

Looking Back, Moving Forward: Critical Communication History

Editorial Introduction

D. TRAVERS SCOTT
Clemson University

DEVON POWERS
Drexel University

In May 2012, the Communication History Interest Group sponsored a preconference at the International Communication Association (ICA) gathering in Phoenix, Arizona. That preconference, entitled *Historiography as Intervention*, was an effort to extend the flourishing interest in the history of our field by bringing together scholars whose work raised provocative questions pertaining to historical methods and subjects. As the preconference's organizers, we have collected representative essays delivered that day, with a few additions, in an attempt to ensure that the most useful conversations of that session remain lively in its aftermath. In a way, this section presents a record of the preconference's history, but it also attempts to point to fruitful directions forward for historical research in our field. We believe it is an auspicious and fitting time for this work, especially given that, less than a year after that ICA preconference, Communication History became an official ICA Division.

The title of this special section, "Critical Communication History," is meant to underscore the agency we ascribe to the scholarship featured here. These contributions are bound together by a common drive to use history to re-envision the purpose, scope, and destiny of the history of communication as a subfield of study. Our field has reached a crucial moment of resolution—one we might even consider calling a "historiographic turn." As such, communication historians have a new, expanded role to play in establishing a shared past that is not only able to stitch the diverse facets of communication more decidedly together with one another, but also elastic enough to accommodate the range of approaches, subject areas, and questions that have made communication such a rich and vital discipline.

To be certain, the path toward this moment has been neither direct nor easy. Communication is a discipline that has long struggled to define its relationship to history, and we have often wrestled mightily with what this dearth of historical knowledge means for the state of the field. Because history is a marker

D. Travers Scott: dscott3@g.clemson.edu

Devon Powers: djp74@drexel.edu

Date submitted: 2013-07-30

Copyright © 2013 (D. Travers Scott & Devon Powers). Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial No Derivatives (by-nc-nd). Available at <http://ijoc.org>.

of a discipline with a lively intellectual character and a defined, if diverse and debated, identity, the relative paucity of our own history is yet another explanation for our field's perennial, indefatigable identity crisis. Hanno Hardt says as much in his foreword to *The History of Media & Communication Research: Contested Memories*, where he notes that, in the process of its "coming of age," the field of communication "has discovered history, not only as an essential instrument with which to forge the story of its own significance but also as a desirable form of authentication and legitimation in the intellectual community through a process of differentiation" (Hardt, 2008, p. xi). The implication, both of Hardt's forward and of the larger volume in which it appears, is that such a coming of age has not yet been realized, that we are still plagued by a history that is "anemic and notably unreflective" (Pooley & Park, 2008, p. 1); compared with other disciplines, communication once again falls short.

It is certainly true that, when compared to other fields, our own historical sensibility is far less pervasive. Social sciences such as psychology, anthropology, sociology, and economics have been reflecting on their histories since the mid-20th century, something communication simply could not do, given "the field's relative youth as a self-conscious discipline" (ibid., p. 4). Communication may be no different than other disciplines, then, in that history is, by design, an afterthought, something that obviously comes into being with the passage of time. However necessary it is to point out and work on the shortcomings of the history of communication, we want to suggest that the use value of this endeavor has reached its limit. The unintended consequence of lamenting the sorry state of the history of our discipline is twofold: On the one hand, we do not give enough credit to work that has been done, especially in recent years, to fill this lacuna; on the other, we run the risk of producing a history that suffers from the same self-doubt that long has characterized our field. A truer, less self-defeatist take would acknowledge that, while our past may never be as tidy as older, more established disciplines, and while there remains significant work to be done, the history of communication can rightly claim to exist, in a form that practices the robustness of other disciplines, if not yet the wealth or stature.

And it is growing: The large number of young and junior scholars involved with the Communication History Division at ICA, as well as at other communication conferences, and the range of work being done across similar fields, such as media archaeology and history of science and technology, all indicate that we are reaching a negotiation regarding what communication history is, should, and could be. If the debate once was "about whether communication has, will, or should achieve disciplinary status" (Mumby, 1997, p. 1), the current growth in historic work in communication suggests that disciplinarity has been realized. The time is ripe for questions of "Who are we?" to progress to questions of "What now?"

