

Interviewee: Fred Antczak [A]

Interviewer: Emily Smith [S]

Transcriber: Eric Detweiler

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### Transcript

S: I am Emily Smith, and this is Dr. Fred Antczak. It is just after 11:30 a.m. on Thursday the 31st, and we're about to begin. So when did you first join RSA?

A: It would have been the early 90s. Donovan—I was at the University of Iowa, and Donovan Ochs and Sharon Crowley were there and dragged me to a conference, and I enjoyed it and the people who heard my paper weren't indignant, so it became kind of a staple. And then I found myself on the board in the mid-90s.

S: So you first learned about the organization from other people at your institution?

A: Right.

S: Oh, great. And how would you describe the organization when you first joined it?

A: It was personality-driven. You went to RSA for the concentration of rhetoricians, but to see, you know, individuals. It wasn't—I mean, the organization does so many things now that it didn't do then, and you didn't think of it as professionalizing in all of the same number of ways.

S: "Professionalizing" in the sense of building scholarly community?

A: Yeah, and, you know, the every-other-year institute with the fellowship money and all of the things that have ensued since then. It's become a different kind of organization that you come to the organization and meet personalities rather than the other way.

S: Yeah. So who were some of the key people or the key personalities you remember meeting or working with during your early years of RSA involvement?

A: Well, as I said, Don Ochs and Sharon Crowley. I think Jerry Hauser and I were, you know, simpatico right from the beginning. I'd known him before. Jan Swearingen, a sequence of people sort of in the same age range.

S: So would you say you see sort of generations, either, not necessarily chronologically, but maybe sort of philosophically through RSA?

A: Well, maybe chronologically too.

[both chuckling]

A: Yes. And I think one of the markers was when I got into it, there was—I don't know, it was easy to tell who were the English folks and who were the communication folks. And since I sit uncomfortably on the fence between them, I got to talk to them both, but I think it was a problem sustaining that kind of conversation at first.

S: Between those two kind of meta-disciplinary—

A: Yeah, because people knew people in their own area. I don't think there was any unfriendliness. People, to the extent that the work appeared in books, read each other's work. I don't think there was as much reading each other's journal articles except, you know, in *Philosophy & Rhetoric*.

S: Yeah, and that certainly seems to be part of the kind of professionalization trajectory of the organization today.

A: Absolutely.

S: And this is where both the English, generally, and the communication, generally, folks can sort of meet up even if they might be separate at their own institutions.

[04:54]

A: I think that's true. And I'd like to think that RSA facilitates it. I think there was also, and this may still be true, a common sense of being differently put upon. And that the communication folks—it seems like they were constantly being told that, you know, anybody can give a speech or tell you how to make a speech. And the rhet/comp folks, while others in the university would not say that they particularly taught writing, they didn't want to—there was a kind of marginalization there. So rhetoricians formed a bond through different kinds of common suffering.

S: [chuckling] Yeah. Then the bond hopefully can be transformed into common joy in one another.

A: No, and it is, in that the scholarship that has been sort of rocketing out of RSA has gotten the notice of people. I'm a dean, and I talk to people in a variety of disciplines. Rhetoric is now known and respected in a way that I was not aware of it being in the early 90s.

S: Yeah, and even just today, you know, they had the ASHR<sup>1</sup> symposium and the health rhetorics<sup>2</sup>—there's just a huge variety of work being done.

A: Well, health rhetoric is a particular pride of mine. At Grand Valley State—in that we're situated right in Grand Rapids, which is sort of young Rochester, Minnesota, with all

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<sup>1</sup> American Society for the History of Rhetoric.

<sup>2</sup> Symposium of the Association for the Rhetoric of Science, Technology, and Medicine.

sorts of hospitals and research institutes—and so I have a million pre-meds, but the pre-med majors all accept the need to learn to communicate. Health comm prospers.

S: Yeah, that certainly—that can be a hard-won battle if they don't accept it.

A: Yeah, either they're willing to communicate about it or they're not. Exactly right.

[both laughing]

S: All right. So I think we're now at—yeah. I guess we can go back in time a little bit. So what did you perceive as RSA's projects and goals in the early 90s when you joined, at sort of an organizational level?

A: I think it was fairly simple: to get rhetoric more noticed in a scholarly way. There was a broad sense that we had a lot of great teachers among us—teaching not necessarily being equally valued at every different kind of university, but scholarship having, you know, being the coin of the realm wherever you go. And so the first step to that is for people who already know and prize the history and principles and research directions of the discipline to coalesce and become a more active group. And I think there were ways of trying to do that through the 90s.

S: Because rhetoric is simultaneously incredibly ancient and a comparatively recent discipline, so that's sort of a constant and sometimes productive sort of toggling. But yeah, absolutely.

A: But dangerous. You think about, as you may in time learn, the vulnerability of an untenured faculty member and the risk in toggling the value of what you do—I think it was Crowley thought that the discipline had to do more to establish itself apart from the then-SCA, Speech Communication Association, and the Cs.<sup>3</sup> Still vital connections, and you see some of the same people at those conferences, but more of a community identity.

[10:19]

S: And I find, even as I was speaking to the other volunteers, that younger scholars are trying to find our way into which conferences or constellation of conferences we sort of see ourselves, you know, growing into, so that makes a great deal of sense.

A: Yeah, I think you have to be guided by wherever your research takes you. But it is always good to go to a conference where the people who come to your panels are all interested in what you're doing rather than, you know, a third of them interested in what you're doing, the other two-thirds interested in the other two panel members, and, you know, moving in and out of the room as the panel goes on.

[both chuckling]

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<sup>3</sup> Conference on College Composition and Communication.

