Foreword

Dreams of Fields: Possible Trajectories of Internet Studies

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Fielding Internet Studies

A good place to begin a discussion of the field of internet studies is with the notion of whether there is a “field” that one can “view” from any perspective. I do think one can best describe internet studies as a field. A discipline, though, it is not. Disciplines are traditionally marked by departments in colleges and universities. They are usually denoted by a canon (whether for better or worse) and by a curriculum. While we have internet institutes, centers, units, what-have-you, there is not a canon, nor curricula, nor departments.

I am not particularly bothered by this fact, nor do I think scholars working in the field of internet studies should be concerned about it. My own “home” discipline is communication, and for decades there have been debates about whether communication is a discipline or a field or something else altogether (perhaps it is an “interdiscipline,” as some have designated internet studies). There was an infamous, though it seems now often forgotten, issue of the Journal of Communication titled “Ferment in the Field” that was published in 1983. It had a couple or so dozen “names” in the field write about whether communication was a field, a discipline, etc. I remember reading it in graduate school, and reading D. Charles Whitney’s (1985, p. 142) remarkable response to it in another journal, in which he wrote, concerning the mixture of many disciplines within communication, that “the questions communication researchers are asking are too crucial for us to be left alone.” I hope the same can be said of internet
studies, that the questions we are asking are so interesting and important as to cause others to join us in asking them, and I even more so hope that we welcome them.

What stood out for me then about communication, as it does now about internet studies, is how little the debate has mattered since. I look at the youth of the participants in the Critical Cyberculture Studies symposium (not that I am old, really . . . but no matter how the midlife-crisis siren calls on me to digress I will resist), and I wonder how those working in internet studies will fare over time, how they, we, will make a difference. Will we struggle against the things we do not like about academic life? Will we seek to create environments and opportunities that we wish for the field of internet studies? What will we do to make things better? Because I see things in communication little changed from the way they were in the early 1980s, when I entered that field, so I wonder what we will see of internet studies if, fate willing, we may reconvene in twenty years at another Critical Cyberculture Studies symposium to examine the paths it took.

I know that the comparison between internet studies and communication is at least a little of the “apples and oranges” variety. Of course, there were departments of communication even before 1983, so the debate about the ferment in the field was different than it may be in internet studies, and indeed if there is any ferment in internet studies it is not coming from discussions of whether there is a discipline or a field but, I think, from whether there is anything at all. This is not unlike the situation many other fill-in-the-blank studies (women’s studies, African-American studies, Jewish studies, Catholic studies, to name but a few at my own university) found themselves in decades ago. To borrow from Jan Fernback’s (1999) comment concerning online community, what I find people asking me about internet studies in various ways is whether “there is a there there.” I am asked things like “Where should I go to get a degree in internet studies?” and “What are the classic texts in the field?” These are basic questions concerning a field, ones that require an answer, but are not the kind that I find the scholars themselves are all that much asking, nor are they ones to which there is an easy or ready answer. In that 1983 issue of the Journal of Communication, the invitation given to contributors was to write “on the state of communications research today: the relationship of the research with respect to social issues and social structure; and the tactics and strategies for reaching their goals.” When it comes to internet research, I wish we would ask ourselves to undertake these tasks ourselves. But we will need to answer some more-basic questions than those so that
we can consolidate what we have gained to this point, and I think we have gained quite a lot.

If I were for a moment to dream of a field, my dream for internet studies would be the same as the one I had, and still have, for communication. That dream begins with interesting questions, bright students, smart colleagues, and the means and will to work together and share knowledge, insight, and curiosity. For me, that dream has by and large been lived, and I have been very fortunate in that regard. But the reason I know that I have lived it and that it has not been simply a dream is that in a dream having the means and the will would have been simple, easy matters.

The Internet in the Academy

That it has not been easy to find the means and the will to work with others is by no means the fault of internet studies or communication. If anything is to blame, it is the fact of working in a scholarly system (in my case in the United States, but it is a model taken up in many other places in the world) that emphasizes original work and too often merely substitutes individual work for it and that emphasizes competitiveness while promoting collaboration. It is a system that values commerce (in the form of research grants, student numbers, and other quantifiable measures that translate into money) while touting prestige, all the while never making clear what in fact “counts” among the myriad ways one may be evaluated, whether by peers, administrators, or the public.

It may end up being one of the greatest ironies in contemporary higher education that at a time when internet-based creative and collaborative technologies are all the rage—with new ones seemingly invented every other month, reported on in the media, and added to the lexicon (blog, wiki, p2p, podcast—the list goes on and will no doubt grow further)—that the academy’s own use of those technologies lags behind that of the public and that of students. In a recent survey of college faculty internet use that I conducted, the vast majority of faculty (over 90 percent) use e-mail, but fewer use instant messaging (24 percent) and fewer still use new internet tools like blogs and wikis. Part of the reason for this is no doubt that it takes time for technology to prove its value. Why change one’s teaching and work habits unless one can be certain of a benefit (pedagogical, professional, personal, or all of the above)? One respondent wrote that “faculty use of the internet is only limited by their knowledge/ability and by
their imaginations,” but within the academy what structures are in place to encourage faculty to learn about new technologies and unleash their imaginations in this domain? What might internet researchers contribute to the deployment and use of the internet in higher education?

