Reconnecting Communications Studies With Communications Policy

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Ten years ago, in summarizing *Ferment in the Field*, the predecessor to this volume, George Gerbner (1983) noted the centrality of communications in modern society and agreed with the observation that "if Marx were alive today, his principal work would be entitled *Communications* rather than *Capital*" (p. 358). Marx's scholarly writing on capital influenced politics and policy. But could the same be said for writings about today's central economic activity, the communication of information, since *Ferment in the Field* appeared?

The answer is no. Communications studies played only a minor role in the enormous changes in the public treatment of the communications system. During the past decade, individualized and mass electronic media were transformed from national monopolies and oligopolies to new structures that may, in time, resemble print media and their distribution (Noam 1992a, 1992b). At the time communications was on the table of national policy, when new institutional arrangements were being established, the field of communications did not communicate well to governmental decision makers, whether in Washington, Brussels, or other capitals. There were some exceptions, including Gerbner's own work on violence, or studies on advertisements aimed at children, because social science could bring specialized expertise and tools to these questions. But, while communications research has often been quite openly and legitimately political, as in the discussion over the New Information Order (Schiller, 1983), communications scholars absented themselves from actual policy—perhaps questioning, with Lasswell, whether "the concern for enlightened policy [can] survive close involvement in the process itself" (in Melody & Mansell, 1983, p. 109).

Consequently, communications scholarship has been without a real-

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world role, in contrast to some other fields, such as environmental studies, which overcame the structural impediments that limit academia's influence and participation in the public arena. Policymakers often ignore social science research (Hamelink, 1983), but scholars also underestimate their own weight. Ideas may not win, but they matter. While convenient ideas may get amplified more than those that threaten, and while the realistic set of policy options may be narrow (Haight, 1983, p. 231), the policy process is also a voracious consumer of ideas. They are used to illuminate, legitimate, and do battle. The test of an academic field is not and should not be its instrumentality. Communications studies have made important contributions to the understanding of the media that surround us, the processes that contribute to their outputs, and their cultural, political, and economic significance. They have addressed broader issues of class, gender, history, control, language, audiences, the human interface, and content, to mention a few. Even so, when a discipline that is by now fairly substantial in terms of numbers and maturity is largely absent in the shaping of society's treatment of the very subject of its study, one must take note.

Communications Scholarship's Tendency to Defend the Status Quo
In communications' transition from monopoly, communications scholars have often protected the existing order. The old policy arrangements had some undeniable social merit as well as power and benefits to disburse to their participants. In most countries, communications were a public service oriented to the public welfare. But the reality has been more complex. In point-to-point telecommunications—never a popular research subject, despite their pervasiveness in personal and organizational information exchange—long-standing monopolies had become bloated and slow. Technological decisions tended to be captured by domestic supplier industries. Even so, the change to a more open network environment was accompanied by scholarly assertions of impending social doom, few of which were retracted when the predicted calamities failed to materialize.

In television, too, the reality of the traditional public monopoly broadcast system that existed in many countries fell far short of the idealized expectation of quality programming. The pervasive politicization of the powerful public institutions was not given much research attention. Nor was there much study of the negative impact on national and regional cultures and on artistic independence resulting from a system in which a single national public broadcast monopoly served as the gatekeeper and chief financier of the film and video creativity of an entire society. Despite a vast body of political science research, it was often assumed that such an institution would act for the public, without regard to its self-interest or that of its political patrons. Such assertions were even made on behalf of state broadcasting in the predemocratic regimes of Eastern Europe (Szecskö, 1983).

Have other academic disciplines been more involved in the transforma-

tion of communications? Technologists provided some of the tools that enabled change. They (and business-school strategy researchers) often played a booster role that looked overoptimistically at the potential of technical progress. But their role outside technology policy has been comparatively small. Political scientists and historians have had an astonishingly low profile considering the magnitude of change and its long-term implications for the political and social system. Legal academics have played some role by framing antimonopoly arguments, extending free speech principles to electronic media, and crafting new communications statutes. Among social scientists, economists have probably been the most influential, providing the general free-market case which helped to destabilize the "natural" monopoly system. Economists and lawyers were also active—often in the employ of interest groups—in the implementation of change. But once the argument for removing entry barriers had been accepted, they contributed little to a vision of the future.

