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ANOTHER PLEA FOR THE UNIVERSITY TRADITION

The institutional roots of intellectual compromise

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There is a class of US academic fields that resists even the elaborate typologies proposed by leading analysts of university organization.¹ Management science, communication research, criminology, and public administration: these are quasi-professional social science disciplines that, by some measures, have thrived in the expanding post-World War II American university. With roots in the inter-war period, each of these fields was, to varying degrees, organized as a stand-alone discipline in the decades after the war. By the yardstick of student enrollments and faculty hiring, criminology and its quasi-professional brethren have been on a fifty-year tear. My treatment of one of these fields, communication studies, suggests that the packed lecture halls and swelling faculty ranks have, however, been won at the cost of these disciplines' intellectual credibility.

Communication research: media students *contra* media studies

Twenty-five years ago, Jeremy Tunstall wrote, "The fact that a single individual can teach courses in, say, magazine editing and research techniques in social psychology is a tribute to human adaptability, not to a well-conceived academic discipline."² Tunstall, a British media scholar, made the comment in his contribution to the *Journal of Communication's* 1983 "Ferment in the Field" special issue. His title was unobtrusive: "The trouble with U.S. communication research." That one-sentence indictment has never been answered, mainly because there's no good response.

Tunstall was right: the problem with American communication research goes deep. It is true that the field is flush with resources that other disciplines covet, including an enormous supply of undergraduate would-be celebrities. But the same conditions that fill our lecture halls also guarantee the discipline's low-status obscurity. The students – in all their sea-of-white-baseball-caps, Miss America-contestant splendor – enroll because they want to write press-release ledes or pre-broadcast

rundowns. Most communication programs are in the business of vocational instruction first; academic analysis of the media is an often-resented, parasitic add-on. We all suffer because of the vocational taint, if only because the whole field got erected atop that rickety foundation.

So here we are. But how did we get here? The answer isn't exactly a mystery, but it's not something we talk about much, either. The organized discipline of communication studies is the successor to a motley band of ancestors, of which speech and journalism are only the most prominent. In the 1950s and early 1960s, legitimacy-starved journalism schools, with the help of entrepreneurs such as Wilbur Schramm, claimed what had been a loosely organized, interdisciplinary field of political scientists, sociologists, and psychologists. At around the same time, speech departments in need of social scientific standing embraced the "communication" label too. Film studies, just a few years later, was established on the other side of campus, in English and other humanities departments. As a direct result of these polyglot origins, a single large university may have four or five distinct programs that carry the "media" or "communication" labels, and a similar number of scholarly associations claim to represent the whole field. We have, as John Durham Peters observed back in 1986, a discipline made up of "leftovers from earlier communication research married to dispossessed fields such as academic journalism, drama or speech."³

The field we have inherited is the product of professional school opportunism and nomenclatural poaching. It is held together by a word – "communication" – and by duct tape and twine. Its greatest assets are profession-bound majors and budget-obsessed deans. But those riches – and the skills training that secures them – bring out the sneers from our colleagues in better-established disciplines. The issue here isn't hurt feelings, nor is it academic respect. The issue is that the field's tangled institutional history has had real intellectual consequences. Department faculty are divided along applied and analytic lines or, worse yet, expected to teach on both tracks. Prestigious universities and established disciplines discourage students from pursuing graduate work in the field. On average, weaker faculty and graduate students populate our departments as a result. This wouldn't matter so much except that our programs have long since wrested the academic study of the media from the other social sciences. The result is that media study is centered on a field with bricks but no mortar.

Why don't we talk about these matters more? My own explanation is rooted in the area that I specialize in, the history of the field. Most of our published historiography is Whiggish and bleached, but the more striking feature of these histories is their muted treatments of the field's institutional history. Stephen Brush famously asked, back in 1974, if the history of science should be rated "X".⁴ I think that we shy away from our vocational origins because they are as embarrassing as they are indispensable.⁵ The institutional history of our field, in short, is rated "X." But this is no excuse not to talk about it. The problems are not going away.

