

Communications Program

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Toward a Department of Communication at UCSD

Toward a Department of Communication at UCSD

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I. Communication as an Intellectual Domain

It is roughly 100 years since the "humane sciences" underwent the transformations that created the scientific and systematic study of society. Our 19th century forbears sought to discover a "universal history which would lay bare the laws of social organization, historical change and human thought," all of which were treated as different aspects of human nature.

Currently, social science disciplines represent an elaborate, though at times arbitrary, division of labor that emerged in the context of rapidly expanding industrial societies, increased technological power, increasingly complex political and economic organization, increasingly intimate ties between the industrialized and "industrializing" areas of the globe. These changes required new arrangement for the investigation of social reality and for training young people for economic participation and citizenship.

Despite the utility of the departmental division of labor that emerged in the late 19th century, it raises real problems. For instance, the distinction between "individual" and "society" which has been incorporated in the divide between psychology and the other social sciences has stymied research as often as it has stimulated it. The division between political science and sociology seems increasingly arbitrary and counter-productive. Political science often looks crudely formalistic to the sociologist while sociology, for all of its political passion, appears naively apolitical to the political scientist. Today a wide range of "political sociologists" speak more easily across the

departmental divide than to people nominally in their own field. Concerns of this sort are modest compared to the grand canyon that has separated the humanities, as a group of disciplines, from the social sciences (and has left history dangling in between, divided within as to whether it is or should be "art" or "science"). As we shall show later, this grand divide now also appears to be a barrier to some of the most fruitful areas of intellectual discourse.

While the social science disciplines established themselves as separate fields of study and sought to institutionalize to achieve distinct identities and to protect intellectual turf, "information science" grew up in the physical sciences with von Neumann, Morgenstern, Weiner, and others pioneering concepts of cybernetics, information, and control. These ideas were quickly embodied in the new technology of computers which has since become not only a new medium of communication and information processing but a source of models and metaphors for thinking about communication. Stimulated by the theory and practical achievements of computer information processing, scholars like Herbert Simon introduced the concept of information into the fields of economics, management and psychology.

In an independent line of development, early American social scientists and social philosophers looked to "communication" as a central organizing concept. Charles Cooley and Robert Park in sociology, Walter Lippmann in political science, John Dewey and George Herbert Mead in philosophy and social psychology all focused on communication as a key to understanding human behavior. An early concern for Dewey, Park, and Lippmann was to understand the impact of new communication forms, especially the newspaper and the

related industry of public relations, on the prospects for democratic governance. Through their work and the work of Harold Lasswell, attention to the media of communication entered political science. From seeing the media as an instrument of democracy, social scientists turned about-face in the 1930s and 1940s to see the media, especially radio, as a threat to democracy. Studies focused on radio, advertising, the effects of film on the social mores of the young, and other problems of persuasion. These studies took on special urgency when Nazi Germany began massive programs of persuasion using film and radio. During World War II psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists cooperated in research on culture, communication, and persuasion as part of the war effort. Efforts to increase the reliability and sensitivity of radio and radar operators who habitually had to respond to degraded signals of potentially great importance led to further development of the study of language and "information science."

Early theoretical formulations of the concept of communication were dominated by physical models. The Shannon-Weaver model, for instance, takes communication to be the transmission of signals from a pre-specified subset that reduces uncertainty about the source. The translation of "source" and "receiver" into the "stimulus/response" language of behavioral psychology was too tidy to pass up. However, as inquiry in the field has matured, the interactionist voices of Dewey and Mead have gained greater prominence.

Mead, for instance, urged social science to examine the world from the perspective of the interactions which constitute both society and the individual rather than to separate arbitrarily "individual" and "society." The Prague School of Linguistics championed the idea of the "constitutive" nature

of communication, arguing that language itself is a "constitutive" phenomenon. This became a chestnut of anthropological studies in the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis on the relation between language and thought cross-culturally. In Russia, there was a flowering of semiotic theory in many domains, not only in the psychology of Vygotsky but in the film theory of Eisenstein. The Frankfurt School, drawing on both Marx and Freud, paid special attention to the role of art and culture in constituting the social order and insisted, in many variations, that culture is constitutive of human possibilities for action and that "mass culture" is an appropriate subject of scholarly attention.

