

Communication Theory and the Disciplines

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Communication theory, like the communication discipline itself, has a long history but a short past. “Communication” as an organized, self-conscious discipline dates to the 1950s in its earliest, US-based incarnation (though cognate fields like the German *Zeitungswissenschaft* (newspaper science) began decades earlier). The US field’s first readers and textbooks make frequent and weighty reference to “communication theory”—intellectual putty for a would-be discipline that was, at the time, a collage of media-related work from the existing social sciences. Soon the “communication theory” phrase was claimed by US speech and rhetoric scholars too, who in the 1960s started using the same disciplinary label (“communication”) as the social scientists across campus. “Communication theory” was already, in the organized field’s infancy, an unruly subject.

By the time Wilbur Schramm (1954) mapped out the theory domain of the new discipline he was trying to forge, however, other traditions had long grappled with the same fundamental questions—notably the entwined, millennia-old “fields” of philosophy, religion, and rhetoric (Peters, 1999). Even if mid-century US communication scholars imagined themselves as breaking with the past—and even if “communication theory” is an anachronistic label for, say, Plato’s *Phaedrus*—no account of thinking about communication could honor the postwar discipline’s borders. Even those half-forgotten fields dismembered in the Western university’s late 19th-century discipline-building project (*Philology*, for example, or *Political Economy*) had developed their own bodies of thought on the key communication questions.

The same is true for the mainline disciplines—the ones we take as unquestionably legitimate, though most were formed just a few decades before Schramm’s march through US journalism schools. Among the social sciences, *Psychology*, sociology, and *Political Science* populated the late interwar field of *Public Opinion Research*, which in turn formed the nucleus of scholars—many connected by World War II service—who called themselves (without dropping their disciplinary identities) “communication researchers.” Their theorizing directly informed the new communication discipline. But North American and European scholars from all three disciplines (and *Anthropology* too) had already begun scholarly traditions dealing with mass and face-to-face communication decades earlier (Peters & Simonson, 2004).

In the humanities, *Literary Studies* have been especially sensitive to communication-related topics. The question of authorial intent and the reader’s received meaning has long preoccupied students of literature. After World War II, these fields began to directly

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engage the texts of popular culture. Figures like Roland Barthes, Marshall McLuhan, and Raymond Williams were pioneers, but by the 1980s—as the notion of a literary canon came under withering assault—scholars trained in literature came to embrace a far more capacious sense of the text. *Art History* and philosophical aesthetics followed a parallel arc, gradually broadening their scope beyond art objects to the everyday visual landscape. A baggy interdisciplinary field, *Visual Studies*, has emerged to represent these and other humanities currents, taking in migrants from the humanist-leaning social sciences too.

The discipline of *History*, though it has long neglected media and communication questions, has maintained a rich tradition of historiographical reflection about the entanglements of the past with the future. The new big-tent field *Digital Humanities* is even baggier, but equally exciting. The most relevant work to media theory in the digital humanities domain is preoccupied with the same interplay of formal, medium-specific properties and the “text” that, unsurprisingly, interests communication theorists in the McLuhan-inspired medium analysis tradition.

With notable exceptions—*Biology* in particular—the communication fields have rarely intersected with the natural sciences. Mid-century flirtations with biology, mathematics, and engineering—especially by way of the cross-cutting cybernetics, information theory, and systems theory formations—made for intense if also shallow interactions. Communication scholars, Schramm most prominently, adopted cybernetics and information theory tropes with gusto, but most often as field-legitimizing incantations. Even later assaults on the mainstream field’s putative embrace of information theory exaggerated their prominence inside communication research. With the exception of a recent efflorescence of biology-inflected communication theory, relevant developments in cybernetics and systems theory have evolved outside communication proper.

The rise of postdisciplinary “studies” formations over the last 50 years, including the example of visual studies, has underwritten a great deal of thinking about communication. Four of these fields in particular, each with its distinctive backstory and theoretical pantheon, have such inescapable overlap with communication as to count as full-fledged *cognates*: film studies, *Cultural Studies*, *American Studies*, and *Science, Technology, and Society Studies*. Film studies, in the English-speaking world, emerged in the 1960s as an art-appreciating humanities field with its own theoretical canon. Indeed, the mutual indifference of film studies and communication scholars, in the face of obvious affinities, has one source in the siloed pedagogy of the film theory tradition. Preceding film scholars by a decade or two, American studies also achieved a measure of self-conscious coherence centered on a usable past—though in its case the locus was a bundle of literary-historical narratives about the American experience. From the early postwar years American studies scholars had scrutinized contemporary (US) culture, but the field—increasingly untethered from its “myth and symbol” origins—took on popular culture topics with relish in the 1970s and beyond.

