

The field, fermented: Prestige and the vocational bind in communication research

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Abstract

This commentary argues that communication research's main problem is reputational. The field's marginal status—a product of its peculiar institutional history, with roots in vocational training—means that our work is not read by scholars from other disciplines. My claim is that the vocational model exacts a steep reputational price. The gap in prestige between the mainline disciplines and communication means that our scholarship is simply not read. Exiled to the professional-school margins of the university, communication scholars toil away in well-heeled obscurity. In exchange for relinquishing jurisdiction over media and communication, the commentary concludes, we might join a dynamic crossroads—where the vocational underwriting will not loom as large.

Keywords

Communication research, disciplinarity, interdisciplinarity, reputation, vocational training

The problem with communication research is not its unbearable lightness. The quality gap between media and communication scholarship and the mainline social sciences—once a plain and embarrassing fact—has largely closed. The work that goes under the 'communication' label, taken as a whole, is more heterogeneous and spread about than a tightly disciplined field like economics. But it is not worse. The problem with communication research is, instead, its *reputation*. The field's marginal status—a product of its peculiar institutional history—means that our work is not read by scholars from other disciplines. The issue is not so much quality as it is prestige.

The root cause of communication research's reputation problem is vocational training. Especially, in the U.S. and countries that adopted its organizational

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model, the whole enterprise is underwritten by skills-hungry undergraduates desperate to break into industry. The would-be advertisers and social-media managers that fill our lecture halls also pay the bills. This Faustian pact, in the U.S. case, was made back in the late 1940s by Wilbur Schramm, who led the march through the journalism schools (Chaffee and Rogers, 1997). It is our constitutive sin.

There are two main reasons to lament the vocational-support model. The first is that departments are split between skills-oriented faculty and research-minded scholars. A mere classroom wall, in other words, separates the lesson on how to write a press-release lead from a lecture on the damage to democracy wrought by public relations. The result is mission incoherence and intra-departmental cold war, or worse yet—as faculty get tapped to teach skills *and* scholarship—a kind of schizophrenia. As Jeremy Tunstall (1983) observed over 30 years ago, ‘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’ (p. 93).

The second, bigger problem is that the vocational model exacts a steep reputational price. This is the deal-breaker. The gap in prestige between the mainline disciplines and communication means that our scholarship is simply not read. Ideas flow in, but—like the Hotel California—they can never leave. Exiled to the professional-school margins of the university, communication scholars toil away in well-heeled obscurity.

John Durham Peters (1986: 543), in his still-unsurpassed diagnosis of the discipline’s institutional handicaps, memorably compared (U.S.) communication research to Taiwan: a small island claiming a vast territory. My own view is that the discipline is more like the Galapagos Islands—sealed off from the mainland.

Communication research and the geography of relative prestige

In the awkward language of the sociology of academic life (Whitley, 1984: 168–176), the communication discipline can be classified as a ‘fragmented adhoc-racy’, characterized by intellectual and institutional heterogeneity. One index of that fragmentation, in the U.S. case at least, is that four distinctive ‘cultures’ of media and communication study cohabit in mutual ignorance, even on the same university campus (Pooley, 2016). A longstanding debate within communication research asks whether this diversity is damaging, or else something more like ‘sweet lemons’ (Peters, 2011). That debate, however, sidesteps a crucial point: the field’s status relative to adjacent fields. Communication research’s madcap spread is, in part, a *consequence* of this prestige gap, and also doubles back as a *contributor* to the field’s lowly reputation. But the gap itself, in my view, has its main source in the field’s vocational double-mission.

One way of getting at this is to locate communication research along a series of disciplinary contrasts, as codified by Tony Becher and Paul Trowler (2001).

Convergent disciplines are tightly knit and cohesive, while *divergent* disciplines are loosely structured and disjointed.

Another, related point of contrast concerns disciplinary communication: disciplines with an *urban* communication style are characterized by tightly bounded sub-disciplines and research areas with rapid and heavily used information networks; *rural* communication patterns are slower-paced, with fewer researchers working on a given topic, and poorly defined boundaries between specialisms and the field as a whole.

There are, too, the more familiar axes of distinction: *hard* disciplines like physics can be distinguished, at least in the academic imaginary, from *soft* disciplines like literature. Likewise, *pure* disciplines like economics are frequently defined against *applied* fields like criminology. A final hinge of difference concerns the character of a discipline's origins. *Externally-generated* disciplines like nursing owe their existence to government and/or market demands, while *internally-generated* disciplines emerged—in theory at least—from intellectual problematics.

To circle back to communication research, the field is on the 'wrong' side of each contrast, at least in reputational terms: divergent, rural, soft, applied, and externally generated. It's true that these are artificial pole-ends that never apply in fact, and that paired opposites like hard/soft and pure/applied exist to some large extent only in the minds of academics. Nevertheless, beliefs have practical (and perhaps self-fulfilling) consequences. Communication research, especially as institutionalized in the U.S., sits on the low-prestige margins of the university. Hard data are difficult to find—ironically because communication research is typically excluded from reputation studies, and was only recently recognized as a doctoral field by the U.S. National Research Council (Ostriker and Kuh, 2003: 20–24). In the only study I could locate that includes communication (Downey et al., 2008: 197–199), the U.S. academic deans surveyed judged communication to have the lowest prestige among the 25 disciplines named.

