

## ***Critical Forum***

# The Future of Communication History

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The field of communication has always emphasized the future. It grew from a need to make sense out of the encounter with novel technologies and cultural forms in the United States—from the late 19th-century encounter with the mass culture of popular newspapers and magazines, and then from the early 20th-century encounter with film and broadcast entertainment. Yet, even at its origins, the field has always had a powerful impulse to project historical narratives. Communication scholars have fed this impulse with their own original histories while also recruiting historical work from outside the field to form a sort of canon.

It is a very diverse canon. Communication scholars draw from all sorts of histories that are not aimed at each other or directed to a common audience—the history of literacy and of education, of libraries, of technologies, of political culture, and of the senses. It also includes journalism history, the new literary history, economic history, and the history of transportation. Individual scholars choose different slices. You could call this rambling interdisciplinary a field, but it's yet to recognize itself as such. Perhaps now is its time; perhaps its time will never come.

Among communication scholars, the historical work of communication scholarship often divides along two tendencies. One, associated with the Canadian School and U.S. epigones like James W. Carey and Neil Postman, focuses on the grand narrative of media technologies. The other, associated with the traditional fields of journalism history and the history of freedom of the press, focuses on a whiggish narrative of the contribution of media institutions to the rise of democratic freedom. The first tends to be cosmic in scope and emphasizes form; the second is more concrete and emphasizes content (Nerone, 1990, 1993, 2003).

Since the 1970s, a series of interdisciplinary scholarly formations, rooted largely outside the boundaries of communication scholarship, have promised to bridge these two tendencies. Three in particular have recently been influential: the history of technology, the “history of the book,” and the history of the public sphere. Each has produced narratives in the midrange between the cosmic and the concrete, while

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promising an organizing grand narrative for further detailed research. In what follows, I'll briefly characterize each formation and weigh its contributions to satisfying the historical appetite of the field of communication research.

Basic to this discussion is an understanding of the disjuncture between history as practiced by professional historians and the histories that appeal most to communication scholars. "Professional" history was founded on the modernist notion that a potentially infinite number of narratives crafted out of archival documents could assemble itself brick by brick into a great cathedral of knowledge. Historians lost that faith long ago (Novick, 1988). But the practice of professional history hasn't changed. Individual historians still craft narrative bricks out of archival sources, but no longer expect them to make sense of each other, to yield up grand narrative. Instead, each individual work tries to make sense in itself by a bottomless contextualization; Hayden White sees historical work as dominated by the trope of irony (White, 1973, 1987).

Communication scholars, on the other hand, still want grand narrative. They are more attracted to the so-called "natural histories" (Nisbet, 1969) produced by earlier historians like Voltaire and Rousseau or by other social scientists like Marx or Comte, from whom Innis and McLuhan, for instance, stand in a direct line of descent. To professional historians, such work looks pre-professional, lost in a kind of religious fog. Even the more concrete histories of journalism and freedom of the press seem "spiritual" because they appeal to almost Hegelian notions of progress—toward freedom, or toward professional autonomy (Peters, 1999).

So there is an asymmetry between professional historians and communication scholars. Historians don't think much of communication scholarship or the history that communication scholars produce, though they are glad sometimes to borrow a concept or two. Communication scholars, on the other hand, frequently adopt historians, like Elizabeth Eisenstein or Robert Darnton, drafting them into discourses that they didn't intend to participate in. To achieve an identity as a field, communication history will need to overcome this asymmetry. To some extent, this has been accomplished in the specific interdisciplines this essay discusses.

### **The History of Technology**

The history of technology is a well established specialization for historians and other social scientists. It has its own professional organization, the Society for the History of Technology (SHOT), as well as its own journals and canon, featuring work by scholars who bridge theory and archival research like Stephen Shapin and Bruno Latour. It also has its own foundational insight: the social construction of technology.

Like most foundational insights, the social construction of technology is flexible enough to embrace a number of different positions. To simplify, one could arrange the various positions in a spectrum, depending on the most important contextual factors, from culture to policy to economy. Among the histories of technology most frequently cited by communication scholars, Carolyn Marvin's (1988) *When Old*

*Technologies Were New* emphasizes cultural determinants, like gender; Richard John's (1995) history of the U.S. postal system emphasizes policy; and Robert McChesney's (1993) history of U.S. broadcasting policy emphasizes political economy.

All of these works reflect a kind of generational pullback from earlier, starker positions. Cultural work reflects the influence of founding figures like McLuhan, Carey, or Postman, on the one hand, who emphasize the determination of media forms, or the emphasis on the discursive of Foucault or Deleuze and Guattari on the other. Economic work reflects the influence of Dallas Smythe and Herb Schiller, among others. The shared notion of social construction allows current scholars to cite each other's work with approval, unlike the earlier generation.

