

**Communication****As A Discipline**

## **Communication as Social Science (and More)**

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As often happens, I submitted my title before I knew what I wanted to talk about. I do want to speak about communication research as a field, but not only as a field of social science. To try to contain communication in actually existing social science would be to reduce it in unfortunate ways. But at the same time, as someone much invested in social science, I harbor hopes that communication research will be deeply and widely integrated into social science more generally. I believe that the intellectually serious study of communication should be transformative for the social sciences.

Preparing for this speech, I thought I should find out what the field of communication research actually was. I had a few preconceptions and I thought I had learned something from experience. I have done research on themes that are prominent in the field of communications. I have served on several PhD committees and even hold a "courtesy" faculty appointment in NYU's Department of Media, Culture, and Communication. I have been a dean, director of two major university centers in which research on communication figured prominently, and President of the Social Science Research Council. Indeed, in my years at the SSRC we have launched programs both *in* the field of communication (art and media, intellectual property rights, media reform, the public sphere) and *on* the field of communication (an effort to promote links between academic researchers and activists). So I didn't think I was totally ignorant.

Nonetheless, I was not confident in my grasp of just what knit the whole field of communications together, gave it boundaries and a center of gravity, and made it tick. So naturally I did what my undergraduates do, and what if we are honest, we all do. I looked it up in Wikipedia. Here, I learned the following:

Communication as an academic discipline, sometimes called "communicology," relates to all the ways we communicate, so it embraces a large body of study and knowledge. The communication discipline includes both verbal and nonverbal messages. A body of scholarship all about communication is presented and explained in textbooks, electronic publications, and academic journals. In the journals, researchers report the results of studies that are the basis for an ever-expanding understanding of how we all communicate.

Communication happens at many levels (even for one single action), in many different ways, and for most beings, as well as certain machines. Several, if not all, fields of study

dedicate a portion of attention to communication, so when speaking about communication it is very important to be sure about what aspects of communication one is speaking about (sic). Definitions of communication range widely, some recognizing that animals can communicate with each other as well as human beings, and some are more narrow, only including human beings within the different parameters of human symbolic interaction.<sup>1</sup>

Let me sum up my electronic research. Communications is an academic discipline that:

1. Covers everything.
2. Focuses especially on the distinctions between words and not-words, people and not-people.
3. Produces textbooks, electronic publications, and journals.
4. Is a field utterly unable to generate a good account of itself on Wikipedia.

Fortunately, as we tell our students, Wikipedia isn't everything. Valid scientific research requires skimming many websites. I want to assure you in advance that I now have a fully adequate empirical basis for what might otherwise seem to you to be a series of unsupported generalizations. On this empirical basis I propose to offer an analysis of the field and its contemporary predicaments, and to offer advice and exhortation.

#### **As a Field of Study—in Research or in Classes— Communication Really is Wildly Heterogeneous**

Communication is the most important field for the study of many key dimensions of social change. The rising influence of the Internet and new media is the most obvious, but not the only example. And we can think of this not just in the abstract or in studies of individual usage, but also in a series of important contexts from the Arab Spring, to the global financial crisis, to struggles over intellectual property. At the same time, there are a hundred older lines of inquiry that are still active and important.

This is good news, for the most part, because it is a key source of the vitality and creativity of the field. But the field has not yet developed strong enough ways for integrating and benefitting from its diversity.

Stay on the good news. It is not just that communication researchers study lots of different intellectual problems and empirical topics, at lots of different scales and in lots of different places. They do. But as important, many study these in new ways precisely because they look at them from the perspective of communication as a field. They are both stimulated to ask new questions and given effective permission to break out of the approaches that have been standard in other fields. This is true for the study of political communication—greatly enlivened by both cultural studies and a focus on media as such, each slow to develop in political science. It is true for the study of rhetoric, pushed by attention to visual rhetoric and to the role of disembodied speech in various media. It is true for the study of

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<sup>1</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/communication>

popular music, rethought beyond musicology as a matter of cultural institutions and multiple levels of communication.

Nonetheless, as a field, communication strongly reflects its genesis. The path of development and incomplete integration is evident in subgroup loyalties and in the internal divisions of many departments—and too often in weak connections among lines of research that could be relevant to each other and to important larger problems. Communication has been made from (at a minimum):

- a. Rhetoric and speech
- b. Drama, theater and performance studies
- c. Mass communication
- d. Public opinion research
- e. Interpersonal and small group communication
- f. Organizational communication
- g. Journalism
- h. Public Relations
- i. Marketing
- j. Policy analysis
- k. Cultural studies
- l. Media—and media, in turn, means:
  1. Media history from speech through writing, printing, and the range of electronic media
  2. Broadcast media
  3. Film and video
  4. New media including the Internet
  5. Production
  6. Criticism

I could make this list even longer, not least by emphasizing more the disciplines from which immigrants to communications come: literature, history, sociology, and others. Someone who knows the field better than I could make an argument about which of the many dimensions are more important. My own sense is that media is most defining, but that the most creative media studies don't stand on their own, they connect media to other issues: cultural change, social inequality, organizational structure.

Note, too, what is missing. There are fields that might be much better represented in communication studies than they are now:

- m. Politics, economics, and political economy
- n. Engineering and computer science
- o. Design

It is not imaginable that all communication programs should somehow “cover” all these subfields, themes, or contributing lines of scholarship (let alone claim to be their exclusive home). The question is not one of coverage or containment; it is one of connection. It is worthwhile for the field as a whole to reflect on the challenge of integrating and connecting these diverse sources and foci.

