

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

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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