IN THIS ISSUE OF *THE SPOTLIGHT*

The Story of Gordon Freedman

SPRING ISSUE 2021
The Story of Gordon Freedman

MSU COMM alumni can be found across the globe running companies, creating strategy, consulting, developing campaigns, engaging in human resource management and other important and fascinating careers. And, sometimes, they have worked in various industries ranging from covering political scandals to creating documentary films to working in education. And, Gordon Freedman has done it all! Gordon is a Department of Communication alumnus who has had an interesting and winding career path. He worked on Capitol Hill as a staffer during the Watergate hearings, then moved into a career in news journalism, then television production and film. He is currently working on changing the structure of education to bring it up to date in the age of information technology, apps and the Internet. Linked student, Kaumudi Mahajan (KM), had the opportunity to interview Gordon and talk to him about how his degree in communication made an impact on his life.

KM: Could you tell us about your time at MSU? What was it like when you were a student there?

GF: I started off at the University of Denver and then, since I’m from Michigan and it was expensive to attend a private school in Colorado, I returned to Michigan to finish up. I started by looking at University of Michigan but, surprisingly Michigan State seemed more interesting to me. I was drawn to MSU’s interpersonal psychology program and a couple other areas. U of M, at the time, was very behaviorist, very quantitative, which really seemed very out of touch with where psychology was going in the early 1970s. I thought it would be the other way around between MSU and U of M!

However, the MSU Communication Department had become the most fascinating element of MSU to me because it was a way to take sociology and psychology and actual human activity and put them into a framework that allowed you to look at how society works on one level, and how things happen between people on another level. At the time, the war in Vietnam and the protests in the U.S. seemed to indicate that the country needed deeper understanding across the divides.

My interest was in the theoretical side of communication as a framework to examine human behavior, personal, social and political. I found this much more satisfying than psychology or sociology as subjects by themselves because it seemed to be an active form of social science, and something that was new and thoughtful and useful. Also, this was a time when the COM Department faculty were astounding, national and international leaders in communication theory and practice. I didn’t know until later how special some of them were or the department was.

One faculty member who made a deep impression on me was Donald Cushman. Cushman said something that stuck in my mind for all time and has been important to me in everything I’ve done. He said, “The job of the critic is to unmask false pieties.” So, if you think about that ... you look at the things that politicians or corporations say and wonder, “How can I get to the bottom of what that means?” what are they cloaking with their rhetoric? What lurks beneath the surface?”

That little saying summed up a lot of what it meant to be in the COM Department, as opposed to Comm Arts. Ironically, I had no intention of going into the news, media or film, but eventually ended up in all of them using the theory I learned in MSU to better perform my reporting.

I’d sum up by saying that the communication department gave me a perspective that I could use to analyze a variety of social, political and business organizations.

– Gordon Freedman
KM: Were there specific theories or experiences you had throughout your education that prepared you for your career path?

GF: I would say so. For one, I've had a great interest in organizational behavior and its effects on individuals and their well-being. This included the foundational readings and interpretations we were taught, especially of George Herbert Mead’s work examining meaning and how it arises in language and relates to the self in society. I would say the framework of how meaning gets created, transmitted and where that breaks down is essential for interpersonal communication, or if you’re posting a blog or reporting for the New York Times. Also, the truth value of what people say, write and communicate is important as well, something that is severely challenged today. It is getting more difficult to “unmask false pieties.”

For anyone that’s considering going into broadcast, news journalism, film or social media, not having a broad understanding of human communication is a mistake. What is on the surface and why it is on the news, or film, and who it benefits, is often very deceiving though appearing quite legitimate.

We need to deconstruct to understand.

KM: So, are there strategies you’d tell people to employ when they’re trying to decipher the real meaning behind what someone is saying?

GF: I learned something equally lasting from outside the COM Department from an outstanding abnormal psychology faculty mentor, Dr. Marian Kinget, who had been associated with the European philosophy of phenomenology and the work of human-centered psychologist Carl Rogers. In phenomenology, it is the job of the philosopher, or observer, to get through as many layers of “suppositions” or assumptions being presented to finally understand what someone is saying, and why they are saying it in a given situation. When you hear political talk, or corporate speak, the question is what the presuppositions are being made that are not spoken, and what are they based on. In this scenario, the job is to uncover those presuppositions, or the pre-positions, which are being stated or might be the rhetoric of a political movement or an economic theory.

There’s intention, attention and being able to peel back the layers to ask, “What is sitting in the background of the speaker and their associations and relationship to give them the validity to make that statement, and what should I make of it?”

_When there’s communication, it’s never a simple matter._

KM: Can you give us a quick summary of your career path?

GF: Across my career, I have worked as a political corruption investigator on Capitol Hill, an investigative reporter in the Washington, DC news corps, a network television news and news magazine show producer and feature film and television producer. In those jobs, I was bringing information not known to the public and processing it for public consumption — in Congressional hearings, in newsprint, broadcast news or actually in documentary film or entertainment based on fact.

All this including making a feature documentary on Stephen Hawking which won at the Sundance Film Festival. That film changed my perspective of being a processor of information not well-known or understood by the public to thinking how I could put my communication theory perspectives to use in reform — not processing others’ experiences — but taking a challenging area, like education transformation, and trying to construct better approaches.

So, in 1998 as the Internet emerged, I made a sharp turn away from media and commenting on society and digging around its edges to trying to deconstruct where the failure in education was coming from because so many young people and working adults will never have a good education like I had. Education to me is an entire communication and knowledge ecosystem that needs to be vastly improved and modernized. I use my Comm theory experience to look for points of failure and for points where leaners and their institutions can progress together.
KM: How did you start off on this the multiple career path you have taken?