Communication is heterogeneous not just in the mix of fields it embraces, but in the organizational and curricular models it has produced for itself. There are programs to which production

and performance are central and programs that don't address either (not to mention a prevalence of snide comments about who is really intellectual or really useful). There are communications programs that emphasize professional training and indeed some that are organized as professional schools (though even the professional schools of the field do not embrace a common structure of professional degrees). In some of the professional programs journalism is central; elsewhere it is precluded by the organization of journalism in a rival professional school. On some campuses, there is a happily integrated school or department (or at least in principal that is possible). On others, the tensions cause more frequent grievances among colleagues, and on still others—way more than should be the case in a rational world—there are multiple and competing departments pursuing different versions of communications. My goal is not to praise conformity, but rather to indicate a challenge. This is not without material basis and implications.

The diversity and creative chaos of the field of communication become worrying at various specific points. For example:

- When explaining to students' parents why communication is a good major.
- When approaching central administrations for new faculty lines.
- When wondering why major funders like the NSF treat communication research as marginal at best.
- When conducting tenure reviews.
- When creating or debating the structure of curricula.

All of these really matter, but they all matter mainly in practical ways that should not be made into matters of principle. They do not hold any very clear implications about the underlying intellectual merit or coherence of the field. In other words, don't feel bad about this. It is not like everyone else has their disciplinary house in order. Every field is heterogeneous; the issue is how well its parts are connected.

### **The Importance and Limits of Discipline**

In fact, the "established" disciplines are not very old and they vary greatly in their internal organization. Most took their modern form only about 100 years ago, in the wake of the rise of the PhD degree and amid the attempt to redefine the modern university as an institution integrating research and teaching. This overturned an older model of disciplines and fields of study, one more rooted in the classics but also in the professional project of training clergymen. The older model was interdisciplinary, as it were, because it was presumed that all students would study all of the main subjects. Moreover, professors might move through a hierarchy of chairs like rhetoric, philosophy, or theology without specializing permanently in any of these as a separate field. The idea of the liberal arts took on new meaning when the old academic model was overthrown. Particularly in the United States, it constituted a new model for integrating disciplinary fields a few at a time. What eventually became the major started with "free electives"—that is, the option to study specific subjects outside the classical curriculum and grew into new fields of concentration. Majors were modeled on the new PhD programs. These research

fields became the main disciplines. They were grouped into the divisions of science, social sciences, and humanities, but they made the university (or college) as a whole into an interdisciplinary field.<sup>2</sup>

In science, there was recurrent redefinition of fields. Where are the precise boundaries among physics and either astronomy or atmospheric science? Botany and zoology were once seen as distinct, then merged into biology. Biology, in turn, grew to contain numerous subfields loosely integrated by the idea of evolution. Some of these subfields like genetics or molecular biology have become as large (in numbers of faculty or budgets) as the disciplines of the social sciences. Interdisciplinary fields like biochemistry and nanotechnology formed and reformed. This process was never frictionless, though it was aided by the idea that science was itself a shared enterprise, as well as by substantial flows of research funding. It is an open question, in other words, whether biology is “a” discipline or itself an interdisciplinary field.

By contrast, the disciplinary framework for the social sciences became more or less fixed early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Economics, sociology, and political science all emerged out of the common framework of the field of history between the 1870s and the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—and sociology was initially organized mostly within economics, until it formed its own disciplinary association in 1905. Psychology followed its own developmental path, was strongly knit into the social sciences until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, but now has stronger connections to natural science in most research universities. Anthropology and geography also both straddled the science/social science divide. This is one reason that anthropologists fit uncomfortably into once widespread joint departments with sociology. And it remains a telling split in anthropology; witness the arguments last year when the American Anthropological Association proposed to drop the word “science” from statements of its long-range plans. The dominance of physical geography meant that most U.S. geography departments focused more on natural than social science, subordinating human geography more than in most of the English-speaking world.

Each of the emerging social science disciplines included subfields with the potential to become separate disciplines in their own right (which also meant that there was something like interdisciplinarity inside each). Though it was well-funded, significant in public policy, and had a strong research tradition and professional association, demography never managed to win disciplinary autonomy in most universities. Despite its vigorous re-founding after WWII, international relations never managed to break out of political science (except where it moved into new professional schools of international affairs). And even famous and influential efforts to create more unity among disciplines, like Harvard’s Department of Social Relations, failed to overturn the established disciplines.

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<sup>2</sup> Conversely, both the idea of a foundation in ‘general education’ and the notion of distributional requirements reflected some continuation of the older curricular ideal of covering all the fields. This attenuated over time, both as students pressed for degrees oriented to specific jobs and as some research fields, especially in science and technology, argued that students simply couldn’t spare time for breadth. This has gradually undermined the compromise between breadth and depth that long defined the characteristic U.S. undergraduate degree structure. The change is most pronounced outside elite liberal arts schools. In some settings, communications programs interestingly reinstate elements of a liberal arts model with a partially professional framework.

It would be interesting to explore further why the social science disciplines were so resistant to reorganization (though this isn't the place for a detailed inquiry). At least in the early years, some of this had to do with political leanings: history and political science were relatively conservative while economics and sociology were more liberal, oriented to social activism, and sometimes even socialist. Some of the answer, no doubt, has to do with the fact that all felt embattled and though they needed to protect their legitimacy (an issue that weighed heavily, for example, on some mid-20<sup>th</sup> century sociologists like Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton, who also contributed in major ways to communication, though they kept the field at arm's length).