One figure in the field who did address the vocational question, though unevenly, was the late James W. Carey. In a pair of lectures two decades apart, Carey issued an eloquent defense of what he, following Harold Innis, called "the university tradition."⁶ He isolates the issue that, in my view, is decisive: the "inherent tension between the

university tradition and the practice of journalism.” He cites his own brief career in advertising to highlight the field’s organized schizophrenia. “I composed hymns to hemorrhoids, symphonies to soporifics. And with that background I am a professor, engaged to profess the truth. How does one do that?” Carey doubts that it is possible. As if to anticipate Tunstall, he says that the European scholars he encounters are “bemused by what they take to be our arrogant and naive belief that we can pull off this miracle.”⁷

There isn’t space to explain why the pair of Carey addresses did not, in the end, make a muscular enough case for the university tradition – at least not in Innis’ sense of the phrase, which located truth-seeking and scholarship at its core. When we train our attention on these things – truth-seeking and scholarship – our field’s defining tension is placed in relief. Communication studies’ problem isn’t mainly the entanglements of funding, nor is it other kinds of externally sponsored research. We should be worried about compromises like this, of course, but we need to turn our gaze inward first. The real problem is the field’s institutional history, its applied and analytic double mission. From an academic standpoint, we aren’t exactly sleeping with the enemy, but we do have incompatible differences with our spouse. This is why we need another plea for the university tradition.

The handoff to the journalism schools

The history of the institutionalization of our field is a story that hasn’t yet been told. There have been a few narratives that touch on the development of an organized “communication” discipline, including a few under-appreciated doctoral dissertations. But most of the historiography covers the field’s intellectual development in Whiggish terms, and leaves out most everything else – perhaps, as I have suggested, because the field has little else, save the nebulous term itself, to hold it together. Ernst Renan, a nineteenth-century French thinker, famously observed that nations need to forget as much as they remember. Something like that is at work in our own field’s institutional amnesia.⁸

I won’t even attempt to tell the story of the field’s establishment here, but will instead linger for a moment on the 1950s and 1960s, when the interdisciplinary social scientific field of communication passed the baton to established programs in professional schools of journalism and speech departments.⁹ There is an irony I will mention up front: journalism and speech both emerged out of English departments in the early twentieth century. Their convergence on the “communication” label reflected, in both cases, the felt need to import social scientific legitimacy in the rapidly changing, post-World War II research university.

The self-identified field of “communication” was born in the late 1930s, though of course a good deal of media scholarship was produced earlier – very little of it, incidentally, gripped by a “hypodermic needle” conception of media effect. Communication had already been the main topical focus of a new interdisciplinary field, public opinion research, which coalesced in the mid-1930s around sampling-based polling methods. The sociologists, political scientists, and psychologists who

populated the public opinion field were not – most of them anyway – attracted to media questions *per se*. But the Rockefeller Foundation's interest in educational broadcasting, along with media firms' willingness to commission research on their audiences, meant that communication topics were prominent.¹⁰ When German tanks rolled into Poland in 1939, a Rockefeller-sponsored "communications seminar" just under way, comprised of leading public opinion researchers, re-cast its mission to address the international emergency.¹¹ As J. Michael Sproule has shown, the "communication" label itself was settled on as a fresh alternative to "propaganda analysis," which was identified with a blanket condemnation of propaganda at the moment when America needed to distinguish between the good and bad sort.¹²

The Rockefeller Foundation soon established a network of communication research initiatives that, after Pear Harbor, were incorporated into the federal government's sprawling propaganda bureaucracy, which mobilized hundreds of social scientists across dozens of civilian and military agencies.¹³ Public opinion researchers formed the nucleus of a wartime propaganda and morale research effort that drew dozens of other prominent scholars into its orbit. Communication topics and survey methods emerged from the war at the center of quantitative social science, especially within sociology, but in important strands of political science and psychology too. There was palpable excitement about wartime methodological innovations, as well as substantive findings, among the networks of newly connected scholars who returned to campus in 1945. Crucially, those methods and findings were identified with survey methods and what was increasingly referred to as "communication research."

