

# Business Communication-ification at the Capitol Insurrection

McClain Watson

University of Texas at Dallas, Richardson, TX, USA

## What is Business Communication?

Is it \*any\* communication by \*anyone\*, “about”, “business”? Is it only communication that is created by a business or takes place “inside” a business? What people can speak as a business? Can those people ever \*not\* speak as a business? Who decides whether a particular communication is “business communication” or whether it is, simply, “communication”? Can any communication become or be transformed into “business communication”? If it can, who has ability to do that?

These questions are perhaps tedious but the consequences of how business communication scholars and educators answer—either explicitly or implicitly—are significant. And yet, while there have been many articles over the years seeking to answer the question “What is *the field* of business communication?”, the question “What is business communication?” has been very rarely asked much less answered (Daniel, 1983; Keyser, 1972). In his 1993 article “The Shape of Our Field: Business Communication as a Hybrid Discipline,” Shaw wrote “The difficulty we’ve had defining the discipline has, more than any other problem in the field, compromised our full acceptance into the broader academic community” (Shaw, 1993, p. 298). For Shaw, defining the field is

critical because otherwise “the coherence of our efforts has simply been assumed” (Shaw, 1993, p. 299). Hagge (1989) described the result very clearly: business communication scholar-educators who are “obsessed with justifying their discipline...[N]o discipline I know appears as pilingly unsure of itself as business communication” (Hagge, 1989, p. 89). No one has painted this picture more clearly—or depressingly, or relatably—than Reinsch, who kicked off his 1996 article on the topic with a Dickensian sketch that simply must be quoted in full.

Gazing into the ballroom, Business Communication sees its putative father, the wealthy “Beast” (a prosperous but somewhat insecure business school), posturing awkwardly near the punch bowl. Its putative mother, a deposed former “Beauty” (Rhetoric), fidgets in the background, straightening her skirt and desperately wishing someone—even the clumsy but wealthy Business—would invite her back onto the dance floor. In the center of the ballroom, a spotlight traces the graceful sweep of the current queen, a radiant Physics wearing a necklace of charmed quarks, waltzing with the crown prince, handsome Biology in a tuxedo with a double helix cummerbund. No one—not even Business or Rhetoric—pays much attention to Business Communication pressing its face longingly against the window and feeling very much like an orphan. (Reinsch, 1996, p. 27)

Obviously, there are important reasons for any group of scholar-educators, particularly one as institutionally fragmented and educationally diverse as we are, to continually (re)assess their place within larger tectonic professional and disciplinary movements. Most of us would agree that our everyday occupational realities as actually-existing business communication faculty should generally be treated as more pressing than pure theory attempts to divine a permanent definition of “business

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Corresponding author: McClain Watson

Organizations, Strategy, and International Management, University of Texas at Dallas, SM43, JSOM, UT-Dallas, 800 W Campbell Rd, Richardson, TX 75080, USA

Tel: +1-972-883-4875, E-mail: [mcclain.watson@utdallas.edu](mailto:mcclain.watson@utdallas.edu)

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communication” as such. This is especially the case if we want to also consider the boundaries of such clearly overlapping fields as strategic communication, corporate communication, management communication, and so on. So, clearly these conversations about the place of business communication as a profession and as a discipline should be encouraged.

And yet, we can't simply leave any attempt to better understand “business communication as such” behind. Doing so is surely one of the factors contributing to why we are so uncertain about our intellectual and professional legitimacy in the first place. So, what is “business communication”? What is it not? Who can draw that line?

The challenges of addressing this question head-on have long been clearly described (Hagge, 1989; Reinsch, 1991; Sager, 1976). In this paper I ask a related question but from the side: Can \*any\* communication/utterance/text be—or be *made into*— “business communication”? Framing the question this way means that we no longer need to claim to offer a definitive, all-encompassing definition but instead allows us to acknowledge that, unlike, say, the definition of mitochondria, any definition of “business communication” will always be incomplete, partial, and provisional (Reinsch, 1991).