The meeting of these different positions is evident in Paul Starr's *The Creation of the Media* (2004), the most recent masterwork in this tradition. Heavily influenced by the new institutionalism, Starr argues that the development of communication technologies takes off from policy decisions made in a more or less conscious process of debate. These decisions, however, establish a path of development that comes over time to set limits to future possibilities. His narrative moves through time from the open and intelligent debate on early postal policy in the 18th and 19th centuries to the 20th century's mostly closed bargaining over broadcast and telecommunications policy. The arc of this narrative seems to reconcile the various positions. But one could argue that in the final analysis political economy trumps culture. By the end of the narrative, policy discussion has been confined to industrial players; throughout the narrative, cultural factors like gender, race, and ethnicity go missing, as well as the sort of economic factors that mattered so much to an earlier generation, like class and power in the workplace.

From another angle, Jonathan Sterne's *The Audible Past* (2004) offers a rather different social construction. Examining the history of sound media—including familiar items like the phonograph and less familiar ones like the stethoscope—Sterne dwells on the deeply cultural history of the senses, echoing the Canadian School's approach but with a more explicit debt to French cultural theory—Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, Latour, and Bourdieu. Again, while seeming at peace with the economic position, the narrative consistently veers toward the cultural.

One could assess the continuing divergence of work in this formation in several different ways. Perhaps "social construction" simply postpones theoretical commitment, or allows commitments to hide in the narrative. A happier take would see history—the gravitational pull of actual technological development—drawing opposing theoretical positions together. History has to walk on two legs.

In any case, work in the history of technology has come to share a common overt message. It always sets itself up as a corrective to presentist utopian and dystopian fantasies about media forms working Trojan horse-like. It tells us that "new media" are really old media, or at least not so different. Not that any amount of sound historical work can dislodge the general belief in the autonomous power of technology.

## The History of the Book

The history of the book is by now also a well established formation. It too has its own scholarly organization, the Society for the History of Authorship, Reading, and Publishing (SHARP), and its own journals and canon, featuring work by Annales-style social historians (Febvre & Martin, 1976), historians of literacy (Engelsing, 1974; Graff, 1987), social and cultural historians (Darnton, 1979; Eisenstein, 1979), bibliographers (McKenzie, 2002), representatives of the British cultural studies impulse (Altick, 1957; Williams, 1961), and literary scholars (Denning, 1987; Radway, 1984). Although very diverse, scholars in this formation share a general persuasion. Frustrated by the abstraction of intellectual history and the theoretical turn of literary scholarship, they emphasize materiality. Likewise troubled by the scholarly tendency to read meaning from texts, they seek to find meaning created in the reading process. They are by instinct cultural populists. Historians of the book generally are committed to the “making” of culture in the same way that E. P. Thompson hailed the *Making of the English Working Class* (1963).

The history of the book projects a grand narrative of sorts. It is not formalized in a single work, but is currently being collected in collaborative encyclopedic projects, like the five-volume *History of the Book in America*, the first volume of which has already appeared (Hall & Amory, 2000). This narrative is largely a Western one, common to the nations of Europe and North America. It has a prologue in medieval manuscript culture, but really begins with the European invention of printing. It then follows an arc from craft to industrial production and distribution, as the book changes from treasure to tool and reading from intensive to extensive, from elite to mass. This history climaxes at the end of the 19th century, after which the book dissolves into the media.

In their general dislike of abstraction and wariness of theory, historians of the book tend to dislike the field of communication. Historians of journalism like David Nord, Michael Schudson (both editors of the *History of the Book in America*), Thomas Leonard, and Gerald Baldasty have been active in this formation, and James W. Carey’s work is quasi-canonical, but communication scholarship itself seems suspect as presentist and overly abstract—ironically so, because its default theoretical positions make the history of the book continually slide into a history of communication.

Historians of the book look for evidence of the material communication of ideas. This means tracing the life history of printed texts, from authorship to publication to distribution to reading. Robert Darnton has drawn up the model of communication several times (1982, 2000) in the form of circuits representing the transmission of ideas. “The Book,” in this model, is a useful but inaccurate term for any material form of transmission. Making culture requires that the circuit be completed. This can occur only when a reader encounters a text and makes something out of it, the final moment in the circuit. In this model of communication history, the gold standard moment is the “reading experience”; one of the most impressive productions is the

Reading Experience Database, a collaborative project in which scholars contribute finds in diaries and letters and so forth of first-person reports of reading experiences.

The transmission model, coupled with the cultural populism of the formation, tilts work in the history of the book away from the study of institutions and media. Perhaps this is why current work in this formation finds less of an audience among communication scholars than that of the previous generation. There are important exceptions to this tendency, though. Scholars whose work explores both institutional and individual activities include the late William Gilmore-Lehne (1989) and Ron Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray (Zboray, 1993; Zboray & Zboray, 2005). In this work also, however, one sees the assumption of opposing polarities of structure and individual agency, with a normative emphasis on the individual. This is how we imagine print culture to have operated in its most sovereign period. Individuals—authors at one end, empowered readers at the other—used modest institutional actors—publishers and booksellers, mostly—to produce print forms that promoted reason and a democratizing culture. Books and, to a lesser extent as industrialization occurred, newspapers fit this narrative; other media forms, conventionally, don't. This persuasion mirrors the now familiar Habermasian narrative of the public sphere.