In recent years, developments in the study of language and cognition have spread beyond psychology and linguistics to influence the social sciences and humanities widely. Influenced by Piaget, the model of the language learner has not been the pigeon in the box, studied for a brief period, but the child in the family, maturing over years. An interactionist model, not mechanism, has provided the leading metaphor of the psychology of language. In anthropology, the study of language and cognition has been renewed as the "ethnography of communication" and a flowering of ethnographic film-making has led to cross-cultural studies of visual communication, as in the work of Sol Worth. The study of language then reached beyond the level of the individual learner to a consideration of the role of language in society, and a politics and sociology of language emerged. In the sixties, especially in educational research, an understanding of language seemed to offer a way through social policy debacles and intellectual despair. The ability of the preschool child to show the most remarkable capacity for rule-governed behavior in the learning of exquisitely complex grammatical systems offered hope for educational institutions and led to what was nearly a new theology of education. The

lasting intellectual consequence of this enthusiasm has been a recognition of language as the most basic medium of human communication and one whose study is necessarily central (as it had not been previously) to the social sciences.

At the same time, new media of communication, especially television, attracted the attention of scholars and social critics and one notable social seer, Marshall McLuhan. McLuhan's lasting contribution was the reminder that media of communication do not carry pristine messages whose meaning has already been settled but that different media shape and constitute the messages they carry. Different media "extend" the human capacity for thought and social action -- and limit that capacity -- in different ways. These propositions have been explored, refined, qualified, and in some ways made even more provocative in the work of Jack Goody, Ian Watt, Elizabeth Eisenstein, Michael Cole, and others in studies of the consequences of print and literacy. In recent historical scholarship, notably the work of business historian Alfred Chandler, there is much to support the view that changing media of communication and transportation must be viewed as the most central transformative agents in social life in the past several centuries. There are reasons to take seriously the view of 19th century Americans that the railroad, the telegraph, and the newspaper were the key forces for social change in their time; there is also reason to seek the application of these insights to a study of the role of the electronic media and computers in our own day.

Just as the study of government in political science leads to more general concerns with power and authority wherever they appear in human affairs, so also the study of communication, human mediated interaction, leads necessarily to concerns with language, representation, text, discourse, and

comprehension wherever they appear in human activities. These issues have been treated too often in ways narrowly conditioned by disciplinary traditions, so that philosophers, psychologists, linguists, literary critics, sociologists, artists, and anthropologists have often addressed the same topics largely unaware of one another's work.

This has begun to change, however. From the side of the humanities, it is signaled in recent issues of Critical Inquiry devoted to "The Language of Images" and "Narrative." These special issues went beyond humanists to include essays by a psychoanalyst, a historian of film, and an anthropologist. From the side of the social sciences, it is signaled in the recent essay of Clifford Geertz on "Blurred Genres." There Geertz summarizes the ways in which the leading edges of the social sciences are drawing on the humanities for inspiration, metaphor, and models for understanding human behavior, metaphors like "game," "drama," and "text." As social scientists increasingly view social actions as texts to be interpreted, humanists increasingly see the ways in which texts are social actions. Their creation, by individuals in writing fiction or groups in making films or generations of tribesmen in transmitting oral poetry, must be understood in social context.

This confluence of the humanities and social sciences is one of the most important intellectual developments of this generation and yet one which has few institutional underpinnings. We would not claim that Departments of Communication are typically good homes for the intellectual gathering we speak of here. But the Program on Communications at UCSD has become one such home where humanists and social scientists teach courses together, sit at the same faculty meetings, and find "interdisciplinary" work less an experiment than an

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obvious requirement and less a bold departure than an element in everyday work
life.

II. The Communications Revolution and the Job Market

In an article in Science in 1980, Anthony Oettinger, Chairman of the Program on Information Resources Policy at Harvard, wrote:

By widening the range of possible social "nervous systems" the continuing growth of information resources is upsetting the world order just as the Industrial Revolution upset it by widening the physical modes of production. Where this will lead is a hard to foretell as predicting today's world when the steam engine was invented.

