminist parody poking fun at the idealistic lifestyle from children's imagination, dripping in pink with intricate and oversaturated sets and musical numbers; *Oppenheimer*, a somber film about the "father of the atomic bomb," with a mix of muted colors and tense scenes in black-and-white. In this edition, Communication faculty members help explain the nuances of these films and show how they have more in common than first meets the eye.

Both stories follow influential and controversial characters who fundamentally altered society. J. Robert Oppenheimer's leadership at Los Alamos helped the U.S. turn a corner to bring an end to the Second World War and changed the future of warfare and geopolitics. Despite her diminutive stature, *Barbie* has also greatly impacted our culture and generations of women and children who played with the dolls, as professor Grace Giorgio explains later.

Both films were also the subject of criticism. The *Barbie* movie takes shots at a male-dominated capitalist society, yet was produced in partnership with Mattel, the doll's manufacturer. Despite some jokes being lobbed at Barbie's parent corporation, the company leaves the movie relatively unscathed.

Premiering so close to memorials of the bombings in Japan may have contributed to the fact that *Oppenheimer* did not (and has not yet at the time of writing) been released there. Critics also see the story as framed too narrowly through the lens of its eponymous protagonist, arguing that too little is told of the victims.

Despite criticism, these films outperformed expectations. To date, *Oppenheimer* has grossed nearly \$1 billion worldwide; *Barbie* has grossed nearly \$1.5 billion. With their release, AMC reported its highest earning week since the company's founding.

These films also drive meaningful, sometimes difficult conversations. In the following stories, we will see how some of these concepts are used in the classroom and drive the scholarship of the Department of Communication.

From the department head, John Caughlin

Greetings!



John Caughlin

I hope you enjoy the glimpse of our department's activities this year in our winter newsletter. The Barbenheimer-themed cover story provides one example of the relevance of communication teaching and research. Our faculty teach concepts that can be applied broadly, so it is not surprising to see our faculty have interesting insights about the latest cultural phenomenon. Whether it pertains to pop

culture, political discourse, debates about a health crisis, or any other aspect of human symbolic activity, I am consistently impressed with the enduring relevance of our faculty's scholarship.

You will also notice a section welcoming new faculty and staff. To that list, I also want to welcome the new editor of this newsletter, Felipe De La Guerra. He technically works for the College of LAS, but he is serving as our new communications coordinator, and we are excited about what he is bringing to the department!

As always, feel free to reach out to us at any point in the year—we love to hear from our alumni and friends. The department's email is communication@illinois.edu, and you can also email me directly at caughlin@illinois.edu.

I hope all of you have a wonderful close to 2023, and I wish you all the best in 2024.

Trina Wright-Dixon inducted as OSCLG Oracle



Trina Wright-Dixon has been inducted as an Oracle of the Organization for the Study of Communication, Language and Gender (OSCLG). Formerly known as the Wise Women's Council, the OSCLG Oracles are recognized for making significant contributions to the organization and willingly and openly

sharing their experiences as leaders, scholars, and mentors with other members.

The OSCLG provides a forum for professional discussion, presentation of research, and demonstration of creative projects in the areas of communication, language, and gender. Members of OSCLG believe that interaction across a wide spectrum of disciplines is needed to foster more insightful discussion of the issues of language, gender, and communication, and therefore seek to include contributions from teachers, consultants, and practitioners as well as researchers.

FALL 2023 Communication Newsletter

Writer and Editor: Felipe De La Guerra

Department of Communication
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign
702 S. Wright St., MC-456
Urbana, IL 61801

communication@illinois.edu
hcom.illinois.edu

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Playing with gender roles: What a plastic doll can teach us about society



Compared to J. Robert Oppenheimer, the head of a scientific revolution that ended the Second World War and caused hundreds of thousands of civilian deaths, a toy might seem to be an inconsequential figure in history.

However, such is Barbie's influence that professor **Grace Giorgio** uses the doll to teach important concepts in her gender communication class. According to Giorgio, toys are a great way to illustrate how we reinforce gender norms. The types of toys children play with are often dictated by gender, with girls often being given dolls whereas boys are more likely to receive trucks or weapons. Even when the gendered toys are similar in nature, the ways they are presented and the terms we use for them are different (think "doll" versus "action-figure").