Cultural studies is arguably the most sprawling and inchoate of the four, in part owing to the field’s self-conscious rejection of disciplinarity itself. With roots in literary studies, sociology, and the British New Left, scholars at the University of Birmingham’s Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies famously applied freshly translated Marxist theory

to an array of popular formations in the 1970s. As cultural studies spread around the world in the 1980s, particularly to US humanities departments, the field absorbed currents of postmodern thought and came to stress the countervailing interpretive power of the audience. One prominent destination for researchers committed to cultural studies was, indeed, departments of communication.

Emerging from the history and sociology of science—fields with their own complex 20th-century histories—science, technology, and society studies (STS) have in the last two decades covered terrain remarkably similar to that claimed by media scholars. STS's especially fecund bundle of approaches and concepts, grounded in rich empirical work, has remained largely untapped by theorists of media and communication. A related tradition of scholarship on the *History of Technology* has more often overlapped with communication studies—particularly given the rich vein of medium-analysis work indebted to Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan.

Among the other “studies” cognates, two have emerged as self-conscious fields only recently: *Game Studies* and *Popular Music Studies*. Both fields have embraced cross-disciplinarity with alacrity, and have also identified theoretical lineages particular to their domains. A final cognate, *Library and Information Science*, is increasingly relevant to communication theory, as media- and information-related questions converge. Like communication itself, library and information science is a postwar discipline built atop professional training, with standalone schools that have, in particular times and places, overlapped with their communication counterparts.

In the wake of social movements committed to marginalized populations, the academy has accommodated a number of interdisciplinary fields—notably *Gender Studies*, *Ethnic Studies*, and *LGBT Studies*—that have taken communication-related questions as central. Mediated representations of sexuality, race, and gender have been a crucial lens for these intersecting fields' thinking about identity and politics, in both emancipatory and marginalizing terms. The looser and self-consciously cross-disciplinary nature of gender, race, and LGBT studies has enabled more theory-sharing reciprocity with communication research proper than the more self-contained “traditional” disciplines.

The communication theory domain is expansive (Craig, 1999). Its incarnations within communication studies represent a fraction, perhaps just a small one, of the contributions from beyond the discipline's borders. Many of these remain unknown, or thinly engaged, by self-identified communication scholars. In that sense, the communication field remains analogous to Taiwan, in John Durham Peters's (1986) classic formulation: a small island claiming a vast territory (p. 543).

The social sciences

The history of communication theory, from one angle, is a decades-long rivalry between *Psychology* and sociology. Both disciplines—psychology spun off from philosophy, and sociology extracted from economics—claimed the space of social psychology in the first decades of the 20th century (Good, 2000). Despite the prominence of communication in the writings of early sociologists like Charles Horton Cooley,

George Herbert Mead, and Robert Park, psychology has taken up theorizing (both mass and interpersonal) with greater alacrity ever since. Max Weber's 1910 appeal for a sociology of the newspaper was not much heeded, at least within German sociology (Weber, 1976). Even the mid-century media research of Columbia University's Bureau of Applied Social Research—much of it, anyway—was arguably psychological in its core methodological assumptions. The emergence, in the postwar decades, of a self-conscious subfield devoted to sociological theory did not produce an uptick in sociology's engagement; the major social theory treatises of the last 50 years have neglected, to a remarkable extent, media- and communication-related issues. Sociology and communication, despite occasional flirtations, have kept their distance.

Even so, two major strands of sociological thought have informed theorizing about communication, one preoccupied with microlevel interactions (the interpersonal) and the other with macrolevel institutions (the mass). In the face-to-face and small-group contexts, approaches indebted to American pragmatism and European phenomenology have informed rich, processual accounts of communication. Cooley and Mead linked social interaction with selfhood itself, and Mead's heir Herbert Blumer established a still flourishing tradition, symbolic interactionism, rooted in Mead's core insights. Meanwhile, the phenomenological tradition was sociologized, and brought to America, by the Austrian banker-philosopher Alfred Schütz. European transplants Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann as well as Harold Garfinkel, an American student of Talcott Parsons, were among the prominent sociologists influenced by Schütz. The emphasis, for the phenomenology-inflected approach, has been on the invisible web of taken-for-granted "typifications" that make stable social life possible. As with the pragmatist tradition, the process of communication qua interaction is crucial—the source, in the phenomenological case, of these unrecognized, commonsense assumptions. In that sense, communication is indispensable to what Berger and Luckmann, in their classic 1966 book, called the *Social Construction of Reality*. The great American sociologist Erving Goffman had significant roots in both traditions, the pragmatist and the phenomenological. His dramaturgical approach proposed that social life, especially everyday interaction, could be fruitfully recast in theatrical terms, complete with actors, the front- and back-stage, and audiences.