### **The History of the Public Sphere**

The most concrete forms of communication history—journalism history and the history of freedom of expression—have always concerned themselves with the relationship between communication and governance, especially the emergence of forms of representative democracy. One could argue that these histories always were histories of the public sphere without recognizing themselves as such. Certainly a notion of public space lay at the base of the debate between Lippmann and Dewey, a debate that did much to define the terms of the field. A fine example of this is James Carey's presidential address to the Association for Education in Journalism (1978), which firmly places the practice of journalism by professionals within the context of a transforming public sphere. Carey relies mostly on Richard Sennett (1976) and Sam Bass Warner (1968) for his account of the history of public life.

In the 1990s, the publication in English of Jurgen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989) gave a new identity to this tendency. Habermas's account was influential across fields and disciplines for a number of reasons. First, its approach was architectural, looking at the social history that allowed for the creation of a particular kind of space. As a spatial history, it promised to transcend some traditional stalemates—between form and content, the political and the social, the discursive and the metadiscursive. For journalism historians and intellectual or cultural historians, especially, it permitted a more satisfying form of argument about the impact of certain ideas. In particular, in the area of the history of ideology, it allowed historians to turn their attention away from discursive analysis—how specific texts framed arguments about, say, liberty vs. virtue—and toward the metadiscursive conditions—how the practice of printing in the 18th century entailed a certain etiquette (Clark, 1994; Warner, 1990). Finally, for communication scholars

especially, Habermas's version of the history of the public sphere offered to ground normative argument in a genuinely historical scholarly practice.

In the 1990s, the political moment had produced a perfect climate for receiving Habermas. Intense normative interrogation of media practice had been inspired by evidence of serious decay in public discourse and political participation. Robert Putnam (1995) captured the mood perfectly in his essay "On Bowling Alone." In journalism schools and in newsrooms, the quest for a more successful posture inspired the public journalism movement (Merritt, 1995; Rosen, 1999). Hence the enthusiasm over Habermas's *Structural Transformation*, a work which otherwise might not have earned much attention, characterized as it is by reliance on last generation's historical scholarship, by difficult prose, and by a critique of mass culture that had become unfashionable in the 1980s.

But Habermas's account quickly began to decay. Some scholars, attentive to the traditional whiteness and maleness of the general public sphere, called for both historical and normative work to adopt a notion of plural publics (Fraser, 1997; Ryan, 1997), and even more radically of counterpublics (Warner, 2002). This sort of public sphere revisionism promised to take a more inclusive view of past society, and pledged to work toward opening up present-day public discourse, but did so at the expense of the grand narrative and unifying architecture of Habermas's initial account. Other scholars took a harder look at Habermas's history on its own terms, and concluded that the strong public of the 18th century really didn't exist (Altschuler & Blumin, 2000; Schudson, 1999). Ordinary people, they argue, have never been generally involved in political discourse, and political discourse has never been very elevated. Lippmann was right. At the turn of the millennium, it was possible to say that Habermas's moment had passed.

But these arguments seem to me to miss a key part of the communication history of the public sphere, which we can call the representation of the public. The public does not exist unless it is represented. This is the crucial distinction between Habermas's public and George Gallup's, say. The public sphere includes mechanisms for representing the public, and U.S. politics has always been based on the struggle to control the representation of the public, a struggle that has often been violent (Nerone, 1994, 2006). Harold Mah (2000) has argued persuasively for a return to a focus on the ways in which the public sphere produces a representation of a unitary public opinion, an argument which brings Habermas into conversation with another recent canonical work in communication history, Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1991). Perhaps a public sphere synthesis of communication history can still occur.

## Conclusion

And now for an entirely equivocal summing up: Looked at from an Archimedean perspective, communication history displays galloping theoretical incoherence. It is as interdisciplinary and eclectic as any neighborhood of scholarship anywhere. None of the formations we've looked to have any real promise for establishing coherence.

I still treasure some hope for the history of the public sphere. But even there the promise is to make sense of and offer a research agenda for only a limited swath of communication history, to the exclusion of much else that interests communication scholars.

But although this situation is not good for theorists, it's good enough for historians. Historical practice doesn't need theoretical coherence beyond what is required to be able to tell a compelling story. In fact, the failure of grand theory is one condition that impels scholars to turn to historical research. Within comfortable zones of theorizing, histories are projected without any need for recourse to the archives. One might say that it is the job of historians to produce disquiet for these zones of theory, to defamiliarize.

But without a clearer disciplinary identity, the history of communication will not gain the respect of other more disciplinary historians. It is not, in the final analysis, real conceptual coherence that makes a historical field come to awareness of itself—if that were the case, we would have no such thing as journalism history, which does have an identity, incorporated into scholarly organizations, promoted in journals, and instituted into curricula in journalism degree programs. No one really knows the boundaries of journalism history; certainly, much of what is taught in journalism history courses is not what journalists would recognize as journalism. Rather, journalism history shows that a historical field is itself historically constructed.

By the same token we can imagine communication history becoming a historical field. Ultimately, however, to achieve the kind of status that historians of, say, law or education (or even journalism) have achieved, communication historians will need to incorporate more fully—to form scholarly organizations, to establish journals, and to erect a curriculum within established degree programs.

Either that, or learn to love the margins. I recommend the latter.

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