Barbie provides a particularly interesting case study. Using the documentary "Tiny Shoulders: Rethinking Barbie," students in Giorgio's gender communication class learn about the rise and evolution of the doll and how it helped shape society. Giorgio describes how the doll was a stark contrast from the baby dolls that encouraged girls to become mothers. Barbies tapped into girls' imaginations and enabled them to envision a future with a career, a car, and a house of their own.

Over time, Barbies changed to mirror a changing society during the rise of and pushback against feminism. Barbie's gaze would shift from downcast, perceived to be deferential or non-confrontational, to more direct and confident. "Barbie even tracks the backlash," said Giorgio. "In the '90s, you would pull the string and she would say things like, 'Math is hard!'"

But much like Oppenheimer, Barbie is a flawed character. Her origins represented opportunity for a particular type of woman: privileged (read: white). As the documentary points out, the doll also reinforced unrealistic body ideals, with proportions that some have argued are not only dangerous, but physically impossible to achieve.

"The Barbie toy allows us to talk about bodies," said Giorgio, pointing to why this toy, in particular, furthers discussion in gender communication. "Our gender is very much embedded not just in our minds and our experiences, but also in our bodies."

Having taught several iterations of the gender communication course since 2009, Giorgio has had to update the content several times to keep the materials relevant to societal

changes. In the next version, she plans to incorporate Barbie: The Movie as part of the course materials.

Barbie undoubtedly triggers nostalgia for the many generations that grew up playing with the dolls since its initial release in 1959, which may explain part of Barbie: The Movie's commercial success. Nostalgia has long been used to sell products, and media production companies are no exception, rebooting popular series or movies and producing originals in settings that allow audiences to reminisce, like Netflix's Stranger Things.

"It helps us to conserve something that we feel like we're losing or to reconnect with something that we feel like we've lost," said professor Ned O'Gorman, whose forthcoming essay, "Memory at the End of History" discusses collective memory in the '90s and how people look to the past during moments that feel strange or unfamiliar.

Even though some have criticized it as corporate propaganda at times, Giorgio believes that Barbie cleverly deals with important topics. Presented in a way that anyone could laugh at — men included — the film and its characters find themselves having to literally overthrow the patriarchy to restore Barbieland to its former glory, learning important lessons along the way. An impassioned rant from America Ferrera's character about how impossible it is to be a woman encapsulates



just some of the struggles that women face personally and professionally.

On the decision to let Greta Gerwig go forward with satire about its top brand, Giorgio said it was a risk Mattel knew it could take. "Do they really believe in that manifesto? Probably not. Some of them might. But Greta Gerwig does, and they were brave to bring her on and have her write the script and go ahead with what she did."

Studying how we communicate — including through popular culture, is fundamental, she said, because the ways we communicate are so complex. They play a role in shaping our culture and help us understand our society and how we fit into it. The skills students learn in classes like hers, she added, will help them understand not only how to communicate effectively, but how to understand other people's perspectives. According to Giorgio, regardless of where their future careers lead them, students will undoubtedly have to make decisions that affect others. The lessons they take from the classroom will set them up for success long after they graduate.



Blast from the past: A ‘hero’ from history helps make sense of the chaos



Fewer than 120,000 U.S. World War II veterans are still alive in 2023. People who lived through the war are relatively few. Why then, in an age of shortening attention spans and character limits, would a three-hour-long biopic about J. Robert Oppenheimer interest the modern audience?

Although the dust may have settled long ago, a fresh look at the “father of the atomic bomb” may still have something to teach us about the present, according to professor **Ned O’Gorman**.

During difficult moments or times of uncertainty, we look to the past for comfort, reassurance, or answers, he said. People are looking to make sense of the seemingly incessant chaos in increasingly uncertain times, and films like *Oppenheimer* and *Barbie* — perhaps more unexpectedly — can help us think through the complexities of the present. They drive important conversations and debates that give us direction.

People use stories to make sense of things, often looking for a hero or villain. But many of the disasters we have had over the last 15 years have lacked clear villains, O’Gorman said.

“There is something about the impersonal nature of 21st century life, that it seems like things come to us out of nowhere for reasons that we cannot understand and with no apparent motive behind them. We live in a world where a lot of things seem to happen without anybody behind the wheel.”