This was true even though there were few, if any, dedicated "communication researchers." Instead, communication was an important topic of interdisciplinary study at Paul Lazarsfeld's Bureau of Applied Social Research, Michigan's Survey Research Center, and many other similar institutes that surfaced around the country. Indeed, to a remarkable extent "communication research" was co-extensive with – the same thing as – elite social science writ large. The point could easily be exaggerated, but a significant number of the scholars who stood at the center of what soon became known as the "behavioral sciences" were identified with, and worked on, communication topics. Recall that the "behavioral sciences" label was the self-anointed name for the social sciences' quantitative vanguard. Communication research was arguably the main focus of the well heeled, though short-lived, Ford Foundation initiative that gave quantitative social science its post-war name, the Behavioral Sciences Program (1951–57), directed by the Lazarsfeld collaborator Bernard Berelson.¹⁴

The "behavioral sciences" movement, such as it was, emerged in tandem with the Cold War national security state. With the fall of Czechoslovakia in 1948, the "loss" of China the next year, and the eruption of Korean hostilities soon after, the federal government – through the State Department, the Pentagon, and the recently chartered Central Intelligence Agency, with the help of the major foundations – invested heavily in psychological warfare research. From 1948 until the early 1950s, the government in effect remobilized the World War II propaganda and morale network. Another wave of sometimes clandestine federal sponsorship swept through the "behavioral sciences" in the mid-1950s onward, as part of the new, post-colonial

Cold War campaign for third world hearts and minds. Daniel Lerner's 1958 *The Passing of Traditional Society* was only one among many covertly funded Cold War studies that were repackaged as international communication research and modernization theory. One strand of critical historiography, identified especially with Todd Gitlin, has it that 1950s communication research was in the business of delivering "limited effects" findings to receptive media firm sponsors. This isn't entirely wrong, but the more important underwriter by far was the federal government. Needless to say, the 1950s were a period in our field's history when external entanglements really were worse than troubling.¹⁵

Changes in the patronage system for social science in the early to mid-1960s, among other factors, broke up this interdisciplinary nexus of Cold War communication research. As Hunter Crowther-Heyck has shown, the response to Sputnik in 1958 set in motion a new funding regime that, for a few years, overlapped with the mix of foundation, State Department, and military dollars that had been dominant. Starting in the late 1950s, a new, far more prominent role was given to civilian federal agencies, including the National Science Foundation and, notably for psychologically inflected communication research, the National Institutes of Mental Health. In practice, these agencies emphasized disciplines and peer review; the old system had relied more on the informal advice of highly connected "brokers" like Lazarsfeld and Berelson.¹⁶ There's much more to say about this, but for our purposes the crucial point is that interdisciplinary communication research gradually withered. The field, as a result, was delivered into the eager hands of Wilbur Schramm.

Schramm, a consummate academic entrepreneur originally trained in English, had conceived the idea of a journalism-based communication discipline while serving in the Office of War Information.¹⁷ He left Washington to return to the University of Iowa back in 1943, after securing the deanship of its journalism school. Existing journalism programs already housed a narrow scholarly tradition, focused on the history of journalism, First Amendment analysis, and readership studies. Schramm's vision was far more ambitious, and he succeeded in establishing a "Communication" PhD program at Iowa, organized around quantitative social science. He left for the University of Illinois in 1948 at the invitation of the University's president, a mentor who installed Schramm at the helm of a new and expansive School of Communication. Schramm quickly established Illinois's PhD-granting Institute for Communication Research, directly modeled on Lazarsfeld's Bureau. And he set out, with energy and enthusiasm, to erect the scaffolding that any new field needs, including conferences, readers, a usable past, and a network of tenure-track scholars. Though a zealous Cold Warrior showered with contracts from the State Department, military, and CIA, Schramm had all the while been building up an institutional home for an interdisciplinary field that, by the mid-1960s, had lost its other support. He had successfully relocated the field to journalism schools.

