Book review

History of Media Studies

When Communication Became a Discipline

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William F. Eadie. *When Communication Became a Discipline*. 184 pp., 1 fig., index. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2022. $100 (cloth).

Last January a PhD student provoked heated discussion in a post they made to the "Communication Scholars for Transformation" Facebook interest group.[1] Insisting that the true understanding of the discipline of performance studies originated only at their MA alma mater, New York University, the junior scholar asserted that the tradition of performance studies that arose from the oral interpretation tradition in Speech (Communication) was not performance studies: properly understood, performance concerns the "analysis of culture"—that is, analysis from the point of reception—rather than the actual production of performances (e.g., folks that self-describe as "performance practitioners").[2] Numerous luminaries of performance studies housed in what were formerly Speech departments—Tracy Stephenson Shaffer, Jonny Gray, and Trish Suchy, to name a few—challenged the trolling gatekeeper, but to no avail: the student deleted their offending posts but still stood their ground. NYU is the origin of performance studies, and this is a hill that they are willing to die on.

Because arguments about what constitutes a field or discipline—its proper object and method of study—constitute disciplinarity as such, dying on (as opposed to running up or down) this hill is foolish. Of course, there are many forms of performance studies with different origin narratives, and certainly a lot of overlap and awareness between them: one tradition is anchored in theater departments, which overlaps with the speech tradition rooted in public speaking and oral interpretation (e.g., often associated with textbooks like Ronald J. Pelias and Tracy Stephenson Shaffer's *Performance Studies: The Inter-*

[1] The discussion began with a query by Bethany Keely-Jonker about what to retitle an "Oral Interpretation" course in their department. Bethany Keely-Jonker, "Colleagues, my department has an old course called 'Oral Interpretation' we'd like to bring back," Facebook, January 23, 2024, https://www.facebook.com/share/p/nGsLyvHUwqhn9otc/.

[2] Joan Joda, "Speech and Oration. It's not performance studies," Facebook, January 23, 2024, comment on Keely-Jonker, "Colleagues," https://www.facebook.com/share/p/nGsLyvHUwqhn9otc/.

pretation of Texts), which in turn overlaps with the NYU tradition

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that draws upon Victor Turner's conception of "liminality" and related anthropological perspectives (and now often associated with Richard Schechner's textbook *Performance Studies: An Introduction*). The defiant, quasi-public demand for the real performance studies to stand (and apparently not deliver) is one of the comforts of conceptual parsimony and linear origin narratives, which retroactively reframe ambiguity and repackage uncertainty into more tolerable luggage.

We confront a greater disciplinary confusion with the fields of "communication" or "communication studies." It's common, for example, for undergraduate communication studies students at the University of Texas at Austin to identify themselves as "communications majors" when the "s" coda usually denotes communication technologies of one sort or the other (e.g., mass comm, telecom, and so on). Graduate students entering into the study of communication(s) seem even more bewildered about the horizon of the field(s), insofar as there are arguably at *least* four North American traditions that claim the term: (1) the speech tradition that arose in the late nineteenth century as "oral English," becoming the field of speech, then speech-communication in the late 1960s, then communication studies in the 1990s; (2) the tradition often associated with Paul Lazarsfeld's studies of propaganda and popular opinion, eventually becoming "mass communication" and associated with journalism departments; (3) the field that originated with Wilbur Schramm's establishment of The Institute of Communications Research at the University of Illinois, which was eventually helmed by James W. Carey and later associated with Larry Grossberg's brand of cultural studies (which in turn was influenced by the British study of "communication" pioneered by Richard Hoggart and Stuart Hall); and (4) the Canadian communication tradition, often described in the US as concerning "media ecology" and associated with figures such as Marshall McLuhan (who had a profound influence on number three). Dispersed under these admittedly oversimplified descriptions of traditions are studies of film, television, radio, and contemporary studies of social media, which may associate institutionally with any of these (for example, radio, television, and film programs have historically been housed with speech and journalism as well as theater and dance or became independent departments). In short, when someone claims to be a scholar, student, or teacher of communication, this has long indexed little more than a floating signifier requiring further contextualization in common conversation (certainly with deans and provosts, but also with folks whom one meets on an airplane).