For large swathes of the modern audience without memories of the Second World War or the nuclear arms race that followed, it makes sense to reframe history in a way that immerses you in the story. O’Gorman claims that *Oppenheimer* director Christopher Nolan, who also directed a *Batman* trilogy, essentially made a superhero film out of this historical event. There are clear parallels between the protagonist and *Batman*, argues O’Gorman; *Oppenheimer*, a hero with a complicated personality — a rebel working with the law but often finding himself at odds with it, much like *Bruce Wayne* in *Gotham City*.

“There’s something about the catastrophic character of *Oppenheimer* and the history of which he was a part — the advent of nuclear weapons, its potential to destroy the world — that is also very much in the consciousness of the 21st century,” he said, alluding to the possibility of global catastrophes stemming from climate change or the escalation of political tensions and armed conflicts in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. “I think he very skillfully tapped into the zeitgeist, and particularly, contemporary anxieties,” said O’Gorman.

According to him, we use films not just to reevaluate the past, but to make sense of the present.

“History itself is complex. People are complex. These films are helping us learn how to think through complexity, and I think *Oppenheimer* does that somewhat successfully. As a historian, I’m with the others who have lots of criticisms about what was misrepresented or what was left out, but you can only ask so much of a Hollywood film.”

Film itself is an ideal medium for stories like these because

of its immersive qualities, argues O’Gorman. In his book, “Lookout America! The Secret Hollywood Studio at the Heart of the Cold War,” O’Gorman and co-author Kevin Hamilton describe how a little-known studio run by the Air Force used film to win the hearts and minds of policymakers and advance its strategic goals.

“In the most abstract sense, why is film used to frame narratives, to sell products, to sell stories — be they historically grounded or purely fictional in nature? I think it has a lot to do with the spectacle,” he said.

Picture yourself in a dark IMAX theater. Undisturbed by the distractions of the quotidian, the close-ups on the massive screen make it seem like you are in the room. The tension permeates the theater as anxious bystanders await to see if the Trinity test results in the small but not impossible outcome of igniting the atmosphere and destroying the entire planet. You share in their anticipation until you experience a blinding flash of light and rumbling audio as the bomb detonates, which quickly transforms into a deafening silence that gives goosebumps. You can see why O’Gorman believes that artfully shot films with expertly composed sound design and gripping narratives can be more effective than other types of media.

For O’Gorman, studying how we communicate through film is valuable. “It accomplishes so much if you can teach students how to watch film and work with film and talk about film. They can pick up a novel, they can pick up a presidential speech, they can listen to a debate on the radio, and they should be able to use those same skills to parse and critique and engage with what’s before them.”

“To me, the most basic form of cultural, civic, and professional literacy is how to be literate about images, about moving images, about messages that come to us on social media. If you are going to have any compass in the world in which we live, it has got to be a critical compass or else you’re going to get lost — and there’s a lot of folks who are lost, politically, civically, and otherwise,” he added.

His advice to the public is to go watch great films in theaters with others. “If we all were willing to give our three hours to one thing and then talk about it with other people, there’s all kinds of great — maybe unintended — consequences that can come out of that kind of thing.”



‘Data nerds’ helping difference makers

Communication faculty member leads research initiative that develops powerful tools for social scientists, humanists, and communities to analyze and understand massive data collections

By Bill Bell



The first thing professor **Scott Althaus** shows you when you enter the Cline Center for Advanced Social Research is a painting by the artist Brian Alfred. It shows seven giant letters arranged on a hill, evoking the landmark “Hollywood” sign that stands above Los Angeles.

The letters are shown from the back, exposing the superstructure that holds them up. They spell “F-R-E-E-D-O-M.” It’s a terrific introduction to the Cline Center, which helps researchers get a handle on giant datasets, so policymakers and citizens can take actions that improve their governments and communities.

Both the painting and the center show the realities that make us what we are — some only seen if you know where (and how) to look.

“We want to create data interventions that allow difference makers — in the public sector, in the private sector, they might be researchers, they might be practitioners — to make decisions that improve societal well-being. We want to supply them with the highest-quality data so that the decisions they make are as well-informed with good facts as they can be,” said Althaus, the Merriam Professor of Political Science, professor of communication, and director of the Cline Center at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.