Every facet of human existence is in the midst of, or is imminently confronting far reaching change. The sites of work, the composition of the labor force, the organization of work, the types of economic activity undertaken, the character of the political process, the organization of house, home, and family are undergoing rapid and radical transformations in part because the means of communication between the elements constituting the social order are changing. One of the basic tasks of the study of communication at UCSD is to address the very notion of a "communications revolution." We address that notion and its implications to provide our students a deeper understanding of the basic forces that are shaping their everyday lives and their futures.

However, while we document and analyze and criticize the "communications revolution," its force is already influencing our students in very practical ways. Many of them come to the Communications Program because it seems more closely linked than many other courses of study to job possibilities after college. While the Communications Program is and will continue insistently to be a liberal arts curriculum and not a specifically job-related education, students are nonetheless correct to believe that the job market is relatively good for people with skills in and interests in communications.

Curiously, the best job market in communications is for Ph.D.s to teach in mass communication. Steven Chaffee, director of the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Wisconsin, writes that "we have been undersupplying the field for years. Most jobs are filled A.B.D., even at the best schools." The market is best for people with both academic and professional credentials, but the market for those with only academic preparation is still good, according to Chaffee. George Gerbner, Dean of the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, also holds the market to be very promising in academic and other fields for Ph.D.'s. He writes, "We could probably graduate five to ten times as many as we do and find rewarding careers for them in academic life, government, industry, media research, executive positions, etc."

In broadcasting, print journalism, teletext, cable television, and related industries, the job market is rated by federal agencies as generally above average to good. This does not mean the jobs are all good ones or easy to come by. Dean Gerbner reports that "there is unemployment rather than jobs in most areas of broadcasting, filmmaking, and journalism." Students with a B.A. in communications or many with M.A.'s find careers in public relations, advertising, and other fields. At UCLA, undergraduates in the communications program were finding jobs in film, broadcasting, advertising, and public relations "even before graduation, and without any college courses devoted to technical skills in these areas," according to Professor Chaffee.

The staggering growth of the communications industries in the past decade, and its almost certain continued growth in the next several decades, make it clear that there will be job opportunities in these fields even though

there may be a lag while the new industries "plumb their creative depths for new software to match the new hardware," as the New York Times put it. (October 12, 1980) Thomas Leonard, associate dean at the graduate school of journalism at Berkeley, finds that "TV work seems on the verge of major expansion and our people seem to do quite well." Berkeley places all of its students in internships and finds that "at the end of the second year no one will come to a placement meeting because virtually everyone has something lined up." There are good indications, then, that students can realistically enroll in a Department of Communication both to learn something about a part of the social and economic order that is increasingly vital for understanding anything about the contemporary world and to explore an area that will be potentially useful in finding work and careers.

We would make special note here that the statements by Chaffee and Gerbner about the job market for Ph.D.'s in communications offers a special opportunity to the UCSD campus. The Department of Political Science and the Department of Sociology and the Department of Anthropology have considerable strength in communications. While the job market for Ph.D.'s in these social sciences has not been good and does not promise to improve in the next decade, the job market for Ph.D.'s in communications is strong. The establishment of an autonomous Department of Communication, able to cooperate with other departments in establishing joint Ph.D. programs, could significantly strengthen job opportunities for Ph.D. graduates.

III. The Idea of Communication at UCSD

The Communications Program at UCSD, established on campus in the early 70s, substantially revised its curriculum and its intellectual orientation and range three years ago. The curriculum now in place incorporates the perspective on communication that the faculty, to one degree or another, share. While it is not appropriate here to go through the whole curriculum, we will lay out the principles on which the introductory sequence has been designed.

As philosophers from the time of Plato have emphasized, our direct knowledge of the world is extremely limited, or, some would say, non-existent. Little of what we know is based upon our immediate experience of the events that shape our lives. Rather, our knowledge is based largely on the experience of others. It is mediated, it is communicated to us. We understand communication to refer to systems of mediated human activity within which people establish common understandings about the world and themselves as part of that world. The different tools of communication, from spoken language to computer communication, are seen as social tools for representing our experience and for constituting that experience.