I work through this question using a very particular event: The insurrection that occurred at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021. I pick this event primarily because it may be the last place one would expect to find “business communication” of the sort typically observed in ABC-style business communication research/thinking. And yet there turns out to have been a considerable amount of business communication at the Capitol on January 6, 2021. This consists not only of business communication as we usually understand it, but also an extraordinary amount of “communication” that subsequently became or was transformed into ‘business communication’ through a process I call *business communication-ification*. After profiling some instances of “business communication” and some examples of business communication-ification, I end by speculating on what it might mean if our object of study can potentially be anything we or others say it is. What are the risks and benefits of throwing open the gates of our field and letting anybody or anything in?

## January 6<sup>th</sup> Business Communication As Traditionally Understood

The clearest example of January 6 “business communication as traditionally understood” came from North Texas realtor and life coach podcaster Jenna Ryan. Ryan livestreamed much of her experience inside the Capitol, making comments like “Life or death, it doesn't matter. Here we go” (Phillips, 2021). Ryan was

subsequently charged with 4 federal counts for her actions on January 6. She pled guilty to one misdemeanor charge and was sentenced to 60 days in prison (Reilly, 2021). More relevant for us are the promotional comments she made related to her business, comments like “Y'all know who to hire for your realtor. Jenna Ryan for your realtor” (Sabawi, 2021). Using her social platform to promote her business is a clear example of business communication as commonly understood. Most would also consider Ryan's livestreaming and tweeting that day as business communication since they function as content/product to be monetized via her social media platforms and used to market her life coaching services (<https://www.selfloveu.com>). So far, so good; hyping one's services is clearly within the scope of business communication as traditionally understood. There were also dozens of vendors at the event selling t-shirts saying things like “MAGA Civil War: Jan 6, 2021” and their hawking and signage would also be considered ‘business communication as typically understood’ (George-Parkin, 2021).

## Business Communication-ification

There were other sorts of communication that day which probably would not traditionally be seen as “business communication” but ultimately *came to become* business communication through business communication-ification. There was Nicholas Rodean, who must have come to the event directly from work given that he entered the Capitol while still wearing his employee identification badge. Rodean was photographed waving a Trump flag throughout the halls of the Capitol (Associated Press, 2021). His employer, Navistar Direct Marketing, issued a statement the next day, a statement which is clearly business communication (or strategic communication or corporate communication) as traditionally understood:

- Navistar Direct Marketing was made aware that a man wearing a Navistar company badge was seen inside the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021 during the security breach. After review of the photographic evidence the employee in question has been terminated for cause.
- While we support all employee's right to peaceful, lawful exercise of free speech, any employee demonstrating dangerous conduct that endangers the health and safety of others will no longer have an employment opportunity with Navistar Direct Marketing.

So, was Rodean wearing the Navistar badge actually business communication? Did he wear the badge intentionally? Does that matter? These questions illustrate the tight spots we get into when trying to determine whether something is business communication—or strategic communication or corporate com-

munication etc—or not. Many—perhaps even most—business communication researchers would likely not recognize Rodean’s communication as “business communication” but Navistar’s response/action clearly shows that they felt it was. Who gets to decide?

Navistar transformed Rodean’s communication/behavior that day—his clothes, his interactions, his presence in the Capitol—into business communication through an act of business communication-ification. Navistar felt it had to distance itself from Rodean and so business communication-ified Rodean’s presence/behavior in order to create a rationale for terminating his employment. This meant that, even if Rodean’s communication wasn’t business communication on January 6, it would become business communication less than 24 hours later.

Another January 6-related example of business communication-ification comes from a flyer posted on an Upper East Side telephone pole in the days after the event. Photos of a January 6 participant wearing a black hoodie sweatshirt featuring the insignia of the Waffen-SS Totenkopf tank division with the words “Camp Auschwitz: Work Brings Freedom” had been circulating since the event. The flyer in question included that photo bracketed by the following text:

- Remember this guy from the attempted coup in DC?  
His hoodie...was sold by a business operating out of 300 East 85<sup>th</sup> Street. This means the person supporting and profiting off the sales of this shirt lives in our neighborhood. This website also sells shirts reading “6MWE.” This stands for “Six Million Wasn’t Enough.” Ask yourself—do you truly know your neighbor? (Antifa Gossip Blogger, 2021)

Although later reports cast doubt on the likelihood of a commercial printing business operating out of that address (Garber, 2021), the creator of this flyer clearly engaged in business communication-ification. The hoodie itself probably wouldn’t be considered business communication by most bcom scholar-educators but the flyer business communication-ifies the sweatshirt in order to disparage the business among its neighbors and possibly cause financial/reputational damage to the proprietors or the person wearing the sweatshirt.