In the academic pecking order, theory is more prestigious than empiricism or policy (Miller, 1983). It is produced for academic receptors, in ever narrowing networks of specialists communicating in jargons. Yet theory must refer to a fast-changing reality, especially if it has political implications and if it is to guide applied research. Ten years ago Pool argued that beliefs were no substitute for empiricism: "Avoid measurement, add moral commitment" (1983, p. 260). Similarly, Melody and Mansell (1983) pointed to an interrelation: "In the policy debate, the theoretical and methodological trappings of research are directly confronted by reality and the test of relevance" (p. 113). But parts of the field have remained inhospitable to empiricism, despite its significant contributions in earlier days. With inadequate incentives inside academia, the empirical and policy base of communications research was further weakened by a brain drain of those with a strong fact base into private consulting, think tanks, and nonacademic dissemination.

Issues for the Future

Given these problems, communications studies are not well poised to deal with some of the issues of the new information order that is emerging or to have an impact on it. Will communications research become increasingly sophisticated methodologically yet less publicly relevant? Or will the next generation of researchers prove to be up-to-date and involved? This requires the identification today of tomorrow's issues, their transmission to the next generation of scholars, and their presentation to the public. What are some of these trends?

Beyond the Nation-State
Under the old information order, territorially organized electronic communications networks were based, technologically, on the need for a net-

work architecture that minimized transmission distances; politically, on the desire of the state for control over communications; economically, on incumbent organizations' desire for profitable protection; and socially, on the shared reference of national culture. But in the future, with the cost of transmission dropping and distance-insensitive, both telecommunications and mass media networks will become globally organized. This will have important effects. For example, "electronic democracy" tends to be viewed as the use of communications media for political participation within established political units. Yet, this is merely one step in the creation of "virtual" communities. Group formation is based on economic and social interaction. Communications media will not create a global village, but instead help organize the world as a series of electronic neighborhoods transcending national frontiers.

Historically, the nation-state was at tension with cross-border allegiances. The new environment weakens national cohesion in favor of both an internationalism and particularism. It is difficult for a state to extend its powers beyond traditional frontiers, but it is easy for network groups to do so. Through communication—the process through which a shared culture is created—they establish themselves as new cultural units, affecting both cultural fragmentation nationally and postmodernist homogenization internationally (Carey, 1983, 1993). They have to set individual contributions to cover their cost, and in the process create their own de facto tax and redistribution mechanisms. They have to mediate the conflicting interests of their members, determine major investments, set standards, decide whom to admit and whom to expel. As group networks becomes more important and complex, control over their management becomes fought over. Elections may take place. Constitutions, by-laws, and regulations are passed. Arbitration mechanisms are established. Financial assessment of members takes place. Networks thus become political entities and quasi-jurisdictions.

Beyond Regulation

The replacement of communications monopolies by a partly competing, partly collaborating, interconnected, and nonhierarchical *network of networks* will fundamentally change the face of media industries as we know them. To provide integration of the various discrete networks, specialized *systems integrators*, which will become in time the central institutions of communications, are emerging and replacing many of the roles of today's telephone companies, broadcasters, and cable operators. They will put together individualized *personal* networks, and interconnect them with each other in what may be described as a *system of systems.*

Such a structure will be radically different from the present media system, and it invites academic analysis. For example, what would be the role of public control? Could some overall and beneficial equilibrium emerge out of decentralized suboptimizing actions? What traditional goals of public policy are left unresolved and what new ones would need to be

addressed? Will they be overshadowed by trade concerns? (Drake & Nicholaïdis, 1992). How do partially regulated environments function? These are important questions for theory and policy. Communications scholars must continue to write about the dangers of marketplace transformation, such as information poverty (Mosco, 1983), but it is just as important to think about what a new support mechanism should look like in the future system of systems. Similarly, concern with a property-rights-based information order and with the invasion of privacy spheres is no substitute for analyzing remedies.

Similarly, the interrelation of the various electronic communications networks must be thought through carefully now that they are beginning to happen. Access rules define the rights of various media and thereby the participatory rights of their users. They are nothing less than a constitutional framework for the communications infrastructure. Leaving such fundamental communications issues to the technical specialists of various disciplines would be like leaving war to the generals (Comstock, 1983).

