Communication—Embrace the Subject, not the Field

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No Renaissance scholar could have asked for a more exciting or promising subject of study than contemporary communication. Never before have more disciplines or more minds converged more rapidly on a single phenomenon: information and its patterning, processing, and communication as central to culture, cognition, and social behavior. Throughout academia, ideas for interdisciplinary collaboration and synthesis in these areas are in the air, and often well under way, most notably in cognitive science and cultural studies.

Evidence to bolster such enthusiasm abounds. Bibliometric studies find increasing convergence on the concepts and literature of information and communication across the range of academic disciplines—from the humanities and social sciences to the cognitive, behavioral, and life sciences, computer science, and mathematics. Undergraduate enrollments continue to climb in courses on mass media and popular culture, literary and critical studies, and cognitive and computer science. Terms like *information, communication, computer,* and *media* are routinely used as adjectives to name the age in which we live.

Although no one discipline could possibly embrace the entire range of academic interest in information and communication, certainly any organized field that calls itself communication might be expected to play a central role. Alas, just the opposite has been true. The American field of communication, at least at its institutional core of research and training, associations and conferences, textbooks and journals, remains today not far advanced beyond its aims of nearly a half century ago. Even more striking than the field's insularity from developments outside its institutional boundaries, its belated and grudging acknowledgment of European social and literary theory notwithstanding, has been the utter lack of interest in communication—the field, not the subject—by the leading scholars of other disciplines.

Once again evidence abounds. Not only are the most cited books on topics relevant to communication rarely written by those formally in the field, but these works cite few, if any, who are. Most of today's leading

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scholars of communication, in the United States no less than in the rest of the world, are neither formally educated in the American field nor consider it exclusively—or even primarily—their academic or intellectual home. Bibliometric studies over the past 15 years depict the field of communication as an intellectual ghetto, one that rarely cites outside itself and is even more rarely cited by other disciplines. Even the "Call for Papers" of this special issue raises the proposition that "communication scholarship lacks disciplinary status," so that "institutional and scholarly legitimacy remains a chimera for the field." Not surprisingly, communication departments continue to hire from outside the field—a largesse rarely reciprocated by disciplines of greater legitimacy.

What Might Be Done

What American communication might do to make itself more central to studies in its own field should by now be obvious: It ought to embrace its traditional albeit now greatly expanded subject matter, communication, while at the same time abandoning all institutional vestiges of its narrow and long outmoded approaches to the field. A particular set of changes that would well position communication relative to other evolving fields, among the subjects of their greatest mutual interest, can be seen as a long overdue shift from what might be called the *Three Rs* to the *Four Cs*.

By the Three Rs, I mean the traditional fields of education: readin' (input and decoding), writin' (encoding and output), and 'rithmetic (computation or processing). Larger implications of the Three Rs might be found both in the impoverished model of education that they imply and in similarly objective linear models like, for example, Claude Shannon's 45-year-old mathematical model of communication.

As the essence of objective linear models of information processing and communication, however, the Three Rs do indeed well represent the American field's other outmoded baggage of the late 1940s: simple linear causation, cybernetics, vulgar computer metaphors and computer modeling, and the persistently embarrassing media effects controversy, what the "Call for Papers" describes as "the perennial black box of communication research" that "still poses the most unanswered questions."

Much as such models capture the intellectual flavor of the post-World War II period in which the American field of communication was born, the Three Rs also evoke other salient features of that time: Systematic study of mass media like motion pictures and radio was still relatively new then, as was the medium of television. Also new were even the most basic systematic techniques for the conduct and analysis of survey research. Because the behaviorism of Watson and Skinner continued to dominate American psychology, the human mind itself remained—for the nation's behavioral scientists—a black box. As McCarthyism came to dominate American society in the early 1950s, critical studies of media

and politics disappeared from public view. High culture, then a central focus of American universities, remained distinctly separate from its imagined other half, so-called popular or low culture, then virtually untouched as a subject of scholarly interest.

Even so brief a summary of the intellectual origins of the field helps to explain the central and still dominant features of the distinctively American approach to communication. Abandon its core of 50-year-old social science (garnished though it might be with a pinch of LISREL) and what remains of this field?

What remains are virtually all the interesting new developments, many imported from abroad, that have invigorated other disciplinary approaches to information and communication in recent decades. Most of these have only marginal if not fugitive status in American communication, however, and even these footholds exist only thanks mostly to younger scholars and to refugees from other disciplines and countries. It is in this residue of approaches, most not dreamed of a half century ago and all still new to American communication, that we might find the focus of a revitalized field, a focus I shall call the Four Cs after its four key elements: cognition, culture, control, and communication.

The Four Cs

By *cognition,* I mean not only the subject itself, long neglected as an integral part of communication as process, but also the work of the new cognitive science, a burgeoning field spanning disciplines from philosophy, anthropology, and linguistics to psychology, artificial intelligence, and neuroscience.

By *culture,* I mean the traditional subject, including its cognitive, external informational (symbolic), and purely material realms, so that cultural artifacts like an automobile, for example, might be simultaneously good to get around with, good to show off one's status with, and also good to think with (in the sense of Lévi-Strauss). Attention to culture necessarily links the humanities (especially literary studies and philosophy) to areas of cognitive science (especially in anthropology and linguistics) and to other social science approaches to mass media and popular culture.

