International Journal of Communication 5 (2011), Feature 1479-1496



# **Communication as Social Science (and More)**

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As often happens, I submitted my title before I knew what I wanted to talk about. I do want to speak about communication research as a field, but not only as a field of social science. To try to contain

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dedicate a portion of attention to communication, so when speaking about communication it is very important to be sure about what aspects of communication one is speaking about (sic). Definitions of communication range widely, some recognizing that animals can communicate with each other as well as human beings, and some are more narrow, only including human beings within the different parameters of human symbolic interaction.<sup>1</sup>

Let me sum up my electronic research. Communications is an academic discipline that:

- 1. Covers everything.
- 2. Focuses especially on the distinctions between words and not-words, people and not-people.
- 3. Produces textbooks, electronic publications, and journals.
- 4. Is a field utterly unable to generate a good account of itself on Wikipedia.

Fortunately, as we tell our students, Wikipedia isn't everything. Valid scientific research requires skimming many websites. I want to assure you in advance that I now have a fully adequate empirical basis for what might otherwise seem to you to be a series of unsupported generalizations. On this empirical basis I propose to offer an analysis of the field and its contemporary predicaments, and to offer advice and exhortation.

#### As a Field of Study—in Research or in Classes— Communication Really is Wildly Heterogeneous

Communication is the most important field for the study of many key dimensions of social change. The rising influence of the Internet and new media is the most obvious, but not the only example. And we can think of this not just in the abstract or in studies of individual usage, but also in a series of important contexts from the Arab Spring, to the global financial crisis, to struggles over intellectual property. At the same time, there are a hundred older lines of inquiry that are still active and important.

This is good news, for the most part, because it is a key source of the vitality and creativity of the field. But the 11(llce8FJ28.(ab Spr(t)1Tw[tyet d)FJ218.037 0 TD.0012 Tc.2055 Tw[Lvllc(o)-38(p)ed-7.2(estr)og )enoug-7.2(estr)

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popular music, rethought beyond musicology as a matter of cultural institutions and multiple levels of communication.

Nonetheless, as a field, communication strongly reflects its genesis. The path of development and incomplete integration is evident in subgroup loyalties and in the internal divisions of many departments and too often in weak connections among lines of research that could be relevant to each other and to important larger problems. Communication has been made from (at a minimum):

- a. Rhetoric and speech
- b. Drama, theater and performance studies
- c. Mass communication
- d. Public opinion research
- e. Interpersonal and small group communication
- f. Organizational communication
- g. Journalism
- h. Public Relations
- i. Marketing
- j. Policy analysis
- k. Cultural studies
- I. Media-and media, in turn, means:
  - 1. Media history from speech through writing, printing, and the range of electronic media
  - 2. Broadcast media
  - 3. Film and video
  - 4. New media including the Internet
  - 5. Production
  - 6. Criticism

I could make this list even longer, not least by emphasizing more the disciplines from which

and performance are central and programs that don't address either (not to mention a prevalence of snide comments about who is really intellectual or really useful). There are communications programs that emphasize professional training and indeed some that are organized as professional schools (though even the professional schools of the field do not embrace a common structure of professional degrees). In some of the professional programs journa

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fields became the main disciplines. They were grouped into the divisions of science, social sciences, and humanities, but they made the university (or college) as a whole into an interdisciplinary field.<sup>2</sup>

In science, there was recurrent redefinition of fields. Where are the precise boundaries among physics and either astronomy or atmospheric science? Botany and zoology were once seen as distinct, then merged into biology. Biology, in turn, grew to contain numerous subfields loosely integrated by the idea of evolution. Some of these subfields like genetics or molecular biology have become as large (in numbers of faculty or budgets) as the disciplines of the social sciences. Interdisciplinary fields like biochemistry and nanotechnology formed and reformed. This

It would be interesting to explore further why the social science disciplines were so resistant to

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past may be, it is not a method. Nor does history have a single defining method (though historians have some strong affinities of style and taste).<sup>3</sup>

The notion that there could be a common method to communication research is laughable. But it is important also to laugh at the notion that there is a single common method for anthropology,

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Backed up by these three examples, I do not think diversity of empirical objects is a problem for communication as a field. Indeed, it can be a virtue. But for it to be a virtue, the diverse topics must be knit together through a web of interconnections. The same goes for diverse methods and diversity orientations to professional practice, public knowledge, and advancement of scholarship. There is no one model for this: economics, business, and biology suggest different potentially successful paths.

But here communication faces a challenge. It suffers from weak connections among lines of research, and to some extent, among researchers themselves. This is partly a function of a high rate of immigration into the field of researchers who retain strong ties to the disciplines or other fields in which they were trained. But it's not just that. It's also a matter of multiple and often competing professional associations, and of the continued strength of the different older fields that have been tributary streams into the communication river. It's a matter of the extent to which researchers working on communication issues at different analytic scales ignore each other's work, as though there were no reason to expect political economy or culture to influence or be influenced by interpersonal and organizational communication.

As the last point suggests, it's also a matter of relatively weak integrative theoretical discussions. I don't mean that communication should aspire to the kind of shared and sometimes blinkered theoretical commitments that have shaped the dominance of neoclassical theory in economics. Sharing arguments can be as valuable as sharing agreements. But we

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More or less similar patterns have obtained in almost every professional field and in most interdisciplinary fields of the humanities and social sciences. In response to this asymmetry, to the sense that it is important for faculty members not to have divided loyalties, and also to the notion that faculty members should have more or less comprehensive knowledge of the field in which they teach (as opposed to knowledge just of its intersection with some other), the general pattern is for each interdisciplinary or professional field to seek to produce more of its faculty members from within its own doctoral programs. Of course, this may or may not be a good thing.