History: A Strength of Communication

As the battles over turf and definition become increasingly vestigial, communication history can begin to take pride in the unique attributes of the history we produce. What can we offer back to the field of history? What can we add to other fields and subfields with which we intersect, such as media studies, science and technology studies, area studies, philosophy, rhetoric, cultural studies, American studies, and other social sciences? From our vantage, communication offers at least three inherent strengths: a deeply-held resistance to technological determinism; a dexterity with inter/transdisciplinarity; and, from this, an atypically rich theoretical and methodological toolkit from which to draw.

The study of communication technologies has long been a central part of our field, drawing on and benefitting from scholarship in such fields as history and science and technology studies (STS). Indeed, conferences of the Society for the Social Study of Science (4S), the Society for the History of Technology (SHOT), and the History of Science Society (HSS) have welcomed attendance and presentation from scholars of communication. Such events provide not only transdisciplinary investigations of topic, theory, and method, but also a reflexive opportunity for communication scholars to assess their own unique perspectives and contributions. However, an ongoing critique of technological history since at least the 1970s has been that of technological determinism—that researching social development through the lens of technology too easily obscures human actors and agency. Technology has often been elevated to what cultural communication scholars Slack and Wise call “a starstruck actor, stepping on other actors’ lines and hogging the limelight” (2005, p. 3). Such a perspective is not only inaccurate, but also encourages people to forget that technologies are things that humans make and can change, not autonomous forces. Communication scholarship can run this risk, of course, as in the most extreme versions of McLuhanesque media theory and its revivals. However, one of the aspects of our discipline that moderates this tendency is the centrality of humans to our research. This has ranged from the humanistic inquiries and insights of rhetorical criticism to the functional questions of what people do with technologies, as in the foundational new-media research organizational and interpersonal communication scholars conducted in the 1980s and 1990s. Even earlier work in propaganda studies and the most current, nuanced, media-effects research is centered on human-sent and -received message content. Regardless of our methods or ontologies, there is no true communication without people.

Such pluralism is another benefit our field offers historiography. At our conferences, in our journals, among our peers, and often within our own work, we are accustomed to navigating highly diverse approaches to generating knowledge. While certain strands, such as rhetoric and the effects tradition, have (and, arguably, still do) dominate our field, no such strand has ever achieved hegemonic status. Individual departments and schools may have cultivated distinct identities and specializations, but it has never been tenable to claim that there was *one* way to study communication. The attention to difference and ontological skepticism wrought by postmodernism, poststructuralism, and globalization provoked crises in other fields, such as anthropology, English, history, and sociology, that are still reverberating. While communication was not unscathed, our historic lack of absolute master narratives of method or theory prepares us to adeptly navigate today’s intellectual climate. Perhaps we can follow Peters to “think of communication studies as one of the first postmodern fields rather than as a stillborn modern one” (2008, p. 157)—battered at times, but attuned to and comfortable with a greater multiplicity of perspectives, worldviews, and lifestyles. Communication scholars thus bring to the table the potential for historiography that is innately reflexive and relativistic, avoiding traps of objectivity, teleology, and ethnocentrism.

On a more practical level, we are used to explaining and situating ourselves. Especially today, as the field settles into a detente with its pluralism, one could argue that communication scholars operate with a degree of standpoint theory at all times. In framing research, we must clearly signal our epistemologies, ontologies, theories, and methods. We lack the luxury of, say, scholars at history conferences who can immediately dive into presenting data without spending so many precious minutes

orienting themselves to their listeners. Administrators and colleagues from other departments may ask why we require so many theory and method surveys, but for students to enter the field, we much teach this as well. Yet, ultimately, our pluralistic history—should we embrace and build upon it—positions communication well to engage with the multiplicity, cosmopolitanism, and internationalism that will continue to frame all academic work into the future.