In accounting for this lowly status, the applied dimension is decisive, since it generates what we might call the *vocational bind*. Bankrolled by the throngs of undergraduates who fill our lecture halls, we enjoy relative plenitude in faculty-size and funding terms. But those enrollments are like golden shackles: the reputational hit from all that advertising and journalism instruction means that our colleagues across campus have license to look the other way.

Communication research, as a consequence, is the quintessential 'insecure science', to borrow Ian Hacking's (1996: 352) phrase. These dynamics do not merely generate repeated bouts of self-doubt and disciplinary soul-searching—though they surely have this effect (e.g., Corner, 2013). This relative prestige gap also has intellectual effects. The field, to borrow a commercial metaphor from information science (Cronin and Meho, 2008; Yan et al., 2013), almost certainly maintains a *knowledge deficit* in the balance of academic trade. That is, communication research has tended to import more than it exports. Though these information-science studies have not included communication research in their large-scale citation analyses of sprawling databases like Web of Science, there is good

reason to believe that U.S. communication research, at least, would qualify as a net importer with a sizable knowledge deficit.¹ A number of older, less-comprehensive citation studies have indeed found a significant imbalance between imported and exported references in communication research (Berger, 1991; Reeves and Borgman, 1983; Rice et al., 1988; So, 1988).

So even if communication research is unbearably light—which I doubt—there is no one paying attention to take notice.

Conclusion

In a recent book, I explore this geography of relative prestige as it made (and unmade) the reputation of the late U.S. communication scholar James W. Carey (Pooley, 2016). My puzzle is the discrepancy between Carey's blinding in-field renown and total obscurity without. Carey, I argue, was a border-dwelling importer, a skilled exegete and creative synthesizer who translated ideas from surrounding, higher status fields. His eloquent, field-specific critique of scientism, for example, was a re-narration of the arguments of high-profile dissenters like Richard Rorty and Clifford Geertz. It was Carey's position on the borders of the field that, more than anything, helps to explain his lopsided reputation. On the hand, he benefitted from his location, accruing intellectual capital from the high-prestige fields of origin. On the other hand, his one-way brokerage—his identity as a communication scholar addressing the field—meant that he suffered the same fate as his colleagues: his ideas failed to win the upstream struggle back to the source.

Is Carey's experience a metonym for the field? Are we trapped in the Hotel California? I am not sure, but I do think that a way to bypass, if not break, the vocational bind is to direct our scholarship outward. Thanks in large part to the digital upheaval in the media that we study, the disciplinary map is already getting redrawn. This is an opportune moment.

Sociologists are returning, in real numbers, to communication-related questions. Political scientists and anthropologists, likewise, are coming to terms with the inescapable centrality of media. Under the digital humanities banner, literary scholars are accelerating their engagement with 'low' texts. Two fields, in particular, are fast-converging on communication-related topics: science and technology studies (STS) and library and information science (LIS). Both fields have generated rich conceptual vocabularies around information infrastructures and the technology/society interplay—and both STS (Boczkowski and Lievrouw, 2008) and LIS (Aharony, 2012) have significant and growing overlap with communication scholarship.

There are reasons, perhaps, to worry over these developments. Won't the reputation dynamics *continue* to punish media and communication scholars with invisibility? Will all those returning sociologists just squat on our disciplinary turf, claiming the grants and research support that are rightfully ours? Will we be banished from our own house?

I understand the concern, but the open-borders scenario is intellectually exciting—and may help release communication scholars from those golden shackles. If disciplinary identity recedes as a proxy for quality, we may be the main beneficiaries. Imagine the study of media and communication as one big trading zone; field-of-origin or the name of one's department just do not matter as much. With our ideas circulating in a cross-citing interdisciplinary mesh, the vocational taint may fade as a reputation signal. The Tunstall problem will not disappear; the same adaptable individual will *still* teach magazine editing (or, more likely, web design) and research methods. But the field's original sin—its vocational underwriting—will not loom as large in the way our scholarship is received.

In exchange for relinquishing jurisdiction, we might join a dynamic crossroads (to borrow Wilbur Schramm's (1963: 2) old metaphor). We will still bring our particular sensitivities and traditions to bear, especially to the extent—as Sonia Livingstone (2015: 2) recently observed—that other disciplines 'appear content to black-box "media."' Our once-awkward bifurcation between interpersonal and mass communication approaches, moreover, gives us unique purchase in a digital landscape that blurs the very distinction. The big upside of the emerging crossroads is that our traditions and insights may finally be heard.

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Note

1. One of the telling challenges to including communication in a study of this kind is that many communication journals are not indexed in Web of Science. The database's 'Communication' category, moreover, maps poorly onto the field's self-understood boundaries. See Leydesdorff and Probst (2009: 1710) and Funkhouser (1996).

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