How a field manages its relations to the outside is a matter of boundaries and edges. Communication, as we have seen, has extremely porous edges, rather than sharp boundaries. Does this matter? Is it, perhaps, actively desired? In general, a capacity to maintain boundaries is closely related to autonomy. But edges are also sites of transactions. Communication departments must, for example, secure resources from the larger universities within which they are located (or from foundations and benefactors). What are the terms of trade in these transactions? How much do departments retain control of their own agendas? What do they contribute to others in order to gain resources? Is it prestige? And should communications departments despise rankings or seek to be among the fields that get ranked? Or, as I suspect is often the case, are communication departments particularly likely to be producers of mass commodities, rather than high-prestige goods? In other words, are they judged for generic contributions measured quantitatively, rather than for contributions of field-specific capital judged by peers within the field? Or more bluntly, are they especially likely to be cash cows within their universities, valued more for their undergraduate enrollments than their PhD programs or research? And where this is the case, how much does it undermine autonomy? This is a question not just about sentiments, but also about how universities organize their budgets.

#### What Does It Mean to be Interdisciplinary?

The study of communication is clearly an interdisciplinary field, but it is anything but clear what that means. Some think communication should become more of a discipline, pointing especially to concerns over lack of rigor or common standards. Others prize interdisciplinarity, though they are divided as to whether this is achieved in a better way by becoming a professional school, or by combining fields of the liberal arts and science. Communication is hardly the only field for which this is fraught terrain; similar issues arise in international studies and environmental studies.

I won't belabor the virtues of interdisciplinarity, though I believe them to be many, and even to include having more "fun." But it is important to see that this can also be a challenge. My friend Ernest Wilson, Dean of the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, likes interdisciplinarity so much that he's given it a pet name, the initials "ID." I am on the same side and agree that interdisciplinarity is vital, but it is also important to distinguish ID from ADD. Interdisciplinarity is not just resisting discipline the way my generation once called for resisting authority. There are several good reasons to be interdisciplinary, but all depend on maintaining some discipline.

In fact, the Social Science Research Council was founded in 1923 with just these issues in mind. The founders were professors from Chicago and Columbia—two universities then in the lead as producers of PhDs and curricular innovators. They received backing from the Rockefeller family for their project of advancing work in "interdisciplines" (thus inventing the project of interdisciplinarity). Their reasoning was essentially that, left to themselves, research-minded academics would talk only to each other and in evernarrower specialties. This was a problem, they thought, because advances in method cut across disciplines, and because real-world problems did not come neatly sorted by discipline, but rather needed the more rounded perspective of interdisciplinary collaboration.

Bringing multiple perspectives to bear on real-world problems turned out to be not only a worthy goal, but also an effective mechanism. Interdisciplinary collaborators grew to understand and appreciate

Few in communication research doubt the virtues of interdisciplinarity, but there is little agreement as to the model within which communication programs might achieve interdisciplinarity—and indeed, which of the various subfields and lines of work are really important or even count. Think back to my earlier example of business as a field that has been impressively successful both in gaining resources and status and in achieving an interdisciplinary integration and identity. No one confuses accountancy for organizational behavior, financial analysis for general management. But as a field, business has used the structure of MBA programs as a way to evolve an effective shared definition that facilitates both external recognition (and the resources that come with it) and internal mutual recognition. There are no comparably shared models in the field of communication. Masters programs are extremely heterogeneous.

But these are not merely intra-academic concerns. The marketing of the field of communication is necessarily a matter of generating student interest—something the field has largely fallen into as a happy byproduct of the prominence of the

(especially in arts and science faculties rather than professional schools) are ultimately in the same boat with colleagues in the humanities and social sciences. In all these fields, with the partial (and only partial) exception of economics, undergraduate enrollments pay the bills. Growth in communication programs is doubt if it is to be financed entirely on the basis of enrolling students who are not much interested in research.

### Conclusion

In closing, let me return to my core themes and to some very limited thoughts on what might be done.

Communication is of central importance. Happily, many of the issues studied by the field of communication research are not only important but also increasingly widely recognized as important. Changes in patterns and media of communication are more and more clearly key dimensions of global change. This field literally studies ways in which the world is made.

My main theme has been the heterogeneity of communication research. I have argued this is not a bad thing; it is even good, but it is nonetheless a challenge. It affects:

- The recognition the field receives externally from funders, from other academics, from businesses that may employ graduates.
- The field's internal coherence and capacity to maintain high standards in intellectual work.
- The nature of linkages between communications research and work in other fields.

While I predict no easy resolution to the dilemmas of being a discipline, an interdisciplinary field, and a profession, I have argued that pressure on communications researchers to offer a coherent picture of the field will grow.

In this heterogeneous field, what is needed is not a pressure for conformity but the production of more and better connections among different lines of work. I have suggested that theory has a special role to play in this, but asking the big questions that connect different lines of work it is a matter that far exceeds the domain of theory. So what is to be done? Well, for starters:

• Create ways for young researchers to connect to each other across schools, lines of work, methodologies, and topics of inquiry. This could take the form of fellowships, workshops, conferences—but the key is lateral connections. Th

But there are also reasons the field needs to develop a recognizable set of institutions.

• Begin to make an active pursuit of interdisciplinary connections around key social issues. Is communication central to the Arab Spring? Don't just congratulate yourselves on being early to know that, build links to Middle Eastern studies and political science. Programs in international