The Cline Center won the Provost’s Excellence in Public Engagement Team Award in May 2023. The team includes Althaus, Loretta Auvil, Joseph Bajjalieh, Kelly Hammond,

Jay Jennings, Michael Martin, Buddy Peyton, Tom Redman, and Ajay Singh.

“We’re the data nerds,” he said.

Keep it on the fairway

They’re data nerds in complicated times. The work they do and information they analyze is often centered on controversial topics. Ethnic, religious, and gender identity. Coups, political unrest, and backsliding democracies. Terrorism and global conflict. Exactly the areas where many people are generating a lot of heat without much light, these days.

“The assumption in many conversations is that anyone who is collecting data on these topics must have some policy ax grind — some reason for doing it,” Althaus said. “We’re not political. We’re non-partisan, non-advocacy. It comes as a surprise [to many] that we don’t have an ax to grind.”

That attitude was established by the people most responsible for the Cline Center’s creation — the late Richard (BS, ’57, political science) and Carole Cline, who provided an endowment for the center, and professor emeritus and founding director Peter Nardulli.

“[Richard Cline’s] number one rule for the center was ‘Let’s keep it on the fairway,’ nothing too far to the right or to the left,” Nardulli said. “He always focused on our high-tech expertise” and how it could be used by policymakers and thinkers of all stripes.

(continued on next page)

Having come up through the finance department at supermarket giant Jewel before becoming its CEO, Richard (known more as Dick) Cline served as CEO of the billion-dollar gas company Nicor for a decade in the 1980s and '90s. He also spent three years as chair of the board of the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago.



Peter F. Nardulli, left, with Carole and the late Richard Cline. (Photo by Kwame Ross.)

The Clines established the endowment for the center in 2004, and Dick was deeply involved in its intellectual development. He died in March 2023 at 88.

“Dick and Pete [saw] a very important role for the center with the technological expertise that we had here and the ability to scan very large volumes of news data from

around the world. That became the signature research focus for the Cline Center. If we can extract basic insights from these news holdings, we can apply those techniques to a variety of topics, and lots of people can use this information to improve societal welfare around the world. That’s in no small part owing to the vision of Dick Cline,” Althaus said.

More SPOTLITE, less heat

The Cline Center conducts its analysis through a variety of platforms, from the Coup D’Etat Project, created in 2013 to better understand the transfer of political power, to the Composition of Religious and Ethnic Groups Project to gauge the divisions affecting countries around the world. Researchers may draw upon the center’s massive repository of more than 170 million news reports from as far back as 1915.

Take the topic of police use of lethal force, for example. Prompted by the 2014 protest surrounding the killing of Michael Brown by a police officer, the Cline Center team realized that there was no authoritative registry of these acts. The center launched SPOTLITE Illinois in response. The project collects data on all instances of the use of lethal force by police from 2014 to 2021. It relies on the Cline Center’s index of more than 170 million news stories and automated analytical and machine-learning techniques developed by the center’s researchers.

A dashboard system released earlier this year makes the data available to anyone on the web, and it offers a set of “data layers” that makes the massive amount of information easier to study. The team plans to make a nationwide version available by the end of 2023.

At a county level, users can see how many incidents have occurred over time, see how they’ve changed over time, and get details from news reports of the incidents. The dashboard also offers information on the racial or ethnic characteristics of those involved in these police encounters. That information is often incomplete or incorrect in news reports. To develop it, the SPOTLITE team established a procedure for assessing those characteristics using independent human analysts and hundreds of images of the civilians involved in these incidents. The procedure included a means of deciding whether they had confidence in their determination.

A group of experts from on and off campus oversee the process of categorizing information about the individuals

involved in these incidents so that the SPOTLITE project can be useful for revealing any disparities involving racial or ethnic groups. That debiasing assessment and accountability committee is made up of research methods experts who also come from communities that have experienced historical injustices by police.

“It was extremely important for us to call together that group and have them be empowered to say to the research team, ‘You can’t do it that way;’” Althaus explained. “This is an extremely sensitive topic that has repercussions for communities of color in the United States, because of histories of injustice...It’s taken us a long time to be confident in our methods because the stakes are really high in getting this information right.”

