internet@academia.com: Internet Studies, Popular Communication, and Academic Work

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This article examines the development of Internet studies in the context of media studies and popular communication research. It describes and discusses parallel trends in popular communication and Internet studies, the formation of disciplinary structures and canons, and the costs and benefits of interdisciplinarity. It argues that the institutionalization of Internet studies can provide a means by which Internet researchers in an academic setting can engage in public debate about the social and cultural consequences of Internet technologies and in debate with institutional colleagues about resource, as well as intellectual, issues.

With no small amount of fanfare, Oxford University announced in spring 2001 the creation of the Oxford Internet Institute. With funding of £15 million the Institute, according to Oxford's press release, "will carry out research and make policy recommendations about the effects on society of the Internet with the goal of putting Oxford, the UK, and Europe at the centre of debates about how the Internet could and should develop" ("E-research," 2001).

The institute is housed in Oxford's oldest college, Balliol (dating to 1263), a college that owes its founding, according to its Web site, to "Students (who) had to fend for themselves in small groups based on inns and lodging houses. It was from these small groups that the modern University, consisting of an association of autonomous Colleges, evolved" (http://web.balliol.ox.ac.uk/01/about/history/history.asp).

The story of Balliol's founding and the story of the founding of a modern university bear at least some resemblance to the myths surrounding the Internet's de-

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velopment. Each is believed to have been formed from an agglomeration of small, independent units that formed a network. Indeed, one of the strongest myths, that of the Internet as a quite loose and decentralized association of autonomous individuals and institutions, persists (even though the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers is doing its best to dispel it).

There are other interesting resemblances between the academy and the Internet, many of which arise from the ways in which the Internet is becoming an object of study, a research and collaboration tool, and a site for exploration for academics. Though certainly one form of information technology, the Internet has become "the next big thing" when it comes to media studied by popular communication scholars.

Although Internet studies appears different from traditional media studies (e.g., there is no one medium on which research can focus, as is the case with radio and television), one can see questions raised about Internet research that are remarkably similar to ones from the 1970s and 1980s raised about media and popular culture scholarship. Indeed, in many conversations I have had with colleagues during the last few years, one can replace the word *Internet* with the words *popular culture* and have flashbacks to debates from the 1950s about mass communication and mass culture. Fear, persuasion, propaganda, pornography, escapism—the entire litany of issues that galvanized scholars since World War II is being repeated by scholars studying the Internet's social impacts. I wish, however, to turn attention to issues that I believe will both have a more lasting impact than these, and ones scholars may be able to do something about.

- Will Internet research result in increasingly interdisciplinary work, and with what consequences for faculty jobs?
- What are the longterm implications of doing Internet research for one's career?
- Do opportunities exist for publishing Internet research in journals and books?
- Might Internet researchers find new opportunities for funding or be lured toward industry jobs?
- Might Internet scholars be envied—and even disdained—for pursuing Internet research?
- Is Internet research a passing fad or a lasting area of inquiry?

But the one question that has been foremost on my mind and insufficiently asked is: Will scholars doing Internet research (or research on information technology and culture more generally) play a role as "public intellectuals," participating in the ongoing debates regarding new media and society, ethics and policy that engage the public, or will they be left out of such discussions? And what are the conditions that would cause them to so engage, or to choose to disengage?

WHAT IS INTERNET RESEARCH?

One could say that Internet research shares yet another characteristic with popular culture research, namely that it is very hard to pin down. In a sense Internet research is any scholarship related to the Internet, but that seems a useless definition. Does it include research into computer-mediated communication that does not examine TCP/IP-based networks? (I believe it would.) Perhaps it would be most sensible to note that there are many ways to study and add to what we know about the Internet. We could divide those into three categories:[1]

1. Infrastructure approaches that examine the technological reality of the Internet and network technologies in regard to its hardware, software, interfaces, and the like (Abbate, 2000; Berners-Lee, 2000; Hafner & Lyon, 1998).
2. Superstructure approaches that examine the social reality of the Internet and network technologies in regard to the experiences of users (Castells, 2000, 2001; Dibbell, 1999; Doheny-Farina, 1998).
3. Approaches combining the two, examining the interaction of technology and experience (Dodge & Kitchin, 2000; Renninger & Shumar, 2002; Turkle, 1995; Winston, 1998).

It is important that research on Internet-specific technologies and experiences be informed by a longer tradition of research on network technologies generally (Chesebro & Bonsall, 1989; Jones, 1995; Rice & Williams, 1988). What makes the Internet a remarkably interesting medium for communication scholars is that it is a very popular medium, one that has resemblances to old media but also incorporates new modes of communication. There is much that is new about the Internet, and there are many ways that it hooks into our understanding of technologies that came before it. We will do better as scholars to acknowledge and connect that understanding to our current work. Yet we must also be aware of the experience of the Internet as distinct from the experience of the media that came before. The interactions not only between human and machine, but human to human and, importantly for the Internet's future, machine and machine, are quantitatively and qualitatively different than those we have seen during use of "old" media.