Beyond National Culture
In the past, the scarcity of electromagnetic spectrum permitted only a tiny number of television channels, resulting in program content bridging many viewing interests to aggregate large audiences. The outputs of a medium are defined by its structure. In what ways then will the change in the media structure alter production, news, programs, and distribution? These are areas that were underresearched 10 years ago (Blumler, 1983; Gans, 1983; Tunstall, 1983), and they still are. The broadening of transmission bandwidth beyond traditional limited television leads to a measurable widening of program options and viewer differentiation, both in the high- and the low-culture ends of the program spectrum (Noam, 1992b). This process will take several decades, but it is on its way. Future media based on electronically accessible video libraries will further drastically affect program differentiation, viewer control, and program provision from alternative sources. Viewers will also end up paying much more for their television viewing in the new environment, raising distributional concerns. On the other hand, the production of programs will be encouraged and cultural activity increased.

Beyond Information Scarcity
Recent decades have seen giant strides in the distribution of information and in its production. The weak link in the information chain is the increasingly inadequate absorption capacity of individuals and organizations. Computer technology does not help much—unless underlying information is quantitative and structured, and questions are well-defined. These conditions are rarely met in real life. The mismatch of inflows and absorptive capacity raises questions for communications research. One example is a likely change in the way information gets presented. While the traditional print alphabets are geared to slow and narrowband com-

munications channels, in the future multiple information tracks will be provided in a parallel fashion so as to widen information access to an individual. This change is unlikely to be content neutral, and literacy, culture, and creativity will be affected.

Another approach to enhance the ability to absorb information is to automatize its screening so that less clutter reaches the individual. This will not be neutral, either. In order to make content and meaning more intelligible to machines, many forms of communication will be subject to some standardization of format, syntax, and style. Thus, echoing Innis (1950), the written language itself is likely to be changing with technology, and with it how we think, interact, and conduct politics.

What Is to Be Done?

Communications scholarship has not kept pace with the concrete questions of public treatment of media, even though its subject of study, the communication of information, has achieved centrality in society and the economy (Garnham, 1983). Much of the field has been insular, disconnected, and often invisible. The issue is not the absence of political power by academia. It is one thing to be weak, and quite another to be left behind. Obviously, ideology and media shape each other and are shaped by economic and political conditions. But being mesmerized by the potential of communications media or by the power of their owners is no substitute for thinking along and ahead, providing the world with visions, details, and ways of protecting traditional concerns in the new communications environment.

For the field of communications studies to blossom it must not react to its centrifugalism by narrowing its focus; to the contrary, it must expand. First, it must broaden into adjoining media. In the past, communications studies have concentrated on mass media, paying little attention to point-to-point and computer communications. Yet the blurring of boundaries separating electronic media and the creation of multimedia technologies, group networks, and interactive personal communications render many distinctions obsolete. This can hardly be stated too strongly. Traditional journals, associations, and curricula must recognize that the other forms of electronic communications are an integral part of their subject.

Second, communications studies must broaden beyond the bounds of pure academia. Communications scholars must both address and occasionally venture into a real world, whether in production, government, media business, or public-interest advocacy, to name a few. While one must be determined to avoid excessive closeness, research and teaching will benefit overall from such experience (Schramm, 1983).

Third, even within the academic realm, communications studies must overcome insularity. The field will hopefully maintain and strengthen its own disciplinary multiculturalism, be it by historians of communications,

philosophers, sociologists, interpreters of culture, to name a few. Yet, despite communications studies being broad in concept, there is an absence of strong links and even some hostility to some disciplines not at the center, such as technology, operations research, political science, law, and economics. Ten years ago, Mattelart called for a "decompartmentaliz[ation of] the problems of information" (1983, p. 65). This challenge to reclaim the multidisciplinary approach as the comparative advantage of the field is even more critical today, in both research and curricula.

Fourth, communications scholars might mute their ideological conflicts (Lang & Lang, 1983), in which critical scholars castigate others for serving the status quo (Grandi, 1983) and for ignoring the political processing of technological change, while their opponents dismiss them in turn as reactive and lacking a positive agenda. There is nothing wrong with a vigorous dialectical process of contending ideas, but in communications studies it seems to dissipate disproportionate energy.

And fifth, communications studies must reestablish a strong empirical and applied base within the field, so that theory, methodology, empiricism, and policy will reinforce each other again.

Without such efforts, communications studies will not be able to identify the future of communications or illuminate society's understanding of it. Nor will it be able to delineate its own field. If the chasm between an academic field and its subject matter of study becomes too wide, a self-correcting mechanism takes over. The rapidly moving world of communications media, technology, and infrastructure will force communications studies to change focus, directly or through the next generation of students in the field, and this process of change will no doubt transform the field as we know it.

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