Overall stakeholders giving input on and using the SPOTLITE tool are incredibly varied. Since the project’s inception, representatives from the Police Executive Research Forum, the International Association of Chiefs of Police, the International Law Enforcement Educators and Trainers Association, the ACLU, the NAACP, the Invisible Institute, and academic research experts have all been involved. Michael Schlosser, a member of the SPOTLITE leadership team, is a career law enforcement officer who recently retired as the director of the university’s Police Training Institute. This deep and wide engagement has encouraged an ongoing conversation about the problems that exist in documenting police uses of lethal force and what characteristics would be useful in a common data source.

“I did not know how this was going to go – to bring these groups together. But the conversations went great because, while there are a lot of things these groups would disagree on, the one thing they could agree on was that the data were terrible,” Althaus said.

With tools like SPOTLITE, citizens are empowered to understand how their local law enforcement agencies have exercised their authority and whether there has been anything that has been inappropriate or a matter of concern. Policing agencies have an authoritative set of records from a neutral third party that help to document these things for the local communities, and they are able to improve their training programs and develop better models for use of force policies.

The upcoming national version of SPOTLITE will expand that positive impact.

“We’ll be able to statistically model how many of these instances would we expect in a given county in a given period,” Althaus said. “When we see cases where there are many more of these incidents than we expect, that might be a place that’s deserving of special attention. Maybe there’s something wrong. Maybe there’s a need to take a close look at what is happening and understand if there are opportunities for reform. On the converse side, it’s also the case that we want to identify the places that have far fewer of these incidences than we might expect.”

In fact, as he describes the issues addressed by SPOTLITE, Althaus could be talking about the questions that drive so many projects at the Cline Center: Where are there opportunities for reform? Where are things going well? And how might the insight they gather be shared as widely as possible?

Editor’s note: This story originally appeared in the Fall 2023 issue of The Quadrangle.

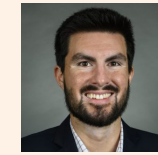
Department welcomes new faculty, staff



Joshua Barbour joined the department as a professor. Barbour earned a PhD at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and rejoined our department from the University of Texas at Austin. Welcome back!



Danielle Cruzan joined the department as an office support specialist.



Felipe De La Guerra joined the College of LAS Office of Communications and Marketing to serve as our department’s communications coordinator.



Jennifer Jones Barbour joined the department as a teaching associate professor and the director of applied and leadership communication. Jones Barbour earned a PhD at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and rejoined our department from the University of Texas at Austin. Welcome back!



Anna Wright joined the department from Illinois College as a teaching assistant professor and the director of oral and written communication.

Promotions



Elisabeth Bigsby has been promoted from assistant professor to associate professor with tenure.



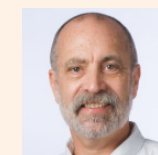
Caroline Bunch has been promoted from lecturer to senior lecturer.

Retired



Sally Jackson, professor of communication, retired this fall after a distinguished research and administrative career. She earned three degrees from our department before moving into faculty positions at the University of

Nebraska, Michigan State University, University of Oklahoma, and University of Arizona and finally returning home to Illinois in 2007. Her scholarship examined communication design, and in recent years, she focused on topics ranging from the natural design of argumentation to highly engineered systems for managing complex human activities. In addition to her accomplishments as a professor, Jackson held a number of administrative positions at the University of Arizona, including the role of vice provost and chief information officer. In 2007, she came back to Illinois to serve as chief information officer and associate provost before returning to a full-time faculty role in 2011.



C. Scott Jacobs, professor of communication, retired in August 2023 after a long career studying language and discourse studies, with a particular focus on understanding the arguments people make in contexts of disagreement (e.g., mediation). His research was grounded in careful study of how language works, and he applied his

insights to understanding people’s evaluations of message quality and truthfulness versus deception. After receiving his bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral degrees from our department, he taught at the University of Nebraska, Michigan State University, University of Iowa, University of Oklahoma, and University of Arizona, and returned to Illinois to join our faculty in 2007. His scholarship was recognized with several national awards, including the career Distinguished Scholar Award from the International Society for the Study of Argumentation.



David Tewksbury, professor of communication, retired in January 2023 after an exceptional career as a scholar, teacher, and administrator. He researched how news media construct the meaning of issues in their

reports and how audiences understand and respond to issue frames. His research also examined how news audiences select news content in the contemporary media environment. He joined the department in 1996 after earning his PhD from the University of Michigan. During his 27 years here, he served as department head and held leadership positions in the College of LAS, where he served as executive associate dean until 2022.



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