S: Yeah, absolutely. So how has the organization changed during the time you've been a part of it, since—

A: Well, late 90s, there was a dwindling, and I think of the Washington conference<sup>4</sup> as crucial in that it forced people to be on panels with folks from the other mysterious realms. It also pulled in more international scholars and more scholars from other disciplines who did fairly rhetorical stuff.

S: Mmhmm.

A: The membership always grows as a result of the conference, but then it continued to grow.

S: And then, what are your hopes for the organization's future, sort of continuing along that trajectory?

A: Well, sort of contradicting my growth point, I hope we don't get too big in the sense that it's possible for rhetoric to become everything really easily, and I think the effect that would have is to unravel some of the tighter bonds that the organization maintains. We don't need to be 300 ever again, but, you know, we had 1,600, I think, in—where was our last conference? Atlanta? Wherever it was, I remember it well. [chuckling] And I think there's a kind of upper limit beyond which there's a loss of intimacy and a loss of the sense that pretty much everybody who walks down this hallway would be interested in your stuff if they would just stop and talk to you. And I think if that happens, it'll bloom out to proportions that will make it too thin.

S: It seems like along with the logistical difficulties that I guess both growth and attrition can represent, growth seems to bring with it the risk of a kind of diffusion of community.

A: Yup. Exactly.

S: I'm going to double back—

A: I think there's worry on the other hand, though, in these days when universities have abandoned the funding of scholarly travels, and this conference taking place in May and June—I think there are a number of people who simply can't get funding and what proportion of them can come is really important to the future of the organization too. I think this is a good slot, calendar-wise, but I think it poses that problem.

[14:58]

S: Especially, as you mentioned earlier, the realities of contingent faculty.

A: Oh, yes.

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<sup>4</sup> I.e., the 9<sup>th</sup> biennial conference, held in Washington, DC, in 2000.

S: People whose positions in the university are distinct.

A: Few of them are funded at all at most institutions, but, you know, a lot of people start out like I did: as contingent.

S: Yeah, absolutely. And now you're a dean, so—

A: One bad thing after another.

[both laughing]

S: So what would you say are your most important or prominent memories related to RSA over these last, gosh, almost 30 years?

A: I think, first of all, the emergence of generations—to go back to your word—of really wonderful scholars. And as I'm looking through the books<sup>5</sup> in anticipation of this conference, you just see wonderful stuff being produced. There was wonderful stuff before, when I was a kid. But I think at this conference there is a much higher floor and a much more reliable level of good work. Another thing that I remember as being sort of pivotal is becoming part of ACLS.<sup>6</sup> Being part of ACLS gives us visibility, but what it immediately required was that we had an annual event, and we weren't going to go to two conferences, so the institute was invented. And that idea has done so many people so much good. It's just—it's a critical part of what RSA does too. I think the leadership has certainly upgraded since my day. You're seeing the best scholars and ablest people going on to the governing positions, and the board is more diverse, more activist. I think that rhetoric—which has been an extraordinarily white discipline—is changing, and I'd like to think that that is at least partially because of some of the things that RSA has done along the way to open that up. It's certainly visible in the makeup of the board.

S: Yeah, and it certainly seems like along with outreach involved in professionalization processes, there's also outreach outside of the organization in trying to, as you say, have more of an activist and sort of engaged bent.

A: I think, as a discipline, we're unusually well-positioned to do that. It's hard to ask for still another thing from an individual or from an organization. But the times call for—we're well-positioned to do it. I think that's the leadership challenge we're seeing taken up by the current leadership.

S: That's great. Would you say you have a favorite conference or a couple of favorite conferences you've attended?

A: Again, the Washington conference, and—I know this is going to sound silly, but the conference I'm at is always my favorite conference. Whenever I come to RSA, I'm sort

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<sup>5</sup> I.e., the conference program.

<sup>6</sup> American Council of Learned Societies.

of gobsmacked by the variety of work, the quality of stuff on matters or in ways that I've never thought of. And I keep coming in order to reinforce the lesson of how little I know, but how worthy of knowing some of the stuff is on the gray edges of my knowledge.

[20:03]

S: Well, I'm all out of questions. Is there anything else you'd like to say about RSA past, present, or future?

A: Well, I think, in my mind Jerry Hauser has been one of the most crucial people in transitioning the organization from a few great, brilliant scholars who got together every once in a while to a professionalizing organization that has a more or less clear notion of what it can do for the world, for young scholars, and, you know, for the scholarship and teaching of rhetoric. There's relatively little on teaching. In the book, I was able to find four or five things. But maybe that will come into greater fashion as the profession is under more pressure—I mean, the whole academic profession—to justify the investment made in it.

S: Yeah. Coming from the English side, I have always been—as long as I've been in the discipline; it's not very long—have been fairly aware of the pedagogical slant. But having more classes with the communication folks, as Penn State has a very close relationship, I've come to realize, first of all, the fascinating things they do in their teaching, but second of all, how little they have previously been able to share it with us. [laughing] So yeah, it certainly seems like that would be a great area for growth.

A: I hope so. Anything else you want to ask me?

S: I don't think so. You said this conference was sprung from the mind of Kenneth Burke? [chuckling]

A: Well, actually in historical fact, George Yoos is probably the person who was the early driver of the journal and the conference. There was a lot of work on Kenneth Burke at the beginning, and I think it's a sign of health not that Burke would ever be forgotten, but that there are many many different kinds of work now being done.

S: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, certainly at Penn State we have a similar perspective on the question of reverence and also expansion into considering—

A: Yeah. Well, you're well-positioned through that.

S: All right, great. Well thanks so much your time .

A: You're welcome! Thank you.