The second, more macro-oriented strand has taken up the role of mass media in stitching together social order. Three traditions in particular have furnished theoretical scaffolding, though the first—the collective behavior tradition indebted to Chicago sociologist Robert Park—has been largely ignored by communication scholars. Park, a student of John Dewey and a number of influential German academics (including Georg Simmel), developed an original approach to the question of social order, with mass communication granted a central role. Park focused on collective phenomena like crowds, newspaper-generated "publics," social movements, and trends in fashion. His processual view was that these formations, most of them dependent on mass communication, were the building blocks of new social orders—new, solider institutions. Second- and third-generation Chicago sociologists, including Blumer, Tomatsu Shibutani, and Kurt and Gladys Lang, adapted Park's collective behavior framework to film, news, and rumor. A second tradition, centered at Lazarsfeld's Columbia Bureau, cast media in functionalist terms, as reinforcers of core social values. The Bureau never subscribed to

Talcott Parsons's high-altitude structural functionalism. Instead, Parsons's student and Bureau associate director Robert Merton—the leading American sociological theorist of the postwar decades—elaborated a more pliable and empirically sensitive variant of functionalism that, without explicit mention, continued to inform the studies of Bureau alumni, notably the uses and gratifications approach revived by Elihu Katz in the 1970s. The third tradition turned functionalism on its head: Western Marxist figures, beginning in the 1920s, had pointed to media and popular culture as explanations for the masses' quiescence. For the problem of *order* this line of heterodox Marxists substituted the problem of *consent*. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in the 1940s, and the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in the 1970s (under the influence of Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci), are the two most prominent strands of a sociology-drenched Western Marxist tradition concerned with how media convince the exploited to tighten their own chains.

Jürgen Habermas, the German philosopher-sociologist, spans all three traditions, in a sense. His early 1960s historical work on the public sphere, which has since its 1989 translation unleashed a flood of scholarship across the social sciences, is indebted to the critical theory tradition. His later theory of communicative action is a grand synthesis of Parsons's functionalism, American pragmatism, Weberian sociology, and the philosophy of language. Serious engagements with the historical public sphere notion have come from both rhetoricians and theorists of mass media, although the uptake of Habermas's later work has been uneven and poorly informed. Like Habermas, the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu furnished an analytic framework that cross-cuts, or upends, the three traditions identified above. Bourdieu's field and capital theories, despite the sociologist's own relative neglect of media, have spawned a fast-growing literature among scholars of journalism and popular culture.

The contributions of psychology to communication theory, measured by impact, have dwarfed sociology's. This outsized influence, especially on the US communication discipline from the 1960s onward, has a number of complex sources, including shifts in federal funding and broad trends in 20th-century social science. Though a great deal of what we would call "communication research" predates the mid-1930s emergence of sampling-based opinion polling, the phrase itself was coined in the heady early days of survey research by a cluster of ambitious psychologists, sociologists, and political scientists. For contingent reason—Rockefeller Foundation funding and, after 1941, the federal government's wartime interest in propaganda and morale—**Public Opinion Research** was centered on media questions from the beginning. Psychologists like Hadley Cantril and Rensis Likert, sociologists including Lazarsfeld and Samuel Stouffer, and political scientists such as Harold Lasswell and Leo Rosten formed the nucleus of the extraordinary World War II mobilization of social scientists, where survey research—and related methods like quantitative content analysis—informed a host of government and military initiatives. Many of these figures emerged from the war at the center of American social science. Buoyed by foundation and government funding, especially as the Cold War heated up, so-called "behavioral scientists" (a term backed by the enormously influential Ford Foundation) embraced quantitative methods, general theory, and team-based applied research. Owing to the Cold War backdrop, the 1950s world of American behavioral science was centered on the same

propaganda and morale questions that had preoccupied the wartime public opinion researchers—many of whom remained prominent nodes in social science networks.

Despite the disciplinary diversity of the behavioral sciences ranks, a psychological orientation predominated, especially among empirical researchers. With notable exceptions, the postwar media research of political scientists and sociologists resonated with the core assumptions of (psychological) social psychology. The “behavioral revolution” in political science, and the focus on political behavior in particular, dovetailed with the methodological individualism employed by leading sociological research shops. Survey research methods, as deployed by Lazarsfeld (a lapsed psychologist) and Stouffer, treated the public as an aggregate of individuals. When Wilbur Schramm led the march through journalism schools in the 1950s and 60s, institutionalizing the US communication discipline, he and his allies had the behavioral sciences mold very much in mind. A post-Sputnik spending shift away from the military and foundations in favor of civilian agencies—especially the National Institute of Mental Health support for violence research—helped solidify communication research’s psychological orientation.