As John Durham Peters might suggest, what links all of these communication traditions together conceptually is an impossible "dream

of communication" that bodies—alien, animal, artificial—can be transcended, which is a harmful fantasy to be sure (e.g., the problems associated with the afeared "metaphysics of presence").[3] Because the objects and methods of any field are constantly debated, understanding the fields of communication(s) is perhaps better grasped by plotting an *institutional* history. Of course, chronologies of institutional formation often play into Hegelian dreams of linear progress, but without some sort of temporal device, conceptual genealogies are—at least initially—disorienting, which inspires the self-styled sentries I bemoan.

I've rehearsed the tricky pickle of disciplinary identification at length to better nest William F. Eadie's *When Communication Became a Discipline* (*WCBD*), as readers of this journal unquestionably hail from different communication homes. *WCBD* joins a number of earlier histories of communication rooted in the speech tradition that hew closely to institutional evolution (notably, Eadie worked as an associate director of the National Communication Association for seven years). Largely covering the period between the early 1960s to the early 1980s in the United States, Eadie's argument is presented mostly as an *intellectual* history that picks up where previous histories of the speech tradition leave off, such as Pat Gehrke's *The Ethics and Politics of Speech* or William Keith's *Democracy as Discussion*.[4] As a complement to these earlier studies, Eadie's book traces a trajectory that is careful to detail the interrelationship between *journalism* and the speech tradition, largely in respect to the professional and credentialing organizations of the National Communication Association (NCA; formerly the Speech Communication Association), the International Communication Association (ICA), and the Association of Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC).[5] Other communication traditions are mentioned in passing, but it is the speech circuit that helps to circumscribe that would otherwise be an even more sprawling story.

In the first three chapters, Eadie moves to describe what he means by "discipline," which is narrower than the conception of "field." Eadie asserts that "disciplines . . . are communities of inquiry organized around a particular topic" and can be somewhat crudely discerned in terms of department names or the titles of degrees that "we" award students (4). (Who "we" are is a vexed notion that Eadie also takes up in the introduction.) Although many of us use the terms "field" and "discipline" interchangeably, Eadie's understanding of discipline seems to suggest it refers to academic recognition in local departments as well as through national professional organizations. Eadie says that the story he will tell "takes more the form of argument than it does history, though I do support that argument

[3] John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999.)

[4] Pat J. Gehrke, *The Ethics and Politics of Speech* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2009); William M. Keith, *Democracy as Discussion: Civic Education and the American Forum Movement* (New York: Lexington Books, 2007). One of the most definitive early histories here is Herman Cohen, *The History of Speech Communication: The Emergence of a Discipline, 1914–1945* (Annandale, VA: Speech Communication Association, 1994).

[5] I should also mention that Eadie edited a massive, two-volume reference book for communication studies writ large: William F. Eadie, *21st Century Communication: A Reference Handbook* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2009).

with historical evidence" (5). His argument is that communication achieved "respect in the academy" in the early 1980s (141), when "journalism and speech professors succeeded in becoming communication professors" (5). Eadie says that "by 1982 communication was only poised to become a discipline—it would take several years more before its disciplinary status would be recognized [by whom is never quite clear]" (5). To this end, Eadie isolates five "strands" of communicative inquiry in subsequent chapters respectively, each of which contributes toward a growing coherence in regard to the object of communication and methods of study in the twentieth century.