By *control,* I mean not cybernetics (an important early contribution largely spent by the 1960s) but rather the much more modest insight that all social behavior—including all communication—is by definition goal-directed. The intellectual history of this approach subsumes those of pragmatism, phenomenology, natural language philosophy, social action theory, symbolic interactionism, and the new sociology of science, among other intellectual developments of the past century. Goal-directed behavior and the resultant conflicts among actors competing for resources find no place in the purely objective models manifest in most American research on communication.

Finally, by *communication* I mean the goal-directed movement and processing of information, whether in flows small (like pointing, alluding, and evoking) or large (like teaching, convincing, and simulating), as well as the residues of such flows in cultural programming (socialization) and media content. Here communication serves to link the material and symbolic levels of both culture and cognition, and these to each other, as well as to link cognitive culture to social behavior. In so doing, communication grounds behavior in cognition, and thus the individual—through culture—in the dyad, the group, the organization, and the society.

As one of the Four Cs, communication does not represent a *subject* of study, or an end in itself, but rather a means to another end—a *method* for integrating the concepts, models, and data of many disciplines. All human behavior is instigated, shaped, and constrained by information and communication, after all, both from within—by socialization, perception, and cognition—and from without—through human interaction, social structure, and technologies. Cognition, in turn, is shaped through communication by factors ranging from ideology to advertising, popular culture to journalism—factors that themselves reflect structural constraints like those of technology and political economy. Such external constraints are in turn influenced from within, both through organizational and other interpersonal communication and—ultimately—by individual cognition.

Empiricism, Pluralism, and Paradigm

Reconstituted in terms of the model and method implied by the Four Cs, the field would no longer concentrate nearly as much on particular manifestations of communication. The field would instead devote itself to a more systematic and integrative understanding of a much wider set of phenomena that are simultaneously cognitive, cultural, behavioral, and social.

Communication might in this way transcend what the "Call for Papers" describes as "the 'itch' to discover a universal paradigm," certainly a debilitating affliction in a postmodern age when—in a growing number of disciplines—text reigns supreme at the expense of theory. At the same time, the field might also avoid what the "Call for Papers" terms "a comfortable acceptance of theoretical pluralism," which in practice has meant an increasing proliferation of ever more "theories" (often known by the names of their perpetrators) whose proclamations—aided by opportunistic publishers—daily clog our university mailboxes. To the extent that we can develop the Four Cs *qua* method while forswearing the grail of paradigm, we might stem the flood of marginal theories while focusing our widest possible efforts—however modestly—on a common integrative model.

As just one of many obvious examples of phenomena that might be integrated in this way, consider the current study of popular culture. As

even the most diehard hopes for distinguishing high from low culture have been abandoned, over the past decade, the study of popular culture has flourished. Too often in the United States, however, popular content has been treated as an end in itself, by unabashed fans, rather than as a means to some more general understanding. So integral is popular culture to the understanding of communication, interpersonal no less than mass, that the field can hardly afford to leave the subject entirely to specialists. What are we to do?

Historical evidence suggests that we increasingly think with—and are thus influenced by—mass-produced sound bites, images, and icons, among other constituents of cognitive structure. Popular culture might therefore be studied as a component not only of material artifacts and media content, but also of cognition—a possibility largely overlooked by cognitive scientists. Both fields might profit from the understanding of, for example, the particular cognitive role of icons of popular culture—along with those of ancient myth, the Bible, Shakespeare, and other literature, art, and history—as constituents of everyday thought. By studying popular culture in this way, communication scholars could hope to make significant contributions both to cognitive science, as most broadly defined, and to work on artificial intelligence and expert systems in particular, even though cognitive anthropology has already staked out many of these opportunities.

Toward a Theoretical Synthesis

Despite the integrative potential of the Four Cs, the suggested synthesis cannot yet be considered a theoretical one. Communication still awaits a unifying theory, and indeed much of any theory to call its own. Even to achieve the relatively lofty status of an academic discipline, however, would not require an overarching theory like biology's modern synthesis of evolution, genetics, and ecology or the classical theory and neoclassical synthesis that informs modern economics. Except for economics and linguistics, after all, none of the social sciences or humanities has achieved anything approaching even theoretical consensus, let alone a grand synthesis of theory.

What might communication do to foster development of its own integrative theory and the potential for theoretical synthesis? Many academic fields, including most in the social sciences and humanities, have steadily developed while unified by only a common subject matter or model like those implied by the Four Cs. Much like the concepts of power in political science and the allocation of scarce resources in economics, the concepts of information and communication—as specified by both the Three Rs and the Four Cs—afford a third, potentially powerful, distinct yet complementary, and inherently integrative means by which to approach *all* social and behavioral phenomena.

