

Communication**As A Discipline**

If Everything is Mediated, What is Distinctive About the Field of Communication?

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"I believe that the intellectually serious study of communication should be transformative for the social sciences," said Craig Calhoun in his keynote to the 2011 ICA Annual Conference in Boston, thereby capturing in a single sentence our ambitions for the field (intellectual! transformative!) and yet also our doubts (serious? should?). Three years ago, in my presidential address to the 2008 ICA Annual Conference in Montreal, I argued, relatedly, that everything is mediated—from childhood to war, politics to sex, science to religion—and more so than ever before. As media and communication technologies increasingly shape every sphere of social life from the global and public to the most intimate, from the weirdest niche fandom to the hugely profitable mass market, it is arguable that claims once reserved for historically embedded forms of mediation (notably, language, myth, laws, money) now also apply to the texts and technologies of the converging digital environment. Nothing escapes their imprint. Nothing remains unmediated, in the raw. No strict boundary can be drawn between the offline and the online. Knowledge is power, and in the knowledge society the power to represent is all. Why, then, the doubt? Surely, widespread recognition from other social sciences and humanities departments is imminent, and they will all beat a path to our door to gain our accumulated wisdom.

As Calhoun suggests, we believe both that the time of media and communications has come, and yet we have no expectation of such appreciative audiences. Indeed, we often bemoan the fact that rarely do scholars from other disciplines come to us or our journals for advice on how to study the media; rather, they seem to us to reinvent the wheel, neglect our intellectual tradition of analysis and findings, tread on our toes. We also worry that, despite being "cash cows" for our institutions, we lack the authority to set the wider agenda—within or beyond the university. The substance of Calhoun's lecture seeks to unpack the reasons why, and he offers much for us to ponder and debate. He debunks some myths—for example, although the field's heterogeneity makes it exciting, this is not the reason for any lack of coherence (economics, too, is diverse in its topics), and nor is any lack of a single method (for no field has this, and nor should it).

The field's diversity goes deeper than the range of topics it examines, however. Perhaps because the field of communication is both relatively new and yet so central to the social sciences and humanities, it is largely populated by immigrants from other more established fields which, although leaving us with some divided loyalties, also generates the intellectual pleasures of multi- and interdisciplinarity. Contrary to the dominant view in the disciplines that many of us have left, communication scholars are ready to

concur with Calhoun that “the discipline that disciplines provide usually proves very conservative.” We recognize that the necessarily porous boundaries of the field can be the site of creative transactions, underpinning our particular potential for collaboration and for building bridges and sustaining lateral connections.

Calhoun then offers an analysis that appears to contradict his account above. In essence, he proposes that our problem “is not one of coverage or containment; it is one of connection.” His point is that we need not (and should not try to) agree with each other, given the many specialities that make up the institutional structure of the field. But we should talk to each other more, debate our differences more robustly, and one hopes, discover some unexpected and valuable synergies. Of course, Calhoun’s point about our relishing interdisciplinarity and yet not talking sufficiently (both within and beyond the field of communication) is not really a contradiction. Rather, he is—rightly, I think—criticizing us for failing to act according to our own pretensions. We all know that conversations with colleagues doing very different work from our own can be surprisingly stimulating, and yet over and again we seek out conversations among those we already agree with (as, indeed, predicted by theories in our own field). This is not a call to identify a consensual common core to the field of communication, but nor should we be satisfied with merely listing the subfields (as illustrated by ICA’s alphabetical list of divisions and interest groups on the Website).

So, we should eschew being “theory-lite” and prioritize “integrative theoretical discussions” in order to build “a web of interconnections”—as François Cooren also argued in his Presidential Address at the same conference. This will take imagination and critical reflection. Further, despite the importance of internal critique, we should respect and not undermine the efforts of those who represent us in the bid for power and resources, notwithstanding that “if it is the job of chairs speaking to deans and donors to achieve clarity, it is the job of researchers to debate ambiguities and raise questions.” (I might illustrate a small resolution of this often-fraught relation between internal complexity and external clarity with an image produced by our annual departmental away day when, building on a transcript of our day-long discussion of diverse but intersecting interests, we produced the simple wordle in Figure 1.)



Figure 1. Departmental Interests in Media and Communications at LSE.

Of course, communication has always been constitutive of society, fundamental to all human action. In one sense, then, all that is new is that, in the past half century we have created a new and rapidly expanding field to study what was already part of the subject matter of older disciplines. Although what is changing is the growing importance of the technological and commercial mediation of communication—a historical process that scholars now term “mediatization” (Krotz, 2007)—there is an irony to be faced. For the more important that technologically mediated (and other) forms of communication become, apparently legitimating the importance of our field, the more vigorously will they instead be claimed by all those other disciplines. Indeed, it is already apparent that political scientists, sociologists, anthropologists, linguists, educationalists, psychologists, and others are encroaching on “our” territory, especially as new and digital media enable a reshaping of their traditional subject matter.

Thus, I suggest that the challenge facing the field of communication is bigger than that of building lateral connections and creative intersections, important though this is. For we now risk losing authority even over our own field, especially if we define the field in terms of a listing of topics and issues. It is, therefore, crucial that we identify just where our expertise lies and what specific knowledges and arguments we bring to these ever-widening circles of intellectual and public attention accruing to the phenomena of media and communication. We may all answer this question differently, and that is fine. What matters is that we are prepared to debate these answers, internally and externally.

To illustrate with my own research on children’s use of the Internet, scholarship on media and communications offers some distinctive expertise—a critique of moral panics, a contextualized recognition of continuities as well as change in the contours of the mediated landscape, an analysis of how people (individually and as socially situated groups) negotiate the semiotic nature of texts and technologies in context, a critique of misleading or simplistic assumptions about the media (cf., technological determinism, implied audiences and users, preferred readings), and a critical account of the affordances of the Internet. Yet, for theories of childhood and family, of learning and peer networks, and of risk and vulnerability, I must look to other disciplines. For me, and I suspect, for most of us, it’s this cross-fertilization that is interesting.

I would go further, though, to say that we should see our skills and openness to such collaboration and cross-fertilization as a particular strength of the field, one that we will need as we face the curious circumstance that although, yes, our moment has come and everything is mediated, ever less can we hope to keep the analysis of media and communication for ourselves. Calhoun’s advice is timely. We should now embrace this widening of our scope, allow our boundaries to become even more porous, and capitalize on the increasing scope for collaboration and debate, rather than seeing this as a competitive threat, or as a potential loss of identity. Our subject matter is vital to societies the world over. Whether our analysis finds a valued place in the increasingly wide debates this subject matter attracts is up to us.

References

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