For whatever reasons, none of these other social sciences embraced communication research wholeheartedly, yet no place was made for communication as an independent discipline among the several social sciences. Neither did the older speech communication programs rooted in the humanities (and in the prominence of rhetoric in the old pre-reform classical curriculum), fully embrace the growth of social science research on communication. More than anything else, it was the postwar growth in professional programs, especially from the 1970s, that made for spectacular growth in communications departments.

Older disciplines proved remarkably slow to revise their problem-sets and internal organization to take up new questions about communication and social change. But this should count as a warning about excessive aspirations to "be a discipline like the others." The discipline that disciplines provide usually proves intellectually conservative. Advisors convey to graduate students that it is better to write dissertations on well-established issues in well-established subfields. And beware, this is already happening in communication research. It is not the case that the field is inherently free; rather it is relatively new, rapidly growing, and weakly institutionalized. These are features that encourage freedom, but they may be only temporary.

In short, communications need not spend much anxiety on discipline-envy. All disciplines and all professional fields have more or less intellectually arbitrary demarcations. They have histories that mark them as "assemblages". This is a currently fashionable term that is often used as though it means something more deeply theoretical but which I think actually means that what has been put together is not automatically coherent, not readily theorizable, and requires work for its maintenance. So it is with communications (and most other social science disciplines): searching for the unifying principle is likely to be misleading or counterproductive. Unity is more a matter of connections and family resemblances. Of course, this doesn't stop people from making tendentious claims about the principled integrity of the older disciplines.

Allow me an anecdote: While I was a dean at Chapel Hill, the Arts and Sciences Curriculum Committee debated the formation of a cultural studies major to be housed in the communication department. A historian spoke forcefully in opposition. How could cultural studies be a major, she asked, when it was not rooted like a proper discipline in a single distinctive method? As an advocate for critical, reflexive social science, I couldn't help asking in return: What is the single method that unifies the discipline of history? "Um," she stammered, "Well, the past. Documents. I mean archives." It will not be lost on you that not all historians work in archives, or with documents, and moreover, that whatever the

past may be, it is not a method. Nor does history have a single defining method (though historians have some strong affinities of style and taste).<sup>3</sup>

The notion that there could be a common method to communication research is laughable. But it is important also to laugh at the notion that there is a single common method for anthropology, economics, history, psychology, political science, or sociology.

The idea that methods define disciplines is an illusion with roots in late 19<sup>th</sup>- century debates over a tendentious division between purely objective and generalizing science and knowledge based on subjective, particularizing interpretation. The *methodenstreit* was not an intellectual success and this is not how disciplines are really organized. Of course this hasn't stopped attempts by social scientists to claim more scientific standing by insisting that their methods are becoming more perfectly objective. Nor has it stopped recurrent movements to replace one set of methods by another, nor assertions that some specific technique constitutes the gold standard for knowledge—whether the trump card is held to be double-blind experiments or the analysis of total populations rather than sample surveys.

Natural and physical scientists generally claim the scientific method as a common foundation of all scientific fields (and in this sense, the scientific method is not identified with a particular research technique). This is the reason we speak of science in the singular, while in phrases like the “arts and science” the various arts are seen as incommensurably plural. The humanities have been brought under the latter usage (which perhaps made more sense for arts like painting, sculpture, and poetry). Humanists often claim that each discipline should be defined by a specific method. This doesn't always get in the way of research or interdisciplinary collaboration, but it is misleading nearly every time it surfaces. It is social scientists, however, who are most prone to fetishize method as technique, and seek scientific status on this basis. Communication is one of the fields least likely ever to be defined by a common method. There is great diversity in methods of *doing* communication, from speech to writing to filming, broadcasting, and so on. And there is great diversity in methods for *studying* communication, with contributions from experiments, ethnographies, historical research, surveys, textual analyses, and increasingly visual methods. But there is also a perennial renewal of the *methodenstreit*. Communications research remains split between the embrace of scientific universalism and humanistic focus on contexts and cases, between the pursuit of quantitative precision and interpretative depth. My advice here is simple, coming from the equally split field of sociology: Get over it. No side has the whole truth.

This is not to say there are no interesting questions to explore regarding method. In the first place, of course, there is always the potential to improve research techniques (though technique is the most limited sense of method). Second, there are important questions about what counts as good knowledge and why, and these need reflexive exploration—but in the spirit of improving knowledge not the pursuit of closure. In this sense we might consider history, which does not have a common method

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<sup>3</sup> A minor historical follow-up: The interdisciplinary cultural studies program still thrives at Chapel Hill (rebranded as Cultural Studies @ UNC). Yet when the graduate school recently posted a list of cultural studies programs, the list included Asian Studies, Women's Studies, Religious Studies, African-American Research, Minority Aging, and even the Study of the American South but not the program that actually offers a major in Cultural Studies. Evidently “cultural studies” had taken on another life as a term for programs promoting diversity or the study of minority cultures.

but does have a subfield of historiography that asks basic questions about how we know the past and how the different methods (and concepts and theories) we use matter. Third, there are vital questions about what competencies a communications graduate should possess. If we thought of studying communication as mastering a number of skills, what would they be? How much would the list be unique to communications, how much shared with other fields? Would being able to use theory in doing analysis be on the list? Would statistics? And for that matter, this being communication, would either public speaking or writing clearly be required?

