

Paul Messaris, Annenberg School

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Paul Messaris, the Lev Kuleshov Emeritus Professor of Communication in Penn's Annenberg School of Communication, died last month after a short illness. He was 71.

Socrates Paul Angelo Messaris was born in South Africa in 1947, and he was raised in both South Africa and Greece. He received his bachelor's degree in economics Phi Beta Kappa from Princeton, and he earned both his master's and doctorate degrees (1972, 1975) from the Annenberg School for Communication, where he studied under Larry Gross. Dr. Messaris was also heavily influenced by Sol Worth, who helped build the foundation of the school's visual communication curriculum.

Dr. Messaris began his career as an assistant professor in 1975 at Queens College. Following Dr. Worth's sudden death in 1977, Dr. Messaris was hired by Penn to join the faculty as an assistant professor. He remained at Penn until his retirement in 2017.

"Overall there was an element of precision in his thinking—he was deliberate, careful, precise—which also helped make him a good writer," says his doctoral advisor Larry Gross, now professor of communication at the University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism. "That same skill translated into his teaching. In class, students don't have the benefit of stopping to re-read a sentence, and Paul would conduct them through a line of argument in a clear fashion that they could readily follow."

Dr. Messaris was one of the preeminent scholars of visual communication and how people make sense out of visual language. His books *Visual "Literacy": Image, Mind, and Reality* and *Visual Persuasion: The Role of Images in Advertising* are classic texts in the category. His central focus was on the psychology of perception and the way meaning is constructed. He was also co-editor of two editions of *Digital Media: Transformations in Human Communication*. In 1998, Dr. Messaris worked with SEAS and PennDesign to develop the Digital Media Design interdisciplinary major, one of the early programs to focus on computer graphics, animation and games.

He taught numerous courses in visual communication, including the much-loved undergraduate course Visual Communication Lab. Beloved for his dynamic teaching style, he always encouraged his students to pursue their interests, no matter how seemingly unusual.

Upon his retirement in 2017, Annenberg's media lab was renamed the Paul Messaris Media Laboratory in his honor. He is survived by his wife, Carla Sarett (ASC '81).