

Communication**As A Discipline**

Sweet Lemons

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We should be very grateful to have the quality of the analysis and exhortation which Craig Calhoun has delivered to us. He is the John Dewey of our time, our key leading advocate of social science for public benefit. Here I offer both reflections on the topic and responses to some of Calhoun's points.

What would it mean to say that communication is the discipline of the 21st century, the theme of this plenary session? We have some knowledge about the history of disciplines and how they connect with centuries, and a quick look at previous dominant disciplines might help us assess our place. The 17th century's great discipline was mathematics, with Descartes' analytic geometry and the discovery of the calculus by Leibniz and Newton. (You might add astronomy for the early part of the century, but perhaps the most important of all breakthroughs was the invention of experimental science itself.) For the 18th century, you might propose political economy, as invented in Scotland, England, and elsewhere, with related supports in moral psychology, statistics, and the novel. For the 19th century, you would probably pick the historical sciences of geology, philology, and biology, culminating in Darwin. The later 19th to the later 20th century is pretty clearly the age of physics, from thermodynamics, quantum mechanics, and relativity theory up through the bomb and particle physics. From the mid- to late 20th century to now, the dominant discipline is probably biology again, with the discovery of DNA through neuroscience, which would get my vote for the most likely discipline of the 21st century. I see no scenario in which communication studies could be the dominant academic discipline of this century.

Should we lament our marginality? No. The Norwegian political theorist Jon Elster (1999, p. ix) proposes a parallel to sour grapes. When you reject something sweet you do not have, that is sour grapes. "Sweet lemons," in contrast, is when you embrace something sour that you do have. We should celebrate the relative marginality of our field. Marginality can be intellectually creative, afford outlooks not available at the center, and instill at least two virtues: humility and hospitality. Once upon a time, in the 1950s and 1960s, communication was at the very heart of academic life. The term itself was the eye of an enormous intellectual storm. Every academic field was touched by a fascination with communication; prominent figures in the natural and social sciences, in the fine arts and humanities all embraced this new god-term. This was largely a postwar harvest, inspired in part by the interdisciplinary projects of cybernetics and the mathematical theory of communication. (War is often as productive for thought as it is hideous for life.) This pandisciplinary intellectual orientation to questions of communication left no institutional trace. Professorships in "communications biophysics" (there was one at MIT in 1959) have vanished, and most fields no longer see a need to sponsor the term. (For the latest account of this moment in intellectual history, see Gleick, 2011).

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What did happen around 1960 was that enterprising people like David Berlo in speech and Wilbur Schramm in journalism realized that they could modernize their fields by taking advantage of all the excitement about communication. They and others seized upon this alluring term to create legitimations for what they were already doing (in Berlo's and Schramm's cases, the social psychology of interpersonal or mass communication, respectively). This was a smart move, but it left us eternally ever after with a structural mismatch between intellectual ambition and institutional standing. As a self-conscious field, communication research was more or less founded in a moment when communication indeed was everything. Today, the urgent interdisciplinary interest has largely waned, and that leaves us with a kind of permanent identity crisis, at least if our model is that of a standard field.

Part of our recognition problem, then, owes to shifts in intellectual fashion. Communication is still, of course, a very resonant word on the popular level, but I don't see the same kind of broad intellectual fascination around it as was evident 50 years ago. Its vernacular use outstrips its academic use; communication as a theme has migrated to therapists, coaches, and politicians. It serves as a magnet for undergraduate interest, but we should not, as Calhoun is right to note, bank on that interest forever. Communication studies appeals to students who are curious about their worlds but want to be employed (a fully reasonable, if often prematurely formulated wish), and Calhoun is on the money when he says "communications programs interestingly reinstate elements of a liberal arts model with a partially professional framework," thus blending new and old models. Thirty years ago, when I started teaching in this field, my students wanted to be on television; today, they want to be wedding planners. Many of my students admit that their major would be business if they could handle the math. Communication studies serves as a back-up option, and thus, as Calhoun notes, a cash cow for many universities (and we certainly do not want to be seen as service departments). As things currently stand, we communication professors perhaps benefit from a kind of structural bad faith vis-à-vis the professional ambitions of our undergraduates: we profit from their misconceptions about what we have to offer. And yet people go to universities for all kinds of reasons and walk around with all kind of crazy things in their heads, so I think we have the opportunity to "seduce" our undergraduates—to seduce and educate them into thinking of our field as something much greater than they suspected. Such alchemy is what all education is about. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2004) famously said, liberal education is the "uncoercive rearrangement of desires." All fields face some misalliance of student and faculty interest. With our funny mix of the professional and the liberal arts, the problem is simply more acute.

The key challenge facing the field is how it organizes itself, not how it thinks about itself. In this, Calhoun is right. (The move is reminiscent of Dewey, who argued that the problem of the public was one of community before it was one of concepts.) It has long been obvious that we do not need a better or clearer definition of communication. No one really knows what communication means, but we might celebrate what theologians call "kenosis" or divine emptying of our central term. Mature fields rarely have clear self-definitions. Since when do psychologists worry about the soul? No biologist that I know can provide a satisfactory definition of life, or thinks of that as a particularly important question. Russell and Whitehead spent a few hundred pages proving that $1+1 = 2$, but mathematicians since have largely given up on defining numbers. A number, according to Russell and Whitehead, is a special class or set, but once you go there, the recursive contradictions start to pile up, as Gödel showed most famously. Mathematics

did not collapse before the abyss of paradox; the discipline became more pragmatic, learning to do interesting things without foundations. Whitehead himself famously said, "The last thing to get fixed in a science is its foundation." Such fixing seems perpetually postponed in most flourishing areas. Just because flourishing fields often have loose self-definitions, of course, does not mean that all fields with loose self-definitions are flourishing. But I do not think the definitional hollowness at our center is *prima facie* evidence of failure. Sometimes vagueness, said Ludwig Wittgenstein, is precisely what we need.