There are questions throughout the social sciences (and indeed in all fields) about the relationship between standard curricula and cutting-edge research. There are good reasons both to teach students established core skills where the frontiers of skill lie, to teach both knowledge that has gained fairly stable acceptance and what debates and new issues are changing the way people in the field think. It is not only communication researchers who address these issues in muddled and anxious ways for there is no single right answer and no way for potential answers not to feel like judgments about the intrinsic worth of different lines of work.

None of this means that insisting on rigor is a mistake, only that rigor comes in multiple forms. Nor does it mean that the field of communication would not benefit from a stronger collective narrative, only that the narrative needs to be one that embraces diversity rather than attempting to discipline it away. But embracing diversity needs to mean forging mutual connections, not just toleration.

In other words, deans and department chairs should not take relative intellectual disorder as an occasion to advance tendentious schemes for coherence. At the same time, the rest of the faculty should see the importance of efforts by chairs and deans to represent the field to external constituencies and not seek to undercut this whenever they get the chance. Representation of the field is important not only for helping outsiders—including funders—to see its value. It is helpful for students. And it is helpful for all members of the field—not so they have a creed to recite but so they have a focus for reflecting on shared concerns. 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 for further research. But the field can't thrive if either completely wins out over the other.

This is not only an issue for academics. It is important that attempts to represent and integrate the communication field include professionals who work outside research institutions, and support the public engagement of researchers and professionals alike. Both professional employment and public engagement depend—like teaching—on offering knowledge that deserves respect. This means knowledge grounded (a) in research and (b) in the perennial critical interrogations that research fields bring to claims that this or that is a settled truth. Diversity must not mean tolerance for slipshod work, nor should coherence be achieved by repressing creativity.

### **How Should the Field of Communication Gain Shape and Coherence?**

The topics studied by communication researchers are extraordinarily diverse. They range from extremely micro accounts of the use of mobile phones to extremely macro accounts of global flows of information and influence. This is often seen as a problem, as though the field must overcome topical diversity and define its core objects of attention. But I think this is specious.



Let me make examples of three fields that have enjoyed great intellectual vitality, growth, and influence in the last 35 or so years. Economics is often faulted (mainly by non-economists) for having an excessively standardized analytic approach and overly strong boundaries. It is seen as obsessed with mathematicization and autistic in its self-referentiality. But it can hardly be faulted for lack of topical diversity, as economists have turned their tools to an ever-wider range of objects of analysis from marriage and family life to infectious diseases, risk-taking behavior to pricing information. Of course the problem-choice of economists remains skewed. Because economists acquire prestige largely by deploying certain sorts of tools in elegant and original ways, problems poorly suited for those tools tend to be neglected. But though we might say that economics is an example of a discipline that became too disciplined, and we might complain about over-reliance on notions like efficient markets and representative rational actors, what suffered was breadth of thinking and openness to different kinds of analyses not topical diversity.

Likewise, business schools have been transformed since the last big academic recession in the 1970s. They have grown enormously, not just in number, but also in status and influence. In the process, they have moved from being relative intellectual backwaters—and low status in the university hierarchy—to become centers of research and often leaders in effective pedagogy. They did this while embracing a range of analytic approaches or disciplines—becoming the primary home to finance, from which mainstream economics kept an arms length relationship partly because it seemed too applied, but also marketing, organizational behavior, and accounting. One could debate to what extent there is a common intellectual basis to the various fields. If this is enshrined at least ideologically in the MBA, then there are two ideologies: case studies and technical analysis. But there is no shortage of topical diversity, as business approaches have been brought to bear on nearly every area of social life, both as analytic perspectives and as approaches to addressing practical tasks. How many of you have not been asked about the business model on which your university or department operates?

Last but not least, I think biology has probably been the most intellectually dynamic and productive field of the last 35 years. It has been the site of major intellectual revolutions like the rise of genomics and a central player in projects like neuroscience. These have shaped reconfigurations of how biologists work and of their relation to other disciplines. For example, genetic research produced a hybrid field of computational biology that not only brought computer scientists and modelers into biology programs, but also shifted the old primary division between field biologists and laboratory researchers. Biology was reshaped by new methods, analytic perspectives, and theories. Its coherence was tested as it went through recurrent restructurings, from combining botany and zoology, to the partial separation of agricultural science, the diversification of lines of applied medical and pharmaceutical research, and the rise of interdisciplinary arenas like nanotechnology. There have been competing agendas for unifying biology, through evolutionary theory, through molecular research, and into the rise of computation and genomics. But through all of this, diversity of empirical objects was large and kept increasing. Not only were innumerable new species identified, but both the internal complexity of organisms and their interaction with each other and with physical phenomena was better understood. And, as must be the case with communications, biology transcended the stance of purely objectivist observation to take on inquiry into the remaking of the phenomena it observed. Biotechnology did not just apply biology; it changed biology and created hybrid biotechnical phenomena that entered into new interactions with organisms, environments, and each other.

Backed up by these three examples, I do not think diversity of empirical objects is a problem for communication as a field. Indeed, it can be a virtue. But for it to be a virtue, the diverse topics must be knit together through a web of interconnections. The same goes for diverse methods and diversity orientations to professional practice, public knowledge, and advancement of scholarship. There is no one model for this: economics, business, and biology suggest different potentially successful paths.

