

The Four Cultures: Media Studies at the Crossroads

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Abstract

The commentary traces four distinct but overlapping *cultures* in US media studies: (1) speech and rhetoric, (2) a media research field centered on the mass communication trades, (3) one detached from those trades, and (4) film studies. I point to each culture's institutional history, typical academic unit, and unique self-understanding. The main claim is that the four-part division has always had an arbitrary character, but is especially incoherent and damaging in an era of media convergence and cross-disciplinary interest in the field's core questions. The commentary argues that the four-culture divide renders our scholarship invisible not just to outsiders from other disciplines but even to our would-be compatriots in the other three cultures.

Keywords

disciplinarity, communication research, media studies, film studies, disciplinary history

In 1959, C.P. Snow famously decried the gap between the “two cultures”—the scientific and the humanist. Snow, a novelist and scientist, was disturbed by scientific illiteracy among the well-educated: “So the great edifice of modern physics goes up, and the majority of the cleverest people in the western world have about as much insight into it as their neolithic ancestors would have had” (Snow, 1959, p. 15). He conceded that the incomprehension cuts both ways, that many scientists seem “not to read at all.” Neither culture “knows the virtues of the other,” he wrote. “Often it seems they deliberately do not want to know” (p. 16).

Here's the troubling thing: we have *four* cultures in media studies.¹ The academic fields that research media and communication, at least in the United States, are more-or-less segregated. There are four big camps: (1) speech and rhetoric, (2) a media research field centered on the mass communication trades, (3) one detached from those trades, and (4) film studies. Each is hermetically sealed from the other three, with the partial exception of the two media research cultures. Snow, at least, could point to genuine difference in his two-culture split. The media and communication cultures have no such excuse since all four camps produce humanities scholarship, and three of the four contain large contingents of self-identified social scientists. For us there's nothing like the divide between Shakespeare and the second law of thermodynamics. Indeed, the stuff that the four media fields study is—and has been for some time now—*indistinguishable*. Elihu Katz's old quip, “God gave film to the humanities and

television to the social sciences,” no longer makes sense. Film scholars study television, communication researchers analyze film, and these mediums, anyway, are delivered in one big stream. God gave digital media to the academy, but forgot about dominion.

One index of this madcap, siloed overlap are the discipline's professional associations. If you're a US sociologist, you present at the American Sociological Association (ASA) annual meeting; political scientists attend the American Political Science Association (APSA) every year. Media scholars choose among *four* big meetings—the National Communication Association (NCA), the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC), the International Communication Association (ICA), and the Society for Cinema & Media Studies (SCMS). Imagine a first-year graduate student trying to digest this alphabet stew. Perhaps the rest of us have grown numb to the strangeness, but it *is* strange.

There is a measure of method to the organizational madness, at least when mapped against the four cultures. The NCA, born in 1914 as the National Council of Teachers of English, is where the speech and rhetoric scholars gather

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(Gehrke & Keith, 2014, pp. 3–6). Academics who teach and study journalism, advertising, and public relations assemble each year at the AEJMC, which was founded 2 years earlier (also out of English) as the Association for Education in Journalism (Emery & McKerns, 1987). And then there is the ICA, the conference for media scholars who tend not to teach magazine editing, crisis PR, or other skills-oriented classes. The organization was formed by social scientists from within NCA (then the Speech Association of America) in 1950 as the National Society for the Study of Communications, and formally split from NCA in 1967 as the ICA (Weaver, 1977). Film scholars have their own meeting place: the Society for Cinema & Media Studies, which began life in 1959 as the Society of Cinematologists (Polan, 2007, p. 4).

Despite these different constituencies, all four organizations claim to represent the whole field. The NCA, the association claims, “advances Communication as the discipline that studies all forms, modes, media and consequences of communication through humanistic, social scientific and aesthetic inquiry” (NCA, n.d.). That sounds a lot like AEJMC’s aim to “cultivate the widest possible range of communication research,” (AEJMC, n.d.) which itself resembles ICA’s commitment to represent scholars “interested in the study, teaching, and application of all aspects of human and mediated communication” (ICA, n.d.). You might expect the film studies group to confine itself to cinema, but SCMS—which added “& Media” to its name in 2004—promotes “a broad understanding of film, television, and related media through research and teaching grounded in the contemporary humanities tradition” (SCMS, n.d.).