Schramm was joined in his takeover effort by the so-called "Bleyer children," the name given to the students of the late journalism scholar Willard Bleyer, who in the inter-war years had pushed to include social science in the journalism curriculum at the University of Wisconsin. In the 1950s, Bleyer children like Ralph Casey, Ralph

Nafziger, Fred Siebert, and Chilton Bush established doctoral programs at Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan State, and Stanford, respectively. In the 1960s and after, an addendum – “and Mass Communication” – was affixed to the names of most journalism schools, in recognition of their scholarly makeovers. Schramm and the Bleyer children had, in short, successfully colonized journalism education in the name of “communication research.” They succeeded in part because journalism schools were, to some extent at least, willing to be colonized; they faced their own legitimacy problems in the post-war American university. Still, the wholesale implanting of a scholarly field into a pre-existing model of professional education produced a great deal of push back among the so-called “green eyeshades.”

The field’s other ancestor, speech programs housed in the humanities, adopted the “communication” moniker for remarkably similar reasons. Speech, before World War II, already had one foot in social science, with its speech disorders subfield. Rapid advances during and after the war by psychological social psychologists working on group dynamics and small-group interaction, however, raised the fear that the field’s claim to interpersonal communication might be supplanted. The social psychological literature was joined to a small native tradition of social science-oriented speech inquiry beginning in the late 1940s. The idea was that public speaking courses and the great speeches curriculum weren’t enough to secure the discipline’s place in the post-war university. “Communication” was a natural fit, in part because speech programs benefitted from another link, to broadcasting education. Starting in the 1920s, some speech departments established coursework in radio announcing as an extension of drama. Radio was joined in the 1950s to TV coursework, and then film instruction in the 1960s. The result was the establishment of RTF (short for Radio–Television–Film) tracks in many speech programs in the post-war years. The so-called “orality alliance” or “Midwestern model” of speech instruction thus comprised four distinct fields: speech disorders, speech communication, RTF or broadcasting, and theater. At many universities, moreover, the departments’ speech component clung to the field’s roots in classical rhetoric; the result was “two cultures,” the humanistic and social scientific, engaged in prolonged “joint custody” of the field. In the 1960s, the Babel-like field began to embrace the same “communication” label that journalism schools were also claiming.¹⁸ So complete was the substitution of “communication” for “speech” that speech-trained scholars were, by the early 1990s, complaining about a discipline left “speechless.”¹⁹

All of this accounts for the head-scratching fact that multiple programs wear the “communication” label at big Midwestern universities. There are, of course, nomenclatural clues to ancestry: programs with “mass communication” in their titles come from journalism, while “communication studies” or “communication arts” signal a speech provenance. Another way to read this madcap story is through the history of the many academic associations that claim to represent the entire field. The American Association of Teachers of Journalism – later renamed the Association for Education in Journalism – was founded in 1912, long before Wilbur Schramm had ever heard of communication research; by 1984 it was the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication. The Speech Association of America

was founded in 1914; by 1968 the organization's name had changed to the Speech Communication Association, and in 1997 "speech" was dropped altogether, so that the SCA became the National Communication Association. Back in 1949, social scientific insurrectionists had broken off from what was then called the Speech Association of America to form the National Society for the Study of Communication (NSSC). The NSSC was renamed, in 1969, the International Communication Association.²⁰ Confused yet? Even the film scholars, who have long gone their separate humanistic ways, have recently asserted jurisdiction over the study of mass communication. The Society for Cinema Studies (SCS), which began life as the Society of Cinematologists in 1959, became in 2004 the Society for Cinema *and Media Studies*: "The goals of SCMS," proclaims the organization's website, "are to promote all areas of media studies within universities and two- and four-year colleges."²¹ It is only appropriate that that the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) doesn't pretend to represent a single field. I won't even touch the Cultural Studies Association.