But here communication faces a challenge. It suffers from weak connections among lines of research, and to some extent, among researchers themselves. This is partly a function of a high rate of immigration into the field of researchers who retain strong ties to the disciplines or other fields in which they were trained. But it's not just that. It's also a matter of multiple and often competing professional associations, and of the continued strength of the different older fields that have been tributary streams into the communication river. It's a matter of the extent to which researchers working on communication issues at different analytic scales ignore each other's work, as though there were no reason to expect political economy or culture to influence or be influenced by interpersonal and organizational communication.

As the last point suggests, it's also a matter of relatively weak integrative theoretical discussions. I don't mean that communication should aspire to the kind of shared and sometimes blinkered theoretical commitments that have shaped the dominance of neoclassical theory in economics. Sharing arguments can be as valuable as sharing agreements. But we are at a moment when theory-lite is the norm in communication studies—as in a good part of the rest of the social sciences and humanities. This may be partly a predictable response to the excessively doctrinaire (not to mention jargon-ridden) ascendancies of Marxism, poststructuralism, postmodernism, and other projects (especially those with French and German roots) that seized on theory for marks of arcane distinction rather than intellectual clarification. But it is a problem, for part of the work of theory in any field is to help integrate its disparate parts and lines of inquiry. This is not just a matter of laying foundations or pursuing synthesis; it is also a matter of providing the terms of reference for critical debate. Lack of integration and critical reflection are problems both for enabling empirical research to have deep and cumulative scholarly significance, and for enabling researchers to say why their work really matters.

This isn't the place to go into it, but having significance and mattering are both judgments that can be made only in relation to some problem or project. Problems and projects are both practical and intellectual and often both at once. I am pointing at once to what phenomenologists call intentionality, what Habermas calls a knowledge-forming interest, and to a pragmatist approach to knowledge. I don't propose to distinguish these or to add to what could be a longer list of references. These three are diverse enough to signal that the point isn't specific to one school of thought. The point here is that one of the most important things that makes a field cohere and be productive is engagement in shared intellectual and practical problems or projects. These are not simply topics about which we know more or less. They are the efforts to understand or to act for which our knowledge is helpful, or insufficient, or misleading. For example, wanting to know how specific media or tools affect both the process and content of communication animates a wide variety of projects, from John Durham Peters' inquiry into "speaking into air" to Eszter Hargittai's exploration of the use of search engines to James Katz's analyses of mobile phone use to Larry Grossberg's explorations of the relation of popular music to youth culture. The same issues inform practical actions like FCC policies regarding concentration of ownership across media sectors. I have specifically chosen examples that would, I think, show up in very different places in any map of the

field of communication research —say, one created from co-citation patterns. My point is that, if the field matters, it is because those sorts of connections get made. The disparate and often very specific inquiries become part of larger projects addressing problems that appear in different settings on different scales.

Coherence in a field like communication need not stem from either a master plan or a common method. Cohering, sticking together, may be the result of innumerable specific connections among lines of research, subfields, professional practices, and public engagements without there being any single set of rules that explains and organizes all of these. It is extremely important to make such intellectual connections, and it is important to take up big, shared issues that are important to the work of many subfields.

The argument that those teaching in a field should have broad command of it makes sense to me, but I see it minimally honored in actual training, hiring, or promotion policies. In fact, departments commonly seek new faculty members by specialization and recognition of their publications in subfields. PhD programs seem, for the most part, adapted to this, pushing students to specialize and publish more than to engage in learning about, or theoretically debating, the field as a whole.

This isn't just an issue for PhD programs. Field formation is a matter largely of building connections and giving shape to patterns of connected research. There are some core issues:

What is the field's common value? Put otherwise, what is its project, the stakes of its struggles, its field-specific capital? Whatever the answer, an inevitable corollary is that this demands evaluation. Every academic field judges the value of contributions. Disciplines are especially strongly influenced by the effort to maintain quality through tenure decisions, peer-reviewed articles, and the like, but interdisciplinary fields and professional programs also judge value. Value may be described in terms of the "quality" of research, though this may be assessed along a range of dimensions from rigor to creativity, breadth to thoroughness, originality to command of existing scholarship. How the field of communication studies assesses the worth and importance of contributions is basic to establishing its core values and shaping its identity.

Who will do the judging? To what extent do different subfields of communication research simply defer to each other, adopting a live-and-let-live attitude? Or to what extent do people from one subfield intervene into judgments of others without first bothering to learn the specific kinds of value that are important to contributions in that line of work? At stake is the question of whether there is real mutual understanding inside the field, as well as the fate of different individual reviews.

Being somewhere between a discipline and an interdisciplinary field adds to the issues. For example, to what extent should tenure candidates in communication departments be reviewed by professors of communication elsewhere, rather than those from other fields? Should it matter if the communication professor in question received her PhD in history, or sociology, or political science, rather than in communication? Or publishes largely in the journals of another field? And what should we make of the asymmetrical relations in which communication departments hire faculty members from a variety of disciplines that would never consider hiring an assistant professor with a PhD in communication? Sociology departments happily send students to jobs, not just in communication, but also in ethnic studies, gender studies and international studies departments—and indeed in schools of business and public health—but seldom would they hire faculty members with PhDs in those fields.