Our pluralism also gives us familiarity with a wide variety of theoretical and methodological approaches. The communication toolkit is large, and we have no compunction about borrowing again and again from our diverse neighbors. This is arguably a strength, rather than a weakness. Whereas there has been a tendency to worry about our lack of indigenous theories, and some prefer to teach only those generated by canonized communication scholars, this seems antithetical to contemporary scholarship and intellectual life. On the most pragmatic level, in our age of budget cuts and fiscal crises, the ability to seek grants and private partnerships across the spectrum of humanities and social sciences gives communication historiographers an edge. We are inherently polyglot, able to adapt to and work with a great variety of funders and collaborators. Likewise, we are not beholden to a limited number of proper ways to do history. While we may risk the ire of our history colleagues for not precisely following their methodological templates, we have the liberatory potential to innovate and share new ways of both asking historical questions and telling historical stories, as well as the responsibility to ensure and communicate our own methodological rigor.

Critical Historiography as Intervention

Therefore, we understand critical historiography as an important intervention into our own discipline, the wider social sciences, and academic inquiry writ large. Understanding historiography as a style of intervention implies two related projects. The first, as we have noted above, endeavors to move toward a place where communication history is not some kind of reminder about how illegitimate we are, but is instead a robust and integrated aspect to the overall discipline. In this quest, we acknowledge that history is a powerful and vital form of sense-making that (re)shapes both the present and the past, and that necessarily must embody a critical awareness to these possibilities.

The second intervention we seek follows closely on the first: to define and critically analyze the ideological aspects of historiography as practice. One such aspect is examining the process of differentiating “old” and “new,” and debates around such divisions. Critical historiography examines the ideological work of such categories and questions their exclusivity, a task that has been particularly fruitful in the studies of “new media” (e.g., Acland, 2007; Chun, 2006; Gitelman, 2008; Jones, Park, & Jankowski, 2011; Marvin, 1988; Pingree & Gitelman, 2003). Another aspect responds to the perspective that “everything in human history is worth knowing.” This perspective asserts that the documenting of the record of human events is, in and of itself, always a significant act to some degree. Critical historiography, however, places a primacy on asking why and for what purposes histories are told, both as a way of conceptualizing historical questions, and as a way of contextualizing and analyzing historical work once it has been done. By “critical,” we draw from critical theory to engage, not exclusively neo-Marxism, but more broadly the strands of social justice and reformist impulses in our field, ranging from the subjective,

normative approaches in critical-cultural scholarship to the applied nature of much health and organization work.

Therefore, by critical historiography, we mean communication scholarship that does not merely or predominantly seek to document the true facts of past events. Indeed, this is taken largely as an impossible, hubristic task. Instead, we seek to deploy understandings of the past to intervene positively in the present.

There are several dimensions or modes to critical historiography. One is the abandonment of any notion that history is ever "objective" in the sense of being free from interpretation. Drawing on the critical theory of such continental philosophers as Michel de Certeau and Michel Foucault, the past is understood as never entirely attainable. To reconstruct events—even if from a bounty of empirical data and artifacts—and subsequently to make sense of them always already involves interpretation, as communication scholar and media historian Jonathan Sterne (2010) eloquently argues. Second, recognizing the incompleteness of accessing past events raises important epistemological questions: If there are always gaps to be interpretively filled in when writing historiographies, how big can those gaps be? How much evidence is required for interpretations to be drawn? These are questions with significant political implications when one considers the erasure and invisibility of various subjugated peoples and persons. Why should historiography be limited to the evidence left by the victors? Indeed, isn't it those who have left little-to-no evidence who most need their stories told? Drawing on Italian historian Carlo Ginzburg's metaphor of historians as detectives working from clues, and on Derridean notions of traces, such critical historiography is amenable to parallel work in sociology that questions definitions and evaluations of historic evidence (Gomez-Barris & Gray, 2010). Finally, if histories are not mere mimetic reconstructions of facts, they suggest another type of writing: narratives. Here again, communication has a home-field advantage. Scholars familiar with Walter Fisher's narrative paradigm (1985) or Sandra Ball-Rokeach's work on storytelling as communication infrastructure (e.g., 2001, with Kim & Matei) are well-prepared to conceive of histories as narratives. While historian Hayden White's work on the narrative *styles* of historiographies is influential, for communication scholars, it is perhaps easier to recognize that historiographies simply *are* literary narratives.