Eadie proceeds by recursively collapsing succeeding chapters into different conceptions of object and method: public opinion and media studies (chapter four); rhetorical and language studies (chapter five); "information transmission" or mass media studies as they intersect with communication systems (chapter six); interpersonal communication (largely social science–based, chapter seven); critical/cultural studies (chapter eight); and a concluding chapter that glosses field developments since 1982. Like a palimpsest, the different methods and approaches to communication are written on top of one another, roving back and forth over the twentieth century. Such an organizational scheme is smart, for while there is a rough chronology to Eadie's story, the recursive character of different vantage points helps to diffuse the assumption that the discipline(s) or field(s) of communication developed in a straight line. For example, Eadie devotes much attention throughout the study to a "sub-group" of the Speech Association of America (a precursor to NCA), the National Society for the Study of Communication, and its journal, *The Journal of Communication*, which were formally established in 1950 (28). After tracing its split from NCA into the International Communication Association in 1970, discussion of ICA will appear periodically throughout the study, such as in the seventh chapter in which a focus on public speech begins to push toward the study of "person-to-person communication as a context for study" and the creation of a much respected annual journal, the *Communication Yearbook* (107). After establishing the ur-plot of the field, each chapter moves back and forth in time, pulling through themes to the present, then returning again to the past to pull up again from a different angle.

When Communication Became a Discipline is a valuable historical argument for how speech communication—and to a lesser extent journalism—achieved disciplinary "status" through various permutations of study.[6] Earlier chronicles of speech departments address a number of struggles and skirmishes in the 1920s among speech instructors about how best to study the object of speech: social science or humanities? The decision by the 1930s was "both," which is be-

[6] Also see Pat J. Gehrke and William M. Keith, eds., *A Century of Communication Studies: The Unfinished Conversation* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

latedly reflected in the name change to the Speech Communication Association in the late 1960s ("speech" referenced the humanities and "communication" the social sciences; notably, the "behaviorists" left with ICA despite the change anyway). This tension over methodology has never left the field, but the focus of disciplinary history has largely been on the formative years before the postwar period. Eadie picks up the thread after the Second World War pulling it into the 1980s, filling in some gaps of understanding (especially in the 1970s) and weaving together very different methodologies and approaches to the study of "communication" into a more or less messy but coherent narrative. The book is chock-full of nuggets of information and detail, and numerous luminaries inside and outside "the field" appear to be given due justice. It is no small feat to address developments in social science and the humanities simultaneously, which is a tribute to Eadie's pastoral grasp of—and attention to—detail.

At times *WCBD* is a tedious read; this is particularly true when Eadie outlines the peculiarities of communication theory and experimental design. In chapter seven, for example, Eadie is at pains to describe the influence of a book titled *Pragmatics of Human Communication* in the development of so-called relational communication (vis-à-vis interpersonal communication), which inspires M.R. Parks to advance a number of "axioms" and "theorems" in 1977, which Eadie in turn lists seriatim over the course of three pages. Such detail in lieu of paraphrasing will not be of interest to the general reader in the wider studies of communication, although I recognize the importance of describing the operationalization of concepts in many influential studies "for the record." However, one doesn't need to get into the weeds with Eadie to appreciate the years-long research and citational depth of his account of communication as a "discipline."

One of the most perplexing dimensions of Eadie's sport is the insistence that communication is a discipline and not merely a field. I will hold off on detailing the morass of distinguishing field from discipline—a popular topic of higher education studies, particularly in the wake of the resource failures of "interdisciplinarity"—other than to say that what appears to be at stake here is a longed-for recognition: when did communication scholars and teachers become *respected* as genuine scholars and teachers in the wider academy? Without appeals to his authority as an experienced officer of the NCA—which he could have easily done—Eadie makes his case based on the historical record and the citational gravitas of important books, articles, and figures over time. Few readers of this journal will fail to recognize the legacy of disrespect toward communication teaching and scholarship that is routinely rehearsed in popular culture: a degree in communication or communications is often

lampooned as a vacuous specialization. From *The Simpsons* to late night talk show digs—most recently on *Real Time with Bill Maher*—communication is derided as an "easy major." Although we should stop far short of saying that the speech tradition represents *the* discipline of communication, as an expression of the whole, Eadie makes a strong case for the rigorous character of communication research and the insights produced by the field, if only by example.

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