So each group claims the others’ turf. Something similar takes place at the campus level, in fractal form. Departments, programs, and schools representing one or another of the four cultures co-exist warily, sometimes in the same building. Re-organization plans, program consolidations and breakups, and periodic renaming mean that it’s not always easy to tell which unit represents which culture—but there are nomenclatural clues. Department titles that include “Arts” or “Communication Studies” almost certainly trace their ancestry to speech and rhetoric. If you see “Mass Communication,” you’re probably looking at a program with journalism roots. Indigenous schools or programs—those without many ties to skills-training—often contain “Communication” as a standalone noun (as in the Annenberg Schools, East and West). True, it’s easiest to identify the film programs, but all four cultures have embraced the “media studies” moniker—as if conspiring to maximize outsider bafflement. Like the professional associations, there’s plenty of topical and thematic overlap at the campus level, but only within duplicative silos. Actual intellectual collaboration or co-sponsorship or even casual friendship is rare.

Consider a big Midwestern state university, Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where Wilbur Schramm established one of the first doctoral programs in the early postwar years.

There’s the speech-derived Department of Communication, housed in the liberal arts college. There’s also a sprawling, standalone College of Media—the descendant of Schramm’s original empire—which tents over programs and departments representing the three other cultures: departments of advertising and journalism, the PhD-granting Institute of Communications Research, and a department of “Media and Cinema Studies.” Or take the private New York University (NYU) case: There you may choose among a journalism program within the arts and sciences college, Cinema Studies degrees offered by the Tisch School for the Arts, or “Media, Culture and Communication” programs within NYU’s education school. Or, say, a Southern institution like Louisiana State University. There you will find a Film and Media Arts program, a mass communication school with trades-oriented degrees and a scholarly PhD, and—in a now-familiar pattern—a speech-oriented department of “Communication Studies” (with its own PhD).

The brick-and-mortar divide matters, if only because the same boundaries organize teaching and scholarship too. The cordoned-off pseudo-unity gets reproduced, in other words, in textbooks and intro classes and literature reviews. The leading US textbook in each culture barely references prominent figures in the others. And yet they each claim the whole field. In the speech/rhetoric *Communication Mosaics: An Introduction to the Field of Communication* (Wood, 2013), the author traces the field back to the fifth-century BC. The discipline, she writes, “came into existence to answer a pressing need of the people of Syracuse” (p. 23). Journalism is mentioned just twice in the entire text, once in a long list of “other curricular emphases” beyond the eight (speech-oriented) “widely accepted curricular offerings” (p. 37). The journalism-centric *Media/Impact: An Introduction to Mass Media* (Biagi, 2014), by contrast, only mentions speech in the context of media law and the First Amendment. Rhetoric (as a tradition) goes unmentioned, and public speaking only appears in a list of typical PR tasks (p. 238).

In the third culture’s leading textbook, *Media Today: An Introduction to Mass Communication* (Turow, 2013), there’s no reference to the Greeks, and press-law gets only passing mention. Unlike the other two books, *Media Today* devotes a full chapter to media research—which the author traces to mid-century Columbia sociologists (Chapter 2). The leading humanities-oriented media textbook (outside of film-exclusive books), *Television: Critical Methods and Applications* (Butler, 2012), traces the film studies spin-off “television studies” as a label “firmly established between 1998 and 2004” (p. xiii). As if embarrassed by that late arrival, the author acknowledges that there is “also a longstanding research tradition that operates under the umbrella term of *mass communication research*.” While “television studies” employs “critical” methods, he writes, “mass-comm research favors scientific research methods” (p. 360). The author refers readers interested in the “mass comm approach” to an appended summary. Much of the book, he admits, will

“look familiar” to “readers who have encountered film-studies textbooks” (p. xiii).

An undergraduate curious about media would be justifiably perplexed by the four distinct visions for the field she might encounter—all on the same campus. There isn’t a single named scholar that appears across the four texts. There’s an argument to be made, powerful though unconvincing, that our balkanized intellectual landscape is not such a bad thing. The claim, advanced by John Durham Peters (2011) and others, is that our diffuse polygopoly leaves lots of interstitial space for creative and brave work. Disciplines with well-defined centers, like economics, are suffocating by comparison, according to this argument. And it’s true that heterodox economists really are exiled to the margins. Within our media research world, reputation and visibility aren’t so tightly hitched to a few top departments or landing a piece in a flagship journal. We welcome—accidentally perhaps, but nevertheless welcome—an admirable range of scholarship. If our four-culture arrangement is a bit disorderly and diffuse, then these are, in Peters’ (2011) phrase, “sweet lemons.” The alternative is intellectual orthodoxy.