Interventions and Insights

For us, and we hope for you, the articles we have collected in this section demonstrate the possibilities of communication historiography. They recover forgotten histories, pose counterhistories, contextualize and denaturalize the present, and ultimately, suggest the ideological uses of historiography and the contingent knowledges it produces. Some take on several of these tasks simultaneously. For instance, Jeff Pooley and Michael Socolow's "Checking up on *The Invasion from Mars*: Hadley Cantril, Paul Lazarsfeld, and the Making of a Misremembered Classic" provides a direct challenge to one of communication research's most cherished legends: Namely, how the Bureau of Applied Social Science's *Personal Influence*, published in 1955 by Elihu Katz and Paul Lazarsfeld, moved communication research toward a "limited effects" model, especially in response to the 1940 "hypodermic needle"-oriented *Invasion from Mars* study authored by Hadley Cantrill. In complicating the story behind the *Invasion from Mars* story, as well as in displaying the surprising impact of Cantrill and Lazarsfeld's interpersonal feud on how these two studies are remembered, Pooley and Socolow show how "IFM and the Bureau, twin born,

came to represent rival camps in the discipline's remembered pasts." There are provocative implications for this work, as the skewed understanding of this story has a strong presence throughout current-day communication research and textbooks.

Ryan Ellis's "The Premature Death of Electronic Mail: The United States Postal Service's E-COM Program, 1978–1985" takes on a stalwart communication institution, recovering the U.S. Postal Service's flirtation with, and ultimately its failed launching, an early electronic mail system. Ellis argues that, for the USPS, email presents a "lost opportunity," an innovation that would initially "fail," only to later become one of the most popular early online technologies. The article is a reminder that technological "progress" is never inevitable nor solely due to its inherent capabilities. Moreover, his research is especially meaningful today as, to quote Ellis, "core elements of the institution of postal service are now under threat." As he notes, this "alerts us to the paucity of the current policy debate surrounding postal reform, while serving as a stark reminder of the difficulties and hazards that await attempts to expand the range of available options."

Ellis's work offers insight into how underexamined communication policies of the past shape the possibilities of the present. In "Japanese Newspapers' Risk Assessment of Nuclear Power in the Wake of the Chernobyl Nuclear Disaster in Historical Perspective," the contribution from Yasuhito Abe, we see how policy decisions relate to media when they are aired in public. Taking as its impetus the Fukushima nuclear disaster of 2011, Abe investigates how it came to be that Japanese newspapers spent many years in support of the expanded use of nuclear power in the country, despite a number of high-profile nuclear accidents, such as the disaster at Chernobyl. Moreover, Japan's status as the only nation to actually experience a nuclear attack was ironically used in favor of expanding nuclear power; as Abe writes, the assumption was that "because Japan is the only country that has been affected by atomic bombs, its nuclear safety must be excellent." In asking, "how did the risk assessment of nuclear power by Japanese media contribute to the development of Japanese nuclear safety policy?" he raises critical questions about the role of news media not only in framing policy decisions for public understanding, but also in shaping those decisions, sometimes—as we know now—with dire results.

Ideological concepts are, by nature, so entrenched as to seem natural and transhistorical. In "What Makes 'Free' Radio? U.S. Media Policy Discussions in Post-War Germany 1945–1947," Mandy Tröger demonstrates this in a historic discourse analysis of perhaps one of the most ideological of concepts—freedom. Examining a narrow period of time, she documents the varying rhetorical deployments of the term "free" in developing German radio. This reminds us of the varied meanings of a term crucially important in today's debates around software, Internet governance, and other areas—a warning that, when a unified, single meaning of a term is assumed, we are swimming in deep ideological waters.

Historic inquiries can also document how ideological currents can be rerouted and redeployed. "Why Is 'Ether' in Ethernet?" is Peter Schaefer's historiography of "ether" metaphors in networking technology. Schaefer shows how meanings associated with new technologies function differently before and after the technologies enter the market. During commercialization, meanings of universal and equitable access to information are deployed, but simultaneously, strategies of limiting information access to privileged elites are enacted.