More or less similar patterns have obtained in almost every professional field and in most interdisciplinary fields of the humanities and social sciences. In response to this asymmetry, to the sense that it is important for faculty members not to have divided loyalties, and also to the notion that faculty members should have more or less comprehensive knowledge of the field in which they teach (as opposed to knowledge just of its intersection with some other), the general pattern is for each interdisciplinary or professional field to seek to produce more of its faculty members from within its own doctoral programs. Of course, this may or may not be a good thing.

How a field manages its relations to the outside is a matter of boundaries and edges. Communication, as we have seen, has extremely porous edges, rather than sharp boundaries. Does this matter? Is it, perhaps, actively desired? In general, a capacity to maintain boundaries is closely related to autonomy. But edges are also sites of transactions. Communication departments must, for example, secure resources from the larger universities within which they are located (or from foundations and benefactors). What are the terms of trade in these transactions? How much do departments retain control of their own agendas? What do they contribute to others in order to gain resources? Is it prestige? And should communication departments despise rankings or seek to be among the fields that get ranked? Or, as I suspect is often the case, are communication departments particularly likely to be producers of mass commodities, rather than high-prestige goods? In other words, are they judged for generic contributions measured quantitatively, rather than for contributions of field-specific capital judged by peers within the field? Or more bluntly, are they especially likely to be cash cows within their universities, valued more for their undergraduate enrollments than their PhD programs or research? And where this is the case, how much does it undermine autonomy? This is a question not just about sentiments, but also about how universities organize their budgets.

### **What Does It Mean to be Interdisciplinary?**

The study of communication is clearly an interdisciplinary field, but it is anything but clear what that means. Some think communication should become more of a discipline, pointing especially to concerns over lack of rigor or common standards. Others prize interdisciplinarity, though they are divided as to whether this is achieved in a better way by becoming a professional school, or by combining fields of the liberal arts and science. Communication is hardly the only field for which this is fraught terrain; similar issues arise in international studies and environmental studies.

I won't belabor the virtues of interdisciplinarity, though I believe them to be many, and even to include having more "fun." But it is important to see that this can also be a challenge. My friend Ernest Wilson, Dean of the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, likes interdisciplinarity so much that he's given it a pet name, the initials "ID." I am on the same side and agree that interdisciplinarity is vital, but it is also important to distinguish ID from ADD. Interdisciplinarity is not just resisting discipline the way my generation once called for resisting authority. There are several good reasons to be interdisciplinary, but all depend on maintaining some discipline.

In fact, the Social Science Research Council was founded in 1923 with just these issues in mind. The founders were professors from Chicago and Columbia—two universities then in the lead as producers of PhDs and curricular innovators. They received backing from the Rockefeller family for their project of

advancing work in “interdisciplines” (thus inventing the project of interdisciplinarity). Their reasoning was essentially that, left to themselves, research-minded academics would talk only to each other and in ever-narrower specialties. This was a problem, they thought, because advances in method cut across disciplines, and because real-world problems did not come neatly sorted by discipline, but rather needed the more rounded perspective of interdisciplinary collaboration.

Bringing multiple perspectives to bear on real-world problems turned out to be not only a worthy goal, but also an effective mechanism. Interdisciplinary collaborators grew to understand and appreciate each other better when they worked on a common problem than when they simply discussed their different fields.

But the founders of the SSRC also recognized that, for research to matter it was important for that it reflect high standards of quality. Part of the interdisciplinary agenda had to be improving quality. This meant improving empirical research, and the SSRC was instrumental in advancing empirical research techniques and explorations of methodological issues. These were precisely interdisciplinary projects, as, for example, improvements in survey research, mathematical models, or the use of computers benefitted many scientific fields (and enabled social scientists of many sorts to bring research to bear on public concerns). Improving quality also meant making sure that research and theory in different fields spoke well to others, and the SSRC was active in explorations of concepts and agendas for mutually-informing research, as well as in advancing theoretical frameworks. It was as important to bring researchers from different disciplines together in context-specific groupings like area studies as it was in generalizing projects like comparative research and mathematical modeling. And each approach had to do with achieving intellectual rigor, albeit in different ways.

The other major argument for interdisciplinarity is that it helps to promote innovation. This has been argued on the basis of numerous studies of scientific research. I might add that it is in keeping with one of the core findings of research in ecology: edges, zones where ecosystems abut each other, are likely to be richer in diversity and density of species than the central area of any one ecosystem. And this is true not just of adjacent zones of natural selection, but also of the edges of forests that abut zones of unnatural selection and even deprivation—as for example, those that are next to agricultural plantations. There are more songbirds at the edges of forests than in the middle.

Research on interdisciplinary problem-solving and productivity suggests that young researchers do best who have both a strong grounding in a specialized field and prior experience in interdisciplinary, collaborative research. In other words, being effective as an interdisciplinary researcher requires not just knowing about different fields, but gaining specific skills relevant to collaboration—including an ability to work with others who have greater knowledge of some relevant kinds, and at the same time, to know how to present one’s own knowledge effectively for collective use. This has implications for how graduate students are to be trained. They need to know at least one specific line of research well and feel competent based on this; they need to know how to situate this in at least one field of related and complementary lines of research; they need to know how to work collaboratively with others who know different things—tools and methods, lines of empirical research, theories. Working collaboratively is a skill to be developed, and it includes both sides of the simple sender-receiver model of communication: how to make yourself understood and how to understand others. Both require reflexivity—examining one’s own taken-for-granted assumptions and seeking to see problems from other perspectives.