In addition to core methodological presuppositions, psychology supplied a host of testable theories to the nascent communication discipline, drawn mainly from experimental social psychology and relevant to both mass communication research and the social science wing of interpersonal scholarship emerging in departments of speech. Figures including Harvard’s Gordon Allport, the emigré Kurt Lewin, Yale’s Carl Hovland, and a number of their students (many assembled in the postwar years at the University of Michigan’s Institute of Social Research) developed and refined influential theories on persuasion and small-group interaction. Significantly, all of them prefigured or contributed to the discipline’s postwar cognitive revolution. Lewin’s late interwar research program on group dynamics generated a typology of group communication styles, which students like Dorwin Cartwright applied to wartime mass persuasion. Another Lewin student, Leon Festinger, developed a number of theories—on cognitive dissonance and social comparison, most prominently—with direct application to communication questions. Hovland’s experimental approach to mass communication persuasion, honed in wartime service with the Army’s Research Branch, produced a series of empirically grounded generalizations about prestige, source credibility, the “ sleeper effect,” and other facets of attitude change. The major communication programs established by Schramm, his allies, or his students (including those at Iowa, Illinois, Stanford, Minnesota, and Michigan State) were populated by social psychologists who framed the field—its curricula and methods—in psychological terms. The approach to psycholinguistics developed by Charles Osgood, based at Illinois’ communication research institute, was influential for a time, though not the theorizing of Harvard’s equally prolific George A. Miller—who remains a curiously neglected figure.

Communication theory indebted to political science has been significant too, but difficult to entangle from the cross-disciplinary public opinion research discussed above. The quantitative approach incubated by Charles Merriam at the University of Chicago was a traceable influence on the US discipline’s postwar behavioral turn. Among his many influential students was Harold Lasswell, who analyzed propaganda with a mix of psychoanalysis and empirical social science methods. Lasswell was a key participant in the Rockefeller-funded late interwar initiatives, and—during and

after the war—led large-scale content analysis projects. Among his many prominent students were Ithiel de Sola Pool and Daniel Lerner, key figures in political science's Cold War-era behavioral revolution and, in Lerner's case, the modernization theory of the late 1950s and 1960s (often with Schramm as collaborator). Pool, along with other political scientists working on propaganda like Gabriel Almond and Lucien Pye, generated theories of political behavior shot through with models of communication. Karl Deutsch's early 1950s cybernetics-influenced systems theory exemplified behavioralists' conviction that communication was the linchpin of modern politics. Ironically, empirical voting research—and its attendant theorizing—was conducted by sociologists (at Columbia) and an interdisciplinary team dominated by psychologists (at Michigan). Political scientists have since adopted the voting-research lineage, and—to a degree unmatched in other significant subfields—have cooperated with communication scholars to develop a rich domain of political communication theory.

Until recently, the two other core social science disciplines, *Economics* and *Anthropology*, have been far more isolated from media research in general and communication theory in particular. One longstanding exception has been the borderlands of anthropology and *Linguistics*, where a distinguished line of figures have influenced or directly contributed to mainline traditions of communication theory. Edward Sapir, Edward T. Hall, Dell Hymes, and Ray Birdwhistell have all introduced major theories at the intersection of communication and language (as well as nonlinguistic meaning systems like gesture, proxemics, and kinesics). The sui generis case of Gregory Bateson, the anthropologist turned cybernetician, is a fascinating case study in submerged impact; few communication theorists draw on Bateson directly, but the British-born scholar influenced the thinking of Hall, Hymes, and Birdwhistell, especially in the field of intercultural communication.

A second route of anthropological influence on media and communication theory has come via creative adaptations of key anthropological frameworks to communication questions. James W. Carey, for example, produced his influential mid-1970s "cultural approach" to communication with Clifford Geertz's interpretative anthropology as explicit guide. Likewise, Elihu Katz and Daniel Dayan's concept of *media events*—among the most fertile constructs of the last 25 years—was indebted to anthropologist Victor Turner's conceptualization of ritual. As Mihai Coman and Eric Rothenbuhler (2005) have argued, the *promise* of media anthropology has long outstripped its actual status in communication research. In the last few decades, however, anthropologists themselves have become increasingly intrigued by contemporary media in everyday life. The anthropology of media has coalesced into a bona fide subfield, whose theorists include Arjun Appadurai, Faye Ginsburg, and Daniel Miller.

Linguistics proper came to recognize itself as a standalone social science only in the early postwar years. The structural linguistics tradition ushered in by Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure in the early 20th century was an important precursor, as was the broadly sympathetic approach developed by Russian linguist Roman Jakobson. Saussure and Jakobson, in turn, were profound influences on a variety of mid-century structuralisms, including the anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss and the literary analysis of the early Roland Barthes. In the mid-1950s, MIT linguist Noam Chomsky issued

his sharp critique of both behaviorist psychology and the quasi-philological tradition of descriptive linguistics, arguing that a deep, universal structure of human language is the generative source of creativity and variety in language. Influential challenges to Chomskyan formalism have emerged in recent decades, some with obvious implications for communication theory. The integrational linguistics developed by Roy Harris, for example, stresses context in mutual meaning-making, against the mind-to-mind meaning transfer model implicit in the postwar discipline. A like-minded approach, interactional linguistics, has debts to ordinary-language philosophy, anthropology, and the sociology of language. Interactionists like Herbert H. Clark argue that language is produced—remade and modified—in everyday conversation.