**Internet in Practice, in Theory**

One of the things that may keep us from making a contribution is the ages-old division in the academy between theory and practice. Consider that the disciplines most often represented at meetings of the Association of Internet Researchers are those in the social sciences and that the struggle for legitimacy of those disciplines in the academy has regularly involved a defense of engagement against theory. Should it be a surprise that internet studies may face a similar struggle?

Perhaps it should, because if internet studies is to be truly multidisciplinary then it must embrace a multitude of disciplines, ones from the arts, engineering, law, and medicine, among others. Why must internet studies have any discipline(s) as primary? Furthermore, why must internet studies replicate any of the struggles and debates that have been part of what has resulted in the academy’s present disciplinarity?

Simply from the standpoint of practice versus theory (a debate all too common in my home discipline of communication) it makes little sense to continue the debate when that energy could be better spent learning both practice and theory. It is worthwhile to consider what could be valuable for internet researchers to know about the internet from a practical standpoint. By practice I mean, in very broad terms, the programming, engineering, and standards development related to the internet. Is it important to know something about how the internet works? Why? Did those who studied other media like television or newspapers know how those media worked? In most cases they did not, but I believe such knowledge would not hurt scholarship and would in fact enhance it. And such knowledge certainly need not be opposed to theory; rather, it ought to complement it. Indeed, to be good theorists and critical scholars of the internet we should know something about the conditions in which it develops, if only so that we can begin to answer any question that begins with “Why?”

But there is a more important reason to engage in learning about prac-
tices associated with internet use, history, and development: because doing so can help us expand the scope of our knowledge and our questioning.

As an example, consider the primacy of text in internet studies. We have done terrific work thus far in internet studies to understand the nature of text-based online interaction. But we have done little more than that. Think about it: what are the interactions on the internet? They are far more than text. They may also be sound (voice, music, and various beeps, blurs, and pings), image (old and new, archival and live, still and motion), or some combination of those, with or without text. Sure, the internet is evanescent (just ask Brewster Kahle). It is hard to study, particularly when one focuses on anything other than text, but we have to study and understand other than text on the internet.

As a brief but important aside, even when we do study and analyze text, let us ask why it is that we largely choose text from the same kinds of sources (newsgroups, MUDs, etc.) and treat virtually all text the same? The internet’s earliest history is one of textual interaction, but it has developed into a highly visual medium. What caused the development, the evolution from text to image? How can we create new methods and tools for understanding text and image?

Understanding, or at least paying attention to, internet practices can also help us understand the phenomenology and ontology of the internet. To put that in another, somewhat simplistic way: we are too quick to use the vocabularies to which we ourselves have become accustomed through our own internet use. But what if we problematize some of the basic terms we casually use, like e-mail or Web? For example, what is email in terms of its experience, its perception? Is it text only or graphical? Is it fast, slow, easy to read, hard to understand? What does it mean to its users? How did we get where we are in e-mail’s development, and how does that development tie in to e-mail use? In a follow-up to the “Ferment in the Field” Journal of Communication issue, Joli Jensen (1993, p. 67), in an article titled “The Consequences of Vocabularies,” noted the importance of being self-reflexive about how we go about naming the objects and subjects of our study: “In doing such mappings, explorations, and definitions, we create what we pretend to merely describe.”

As somewhat of an aside, perhaps the most important reason to be self-reflexive is the possibility that disciplinarity may creep in through the back door. We all bring to our own scholarly endeavors various intellectual backgrounds, approaches, and interests, most often formed while graduate
students, whether we studied in strongly disciplinary or highly interdisciplinary programs. Those of us working from an academic institutional base (as are the majority of scholars in the United States) also bring with us, whether deliberately or not, interests focused and shaped, whether subtly or not, by the institutions and units within which we work. There is nothing sinister or dire about this. However, it becomes problematic when such focus and shaping tends toward the exclusionary. For example, at the conferences of the Association of Internet Researchers the preponderance of work presented is oriented toward the social impacts of the internet. There may be many explanations for that orientation, not the least important being that the internet’s social impacts may simply be interesting to many people. But it may also be that the disciplinary backgrounds and situations of those attending the conferences are such that social impacts come to the fore. Judging by my own observations, the majority of presenters have degrees in, or are in departments that belong to, the social sciences.¹ The social networks of attendees may in turn reinforce the substance and/or impression of conference content and may also dissuade those outside the network from attending, leading to self-exclusion or exclusion by default. In that case, in addition to being self-reflexive, one must ask, “What are we missing?” not in the sense of gaps in our own work (important as those are) but in the sense of ascertaining what we are overlooking entirely and why. We are all poorer, in a sense, for associating if our associations are not clearly and forthrightly inclusive in word and in deed.

