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Recognizing 'Ourselves' in Media and Communications Research

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Introduction

What has the communication discipline contributed to the social sciences and what is its impact on policy and social change?¹ These questions challenge us to rethink the relevance of communication research and its place and role in theory and praxis. It is sometimes asserted that communication research has numerous deficiencies as a discipline. These may include the fact that 'we' have not developed our own set of disciplinary problems, that 'we' fail to return something of value to society, and that 'we' are not sufficiently interdisciplinary. I suggest in response that it is important to engage critically with the notion that there is a cohesive 'we' that self-identifies with a discipline of media and communication, especially when scholarship beyond the United States academy is considered. I argue that media and communication studies is inherently interdisciplinary, but that interdisciplinarity, in and of itself, is not an antidote to scholarly 'lightness' in this or any other area of research in the social sciences.

Who do 'we' think 'we' are?

If we ask who 'we' refers to in the context of an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of research in the media and communications field, it is necessary to problematize who is assumed to be identifying with research in this area. My early training and subsequent career have convinced me that the study of media and communication does not benefit from the project of building a discipline. I was trained in the communication field at Simon Fraser University in Canada. In the late 1970s there was a debate about whether media and communication studies is best regarded as a discipline or a field. My teachers had been trained in economics, philosophy, psychology, and sociology and their research was variously informed by theories in those disciplines. They introduced their students to the 'cannon' of theory that they had come to regard as salient for media and communication research. This embraced Canadian, United States and European scholarship as well as work by scholars in Asia and Latin America. The main emphasis was on critical engagement with disciplinary theory and empirical research. It was also on the importance of critical engagement with

theory to ensure the social relevance of research in an interdisciplinary field of study (Melody & Mansell, 1983).

The Media and Communications Department at the London School of Economics where I work fosters a similar strongly interdisciplinary approach. It is engaged, not in a project of discipline building, but instead, in contributing to building a field of excellent and socially relevant research in an area that benefits from collaborative scholarship with specialists in their respective disciplines. Struggles for disciplinary recognition often favour work that only exceptionally challenges its own theoretical and epistemological premises. When disciplinary recognition is the principal driver as a result of pressures within universities to compete for students and financial resources, departments frequently start to mimic each other, innovating only on the margins. When competitive success is the main motivator, opportunities to engage in debate about how knowledge conventions are forged are at risk of receding into the background. Certain research questions, especially those challenging received views are at great risk of being marginalized by instrumental or dominant theories and methods (Mansell, 2012). I suggest that an important and obligatory question for media and communication researchers who tackle their subject area from both material and symbolic perspectives, is who is 'we'? What are the conventions and understandings of power relations that enable 'us' to recognize ourselves and to draw distinctions between ourselves and others?

There are numerous ways in which recognition can be gained for an interdisciplinary field of inquiry. If, as I suggest, the field of media and communication studies is inherently interdisciplinary, it does not need a set of 'disciplinary' problems. Certainly it needs an orientation and persistent consideration of where its core interests lie. Some may denigrate research on media and communication because of it does not benefit from widespread recognition as a discipline, but it is far more fruitful to focus on the vibrancy of inquiry in the field and to build upon this. The realities of the academy, especially in the United States, push towards a disciplinary orientation. This orientation has been exported around the world, typically in the form of

instrumental or mainstream theoretical approaches. A strength of inquiry in this field, however, has long been its engagement with critical research, however this is understood (Babe, 2015).

Claims to interdisciplinarity

What can an interdisciplinary field of inquiry into media and communication aspire to? How does it go about establishing knowledge conventions and are there substantial differences in the way regimes of power take hold? Perhaps interdisciplinarity is simply a different pathway where the same problems are encountered as those confronting the discipline builders. I suggest that the interdisciplinary pathway is different because it more open and responsive to the lived problems and experiences of social actors. I take my department as an example to illustrate how it is feasible to differentiate an interdisciplinary approach from a disciplinary pathway.

The Media and Communications Department at the London School of Economics and Political Science is a relatively new department established in 2003. There was research underway across the School with a focus on media and communication for many years before this, principally, but not exclusively, in the social psychology and sociology departments. A broad interdisciplinary network embracing scholars was fostered with disciplinary expertise in economics, geography, information systems, philosophy and linguistics, and law, as a precursor to the formation of a department.

Once formally established as a department, the idea that scholars in the department should retain their disciplinary expertise was maintained. Growing from a very small to a medium sized department enabled the inclusion of scholars with specialist knowledge in multiple disciplines and fields, currently including political science, science, technology and innovation studies, and gender studies in addition those mentioned above. Only a relatively small number of colleagues, including myself, have a doctorate in communication

studies. We publish in communication journals, but we also publish in disciplinary journals.