The case of economics is peculiar. An enormous and central social science discipline, economics has been conspicuously inattentive to media institutions and questions. Though a subfield devoted to media economics has emerged in recent decades, it remains comparatively anemic and on the periphery of the (tightly disciplined) discipline. Research and theorizing on media firm and information industry exceptionalism—including core principles of network effects, attention economics, experience goods, and (more recently) information cascades—have crept into communication theorizing. But the relative and mutual indifference of communication theory and economics remains a sociology-of-knowledge puzzle. Perhaps the implicit challenge to the discipline's postwar neoclassical mainstream posed by information asymmetry and advertising demand-stimulation helps to explain the neglect. One byproduct of the remarkable vogue for behavioral economics may be heightened interest in the inescapably central role of information and media in many of the core cognitive biases.

The intersection of communication theory with the discipline of *Geography*, finally, has become much more active in the last 30 years, in the aftermath of critiques of the discipline's postwar quantitative orientation. Diverse strands of critical geography have taken up communication-related questions, and some of these have directly influenced media and communication scholars. One especially productive line has its source in French Marxist Henri Lefebvre's arguments for the social production of space. Lefebvre was a formative influence on the critical geographies of Manuel Castells, Edward Soja, and David Harvey, who in turn have helped usher in an arguable "spatial turn" across the social sciences—a heightened sensitivity to the spatial dimension of social life. References to the collapse of space and time have dotted the popular and academic literature since at least the arrival of the telegraph and the railroad. But critical geographers like Soja and Harvey, following Lefebvre, have pointed to geographical imaginaries—the way in which socially produced conceptions of space (and time) mediate perceptions of everyday life. Harvey's re-reading of Marx in spatial terms has been especially influential on communication theorizing, including, for example, Vincent Mosco's analysis of "spatialization" in late capitalism. Another strand of recent geographical thought, critical cartography—notably the 1980s work of J. B. Harley—positioned maps not as transparent communications but as power-knowledge formations. The subfield's concept of cartographic knowledge, as implicated in administration and power, has fruitfully informed more recent analyses of GIS as data-rich blueprints for managing populations.

The cognate fields

A number of fields and disciplines overlap with communication research directly, despite more or less distinctive identities and degree programs. The case of film studies is the most fascinating, if only because its medium-specific self-segregation is arbitrary and increasingly anachronistic. The study of film, especially in the United States, incubated its own tradition of theory, whose key figures rarely appear on communication theory syllabi. Three other postwar formations, *American Studies*, *Cultural Studies*, and *Visual Studies*, occupy some of the same intellectual territory, in Venn-diagram terms, as communication scholarship, but with research domains and theory traditions that also reflect their distinctive scope. A third category of cognate fields has, more recently, carved out its own interdisciplinary space; *Game Studies* and *Popular Music Studies*, for example, count communication scholars among their ranks, yet also grant membership to researchers with other disciplinary identities. A final pair of cognates, *Library and Information Science* and *Science, Technology, and Society Studies*, have always shared some overlapping jurisdiction with communication. The convergence of media and information technologies, however, has dramatically expanded that shared territory. As with film studies and indeed all the cognates, the existing borders separating these fields are hard to justify—regardless of the powerful institutional path dependencies that underwrite their mutual sequestration.

God, Elihu Katz has quipped, gave film to the humanities and television to the social sciences. Film studies programs were, in effect, built atop the new appreciation for cinema's artistic qualities in the 1960s, with faculty drawn from existing humanities ranks. From the beginning, film theory was the field's main unifying feature. A cross-disciplinary lineage of "classical" analysts of film's formal distinctiveness (in aesthetic and other terms) could be traced back to the early 20th century, including Sergei Eisenstein, Rudolf Arnheim, Siegfried Kracauer, and Béla Balázs. Arguments appearing in *Cahiers du Cinéma* in the postwar decades—notably André Bazin's realism and the journal's elevation of the director as auteur—were incorporated into a remarkably stable canon that, however, proved accommodating to regular accretions in the 1970s and 1980s. Influences from psychoanalysis, semiotics, and Western Marxism gave rise to a number of competing theories often grouped under the "apparatus theory" label, elaborated by Jean-Louis Baudry, Christian Metz, and—in a feminist revision—Laura Mulvey. In recent decades, the tradition has expanded to include work indebted to poststructuralism, affect theory, feminist theory, philosophy of language, and even a revived formalism.

As an academic formation, cultural studies is more amorphous, in part because of its avowed antidisciplinarity. Indeed, self-identified cultural studies scholars occupy posts in the full range of media, communication, and film programs as well as traditional humanities disciplines. With debts to the left-Leavisite cultural history of literary scholar Raymond Williams and historian E. P. Thompson's "history from below"—and with overlapping roots in the British New Left—Richard Hoggart (also trained in literature) established the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham in 1964. Under the leadership of Hoggart and Stuart

Hall—Hoggart’s successor as director—the Centre embraced a distinctive orientation to the study of culture, with (1) an emphasis on everyday life and discourse, (2) explicit political commitments, and, especially under Hall, (3) engagement with theory in general and Western Marxism in particular. With the mass media as a major topic for analysis and critique, Hall and others at the 1970s CCCS grappled with a wave of newly translated texts from continental theorists, notably the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci. The Centre also engaged with French structuralism, especially the work of Marxist Louis Althusser, in presenting a series of diagnoses that—while open to audience meaning-making—stressed how the media help reproduce existing inequalities. Over its subsequent history, as cultural studies has spread around the world, the tension between power and agency, on the one hand, and structural regularities and historical particularity, on the other, have defined the field—with agency and particularity arguably in ascendance.