GF: When I was at MSU, during my spring semester of my sophomore year, I was taking a logic class that, for the life of me, I couldn’t figure out. At the same time, the country was embroiled in the Vietnam War, and we were beginning to go through an earlier version of what we have all been through more recently with the Russian investigations of President Trump. This was the beginning of the Watergate investigations of former President Richard Nixon. It is hard to understand now how surprised and polarized the country was when Nixon was accused of campaign violations, using secret teams to break into the Democratic National Committee headquarters or the office of major government dissident and lie about it. The American was naïve then. But for us, a new young generation, these things seemed wrong.

I was one of the students who attended rallies and to sleep-ins on the campus grounds, though I would sneak to class during the day. The news was full of Nixon’s alleged misdeeds, and hearings were beginning in Congress. I felt what had been happening in the streets in protest was now coming to Congress and I wanted to go see this. So I left my logic and other classes behind and drove to DC to watch the hearings in person, leaving in my beat-up, orange VW Bug.

There were long lines to get into the hearing, and someone I met in line asked me, “If you are so interested in this, maybe you could get a job here.” I didn’t think it was even possible to “get a job,” but somehow, I started to explore the possibilities, and eventually I found myself on the staff of the Senate Watergate Committee. Right after I landed the job, my parents, upset that I abandoned classes, wanted me to return to MSU. However, COM Department Chair Dr. David Ralph, saved me. He said, “What we do as academics is the same every year, it’s boring. You need to go get us the scoop and bring it back here,” adding, “You tell your parents that the Chair said you must stay in DC.” The COM Department came through for me!

As I started as a researcher on the Senate Committee looking for political corruption and illegal behavior of the President’s staff, my thinking was guided by what I was learning about how to analyze and put complex matters into a theoretical perspective that could guide understanding. To me, political corruption was when “practice becomes principle.” This saying and what it implies has stayed with me. In fact, to assuage my parents, I did two independent studies while in the Senate staff job and one of them was about how rhetoric and meaning can degrade principles when people in power deviate from it for their own interests. The Nixon Administration started to reinterpret the U.S. Constitution, replacing Constitutional principles with their own practices. In the hearings, this was severely rebuked. The chairman of the committee would shake a tiny copy of the U.S. Constitution at the president's aides in a way that one might shake a cross at a vampire to bring them back to our Constitutional foundations.

While I was finally finishing up at Michigan State, after the Watergate investigation, I started commuting back and forth to DC from Lansing, working on Capitol Hill in two more Congressional investigations that followed Watergate. In my time on the “Hill” I got to know the written press and the national news media quite well, sometimes giving backgrounders, or in a few cases, being a source for investigative stories.

KM: Do you think that the idea of ‘practice becoming principle’ in government and advertising has become more prevalent now?

GF: I think it’s very difficult today to get back to an agreement on what the principles are and to have a meaningful relationship or understanding of the value of truth. The truth has become a variable, it’s hard to understand where the truth plays a role. It’s difficult now to become a journalist or media person because it appears that politics of all kinds have become more of a sport than about actual governance. Most good writers seem to be trying to come back to principles and truth, but since principles are being twisted and debased now, the journalist’s job is much more difficult, and this would apply to advertising as well.

“I learned a lot that is not taught in journalism school through the back and forth with the press and news media while working as a Congressional staffer.”
Truth telling is not just a good Samaritan quality, but rather a way to organize society to operate cooperatively, something that is severely challenged now, and communication analysis and action is more important than ever.

**KM: How do you think your approach to communication has shifted over the years?**

GF: Well, the world is a completely different place now then it was when I was at MSU because of the Internet and mobile communications! Now we’re living in a world where there’s no shortage of information or access to it. Every sector in the economy (finance, manufacturing, medicine, etc.) has made great use of information technology. When you log into any traditional e-commerce system, you’re logging in as an individual, and hopefully it’s doing you some good because it is matching patterns. The only sector that hasn’t taken real advantage of the information technology revolution is K12 education and higher-ed.

We’re in a time of virtual education where people have used tools that were designed for online learning. But these tools are just an extension of what the classroom looks like in person. We just took it and moved it online. The communication framework for education today is the same as it was many years ago: stuck in the separate organizational and institutional structures. But for students in the informational age who are trying to gather information and deduce what they’re doing to do with their life, career and general future, there are no tools for this in K12 or higher ed like there are on the web for everything else.

So to conclude, to come full circle from my personal educational experience, education is now in need of being transformed to leverage the information age to match education with jobs and new careers and to open the process to all people, not to exclude them because of poverty, race or other constraints. Education is what the future is based on — for all of us — it’s not about buildings and administration.

I don’t see schools of communication actually going in and analyzing this kind of problem. Yet, these are all communication issues. Michigan State has one of the best communication and education departments in the country. My hope, if I can contribute further, is to try to bring those two MSU departments together to build a more solid structure for learning in class and on the open Web so more learners can contribute personally, socially and economically to keep our country reflective, reflexive and purposeful.

“I think the Communication Department training I had at Michigan State gave me the ability to hear any kind of discourse and peel back the layers to actually see more of what’s going on and not get pulled in emotionally. I think this is really important; all communication in itself is not complete. Each person brings a history of other material to it. I use that training every day and with everything I do.” -- Gordon Freedman