Thus might the field of communication hope to join economics and po-

litical science in a tripartite division of social science, defined as the study of information and communication, of the power emergent from but dependent on them, and on the role of such power and control in the allocation of resources—including those of both information and power. Is it difficult to imagine a future in which no educated person could encounter the term *political economy* without reflexively adding a third concept like information, communication, or media? By such means might communication subsume much of the subject matter of sociology and anthropology, both currently in eclipse, and at the same time appropriate many of the social and behavioral aspects of psychology.

Under the four Cs, communication might find a more distinct place among the social sciences, by virtue of its several theoretical and methodological subfields that would necessarily center on the *exchange and flow* of information quite apart from considerations of cognition and culture per se. Modeled as one essential aspect of *all* social exchanges and flows, much as Cooley once modeled transportation, information provides the field of communication with an identifiable and measurable entity and potential commodity, distinct from those based on matter or energy, with the commoditization of information as the obvious focus of yet another important subfield.

In this way communication could complement a number of other fields that also study behavior and society as exchanges and flows: ecology, the study of energy flows; kinship analysis, the study of *ideal* flows of people through marriage, residence, and inheritance; demography, the study of *real* flows of people from birth through menarche, marriage, child bearing, emigration and immigration, to death; and input–output economics, the study of flows of money or value added. Unlike more narrowly defined studies of exchange and flow, however, communication would be able to contribute findings concerning the creation, marketing, exchange, and flow of information to a wider synthesis involving *both* the subjective (culture, cognition, and purpose in the form of *intended* control) *and* the objective (the Three Rs and *actual* control).

Because it would be predicated on the strictest attention to information, communication, and media in all aspects of human life, such a synthesis of subject matter and models, if not of theory, would force the study of any one behavioral or social phenomenon to confront all others. This would hardly end the "ideological and methodological battles" that the "Call for Papers" says "continue to fragment our field," but it would achieve an even more productive end: It would assure that such battles, the lifeblood of any discipline, take place on common ground in compatible if not identical language. In this way, the field of communication might aspire to become what Comte had hoped to make of sociology—queen of the social and behavioral sciences. Certainly the field meets one necessary condition: Its essential subject matter, information and communication, plays a fundamental role in the central theories and models of all relevant disciplines.

Communication—The Very Idea

If communication is to achieve anything like the modest synthesis suggested here, leaders of the field will have to think of themselves, above all else, as students of information, communication, and media per se, and of how and why these matter in all of their various manifestations, contexts, and applications. Considering the complex interrelationships inherent in such subject matter, it is easy to see the folly of balkanizing it in separate studies—like those of interpersonal, organizational, and mass communication—as the American field has increasingly done.

A more comprehensive view of the subject matter of communication, compatible with the one implied by the Four Rs, is that of the four-volume *International Encyclopedia of Communications* (Barnouw, Gerbner, Schramm, Worth, & Gross, 1989), which treats the field in 569 articles representing 30 major areas covering virtually every discipline. Unfortunately for all of us who share similarly expansive views of the field, however, the bulk of research, publication, and conference activities in communication today falls disproportionately in only a few of the *Encyclopedia*'s subject areas. Among these 30 areas, relatively little work in the American field has been devoted to—or even informed by—research on, for example, animal communication, computers, education, or folklore, largely because of the historical accident of entrenchment by specialties now a half-century old.

If communication scholars truly intend their field to represent the ambitious subject for which it is named, they must seek a more rational distribution of labor toward that end. Because virtually anything can be used to represent something else—and increasingly is in postmodern cultures—we must transcend the current concentration on perhaps a half dozen media in favor of descriptive, analytic, and comparative studies of the virtually unlimited numbers and types of media—wherever in societies we might find them. Why could it not be routine to find interpersonal, organizational, and mass communication treated in a single study, for example, or to conduct comparative analyses of widely diverse media as well as contexts? Few institutional changes could better improve the field of communication, or attract brighter students to the field, than the more dedicated pursuit of communication itself—the very idea—regardless of the subjects that might lead us to study.

This approach to building a discipline seems manifestly superior to its opposite extreme, what the "Call for Papers" describes as a focus "on socially relevant research" with the aim "to influence either the practice of journalism and communication or the formulation of communication policy." Nothing is more relevant to real-world concerns than theory and methods, as fields ranging from mathematics to economics can attest.

No one person could be expected to study all or even most aspects of communication, of course, no more than a single psychologist could be expected to master all of neuroscience and cognitive, developmental, so-

cial, and clinical psychology. Just as the ultimate status of academic psychology depends on its integration of this entire range of phenomena, so too does the future of American communication depend on its ability to synthesize its own subject matter in some way.

For this to happen in communication, however, its leaders must turn their collective gaze away from the past half century to the future—away from the field's now ossified subject divisions toward the other disciplines that increasingly usurp its claims to the academic study of communication. Most important of all, the field must fully embrace the subject of communication itself—the very idea—regardless of what that might entail for its current organization. For surely information and communication will continue to be the focus of intellectual excitement and integration into the foreseeable future, regardless of whether the academic field that today just happens to be named communication—largely through historical accident—manages to survive or not.

Reference

Barnouw, E., Gerbner, G., Schramm, W., Worth, T. L., & Gross, L. (1989). *International encyclopedia of communications* (4 vols.). New York: Oxford University Press.