American studies, which gained self-consciousness as a field two decades earlier, has also been resolutely cross-disciplinary in its intellectual orientation. In its original, post-war incarnation the field was dominated by sweeping literary-cultural histories of the American past by Henry Nash Smith, Leo Marx, and F. O. Matthiessen, with the stress on enduring mythologies of American exceptionalism. The so-called “myth and symbol” school was challenged in the 1970s, and American studies has since incorporated an array of approaches, many grounded in the study of race, ethnicity, and gender. Two important bridge figures were David W. Noble and Alan Trachtenberg, who in distinctive ways (and in dialogue with Leo Marx) linked technology, discourse around technology, and culture.

The new social movements that spread across the West in the late 1960s and 1970s helped to generate corresponding, explicitly engaged, fields of study. Women’s and *Gender Studies*, *American Studies*, *Ethnic Studies*, and *LGBT Studies*, among others, have all positioned media and representation as core objects of study—as sites of oppression, reproduction, and resistance. Indeed, feminist theory, in its multifaceted critiques of science, technology, and the media, has arguably taken the lead in exposing the masked particularity—the submerged androcentrism—of each domain. In concert with broader developments in Continental philosophy and the sociology of knowledge, the fields devoted to the study of gender, race, and sexual orientation have mounted a sustained argument that knowledge, power, and social background are mutually constitutive. Popular culture, in particular, has emerged as a site of political struggle for these fields—the domain of popular meanings where power is continually performed, reproduced, and challenged. Media culture, in one prominent strand of this work, is the preeminent locus for the negotiation of collective and individual identities—and, perhaps, for their destabilization as well.

Another area of overlap, visual studies, is more like an estuary. The field is fed by a number of disciplinary tributaries that, however, maintain their distinctive identities, including art history, visual sociology, visual anthropology, cultural studies, and communication research’s own visual communication subfield. What they share in common is the observation that modern life is uniquely saturated with imagery. Many trace the proliferation of the visual to the 19th-century eruption of visual communication technologies like the photograph and cinema that permitted, for the

first time in human history, the mass production of images (Boorstin, 1961). The rise of the visual was profoundly bound up in the emergence of consumer capitalism, with its demand-stimulating imperative to link buying to imagistic fantasy. One line of analysis, with centuries-old roots in art history and philosophical aesthetics, is formalism. The formal analyst attends to formal properties like shape, color, and their compositional arrangements, with an eye to teasing out their contributions to viewers' meanings. The more prevalent approach is to locate imagery (especially the mass-mediated kind) in their semiotic and social contexts. Literature scholar W. T. J. Mitchell (1995), whose work blends these approaches, has identified a "pictorial turn" in 20th-century philosophy and other humanities fields. A strand of postmodern social theory, often linked to Jean Baudrillard, makes the claim that images have so saturated everyday life that they have detached from representation in a free-floating culture of hyperreality.

Popular music studies is another wide-ranging cognate to communication research. Sociologists and psychologists had occasionally treated popular music as an important facet of mass media culture since the early 20th century, as had a smattering of American studies and communication scholars after World War II. But relative to visual media like television, music has been relatively neglected by communication researchers—while *popular* music has, until recently, been relegated to the margins of musicology proper. Indeed, Theodor Adorno—the German critical theorist—was the rare figure who mixed philosophical aesthetics and musicology with the sociology of popular music. In the 1970s, after two decades of chart-topping music's entanglement with youth culture and movements for social change, popular music attracted new scholarly attention from a revived sociology of culture in the United States and from British cultural studies scholars. UK sociologist Simon Frith's (1978) groundbreaking *Sociology of Rock* offered a model-by-example for casting popular music in economic, social, and political relief. In the late 1980s and 1990s, as popular music studies coalesced around journals and professional societies, a torrent of monographs appeared. The field remains half-segregated from communication research and outside the musicological mainstream. Another interdisciplinary formation with a strong identity is game studies. Though scholars in psychology, education, literature, communication, and film studies had analyzed video games since their popular debut in the early 1970s, game studies as a field emerged around the turn of the millennium. Game studies programs, and published histories of the nascent field, have stressed formal properties of digital games, in part to justify the standalone field. A rich tradition of thinking about the ludic dimension of culture, including classic works by Dutch historian Johan Huizinga and French sociologist Roger Caillois, has inspired some game studies scholars to expand the play concept to the broader culture.