Fair enough, although there’s no risk that we’ll go the way of economics. For better or worse, the study of media will remain anarchic and hard to police. The right question is, “What kind of lawlessness do we want?” Our current setup is four fenced-off lemon groves that each claim *appellation d’origine contrôlée*. We should not let the century-old accidents of legitimacy-seeking journalists and speech teachers organize our knowledge. Nor should the career tracks selected by undergraduates dictate with whom we share scholarship. The same point holds for God’s decision that film is art.

There’s a case to be made that something was lost—something crucial—when journalism schools and speech departments wrested the study of communication, in the 1950s and 1960s, from what had been an interdisciplinary cluster of social scientists and, in fewer numbers, humanists (Pooley & Katz, 2008). The two cultures formed by re-branded speech and journalism programs had robust enrollments and plenty of faculty jobs, but their place on the reputational margins of the postwar university has meant that their scholarship—our scholarship—has been scarcely read and otherwise ignored by the mainline disciplines. The third culture, emerging a bit later, has suffered the same fate. As a result, we toil away in well-heeled obscurity, sustained by the career aspirations of 18-year-olds who resent the “theory” courses we require. Ours are gold-plated shackles.

The main thing going for the prevailing four-culture arrangement is faculty jobs (although even those are drying up). This is a big deal and shouldn’t be dismissed flippantly. As Stephen Turner (1994) has observed, intellectual projects, like armies, march on their stomachs (p. 54). All those sociologists and psychologists took up posts in mass communication schools because the jobs were there. It’s a legitimate question: Isn’t the relative incoherency of our four-culture

Babelism a small price to pay for all the tenure-track lines that we accrue in exchange? At my own institution, we have 12 full-time faculty, and sociology has just 3.

That’s a compelling point, and I don’t have a good answer. Still, as intellectuals committed to making sense of our thoroughly mediatized cultures, we should be more than a little embarrassed that the departments and schools that employ us are logically indefensible or at least deeply flawed. It wouldn’t matter so much if the consequences did not impinge on scholarship. But the depressing fact is that our four-culture marginality means that our work is invisible not just to outsiders from higher status disciplines but even to our would-be compatriots in the other three cultures.

The good news—good if also unsettling—is that the four cultures’ de facto monopoly on media research has been broken. Sociologists, political scientists, and psychologists, and also humanists of every stripe, even engineers—they’re all taking up media questions. Over the last 60 years, as communication and film programs were populated, the field had of course already absorbed plenty of “outsiders.” The key word is “absorbed”; most were hired into and housed within our programs and departments. What’s different now is that media scholarship has become legitimate, even sexy, within the traditional disciplines. The lava-like overspread of digital media has demanded, at the very least, a reaction from every discipline concerned with social life. The sheer pace of change has rattled sociology (to take a prominent and exciting example) out of its embarrassing indifference to media. This is all for the good. The pretense of self-contained disciplinarity was always a bit silly, not least because of the four cultures’ competing jurisdictional claims. Now it’s flat-out absurd.

Back in the early 1960s, Wilbur Schramm (1963)—the resolute discipline builder—described communication research as a “crossroad where many have passed but few have tarried” (p. 2). By then, it seemed like something solid would be built in its place. Schramm’s effort to build a durable alternative from within journalism schools was already well underway. Across campus, speech programs were renaming themselves with the “communication” moniker. The University of Pennsylvania’s Annenberg School had just been founded, inaugurating the third culture. In these same years, film studies scholars (“cinematologists”) started meeting and quickly invented a tradition. They were, all four of them, successful academic ventures. We’d be better off, though, without them—without their sealed off marginality. What we need is a real crossroad again, one where many pass and many tarry.

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Note

1. Another metaphor, suggested by a reviewer, would be Germany prior to 1871: one amorphous culture divided among a number of states. The German analogy gets at the institutional grounding for much of the media research split, although the idea of distinctive (if overlapping) *cultures* suggests the way that the intellectual landscape is also balkanized.

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