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Communications

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Rhetoric was a discipline in Plato's academy and has remained a discipline until today, typically labeled rhetorical science. Communications (also communications research, communication studies, communication arts) as a field of study emerged after World War II. The two oldest Ph.D. programs in communications research began at the universities of Iowa and Illinois in 1947. The study of propaganda from World War II experience and the emergence of television during this period were major influences.

Communications in this modern sense considers itself a problematic, a region of interests without disciplinary boundaries. The social sciences have had the greatest influence on developing the scope and character of the problematic. Psychology sees the field in terms of media effects. Political science emphasizes the media's role in public life and governance. Economics continues to be important as media organizations become global in scope. Sociology maps out the impact of media technologies on social institutions.

But a strong tradition from its beginning in 1947 centers communication's interdisciplinarity in language, and more generally, in the humanities. Wilbur Schramm, the founder of Illinois' Ph.D. in Communications in 1947, was a Ph.D. in Literature and director of the Writer's Workshop at the University of Iowa. He argued that communication theory will likely emerge out of language and linguistics, and established appointments in those areas from the beginning that persist until now. But this theorizing centers on the problem of communication not in scholastic terms within the discipline of literature. And it intersects with the other humanities as a whole, especially the arts, philosophy, and history.

John Dewey once said, "of all things, communications is the most wonderful." He meant that

communications made social-political-economic institutions possible and maintaining communications was necessary for their survival. For both theory and practice, communications is like heatness in red hot iron—all-pervasive and a dimension of the iron's character but not the equivalent of structures and boundaries in time and space. Disciplines may have advantages in staking out an explicit subject matter and determining its distinctive contributions to what research and scholarship within these parameters have learned before. In contrast, communication as a region of interests has a peculiar role that is holistic, organic, and integrative rather than isolative and specialized. Rather than scholastic attention to a discrete subject matter, communication study synthesizes in a comprehensive perspective the diverse aspects of human expressiveness and articulates them in terms of a coherent totality. The efforts to develop communication into a self-sustaining specialty with empirical autonomy terminally weaken it.

James W. Carey has understood communication's interdisciplinary character most clearly today. He argues that students of communication begin and end with culture. His major book is Communication as Culture. To the extent we understand culture, to that extent we will know communications in the process. Communication is the epicenter of cultural formation and we reconstruct an intellectual trajectory around this axis in terms of symbol, ritual, representational systems, cultural change, signification, institutional resources, and so forth. But not of these extensions per se replaces the communicative center. Communication scholars elaborate ideology's theory and practice, its conceptual reformulations, discursive character, and its institutional settings with a vitality not available to disciplinary orientations in themselves.

References

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