Library and information science (LIS) is arguably the most exciting media and communication cognate, in part because the two disciplines—traditionally indifferent to one another despite occasional flirtations—are converging. With roots in 19th-century professional training for librarians and archivists, the current "library and information science" formation dates to the 1960s, when library schools began to add "information science" to their names and remit—the same decade, not coincidentally, that journalism schools and speech departments were adopting the "communication" moniker.

LIS concerns itself with the full arc of information: its creation, organization, storage, and distribution. Since the early 1980s the field has generated many models of human information behavior, which remain largely unknown to communication researchers. T. D. Wilson's information-seeking theory, refined over the last three decades, is the most prominent, but extensions and challenges have included Sandra Erdelz's model of information encountering and Reijo Savolainen's emphasis on information-seeking in everyday life. A vibrant subfield of bibliometrics and citation analysis has applied a range of social network methodologies—many but not all quantitative—to track the dynamics of academic knowledge. As digital technologies have proliferated in both the information and media domains, a number of LIS programs have rebranded themselves as “iSchools.”

Communication studies and LIS enjoy a growing reciprocity in citations and faculty appointments. Together with a third field, science, technology, and society studies (STS), they are converging on what might be called a sociology of digital knowledge—exemplified by Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Leigh Star's (2000) work on *information infrastructures*. STS has developed its own rich conceptual vocabulary and sensitivity to the interplay of societies and technologies. As Pablo Boczkowski and Leah Lievrouw (2008) observe, communication scholars have traditionally attended to the *effects* of media technologies, while STS scholars have trained their attention on their *social shaping*. STS scholars have also scrutinized the material and infrastructural dimensions of communication with more rigor and consistency than their media studies counterparts. The conceptual cross-pollination of the three fields (including LIS) holds great, if as yet barely tapped, promise.

The humanities

The humanities disciplines—especially *Philosophy*, *History*, and *Literary Studies*—had touched on communication theory in a thousand different ways long before that label appeared. The engagement of philosophy with communication, even within the Western tradition, is far too diverse to briefly gloss here. Communication was a recurring preoccupation of the ancient Greeks, including the Socratic contrast between sophistry and philosophy itself. Likewise, Plato arguably anticipated the medium theory tradition in his condemnation of writing. Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, which recast and codified the arts of persuasion, remains the touchstone of rhetorical theory (itself a core “humanities” discipline from the Renaissance up to the advent of the modern research university). One thread that runs through the entire tradition is the promise, and breakdown, of mutual understanding—what might be called the problem of interpersonal epistemology. Whether conceived of in terms of the mind-to-mind transfer of meaning by way of a medium like language, or something more like communion—whereby meaning is a cocreative act—philosophers have repeatedly grappled with the knotty question of communication (Peters, 1999).

Perhaps owing to the undeniable pluralism of modern life, including the world's halting disenchantment and the Babel-like encounters routinized by communication technologies, a skeptical position has taken increasing hold over the last two centuries.

Philosophical doubt about communication has had articulate champions all the way back to antiquity. But more recent currents in philosophy—from Søren Kierkegaard onward—have repeatedly battered the idea of *undistorted* communication in particular, raising the specter (or spectacle) of irrationalism and/or solipsism. Scholars in the self-defined field of communication theory have engaged with some of this thought, particularly the diverse neo-Nietzschean line that runs through Georges Bataille, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Gilles Deleuze. Far less attention has been paid, within communication theory proper at least, to the hermeneutics tradition of Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricœur, and Charles Taylor, where communication over time, and across cultural distance, is recast as a *fusion of horizons*. Within the analytic tradition, the same neglect has been served on the later work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, which made the fundamental claim that meaning is defined (and redefined) in specific, contextual language use. That view is broadly compatible with American pragmatism, with its accent on the knowledge (and community) generated by adaptive cooperation. For pragmatism, Wittgenstein, and hermeneutics alike, the question of transference from one mind to another is rejected as the wrong question; meaning is instead made and remade in interaction itself. Pragmatism, at least, has enjoyed a notable revival of interest among communication scholars in recent years.