Calhoun's tough love comes in his critique of our internal organization. His message about building lateral ties inside the field is hard to hear because it's basically a call to get along with your neighbors. His advice to connect with the people who we know all too well is good advice—and hard to carry out. In both travel and intellectual life, it is tempting to look abroad first. Destinations that are not our own are always romantic. All communication scholars know excruciatingly well that our "integrative theoretical discussions" are "relatively weak," but few of us have any clue how to improve them, having spun so many wheels and wrung so many hands over the years. Calhoun is right that our sense of intrafield loyalty is generally lukewarm (while subfield loyalty is often intense), our social capital and network density are patchy, and our public image and visibility are poorly managed. We will never have the coherence of MBA programs, an example Calhoun fruitfully suggests for our consideration, simply because "business" demarcates a much more coherent domain in the real world than "communication" ever will. Obviously, business is a lived practice, and its academic study is as many-splendored as any other field, but it has the overall clarifying mission of making money. If we say that our mission is "making meaning," the relative unclarity of our *raison d'être* is self-evident. (Alas.) Certainly, much has to be done to secure resources within universities in the struggle for recognition, and as a recent department chair, I don't underestimate the importance or difficulty of this work. But this work seems to be more fundamentally political than it is intellectual—the building of institutions rather than of ideas.

Another potential source of the field's prestige problem is our significant female enrollments. In university life, feminized fields lose prestige. Obviously, I am not endorsing the patriarchal bias of the spoils system in higher education, but the phenomenon is very well documented; for example, sociology and social work were once the same field in the era of Jane Addams, but later split along gendered lines, and there's no question which field has more prestige today. (Cause and effect are, as always, hard to sort out here.) There is, unsurprisingly, a gendered dimension to the organization of knowledge as there is to everything else. Economics, which Calhoun recommends as one potential model, is a field where you all but need a Y chromosome to gain admittance. Economics has a masculine style, as Deirdre McCloskey, my former Iowa colleague, has shown in both her writings and her own life, protesting in the most vivid way possible against her field's masculinist vision. Feminized fields with practical orientations are "fluffy"; masculinized fields with abstract theoretical models are "robust." Undergraduate enrollments overall in the United States and elsewhere are trending female, and as men gravitate to business and engineering, other majors take on largely female enrollments. In my anecdotal experience of 25 years at the University of Iowa, my courses once had 50–50 women and men, and now it's more like 80–20, and sometimes 90–10. This demographic shift has implications that we have rarely considered programmatically. It is certainly an opportunity we can embrace. We have been taught by a coalition of feminists, race theorists, postcolonial theorists, and Canadians that those on the outskirts of power have no choice but to develop "double consciousness." The marginal have no choice but to understand both the masters and themselves. Being

aligned with power can be hazardous to your epistemological health, because the rulers only have to know their own minds. Marginality, though it can be risky, invites a flexibility and plurality of ways of seeing the world. What if our disciplinary model were a network, or diaspora, or rhizome, rather than fortress, or nation, or corporation? What if communication studies were to embrace its feminine side more explicitly?

My proposal is that communication studies should abandon the quest for a center and profit from its place along the edges. Once upon a time, communication studies wanted to be a traditional kind of field, designed as a nation state to match and compete with other fields. That project failed and I think we should stop trying; Calhoun is absolutely right that we should abandon our "discipline envy." We live in a world of asymmetrical markets. In the world of academic disciplines, communication studies is not the dominant power, and it shouldn't pretend to be. Looking at imports and exports (i.e., who cites whom) will always produce resentment by showing that we are derivative and ignored. But regions and cities are almost always more interesting places than are nations. Perhaps our field's tendency to look abroad for inspiration is a sign of a weak "national economy," or perhaps we have the gift of hospitality. Peripheral countries have the choice of being provincial or internationally minded. Elsewhere, I've suggested that we cultivate a "small-country cosmopolitanism" (Peters, 2008)—the we-try-harder habits of mind that emerge when you know you inhabit an edge-space. In life and inquiry, most of the most exciting stuff happens on the edges where the border crossers deal and the songbirds sing. We might embrace our "Mercurian" identity (Slezkine, 2004)—Mercury being the Roman god of trade, travel, rogues, and of course, communication. Mercurians, for Slezkine, are minorities who inhabit the in-between spaces and specialize in productive and dangerous trades. There are certain advantages to being a minor player. You get to learn many tongues and host strangers from all over. You learn not to take yourself too seriously. You cultivate ways of thinking that go counter to the hegemonic powers. To be a minority can be very dangerous in a time of pogroms, no question, but there is a wealth of networks, as well as a wealth of nations. The first fits us better.

I think our best bid for being taken seriously is not to look inward as a field, but to deliver work of the absolute highest quality. Count me with the anarchists and nomads, with the hunters and gatherers moving through or against the disciplinary systems, and not with the empire builders. Our field has plenty of those already, but it has another more interesting opportunity that I believe we should seize: that of being the general study of edges. If they only knew, our students and deans would recognize border crossing as the most important and useful study of all. To my fellow communication scholars, I say: Let's enjoy our sweet lemons!

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