Much of what we have learned from studies of popular communication can aid us in understanding the Internet's social and cultural consequences. We can also learn from the development of popular communication as an interdisciplinary field of study and begin to answer some of the questions about interdisciplinarity, careers, and jobs that I posed earlier. In my own experience as a popular communication scholar among faculty in departments of journalism and communication, the

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[1]The citations given here serve to provide examples and are not intended as an exhaustive list.

tremendous variety of these academic programs' origins (in journalism, speech, theater, broadcasting, etc.) had great potential for a broad array of perspectives to be brought to bear on the subject. But that potential was not easily realized. That variety of programs also means that we may have less cohesion among faculty. In the United States, for example, we have been less than cohesive among one another nationally as individuals and departments. Communication departments and scholars have in many cases had to struggle mightily to create a discipline-specific identity for themselves within their institutions, to the extent that the addition of new areas of research and even interdisciplinarity itself are often perceived as a cost rather than a benefit.

But these are issues that have long bedeviled the study of popular communication. One can see by the numbers of scholars, scholarly organizations, and journals like *Popular Communication* that we have grown toward an accommodation with the institutional structures of the academy, and I expect that those doing Internet research will also find such accommodation, eventually. Just as those studying popular communication often come to it via engagement with the many issues it raises, many academics would likely declare themselves not so much scholars of the Internet as scholars who find the Internet a worthwhile site from which to engage issues in their disciplines. Perhaps, therefore, there is an opportunity to build bridges among disciplines by recognizing this common ground.

MATERIALITY, DISCIPLINARITY, AND INTERDISCIPLINARITY

But allow me instead to skirt the issues and make some remarks based on the *materiality* of the situation in relation to jobs for Internet scholars. Interdisciplinarity has not, and continues to not, be easy for those materially in such positions. At each university of which I have been a faculty member, those faculty with interdisciplinary or joint appointments usually have the greatest demands made on their time and intellectual abilities. First, our expectations are higher: They must work between disciplines, and justify their existence in that space in-between, in ways other faculty do not. Second, in those cases in which they have appointments in two or more departments, they are often expected to participate in departmental life as if they had 100% appointments in each department. This is, of course, a dreadful situation, particularly for untenured faculty, who may have to meet the criteria for promotion and tenure in two (or more) units and be subject to additional review beyond that which a faculty member with an appointment in a single department encounters.

Interdisciplinarity is particularly difficult when it comes to material resources. It may work in principle, or in the realm of ideas, but when it comes to faculty lines and budgets, it is difficult to make forceful arguments based on "need" to adminis-

trators. Do we need Internet scholars, centers, and institutes? Why? What are the substantive, *intellectual* arguments we can make for Internet research and teaching? What are the pitfalls, if any, of resources gained thanks to trendiness, or to legislative, private, or industry "buy-in"?

Similar questions have been asked, and will continue to be asked, about popular communication scholars. Do we need them? Why? What is their "fit" within the disciplines? Some of the best answers to those questions have come in the form of arguments for popular communication scholars' engagement as public intellectuals, and those arguments need to be ever more forcefully made for popular communication and Internet studies alike.

As debates about public intellectuals have gained new force at the start of the 21st century, it would appear that those academics most engaged in the debate come to us largely from departments of political science, English, and law schools. (It is not only Richard Posner [2002] who constrained us to those areas in his now infamous *Atlantic Monthly* article in which he cites the dangers of public intellectuals as pundits, as one look at the roster of speakers at most every conference on public intellectuals will confirm.) When popular communication is represented by others, it is usually practitioners (journalists or industry executives) who get a say. The reason academics and journalists seem to be vying over the same turf stems, as I noted in a 1997 essay, in part from their having "a mutual conviction of self-importance and sense of privileged immunity," as Anne Matthews put it (Sahadi, 1994). And it should be no surprise that the present time, one in which new media have further fragmented audiences, we find a greater struggle than ever among those who seek to intellectualize the public, for " there appears to be less and less of the public (or at least less of its attention singularly focused) to go around in a fragmented media world" (Jones, 1997, p. 215).

What is ironic is the degree to which each side, journalism and academe, has little regard for the other and tries to keep it at arms' length. The fact is that much of what we have to say is far from disagreeable to the other, although one side seems to rarely comprehend the other. Importantly, both journalism and the academy are what James Carey (2002) has termed brittle institutions. Each struggles with its relations to corporate concerns. But equally importantly academic values show little regard for engagement with the public. Typically, review committees value writing for "popular" publications, or creating Web sites and CD-ROM texts, very little (if at all) in the tenure process, for instance. If such work doesn't "count," what does that tell us about the general valuing of popular communication and Internet publication in academe? And by what means are scholars (particularly ones new to academe) going to engage the public if not by writing op/eds, creating Web sites, and giving public lectures? Perhaps universities' increased relation with and reliance on corporate America can be, at least in a small way, understood as being due to academic disengagement with the public (or at least with public expression) and a corresponding shrinking of public support.