Public speaking, the finer points of ad placement, theories of media in society – this doesn't make any sense. Anyone who has ever been to a National Communication Association meeting knows exactly what I am talking about. It's true that the ideal pattern – in which ideas come first, followed by a discipline organized around those ideas – is a rare thing indeed in the history of academic life. But what other discipline can publish two major books on its history in the same year, with only five overlapping names among the hundreds cited by the pair of texts?²² Sense is simply not to be had here. And what's worse than incoherence is others noticing it.

The institutional sources of intellectual poverty

The single best treatment of these issues remains John Durham Peters' 1986 essay, "The institutional sources of intellectual poverty in communication research." Writing over twenty years ago, Peters lamented the "victory of institution over intellect in the formation of the field." Communication studies, he wrote, is an academic Taiwan, claiming to possess all of China while isolated on a small island.²³ He recently revisited that classic article, and admits that his views since have "softened." Yes, communication research remains on the margins but, he says, "[h]egemony is epistemologically hazardous." Communication studies has the "comparative advantage of marginality," so perhaps, he concludes, being an island like Taiwan "isn't really so bad."²⁴

I am less optimistic, and side with the Peters of 1986. We all reside in the professional school ghetto; that is, we all suffer from the taint of our split vocational personality, even if our department is exclusively academic. What we have, Robert Craig has observed, is "scarcely more than a single, culturally very potent symbol, 'communication,' a word still trendy enough to attract students, legitimate enough to keep skeptical colleagues at bay for a while, and ambiguous enough to serve as a lowest common denominator for our otherwise largely unrelated scholarly and professional pursuits."²⁵

To stretch Peters' island metaphor too far, we suffer from a kind of Galapagos problem. The prestige gap opened up by our murky origins is wide enough that very

little of our scholarship is much read outside the field. I think of it as the tyranny of the undergraduate professional major: resource-rich, but legitimacy-poor, we scholars of communication toil away in well heeled obscurity. I have joked before that “communication” as the tragic, fall-back field of disgraced English professors is a well established trope in the campus novel. Another index of disrespect is that general interest commentary on media and journalism in magazines like *The Atlantic* or *The New York Review of Books* is almost never penned by communication scholars. Our own scattershot institutional history, mixed up as it is with the gravitational pull of better-established disciplines, means that we have a very weakly defined reputational system and no established hierarchy of journals. We are plagued, in short, by a kind of reverse Matthew Effect, in which our low status tends to attract weaker faculty and graduate students, who proceed to confirm our colleagues’ worst impressions.

What does it mean, then, to plead for the university tradition? I think we could do worse than follow James Carey’s advice: “The imperative task,” he said, “is to widen the bonds of sympathy within the university and renew emphasis on the education of our students not as consumers but as co-participants in a community of learning.”²⁶ I just don’t see how we can do this while trying to pull off what Carey called “this miracle.” If we succeed at all, it is a tribute to human adaptability, not to a well conceived academic discipline.

The same animating tension holds, perhaps less sharply, for the other quasi-professional social sciences, like management studies, public administration, and criminology. It is not just that these fields, like communication, are both well off *and* status-poor. The Faustian paradox is that the source of their wealth – professional training – is the cause of their prestige problems. This, at least, is the lesson of the communication studies case, which awaits further, comparative treatment with its quasi-professional peers.

Notes

- 1 See Richard Whitley, *The Intellectual and Social Organization of the Sciences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984); Tony Becher, *Academic Tribes and Territories: Intellectual Enquiry and the Cultures of Disciplines* (Milton Keynes, UK: Open University Press, 1989).
- 2 Jeremy Tunstall, “The trouble with U.S. communication research,” *Journal of Communication* 33(3), 1983, 92–95, at 93.
- 3 John Durham Peters, “Institutional sources of intellectual poverty in communication research,” *Communication Research* 13(4), 1986, 527–59, at 543.
- 4 Stephen Brush, “Should the history of science be rated X?,” *Science* 183, 1974, 1164–72.
- 5 See Jefferson Pooley, “The new history of mass communication research,” in David Park and Jefferson Pooley, eds, *The History of Media and Communication Research: Contested Memories* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 43–69, at 59–60.
- 6 James W. Carey, “A plea for the university tradition,” *Journalism Quarterly* 55, 1978, 846–55; James W. Carey, *The Responsibility of Intellectuals in the Age of Electrical Machines*, Carroll C. Arnold Distinguished Lecture (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2000); Harold A. Innis, “A plea for the university tradition,” *Dalhousie Review* 24, 1944, 298–305.
- 7 Carey, “A plea for the university tradition,” *op. cit.*, 846–47.
- 8 Ernst Renan, “What is a nation?,” in Homi K. Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990), 7–19.

