

Communication

As A Discipline

Introduction to the Special Section: “Communication as the Discipline of the 21st Century”

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The theme of the 2011 conference of the International Communication Association (ICA) was “Communication @ the Center” to highlight the centrality of communication scholarship in the contemporary world.

The 20th century witnessed the immense impact of communication technologies, from the spread of sound recording, motion pictures, and radio as worldwide phenomena to the emergence of television as a dominant influence in nearly every institution, to the explosion of the Internet at the turn of the new century. And the digital revolution is far from over, as new inventions repeatedly challenge assumptions that were themselves formed only yesterday. This is an exciting and critically important moment for communication scholars to contribute to understanding and shaping the parameters of our changing technological and academic environment.

If it once were possible to view communication studies as peripheral to the central mission and focus of the academic universe—as many in the academy did and some still do—that is no longer a defensible position. Today, any credible model of the liberal arts must recognize the centrality of communication for any responsible educational program. If the goal of the liberal arts in higher education is the acquisition of basic intellectual skills combined with knowledge of the historical roots and cross-cultural variations in human behavior and institutions, then communication is necessarily at the center of education. As recognized in the classic traditions of Western education, communication is the fundamental human trait and the basis of all culture. The forms and media of communication provide the nervous system that links the components of our national and increasingly global political, economic, and social systems.

Communication studies can rightfully claim a central role not only in the basic general education of an informed citizenry, but also in understanding and clarifying many of the central challenges of our rapidly changing world. Among these are:

- The globalization of our information environment as we experience a flatter world in which one-way communication is increasingly replaced by multidirectional transmission; in which the North isn't always the source and the South always the receiver.
- The high stakes involved in struggles over ownership of the new media, as well as the resistance to the ever greater consolidation of ownership over old and new technologies.
- The crisis in journalism brought about by the collapse of the economic model of commercially supported news enterprises wedded to an outmoded production and distribution system, as well as the upheaval wrought by the folks formerly known as the audience taking [partial] control over the means of production and dissemination of information.
- The epochal shifts in our information environment as we learn, both for better and worse, to live with technologies that provide opportunities and challenges unimaginable until recently outside the confines of science fiction—and more are on their way.

In these and many other similar transformative challenges, communication scholars have the opportunity to draw upon a wealth of disparate theoretical and empirical strands to clarify questions of real societal import, illuminate complex realities, and help explore solutions to pressing problems, as well as longstanding intellectual mysteries. Communication scholars, individually and collectively, need to assert our centrality to any cogent and credible account of the contemporary world.

The opening plenary of the conference provided a platform for the exploration of some of these questions.

The lead speaker was Craig Calhoun, President of the Social Science Research Council and University Professor of the Social Sciences at NYU, who spoke on "Communication as Social Science (and More)." Following Professor Calhoun, Professors Joseph Cappella, Sonia Livingstone, John Durham Peters, and Georgette Wang each spoke on the topic of the plenary session. All of the speakers have kindly agreed to have their talks—slightly revised and amended—included in this special section. It is our hope that these pieces will stimulate thought and conversation among our various communities, and lead to further contributions to this important topic.

Along those lines, one member of the audience at that plenary, Jeff Pooley, responded to the announcement at the session that the talks would appear in *IJoC* by submitting a paper on the same general topic—specifically addressing the history and status of communication studies in the U.S. academy. We were happy to include this additional contribution to the discussion, and we invite our readers to join in what we hope will be an ongoing conversation on the future of our field. This set of articles is characterized by an overly U.S.-centered focus, despite Livingstone's and Wang's contributions, and so we especially encourage additional interventions from non-U.S. and international perspectives.