Few in communication research doubt the virtues of interdisciplinarity, but there is little agreement as to the model within which communication programs might achieve interdisciplinarity—and indeed, which of the various subfields and lines of work are really important or even count. Think back to my earlier example of business as a field that has been impressively successful both in gaining resources and status and in achieving an interdisciplinary integration and identity. No one confuses accountancy for organizational behavior, financial analysis for general management. But as a field, business has used the structure of MBA programs as a way to evolve an effective shared definition that facilitates both external recognition (and the resources that come with it) and internal mutual recognition. There are no comparably shared models in the field of communication. Masters programs are extremely heterogeneous.

But these are not merely intra-academic concerns. The marketing of the field of communication is necessarily a matter of generating student interest—something the field has largely fallen into as a happy byproduct of the prominence of the media, but which it cannot take for granted. It is also a matter of marketing students to potential employers. What are the distinctive competencies or comparative advantages that communication graduates might have? And here I mean graduates at bachelor's, master's, and doctoral levels—for at all levels, not just the lowest, communication departments are educating students for mainly nonacademic careers. This has been partly—but only partly—masked for the PhD level during the years of a boom in academic jobs. But this is not the future.

There is also an important issue in how students inhabit the field. That is, whatever their concentration within it, how will they feel about the whole of it? And will it be something to which they retain a connection? Let me pose this question specifically at the PhD level. Are PhDs in communication research more or less generically PhDs such that their continuing loyalty to or engagement in the field is low? Or are they still part of the field of communications research after taking jobs in government or business? This is a question we could put to many fields and with different results. For example, PhD economists and psychologists working outside academia tend still to consider themselves economists or psychologists. Some publish and many attend professional meetings and keep up networks with other PhDs in the same fields. This is much less true of sociologists and political scientists, though in each field there are efforts to try to incorporate nonacademic practitioners better into the life of the research field.

Simultaneously, it is important for communication researchers to ask who their constituencies are. Who are the consumers and users of the knowledge they produce; who pays for it, and how? To some extent, the constituency is academic; the readers of journals are disproportionately other professors and graduate students. But for communication, as for all academic fields, a vital concern should be thinking about the professions they may inform, the employers that may hire graduates, the policy arenas in which their knowledge may make a difference, and to what extent they inform broader publics. It is not a communication strategy to do whatever research one was going to do anyway and publish it in the highest prestige academic journal that will take it, and then hope that Malcolm Gladwell will discover it and publicize it.

It is worth adding that this becomes all the more important with the internationalization of communications research. The field has developed, like many, with disproportionate European, North American, and Australian contributions (and indeed my focus has been mainly on the North American context). But there is rapidly growing communications research elsewhere, especially in Asia and Latin America. Partly because the field is newer, old disparities are less of a factor. In any case, much of the

field's future lies in research in and on the rest of the World—and in building international connections.

### **The Field of Communication and the Transformation of University**

Finally, before closing, I want to say a few words about the institutional context in which communication research is primarily organized. Some members of the ICA work for Microsoft or Google, some for government agencies, some for philanthropic foundations, and even a few for activist organizations like the Consumers Union or Free Press. But most work for colleges and universities. And we should take very seriously the transformations underway in higher education. To try to be exhaustive would launch another talk instead of finishing this one, so let me be a bit telegraphic.

University budgets have changed dramatically in the last 35 years. Nearly all the net growth has been in professional schools and technoscience (including health science). Communication programs have grown dramatically. In some cases, this is bucking the arts and sciences trend; in other cases, it is participating in the professional school trend. But many communications programs are, in fact, hybrids—however institutions formally classify them. And this raises questions for the future.

The financial bases for our work shape it significantly and more all the time. This is so because universities are increasingly organized to make financial flows explicit, even if sometimes in distorting modes of accounting. This is bringing an end to some forms of pooling resources. Universities and colleges that have long been creatures of cross-subsidies are now being organized as profit centers. This means that specific units are judged for what they bring in. Sometimes they bring in prestige that can be translated into money by attracting students or donors. But this is not equally true for every field.

External funding matters in itself, and in some cases, also as an indicator of prestige. Witness universities like Nebraska and Syracuse, currently being driven out of the elite American Association of Universities for failure to demonstrate enough funding from the most prestigious research agencies. This is largely a matter of grants. Contract research is also valuable as cash, but less so as a source of prestige. Where it is the basis for connections to corporate backers, though, this may impress central administration. And of course, it may also impress students hoping for jobs in such corporations (and rightly so, since internships and connections do often pave the way). Endowments are, of course, always golden.

It is painful but telling to analyze the terms of trade by which some programs are subsidized, since their prestige is valued, while others do the subsidizing. Suffice it to say that communications programs are more often givers than receivers in the cross-subsidy trade. There aren't many schools where, say, physics professors teach high loads in order to subsidize the research of communications faculty. High enrollments improve arguments for resources, but they also increase the likelihood of being treated as a cash-cow unless it is possible to convince administrators that they deliver prestige—external recognition.

Most of the time (and at most institutions outside the top elite), communications faculty salaries are dependent on undergraduate enrollment. This comes in different structures in tuition-driven private universities and public universities receiving state funds on head-count formulae (and increasingly becoming tuition-driven themselves). But what it means is that most communications professors

(especially in arts and science faculties rather than professional schools) are ultimately in the same boat with colleagues in the humanities and social sciences. In all these fields, with the partial (and only partial) exception of economics, undergraduate enrollments pay the bills. Growth in communication programs is the background to new faculty lines, but also to increasing class sizes and in some places higher teaching loads. This raises strategic questions: how much to embrace undergraduate teaching as a definitive mission; how much to orient programs to attracting students; how much to try to escape from enrollment-dependence into the competition for prestige instead?