A principle aim of the LSE Department of Media and Communication is to ensure that members of the department and students ground their work in disciplinary theory drawn from the social sciences and that we engage with, and critique, whatever the canon might be, whether it originates in the United States, the United Kingdom or elsewhere. We teach at the post-graduate level and we focus on global media and communication, political communication, policy and governance, communication and development, and data and society problems and issues. Theories of power, the public sphere and publics, globalization, mediation and mediatization, political economy, postcoloniality and cosmopolitanism, inform much of our work.

Members of the department engage in debate about what it means to 'deWesternize' the field of media and communication research. Diverse views about what this means in practice for teaching and research are under continuous discussion. Partly as a consequence of our interdisciplinary stance, students are accepted from disciplines across the social sciences. All our students must take and pass a qualitative and quantitative methodology course and a reflexive approach to empirical research is emphasized, informed by disciplinary expertise. Academic staff engage in mixed method empirical research and students are encouraged to do so as well in their research projects.

A focus on a set of core issues is a means of ensuring that the work of the department coheres as a field of intellectual inquiry. We converge around inquiry into processes of *mediated knowledge construction* - what are the shifting relations between knowledge producers and users in a mediated world? We investigate *mediated political agency* - what are the changing relations between the media and their forms, subjects and modalities of political and civic agency? We examine cultures and identities - what do belonging and community mean on all scales from the local to the transnational? We investigate governing mediated environments - what roles do technologies, structures and processes of media

and communication play nationally and internationally? Cutting across these themes are comparative and transnational research problematics and attention to the ethical implications of undertaking engaged, critical research and teaching. The starting point is critical inquiry into pressing social problems and the role played by the media and communicative practice in a wide variety of contexts. The analysis of mediated experience is at the core of what is explored with the ambition of ensuring that normativity is connected to explicit, often contested, cultural, social, political and economic values.

In the light of this interdisciplinary approach, I suggest that encouraging and provoking reflexive engagement among scholars and those working outside the university is more productive than a lament for the lightness of media and communication as a discipline. Achieving excellence in research in the field of media and communication is the goal of my department alongside achieving social relevance and impact through a variety of approaches to knowledge exchange.² An online media policy platform³ and a think tank on journalism and society, POLIS⁴ provide a means to highlight how research in the field of media and communication connects with the agendas of governments, non-governmental organizations, and United Nations agencies, as well as with the private sector.

When emphasis is given to questions about how, for instance, inequality and mediated life intersect, this shifts inquiry away from debate about whether the study of media and communications must acquire status as a discipline. I do not suggest that interdisciplinarity is a way to avoid the emergence of hierarchies of knowledge or the proliferation of theories, but it does help to focus attention on critical enquiry. This is because it ensures constant attention to the inquiries of others who may not regard the role of the media and communication as an important feature of cultural, social, economic and political change or of asymmetrical power relationships, but who are willing to engage in a constructive dialogue.

Conclusion

Interdisciplinarity in the media and communication field encourages a critical focus on why media and communication matter (Silverstone, 1999). It focuses scholarly attention on theory development concerning the material facets and the symbolic process of mediated communication that help to expose lived asymmetries of power at both the individual and the collective levels. The aim of interdisciplinary inquiry is to understand and critique the material and symbolic power of media – old and new.

Interdisciplinarity is not an antidote for the 'lightness of communication research', but it does offer a pathway for resisting the hegemony of a disciplinary project. It is a means of emphasizing research on pressing social problems and of ensuring that normativity in research in the field is explicitly related to values. It is a means of provoking forward-looking reflexive engagement among scholars within the media and communication field and beyond. It is a pathway that enables scholars to recognize themselves as having a common interest in social problem-solving and the way the media and communication are implicated in a way that is respectful of diverse traditions of critical scholarly research and teaching across the social sciences.

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Notes

¹ This is a revised version of a presentation for the ICA Panel session on 'The Unbearable Lightness of Communication Research' organized by Jan Servaes and Jim Anderson, ICA Conference, San Juan, 24 May 2015.

² The Department's status at the forefront of work in the media and communication field was confirmed by the results of the UK 2014 Research Excellence Framework with 47 per cent of the Department's research output rated 'world-leading' (the highest category) and a further 44 per cent rated 'internationally excellent' (the second highest category). The Department ranked top in the UK for both the quality of its research and the strength of its non-academic research impact.

³ See <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mediapolicyproject/>

⁴ See <http://www.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/Polis/home.aspx>