

# 2016 ACR Presidential Address

## It's Time to Think

Mary Frances Luce, Duke University, USA

I would like to start by acknowledging what an historic conference this is for ACR. This is the first time that our major conference, what used to be known as the “North America” conference, takes place outside of North America. As is always the case for ACR, and as was particularly true this year, the most important thing that I did as president was to recruit two excellent volunteers to run the conference. I think we can all agree that Page Moreau and Stefano Puntoni have done an excellent job. Their job was harder than most due to the increased uncertainty around pulling off an ACR of this scale outside of North America. I know we all agree that they more-than rose to the occasion, so the organization truly owes them our thanks. This conference is an important step in ensuring that ACR remains the premier global organization for consumer research.

While I believe I did a good job on my main task, that is recruiting Stefano and Page, I was less certain about how to approach a second main task, this talk. It is hard to imagine something worth the time of such a wide and varied audience. In the end, I will make this short and I would like to mainly offer my own reflections on our individual and collective profession.

I start with what I think is a common occurrence for many in our community. We try to explain our profession to someone, explaining our specific job requirements (e.g., a certain number of hours teaching per week or month or year) and similar explicit responsibilities. The perplexed individual asks some version of “but what do you do all day?” More generally, for most of us we have a profession with amazing freedom to fill our days and our thoughts with whatever we find most rewarding. This is an awesome privilege. With this privilege comes, I would argue, the responsibility to be mindful about how we add value to society. I believe that we do so by thinking very deeply, creating new perspectives on important activities of individuals, society, and organizations. I also believe that truly adding value in this way takes time, and not just effort but time for reflection.

The importance, and the value, of time to think has been very clear to me in recent years. I have enjoyed some truly awesome opportunities, for instance to co-edit JCR with Ann McGill and Laura Peracchio and to serve as the dean of the faculty at Duke's Fuqua school. These responsibilities come with their own vexing problems and external deadlines. When I am immersed in these deadlines I, at least, find that I can do some research, but I cannot do research in the same way. Increasing my own level of busy-ness has illustrated to me that there is a stark contrast between producing output, even research output, and really reflecting. I find I have to willfully schedule downtime to really think. It is not something that happens well in spare hours here or there. Not having normal faculty reflection time has, like nothing else, shown me its value. Of course, this is a lesson many learn much earlier in their careers.

It seems to me that production can easily crowd out reflection, particularly in our current professional environments. It is very easy to use tools such as Mturk or google scholar searches to get tasks finished much more quickly than we can reflect on them. These productivity tools are important, and not going anywhere. And they are not bad things. However, today's environment makes it even more important, I believe, for all of us to be mindful of the incentives we set for ourselves and for others. It is easy for counting and other forms of productivity-focus to crowd out thinking and evaluating the

quality of ideas. We set incentives as mentors and reviewers. When we do so, it's often easy to assess production and harder to assess the novelty or quality of ideas. For example, as a reviewer, it is often easier to check the accuracy of a statistical test than it is to assess if the authors are causing you to think in a new way. As senior faculty making hiring or promotion decisions, it is simply easier to count papers than to read them. However, I believe the vibrancy of our field rests much more on the quality of ideas we collectively produce than on the overall number of experiments, or interviews, or journal pages. I'd like to encourage us all, myself included, to avoid losing sight of our profession as creating truly new ideas and perspectives that have the potential to not only change how each other thinks about consumption, but to ultimately change how business and global society functions. (Overall, then, in speaking of the importance of time to think, I am asking you to do as I say, but not as I do.)

My comments so far raise the question of what we should be thinking about? As members of ACR, we try to understand the role of consumption in people's lives: How they deploy key resources such as time and money, as well as how they promote meaning, enhance community, and steward global resources. Our field has unusual breadth due to the wide swath of human experience we study; we are almost constantly consuming and consumption is incredibly important to our economies, our societies, and our global environment. So, what is the goal of consumer research? I believe that any academic endeavor should ultimately solve problems, that is should ultimately improve the human condition. (Note that this is not the same as saying that research must be motivated by a clear problem. The most basic of research can become the most useful over time, and in unexpected ways.) But whose problems to do we solve? Sometimes we solve the problems of other consumer researchers by suggesting useful theories or methodologies. This is, of course, how science advances. However, if we are to ultimately claim that we have made an impact, we must go beyond solving each other's problems. One source of problems to solve resides in business, and this community has long had an important applied focus. It further seems clear that this organization has always aspired to do more than support business and instead to better society by ultimately making consumers better off with our work. Now, bettering society involves solving complex, messy, multi-determined problems. So, this goal brings me to a conclusion about consumer research that is important to me. Specifically, I think none of us can truly reap the benefits of our own reflection, nor can we truly realize the potential of ACR, unless we attempt to take an interdisciplinary approach to consumer research. Big, societal problems cannot generally be solved by the point of view of one paradigm. The power in ACR comes from our potential for interdisciplinary work integrating across our specific paradigms for robust solutions.

Truly integrative work is much more easily lauded than achieved. My JCR co-editors and I wrestled with this problem in our final editorial. There, we argued that our field is at an inflection point. As a scholarly community, we now have many clear building blocks. It is important to use them to build bridges instead of silos (Peracchio, Luce, McGill 2014). If we take our own field seriously, that is if we take consumption seriously as an important area of inquiry, then it seems that we have to take each other seriously

## ***2 / It's Time to Think***

as well, looking for integrative solutions to truly big problems. It is not an accident that many of ACR's important initiatives, such as the Transformative Consumer Research Initiatives and the Journal of the Association for Consumer Research, are interdisciplinary at their very core.

Thank you very much for your time.

## **REFERENCES**

Laura Peracchio, Mary Frances Luce, and Ann McGill (2014)  
Building Bridges for an Interconnected Field of Consumer  
Research, April, *Journal of Consumer Research*, vi-viii.