A critical perspective insists on remembering that the past is not simply a transparent set of facts accessed and excavated. The past is a narrative created and shared. The methods of historiography are explored in Christopher House's examination of oral history in HIV prevention. In "Religious Rhetoric(s) of the African Diaspora: Using Oral History to Study HIV/AIDS, Community, and Rhetorical Interventions," House's work not only informs the present, but shows how telling stories of the past is a practical tool of intervention in contemporary crisis.

Conclusion

As researchers and editors, we are excited by the potential for critical communication historiography, but we suggest that its potential is not yet wholly fulfilled. Much work remains to be done in making historicization a standard part of communication scholarship. Even when not doing historiography, too often communication scholars neglect to situate sufficiently their phenomena of study in place and time and acknowledge their contingency. Second, we urge continued hyper-awareness regarding the pitfalls of technological determinism and diligence in foregrounding human actors. As Rosalind Williams (2007) has clarified, this does not mean neglecting the reality of change and technological impacts; however, it does mean keeping a focus on our human agency for creating technologies—and re-creating them in more effective and egalitarian ways. Indeed, following the work in critical-cultural communication scholarship, we also call for a stronger emphasis on articulating the significance of past events, rather than merely documenting them. More explicit engagement with what is at stake in historic phenomena, for whom, and when could be supported by greater theoretical foundations in issues of power and inequality. Such theorizations and articulations would make clearer to all why historic work matters in the present. Communication has the opportunity to re-envision or 'queer' historiography by coming up with new modes and methods of practice. We urge scholars not to replicate the exact modes of traditional historiography, but to consider and explore the unique advantages our own discipline offers.

The coming years promise many new opportunities for communication history, not just in research, but also in our teaching and within our scholarly community. Whether through enhanced history offerings within our curricula, more collaborative work between communication history and other subfields, more effort to publish our work in traditional history journals, or growth in the newly inaugurated Communication History division at ICA, there are abundant opportunities both in and beyond scholarship for evolution. This can only happen, though, with continual effort to push for recognition alongside continued dedication to the trailblazing work that has already been done. One might say that, now, for us, there is history in the making.

References

- Acland, C. (2007). *Residual media*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Ball-Rokeach, S., Kim, Y., & Matei, S. (2001). Storytelling neighborhood: Paths to belonging in diverse urban environments. *Communication Research*, 28(4), 392–428.
- Chun, W. (2006). Introduction: Did somebody say new media? In T. Keenan & W. Chun (Eds.), *New media, old media: A history and theory reader* (pp. 1–10). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Fisher, W. (1985). The narrative paradigm: An elaboration. *Communication Monographs*, 52(4), 347–367.
- Gitelman, L. (2006). *Always already new: Media, history, and the data of culture*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Gomez-Barris, M., & Gray, H. (Eds.). (2010). *Towards a sociology of a trace*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Hardt, H. (2008). Foreword. In J. Pooley & D. Park (Eds.), *The history of media and communication research: Contested memories* (pp. xi–xvii). New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Jones, S., Park, D. & Jankoski, N. (Eds.). (2010). *The long history of new media: Technology, historiography, and contextualizing newness*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Pooley, J., & Park, D. (2008). Introduction. In J. Pooley & D. Park (Eds.), *The history of media and communication research: Contested memories* (pp. 1–18). New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Marvin, C. (1988). *When old technologies were new: Thinking about electric communication in the late nineteenth century*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Mumby, D. (1996). Modernism, postmodernism, and communication studies: A rereading of an ongoing debate. *Communication Theory*, 7(1), 1–28.
- Peters, J. (2008). Institutional opportunities for intellectual history in communication studies. In J. Pooley & D. Park (Eds.), *The history of media and communication research: Contested memories* (pp. 143–162). New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Pingree, G., & Gitelman, L. (Eds.). (2003). *New media 1740–1915*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Slack, J. D., & Wise, J. M. (2005). *Culture + technology: A primer*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Sterne, J. (2010). Rearranging the files: On interpretation in media history. *The Communication Review*, 13(1), 75–87.
- Williams, R. (2007). Presidential address: Opening the big box. *Technology and Culture*, 48, 104–116.