

Book review

Waisbord, S. R. (2019). *Communication: A post-discipline*.

Cambridge: Polity Press. 171 pp.

Reviewed by **Jefferson Pooley**, Muhlenberg College, Media & Communication, Allentown, USA,
E-Mail: pooley@muhlenberg.edu.

<https://doi.org/10.1515/commun-2019-0173>

In a pair of important essays published 25 years apart, Peters (1986, 2011) set the terms of the debate that Waisbord takes up in this short book. In 1986, Peters decried the “intellectual poverty” of a communication discipline—at least in the U.S. American case—built atop an incoherent institutional foundation. By 2011, Peters was far more sanguine about the field’s madcap heterogeneity: Communication scholars are freed from the shackles of orthodoxy that bind academics in more coherent disciplines. Waisbord agrees with the later Peters. His argument is that the field’s chaotic and porous character is a good thing—and that, regardless, there is no ordinary coherence to return to.

Much of the book is devoted to establishing the baseline claim that communication is far more fragmented than even those disciplines, like sociology, that also complain of segmentation. Waisbord’s case—partly built on reflections from his recent tenure as editor of the *Journal of Communication*—is utterly convincing. He makes the point, in part, at the *institutional* level, as he traces the polyphonic nomenclature, department/school/program organizational variety, and the disorienting landscape of scholarly societies and conferences. He attends even more to the field’s *intellectual* disarray—its “remarkable diversity of studies and questions” (p. 55) and “lack” of an “ontological center” (p. 9). The book does not take a position on whether the intellectual fragmentation reflects the institutional multiplicity, or vice versa; there is, instead, an implicit theory of mutual reinforcement. Throughout Waisbord references the would-be discipline’s history and on a laudably international scale. One ironic confirmation of his core “Babel” thesis is that the sheer heterogeneity, even within national traditions, means that his treatment—in historical and geographic terms—is unavoidably perfunctory.

Communication, though repetitive at times, benefits from consistently sharp analysis. Bracketing for a moment its normative call for a “post-discipline”, the book is, in effect, a sociology of communication research, as illustrated by three especially insightful observations. The first is Waisbord’s fascinating claim that the recent intensification of the field’s existing pluralism means that paradigmatic disputes—like grand methodological debates or flag-raising around the “criti-

cal” or “administrative” labels—have lost their purchase. Localized knowledge, oriented topically, now organizes debates, as a brute fact of specialization. We have, as a result, experienced a “softening” of “epistemological and ideological squabbles” (p. 135). A second astute point is that, since the onrush of the digital, communication scholars have shared the mediatized terrain with over a dozen cognate fields—“academic trespassing” that Waisbord ultimately welcomes (chap. 3, p. 9). There is, finally, in the chapter on globalization, a gentle push-back against overly simplistic calls for the field’s de-Westernization, grounded in a rich sociological analysis of entrenched North-South inequalities (chap. 4).

Waisbord’s concluding chapter issues the plea, teasingly hinted at in the book’s subtitle: Communication already is, and should further embrace, its status as a “post-discipline”. In practical terms, this means celebrating, rather than bemoaning, the field’s “wonderful jumbled landscape” (p. 21). Waisbord is also keen to encourage the rest of us to accept, rather than fear, the crumbling of disciplinary walls that were never, anyway, defensible or sturdy. Communication’s messiness, in short, is a feature, not a bug. He concludes with a modest call for forms of intra- and inter-disciplinary bridge-building, around theoretical stock-taking and large-scale social problems like misinformation and climate change. His proposal for the field is to cultivate a post-disciplinary way of seeing—which, in the book’s last page, he labels a “communication imagination” (p. 153).

For all of his sociological acuity, Waisbord does not address a core feature of the field’s institutional set-up in many national contexts: Skills training. To varying degrees, communication programs depend on large undergraduate enrollments predicated on applied training in journalism, advertising, public relations, marketing, broadcasting, and now social media management. Following the U.S. American “mass communication” model, many communication units around the world were established as late-arriving professional schools on the university’s margins. These programs, with their vocational taint, have a peculiar profile: resource-rich and status-poor. The result has been a persistent prestige gap between communication research and adjacent disciplines, with troubling consequences for the intellectual balance of trade. Communication, with its low status, suffers from a Hotel California problem: Ideas come in but can never leave. Waisbord nods to the reputation costs—“Communication studies, as a long-standing area of academic inquiry with a distinguished history, unfortunately remains a well-kept secret in large swaths of academia” (p. 88)—but does not really address the underlying institutional sources. In his positive argument for communication’s status as a post-discipline, his frame of comparison is, tellingly, the ‘studies’ fields: cultural studies, ethnic studies, women’s studies, and so on. But these are interdisciplinary formations drawing on faculty housed in established departments. The more apt comparison set for communication research is profes-

sional programs like business, social work, library and information science, and education—where, in each case, a diffuse, multi-disciplinary research community is epiphenomenal to these programs' core training mission.

Waisbord's argument that the genie cannot be put back in the bottle—that pinning for a coherent discipline is a fool's errand—is compelling. Communication, he rightly asserts, never *was* a discipline; recent developments like the academic globalization and the oceanic spread of the digital, make that coherence project still harder to conceive. The book's blend of realism and optimism—an echo of Peters' (2011) "sweet lemons" position—leads to a welcome conclusion: The field's centrifugal dynamism is both irreversible and healthy. If anything, Waisbord's case for the post-disciplinary status of communication research does not go far enough. As the book astutely documents, communication is but one of a manifold set of fields that share joint custody of a mediatized social world. Communication has no meaningful jurisdictional claim to what is a borderless trading zone. Rather than position communication as a post-discipline, we might instead think in terms of post-communication. According to that view, we are merely participants in the social studies of digital life—scholars of mediatized society who happen to work in communication programs. With the disciplinary label dropped altogether, we might contribute as full peers to an exciting "post-program era" (cf. Pooley, 2018)—with nothing to lose but our reputational chains.

References

- Peters, J. D. (1986). Institutional sources of intellectual poverty in communication research. *Communication Research*, 13(4), 527–559. <https://doi.org/10.1177/009365086013004002>
- Peters, J. D. (2011). Sweet lemons. *International Journal of Communication*, 5, 1467–1471. Retrieved September 15, 2019 from <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/1355>.
- Pooley, J. (2018, March 5). The post-program era: The rise of internet & society centers—and a new interdiscipline. *Culture digitally*. Retrieved September 15, 2019 from <http://culturedigitally.org/2018/03/the-post-program-era-the-rise-of-internet-society-centers-and-a-new-interdiscipline/>.