I realize I have probably made the situation sound more abysmal than it is, but I do want to point out that the challenges hereby posed by interdisciplinary and joint appointments are not insurmountable, and in fact are just the thing for some scholars who thrive in such circumstances. Interdisciplinarity should be more than a commingling of literature, method, and departments. It requires a mix of intellectual work, practice, and an understanding of the ground on which an area of study has been built.

That ground, it is necessary to point out, is often difficult to find in relation to the institutions of academia. Where does a discipline "live"? Is it in the texts we create, the journals in which we publish, the gatherings (conferences, symposia, etc.) we attend? Is it in the departments we create? The associations to which we belong? In material terms it is in all those places, but the least ephemeral, at least in modern academic life, is the department. But to what extent can we create departments, or restructure existing ones? And will not doing so simply trade one set of borders for another? Although the department provides an institutional *imprimatur*, is it always necessary to have one for an area of study to have legitimacy?

The more important issue is whether there is actually a body of knowledge that we may agree on to create a curriculum or degree in Internet studies, for this is what departments do—they provide a course of study that leads to a certification of completion, a degree. It may be a struggle, particularly given how early we are in the development of Internet research, to come to agreement over such a body of knowledge, yet such is always the case as new knowledge coalesces in our people and institutions. And, anyway, curricula ought by nature to be dynamic and not something uncontested. The existence of a journal such as this one will go a long way toward helping us develop a body of knowledge and create new understandings about what we do and what we value, understandings that can be communicated to others in other disciplines and departments. Internet studies will likely do the same, having already taken its first step toward legitimacy and agency with formation of the Association of Internet Researchers. (Perhaps an Internet studies journal will be next?) And, much as popular communication has given us myriad opportunities to better understand modern life and culture, so too will study of the Internet and information technology aid us in the study of popular communication. In an insightful essay about popular music pedagogy, Larry Grossberg (1986) wrote the following:

> Susan Sontag commented that one of the reasons she left academia was that her colleagues could not accept the intersection of serious scholarship (and politics) with the pleasure of the popular … academic criticism has typically dealt with popular culture by way of value systems and classifications that simultaneously protect professorial authority and deny the popular its specificity. (p. 177)

One of the most interesting aspects of Grossberg's (1986) essay is his discussion of his relationship to his students in terms of each other's claims to under-

standing, and ultimately to power. Studying and teaching about the Internet and information technology is not "for free," it is not an activity we can take for granted. It is an activity that must be articulated with broader issues of communication, modernity, and post-modernity. We must acknowledge the consequential and political dimension of Internet studies and popular communication studies, be that in relation to policy, censorship, access, privacy, or any number of other important issues, lest we lose contact with the Internet as a *practice* (social, economic, political) and not just a technology, and, ultimately, with intellectual work as meaningful to everyday life. In another essay, Grossberg (2002) noted his disappointment with popular music studies, noting that its "disciplinization" may have forestalled development of

> a common vocabulary in which to argue about the differences between musics or musical cultures, and between critical interpretations and analyses. … Too much of the unarticulated, taken-for-granted theory of popular music is really the generalization of specific formations of popular music culture, one that marks both the biography of many of the writers and the specific and intense forms of investment that many of us who write about popular music have had and continue to have in the music. (p. 29)

Grossberg's disappointment is one that may be avoided for both Internet studies and popular communication. For the former it is particularly important that scholars engage with engineers, technology's users, and policy makers to both have our voice heard and to hear those other voices in critical dialogue. For the latter it is particularly important that the development of theory is nurtured and not abandoned in the contestation among particular forms of popular communication, and that instead such contestation lead to theoretical representations of specific and articulated instances of cultural formation. For both it will be important to have extra-departmental spaces—associations, journals, conferences—that simultaneously provide for interdisciplinarity and have disciplinary value.

Another important area of articulation is internal, namely within the academic institutions in which the great majority of intellectual work takes place. The struggle over real resources as well as symbolic ones (over budgets as well as power) needs to take place within the university and not outside its walls. For that reason, I believe ultimately some form of institutionalization of Internet studies will be a good thing, as it has on balance been good for the study of popular communication. I am hopeful that it will provide a platform from which scholars with interests directly or indirectly related to the study of the Internet and information technology can be heard and can add our voice to the public, and private, debates about the these technologies' evolution and role in society generally, and education specifically. Mostly I am hopeful that we will find such institutionalization is a way for us to engage with one another in the development of the institutions in which we work and live.

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