Enrollment growth reflects partly the excitement of new media and recognition of the centrality of communication generally to the future of society. Some earlier growth reflected the cultural studies boom of the late 20th century (and also the extent to which in the U.S. this was resisted by most of the social sciences, leaving room for communications studies programs to complement a trend with roots in traditional humanities programs). But the rising enrollments of communication departments also reflect very centrally the aspirations of students to make careers in media and communication.

Not surprisingly, 18-year-olds do not know a lot about the structure of careers, and in any case these have been changing rapidly. There is no more clarity about “communications” as a professional field than as a research field. Is it close to business as public relations or organizational communication? Close to the arts as performance studies and media production? Is it the future of journalism as legacy media decline? Or is there a future in which critical media theorist is actually a well-paid professional job title?

Communication programs are widely beset by a tension between what their students want to study and what their faculty members want to teach. They respond with varying degrees of hand-wringing, compromise, and bad faith. But the issue is significant. Beyond the question of how well undergraduates are served, there is the question of how the curriculum structures the understanding of the field. It shapes external perceptions, and it also shapes hiring.

This introduces another tension, for communications programs are large users of non-tenure-track faculty. This reflects growth, and class size (which also reflects departmental “terms of trade” with the rest of the university), and faculty preference for more advanced courses. But it also reflects the extent to which students want courses regular faculty aren’t prepared to teach. Many of these are on the “professional” side of curricula. The non-tenure-track faculty employed may be outstanding. They, no doubt, often include professionals working in important positions in the media industry. Some of these don't teach for the money and some who do are well-paid, but the communication field is influenced by the growing distance between tenured faculty members and large numbers of younger colleagues barely scraping by as adjuncts with marginal futures.

This issue is exacerbated by the possibility that the recent growth in enrollments will not continue forever. The supply of students who want vaguely conceptualized communication careers may not be infinite. There may be more discrimination on the basis of whether programs actually able them to secure the jobs they want. And programs may be pressed to devote more of their faculty positions to serving career-oriented students. This is an issue even for schools and departments that understand themselves to be first and foremost professional and pre-professional. It raises questions about what sorts of research are relevant to professional education—and how relevant research can be made compelling to students who don’t see its connection to professional skills. The question becomes more acute for programs that understand themselves more in scholarly or liberal arts terms. The future of communications research is in



doubt if it is to be financed entirely on the basis of enrolling students who are not much interested in research.

### Conclusion

In closing, let me return to my core themes and to some very limited thoughts on what might be done.

Communication is of central importance. Happily, many of the issues studied by the field of communication research are not only important but also increasingly widely recognized as important. Changes in patterns and media of communication are more and more clearly key dimensions of global change. This field literally studies ways in which the world is made.

My main theme has been the heterogeneity of communication research. I have argued this is not a bad thing; it is even good, but it is nonetheless a challenge. It affects:

- The recognition the field receives externally—from funders, from other academics, from businesses that may employ graduates.
- The field's internal coherence and capacity to maintain high standards in intellectual work.
- The nature of linkages between communications research and work in other fields.

While I predict no easy resolution to the dilemmas of being a discipline, an interdisciplinary field, and a profession, I have argued that pressure on communications researchers to offer a coherent picture of the field will grow.

In this heterogeneous field, what is needed is not a pressure for conformity but the production of more and better connections among different lines of work. I have suggested that theory has a special role to play in this, but asking the big questions that connect different lines of work it is a matter that far exceeds the domain of theory. So what is to be done? Well, for starters:

- Create ways for young researchers to connect to each other across schools, lines of work, methodologies, and topics of inquiry. This could take the form of fellowships, workshops, conferences—but the key is lateral connections. This should have the added benefit of supporting young researchers in a period when the job market is doing this, well, imperfectly.
- Recognize the value of synthesis and debate that helps to make clear the state of the art in different subfields and give a better account of the field at large. This could come through annual reviews, journals, or electronic information resources (we've tried a small example with the SSRC site on public sphere research). It requires rewarding good synthesis—and debate—as well as the production of new (and often fragmented) knowledge. And good synthesis is also the basis for making sure good research gets appropriate recognition.
- Start a conversation about the models for degrees and organizational structures (or renew it if it exists). There are always local patterns at every institution that make change seem impossible.

But there are also reasons the field needs to develop a recognizable set of institutions.

- Begin to make an active pursuit of interdisciplinary connections around key social issues. Is communication central to the Arab Spring? Don't just congratulate yourselves on being early to know that, build links to Middle Eastern studies and political science. Programs in international studies, environmental studies, and public policy studies are all growing alongside communication; closer connections should be growing too. Do not take interdisciplinary connections for granted, just because communication has always had a surfeit of them. They will decline with in-breeding and in any case need constant renewal.
- Make sure that internal discussion flourishes not just about "what is the field of communications" but about the important intellectual and practical problems on which communications researchers can produce necessary knowledge.

My suggestions are much smaller than my analysis and than the need. But the field of communication research is proof that multiple small starts can have an enormous impact. Work in the field is important; it is at least often insightful; and it is as much in the vanguard of understanding what is happening to our world as work in any of the social sciences.