The January 6 event led to other instances of business communication-ification being used to bring financial or reputational hardship—or gain—to participants and their supporters. Brandon Straka, a hair stylist and political web influencer who spoke at rallies on January 5, 2021 and participated in the breach of the Capitol a day later, subsequently sought financial donations from supporters to fund his legal defense. A fundraiser was planned for this purpose at the Rio Crest Winery in Guerneville, CA (Straka, 2021). Despite attempts to keep the

event under wraps, word quickly got out (Callahan, 2021). Flyers and communication advertising a fundraiser would be considered by most to be ‘business communication as traditionally understood.’ Yet the event and its location were quickly business communication-ified by dozens of people on sites like Twitter:

- For my wine peeps cross Rio Crest Winery off your list. They are funding to support someone who participated in the Jan 6th insurrection. (Carter, 2021)
- Is that the Rio Crest Winery located at 15460 Morningside Dr in Guerneville, CA? Can they be reached at 707 869 8353? Not in my backyard! (vsmce2, 2021)

and Yelp:

- I was drinking a glass of what I thought was a fine glass of Merlo only to discover a piece of turd in my glass. Then, I realized the turd smelled of the winery owner who allow a self-loathing, Trump-supporting Capitol rioting insurrectionist to hold his fundraiser on the premises. Do not support this establishment until they clean up their act and realize which side of history they want to stand. Rio Crest: NOT.THE.BEST (Stone, 2021)

These examples illustrate what appears to be a key characteristic of business communication-ification: It is typically an act of praise or censure, depending on the motivations of the speaker. Don’t like the politics of a winery owner who donates to a disagreeable political candidate? Business communication-ification enables you to do something about it. Have an employee who has a weekend side hustle as a video game streamer and sometimes makes incendiary political remarks on stream? Business communication-ify her hobby and you now have leverage over her off-the-clock behavior. Are these decisions or actions fair? Legal? Such questions should be asked but are beyond the scope of this paper.

## So What?

So what does it mean for business communication scholars and educators that our object of study can be absent one minute and then suddenly present, summoned into being by perhaps bad faith actors seeking to create reputational/financial damage or gain? We tend to teach/think that business communication, since (we presume) it can only originate from inside organizations or from people acting in a profit-seeking capacity, has fairly rigid boundaries that prohibit just anyone from engaging in or creating it. These boundaries help explain why our teaching tends to be focused almost exclusively on the routine, the mundane, and the commonly encountered forms of business communication (Moshiri & Cardon, 2020). From a teaching standpoint, obviously, it makes sense to focus on the tradition-

ally understood forms of business communication since those are what our students will encounter once they leave school and become business communicators themselves. So, even though it could be interesting to discuss business communication-ification in our courses, its practical utility as a ‘topic that will help students make their way in the world’ seems limited.

On the research/thinking side, though, business communication-ification could have a more interesting effect since it could expand the number and nature of the things we currently find useful or interesting to study. It suggests that anyone can be engaged in business communication whether or not they know or agree to it and that business communication can be weaponized for clout or clicks or to save organizational face. It locates business communication out on the streets and into our daily lives rather than solely in corporate workplaces. It shows that when we think or write about ‘business communication’ we are not thinking or writing about a static thing in the world that everyone can see and agree on. Instead, our object of study is as much a part of the socio-political rough and tumble as any other communication-focused field.

Organizations, leaders, employees, customers, citizens, business communicators, these are contested labels with a wide range of discursive value/significance depending on multiple factors within evolving environments. These factors and environments should be as much a part of our evolving understanding of our objects of study as they already are in many of our sister communication fields as rhetoric, media studies, and cultural studies. Yes, such examinations are likely to be messier, less linear, and more provisional/discursive than we may be used to or comfortable with. And yet, if the pandemic has taught us anything, it is that the distinctions we make and the boundaries we draw between work and home, life and career, “business communication” and “communication,” are not given in Nature but are rather artifacts of human doing that can—must—be prodded and questioned if we ever hope to understand what we are talking about when we talk about “business communication.” So, why not let a thousand BCOMs bloom?

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