- 9 Elihu Katz and I tell a version of this story in "Further notes on why American sociology abandoned mass communication research," *Journal of Communication* 58, 2008, 767–86.
- 10 On the Rockefeller Foundation's 1930s communication research grant-making, see William Buxton, "The political economy of communications research," in Robert E. Babe, ed., *Information and Communication in Economics* (Boston: Kluwer Academic, 1994), 147–75.
- 11 On the importance of the communications seminar, see Brett Gary, "Communication research, the Rockefeller Foundation, and mobilization for the war on words," *Journal of Communication* 46(3), 1996, 124–47.
- 12 J. Michael Sproule, "Propaganda studies in American social science: the rise and fall of the critical paradigm," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 73, 1987, 60–78.
- 13 On the Rockefeller initiatives, see Gary, "Communication research, the Rockefeller Foundation, and mobilization for the war on words," *op. cit.*
- 14 There is still no adequate history of the "behavioral sciences" term, but for a brief overview see Jefferson Pooley and Mark Solovey, "Marginal to the Revolution: the curious relationship between economics and the behavioral sciences movement in mid-twentieth-century America," *History of Political Economy* 42(S), 2010, 199–233.
- 15 Daniel Lerner, *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1958). On Lerner, see Rohan Samarajiva, "The murky beginnings of the communication and development field: Voice of America and the passing of traditional society," in Neville Jayaweera *et al.*, eds, *Rethinking Development Communication* (Singapore: Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre, 1987), 3–19. For an overview of historians' treatment of post-war communication research, see Pooley, "The new history of mass communication research," *op. cit.*
- 16 Hunter Crowther-Heyck, "Patrons of the revolution: ideals and institutions in postwar behavioral science," *Isis* 97, 2006, 420–46.
- 17 Jacqueline Marie Cartier, "Wilbur Schramm and the beginnings of American communication theory: a history of ideas," PhD thesis, University of Iowa, 1988, 174.
- 18 See Jesse G. Delia, "Communication Research: A History," in Charles R. Berger and Steven H. Chaffee, eds, *Handbook of Communication Science* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1987), 76–84; J. Michael Sproule, "'Communication': from concept to field to discipline," in David Park and Jefferson Pooley, eds, *The History of Media and Communication Research: Contested Memories* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 169–71.
- 19 See, for example, Frank J. Macke, "Communication left speechless: a critical examination of the evolution of speech communication as an academic discipline," *Communication Education* 40, 1991, 125–43.
- 20 The best guide to the fields' associations and their histories is Sproule, "'Communication': From Concept to Field to Discipline," *op. cit.*, though his own interpretation is one of increasing disciplinary coherence.
- 21 Society for Cinema and Media Studies, www.cmstudies.org
- 22 Robert T. Craig, "Review of *A History of Communication Study: A Biographical Approach* by Everett M. Rogers, and *The History of Speech Communication: The Emergence of a Discipline 1914–1945* by Herbert Cohen," *Communication Theory* 5, 1995, 178–84.
- 23 Peters, "Institutional sources of intellectual poverty in communication research," *op. cit.*, 538, 543.
- 24 John Durham Peters, "Institutional opportunities for intellectual history in communication studies," in David W. Park and Jefferson Pooley, eds, *The History of Media and Communication Research: Contested Memories* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 143–62, at 157–58.
- 25 Craig, "Review of *A History of Communication Study*," *op. cit.*, 178.
- 26 Carey, *The Responsibility of Intellectuals in the Age of Electrical Machines*, *op. cit.*, 13.