There are other areas that are largely escaping our study. One is the realm outside human-to-human interaction on the internet. Not only are there bots online with which we interact, but there are also other computers and machines with which we interact—and machine-to-machine communication, on our behalf, is an interesting area to examine, too. There is what we might call an invisible internet, that which is infrastructure: protocols, standards, and algorithms. Although the internet’s infrastructure has always been important (after all, the internet’s existence is, despite the frontier rhetoric associated with its origins, based on standards and agreements), as network connections become ubiquitous and pervasive the infrastructure will play an increasingly important role in managing our online interactions. If you think interface design matters to the ways we use computers and the internet, I am betting infrastructure design will matter far more. I am reminded of a dinner in St. Paul in 1987 at...
which James Carey said, regarding new communication technologies, that “we should listen to the engineers.” I parsed his comment then, and now, in light of his very brief comments in the Journal of Communication’s “Ferment” issue and, in particular, in light of a comment he made therein that “cultural studies is an attempt to think through a theory or vocabulary of communications that is simultaneously a theory or vocabulary of culture” (1983, p. 313). What do we know about the theory or vocabulary of those who code and create, and what do we know about its consequences for internet users?

**Conclusion: Detours through Theory, Practice**

I do think it is important for us to attend to matters of theory and vocabulary because they remind us of the multiple layers at which power and ideology operate when it comes to the internet. As Joli Jensen (1993, p. 68) put it, “Our understanding of what we are up to in communication study has been based in a belief in a neutral ‘world out there’ waiting for us to figure it out.” This is not an attitude we can afford to mirror in internet studies if our work is to matter to the academy, and the world, at large. Too much of what comes across my desk in journals, books, unpublished manuscripts, and conference papers is purely descriptive, work done largely without regard to matters of practice, power, and ideology and, further, largely without theory. The internet is far from a “neutral ‘world out there’” that we can figure out without engaging it and ourselves in complex and complicated ways. That it typically comes to us at a screen’s remove should not remove from our consideration the realities (socially, politically, economically, or otherwise constructed) within which those who use it live and within which the hardware and software, markets and marketing operate.

I should note that I do not intend to close with a shrill “call to theory,” nor a “call to practice,” because these alone are not enough. Jensen rightly warns against the “consequences of expertise” particularly in the realm of theory: “The danger is greatest, it seems to me, in the theoretical mode, because loyalties are to theories, not empirical evidence or lived experience” (p. 73). We must remember that theory is politically and ideologically motivated. We detour through it, to borrow a phrase from Larry Grossberg. Likewise, practice is never a mere “act,” for every practice calls
into question other practices upon which one does not act. While theory can give us insight into meaning, practice can give us insight into materiality, effect, and power.²

Indeed, what brought me around, so to speak, in regard to the ferment in the field of communication, were the interactions I had with Grossberg beginning in the late 1970s. That was my introduction to the ferment in cultural studies, and I think that ferment has as much or more to offer internet studies as it did communication. Grossberg’s (1993, p. 89) admonition, in his essay in the *Journal of Communication*’s ferment follow-up, that we “(reject) the application of a theory known in advance as much as (we reject) the possibility of an empiricism without theory” is crucial. It is also crucial that we be “driven . . . by (our) own sense of history and politics” (p. 89). In short, the practices he identified of cultural studies can inform our own work:

[Be committed] to the fact that reality is continually being made through human action.

[Be] continuously drawn to the “popular,” not as a sociological category purporting to differentiate among cultural practices but as the terrain on which people live and political struggle must be carried out in the contemporary world.

[Be committed] to a radical contextualism, a contextualism that precludes defining culture, or the relations between culture and power, outside of the particular context into which cultural studies imagines itself to intervene. . . . cultural practices cannot be treated as simply texts, as microcosmic representations . . . of some social other.” (pp. 89–90)

I will leave it to you to think about the relationships between culture and the internet in Grossberg’s formulations, and about the moments at which one might substitute the word “internet” for the word “culture” in them. The opportunities and contexts in which internet studies can intervene meaningfully are numerous, too numerous for us to be deterred by traditional disciplinary boundaries, perhaps even too important for us to be deterred by traditional institutions. The burden is on us, then, to determine how best to move forward while learning from our own and others’ many disciplinary pasts and institutional histories.
NOTES

1. As AIR’s founder and as someone with a Ph.D. in communication I can take some responsibility for this, perhaps, for it is likely that my own social network contributed to its early disciplinarity regardless of my efforts, personal as well as AIR-related, at multidisciplinarity.

2. It should be noted that it is only for brevity’s sake that I am positing these (theory and practice) in the form of a dualism.

REFERENCES