Literary studies have taken up an analogous question, also centered on the riddle of communication. The activity of literature implicates at least three sites of meaning: the meaning intended by the author, the meaning that inheres in the text itself, and the meaning generated by the reader. Sparring schools of literary analysis have elevated one site over the other two, though broadly speaking the reader's creative interpretations have captured the most scholarly attention over the last 50 years. In the late 1960s and—with gathering momentum—the 1970s, literary theorists like Wolfgang Iser, Roland Barthes, and Stanley Fish highlighted the great variety and contingency of readers' responses to works of literature. In the 1980s cultural studies scholars, often housed in literature departments as that field spread beyond Britain, intensified Stuart Hall and David Morley's modest emphasis on decoding and multiple readings in the 1970s. In literature proper as well as cultural studies—fields that, in the United States especially, were commingling in part due to the humanities' self-generated crisis of the canon—readers and audiences were portrayed as active meaning-makers, more or less untethered from the text or authorial intent. The theory of the active audience dovetailed, despite crucial differences, with the rise of *deconstruction* as a method of literary analysis. Champions of deconstruction, drawing on French philosopher Jacques Derrida, held that texts are inherently unstable, prone to slippages and internal contradictions ripe for analytic exposure. In response to the field's preoccupation with slippage and interpretive play, an older tradition relating literature to the social conditions surrounding its creation—the sociology of literature in the widest sense—has been revived in the form of new historicism and other critical currents. Earlier efforts to link prevailing literary forms (or exemplary works) with the zeitgeist or the political economy of an age include heterodox Marxist analyses by Georg Lukács, Lucien Goldmann, and Fredric Jameson, non-Marxist accounts by Erich Auerbach, Ian Watt, and (the early) Raymond Williams, more focused studies on the publishing industry like those of Robert Escarpit and Lewis Coser, and efforts by Franco Moretti and Pascale

Casanova to set literary production and consumption in global relief. The bright line that once divided literature from everyday culture has, at any rate, dimmed considerably. The mid-century forays into mass cultural analysis by trained literary scholars like Williams, McLuhan, and Barthes have long since settled, by insight and eloquence alone, that the traditional domain of literature was too confining.

History as a modern academic discipline, like literature, has only recently taken up media and communications with real vigor. In the 19th-century US and European academies, with history and the social sciences weakly differentiated (Haskell, 1977), a number of historian-cum-political economists—as diverse as Alexis de Tocqueville, Albert Schäffle, Karl Marx, James Bryce, and Charles Horton Cooley—explored the nexus of newspapers, mass politics, and industrial capitalism in the emerging modern order. But the history profession, for the bulk of the 20th century at least, has neglected communication and the products of mass culture. Though a rich tradition in the history of rhetoric has been essential to speech-oriented communication departments, and though journalism schools have long incubated historical work on the press, both currents evolved outside the history discipline's mainstream. The ironic result of historians' indifference is that the most influential thinking on media history was generated by an economist, a pair of literary scholars, and a classicist: the medium-analysis tradition of Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan, Walter Ong, and Eric Havelock (with a late assist from historian Elizabeth Eisenstein). The *longue-durée* historiography of the Annales School, especially the second-generation work of Fernand Braudel and Georges Duby, suggested a more subtle approach to long-term media and social change, but few historians took up communication topics during the Anglo-American Annales mania of the 1960s and 1970s. Annales approaches, nevertheless, helped spur the marked shift to social history in the 1970s US discipline, with a new focus on the everyday and marginalized groups (and often drawing upon demographic and other social science data).

If communication theory and history have experienced a rapprochement, it is as a result of the so-called “cultural turn” in American social science in the 1970s and 1980s. Scholars like anthropologist Clifford Geertz elevated idiographic interpretation over the quantitative search for behavioral laws. In this same period, historians like Hayden White identified the inescapable centrality of narrative and storytelling for the historical enterprise—an insight that spread to humanist communication scholarship. Partly under the influence of Geertz, meanwhile, cultural history took off in the 1980s, with print culture and the history of the book as notable preoccupations. Geertz, and prominent cultural historians like Robert Darnton, were in turn introduced to communication scholars by the communication theorist James W. Carey. Communication research today is arguably more hospitable to history—and history to communication and media—than ever before, but actual dialogue remains rare. The burgeoning work of early modern historians on the circulation of news and information along Mediterranean trade routes is an especially promising vein for communication theorists to tap.

The new, inchoate field of *Digital Humanities*, conceived narrowly, refers to the use of computing techniques for the analysis and display of traditional literary and historical objects of study. In a slightly broader conception, the field's remit includes research on literary artifacts, like the hypertext novel, that make use of digital or Web affordances.

In both senses, digital humanities as an academic formation has debts to a number of 20th-century forerunner fields that paralleled the postwar history of the computer. But an alternative, more capacious definition of digital humanities would encompass the full panoply of human culture—from social media to software design—now circulating in digital networks. Conceived this way, the umbrella field could host an overdue, cross-disciplinary conversation among already converging fields like library and information science, science, technology, and society studies, film studies, the sociology of knowledge, and communication studies itself.

Conclusion

Decades ago, as communication research was getting institutionalized, Wilbur Schramm (1963) referred to the would-be discipline as a “crossroad” (p. 2). Communication theory—the discipline’s big-picture subfield—has welcomed the contributions of a range of other fields ever since. But only some of these outsiders have truly registered in our traditions. The line dividing influence from indifference, in other words, has remained strikingly arbitrary. The organization of media scholarship has always, if unevenly, reflected the media landscape itself. In our era of digital convergence, Schramm’s crossroads metaphor might be revived and ventilated.

SEE ALSO: Metatheory; Models of Communication; Sociology of Knowledge; Theory and Practice; Traditions of Communication Theory

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