

Preface

In science, the value of a theory is determined by its predictive ability, its ability to explain and predict observable phenomena in ways that are consistent and useful. It is not a concept often associated with the liberal arts, and perhaps even less so with technical and professional communication. Nonetheless, the thesis of this collection of essays contributed by scholars from around the world—that the perception and application of the freedom to create, deliver, and receive information may evolve in ways unforeseen prior to September 11, 2001—does have predictive value. An early draft of the introductory chapter to this collection was delivered as a presentation to a system-wide conference on engineering communication, hosted by the State University of New York at Stony Brook in November 2002. That presentation concluded, as does the current chapter, by pointing out that future court decisions may alter the standards of free speech and free access to information.

On April 7, 2003, the United States Supreme Court, deeply divided though it was in a 5–4 decision, did precisely that in reversing the earlier precepts of *Brandenburg v. Ohio* and ruling that a burning cross is not protected speech but an act of terrorism. Justice Sandra Day O’Connor succinctly described what may very well become the future of First Amendment freedoms by saying that such freedoms “are not absolute.”

Time alone will tell how accurate the authors of the following chapters will have been, for predicting the future in any discipline is always a risky endeavor. But suffice it to say: this collection has passed the first test of its predictive value.