The axiom that our knowledge of the world is always to some degree uncertain coupled with the fact that different people and groups will have different knowledge gives rise to a second major theme of this Communications Program: what is not held as common knowledge is a resource for social control. While it is not possible or desirable that everyone in a society should have the same knowledge as everyone else, differential knowledge and differential access to knowledge are resources of power and may be used to regulate

behavior to benefit the more powerful. Thus the UCSD Communications curriculum considers both (1) the forms of mediated human activity that provide our basic resources for expanding knowledge of ourselves and the world and (2) the ways in which limitations on knowledge operate as mechanisms of social control.

The approach to these issues at UCSD is strongly historical. We believe that Communication programs that focus exclusively on the electronic media or on print and electronic journalism divorce students from their own history and cut off their understanding of the mass media from a necessary, historical perspective. A recurrent question in evaluating the influence of newspapers or radio or television or advertising is: how new is this? What difference does this medium make? What difference does the size of the audience make? Are these techniques of attracting attention really novel? And so on. We want our students to have these questions come naturally to them, we want them to have a framework for responding to such questions, and we want them to know where to go to find answers.

We arrive at a historical approach in two ways.

First, some of our faculty have done historical research and teach in a historically-minded way. Professors Mukerji and Schudson are two of the most historically-oriented media sociologists in the country. Professor Keyssar is a historian of black drama and teaches courses on drama and film that are organized historically.

Second, our faculty has special interests in different media of communication that, while studied synchronically, have diachronic relations. Thus the introductory course, which sets the tone for the whole curriculum, takes up in turn spoken language, writing, print, newspapers, the telegraph, radio, film, television, and new technologies and computers. The historical origins of each new medium are discussed. While the whole faculty does not teach the course, many faculty members guest lecture in it and have contributed to its design. Faculty members with special interests in one communication medium or another do not parochially consider their "medium" the most important but recognize the continuing importance of the various media and see the historical emergence of different media as a central topic of study.

The curriculum is also decidedly comparative in perspective. This means that there is an emphasis on cross-cultural studies, notably in courses offered by Beryl Bellman and Michael Cole. There is considerable interest in communication in the Third World. There is work regarding minorities in the United States, in keeping with the Program's strong commitment to Third College. There is also, on a theoretical plane, a great interest in problems of translation -- how meanings change from language to language, medium to medium, and social context to social context.

If the UCSD Communications Program is unusual in its orientation to history and comparative studies and its view of the study of communication as part of the liberal arts, it is also unusual in its approach to work in media production. The Program offers no "technical training" and less "hands on" work than do many communication programs, but it offers more on-campus workshops and off-campus opportunities for internships than do most other

social science and humanities departments at UCSD. Media production work is central to the curriculum -- in film, video, theater, and writing. It is distinguished by emphasis on the theory of practice rather than on technical skills for their own sake. Through analysis of the media, students in Communication are given a broad social, cultural, and historical perspective for understanding the world. Production experience provides students with the necessary skills and competence to express their concerns and visions in socially effective ways. Although the degree and focus of sophistication in media production varies according to the interests of each student, the program tries to offer a production background sufficiently rich to enable students to compete effectively in the job market. The aim here, as in the rest of the program, is not primarily to fit students into an established occupational and social structure but to equip them to be autonomous and critical human beings, capable of operating in the world beyond the university but capable also of challenging and changing it.

Finally, the UCSD Communications Program is unusual in its strong interest in bridging the gap between the humanities and social sciences. It has sought close ties with departments in both the humanities and social sciences. Its own core faculty includes both humanists and social scientists. Team-taught courses in the Program -- for instance, in "the psychology of film" -- have included faculty from widely diverse fields. In general, UCSD is an excellent university for making bridges of this sort because members of the faculty in both humanities and social science departments here are unusually open to it. The Communications Program plays a vital role in interdisciplinary endeavors on campus and will continue to do so.