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AOIR

2003 KEYNOTE

NOTES TOWARD AN ENGAGED ASSOCIATION

STEVE JONES

It is a great honor to stand before you today.[1] AoIR has exceeded all of the hopes that I had for it. In 1998 at Drake University where the idea of AoIR was first discussed, had I been told it would have so quickly become what all of us have made it, I would have not believed it.

It is also a great source of pride for me to know that we are here at the fourth annual conference of the Association of Internet Researchers, and in a year we will meet again and then a year after that and on and on, and I can think of no scholarly meeting to which I look forward more than this one. The conference attendees and AoIR members over the years have made this a convivial, multidisciplinary congregation in ways that none of the other meetings to which I go can match. I will say more about this later in my talk, about why I think it is important. Let it not go without saying that no matter that I will step down from the presidency, AoIR will always be most special and dear to me.

Even before AoIR was formed in 1998, people were asking me whether I thought there was a field of study for Internet researchers, a field in which those who were interested in the vast array of the Internet's consequences, its history, and its technics could find an intellectual home, and so a good place to begin is with the notion of whether there is a "field" that one can "view" from any perspective. I do think we have built our own home, Internet studies, and it can best be described as a field. A discipline, though, it is not. Disciplines are usually marked by departments in colleges and in 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, we do not (yet) have a canon, curricula, or departments.

I am not bothered by this. As Jonathan Sterne once told me in conversation, having a department lets others "off the hook" in regard to incorporating important ideas into their own curricula and thinking. Instead of having to pay attention in their own teaching and research, they can point to another department and "offload" responsibility. That is why I have been strongly opposed to the creation of "special interest groups" or "divisions" within AoIR. Let us continue to learn from one another not only by finding the visible connections within our work but also by benefiting from the ones that are formed accidentally. While there are those occasions when one thinks, "Why in the world are these papers together on the same panel?" the occasions are far more frequent when we are enlightened by hearing from someone outside of our home discipline or by engaging a group of people with papers, ideas, theories, and research who would otherwise have not had the chance to meet and talk together.

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's an "inter-discipline" as some have called Internet studies). There was an infamous, though it seems to me now largely forgotten, issue of *Journal of Communication* titled "Ferment in the Field" that was published in 1983. It had a couple dozen or so "big names" in the field write about whether communication was a field, a discipline, or something else. I remember reading it in graduate school and reading Chuck Whitney's 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" (1985, p. 142). I hope the same can be said of Internet researchers, 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 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 mattered. I look at how young so many of those who have attended AoIR conferences are, and I wonder how you will all fare, how you will make a difference. Will you struggle against the things you do not like about academic life? What will you do to make things better? What are the things that will "count" not only in the long run in terms of our influence on a field but also at the local level in the units, departments, and institutions in which we work? I ask because when it comes to the practicalities of scholarship and academia, I see things in communication little changed from the way they were 20 years ago, regardless of any "ferment," and so I wonder what we will see of Internet studies if, fate willing, we reconvene in 20 years.

I know that the comparison between Internet studies and communication is at least slightly of the "apples and oranges" variety. And I know that in some ways, at least in communication, the entire "ferment" debate is dated, if not tired. 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. I often am asked questions like "Where should I get a degree?" and "What are the classic texts in the field?" These are basic questions concerning a field, ones that need an answer but are not the kind that we ourselves are all that much asking or ones to which we have easy answers. In that 1983 issue of *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 hope we will ask ourselves to undertake the same. What is "the relationship of the research with respect to social issues and social structure"? But we still 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.

One area that demands attention is the primacy of text. I use "text" here in two ways: the first and most important way is in its literal sense but also, and somewhat less importantly, in its formal and figurative sense (e.g., "the text"). Concerning the former, 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. Interactions on the Internet are far more than text. They may also be sound (voice, music, and various beeps, blurts, and pings), image (old and new, archival and live, still and motion), or some combination of those with or without text. Of course, the Internet is evanescent. It is hard to study particularly when one focuses on 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, we largely choose text from the same kinds of sources (newsgroups, MUDs, etc.) and treat virtually all text the same without great regard for its presence on the screen, its look and experience. It is time to consider the vast array of forms of online communication and attend to them in their variety, singularity, and correspondence.

We are also short on understanding the phenomenology and ontology of the Internet. To put that 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 e-mail in terms of its experience, its perception? Is it text only or graphical? Is it fast,

slow, easy to read, hard to understand? In a 1993 follow-up to the "Ferment in the Field" issue, Joli Jensen in an article titled "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," Jensen wrote, "we create what we pretend to merely describe" (1993, p. 67).

Concerning the more formal and figurative notion of "text," I am concerned that the notion itself is insufficient for Internet studies for all the reasons of phenomenology and ontology just mentioned, but also because its use causes us to at least implicitly continue to separate online and off-line interaction by not considering the nature of online texts as agents off-line or as connected to off-line experience and communication. It would behoove us to consider the variety of arguments and debates in literary criticism—well rehearsed in the work of Stanley Fish (1980)—and in responses to him[2] that engage notions of agency, authorship, and interpretation, and then to consider the nature of the new media that the Internet passes through, its connections to computers and other electronic devices.

It seems to me that there are largely two branches of online textual analysis: one, which is the main branch at present, seeking to describe and understand phenomena; and another, which is the branch less engaged, seeking to understand and critique its social and historical conditioning. To better explain the difference and its consequences, I shall borrow from Foucault:

> History is the work expended on material documentation (books, texts, accounts, registers, acts, building, institutions, laws, techniques, objects, customs, etc.) that exists, in every time and place, in every society, either in a spontaneous or in a consciously organized form. The document is not the fortunate tool of a history that is primarily and fundamentally memory; history is one way in which a society recognizes and develops a mass of documentation with which it is inextricably linked.
>
> To be brief, then, let us say that history, in its traditional form, undertook to 'memorise' the *monuments* of the past, transform them into *documents,* and lend speech to those traces which, in themselves, are often not verbal, or which say in silence something other than what they actually say; in our time, history is that which transforms *documents into monuments.* In that area where, in the past, history deciphered the traces left by men, it now deploys a mass of elements that have to be grouped, made relevant, placed in relation to one another to form totalities. (1972, p. 7)

This is not to say that there is not room for both branches or that there is not a place for textual analyses of online interaction. Such notions are absurd. It is to say that it is not enough to allow for engagement of notions of power, ideology, theory, and criticism that operate at multiple and fluid intersections of the social, economic, cultural, technical, and political.

There are other areas that are largely escaping our study altogether but merit our attention. One is the realm of other than 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 or others' (or even a machine's) 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. These have 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 Internet's infrastructure will play an increasingly important role in managing our online interactions. If interface design matters to the ways we use computers and the Internet, I will bet infrastructure design will come to matter far more. I am reminded of a dinner in St. Paul in the fall of 1987 at which Jim Carey said, in regard to new communication technologies, "We should listen to the engineers." I parsed his comment then, and now, in light of his very brief comments in the aforementioned *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 or of those who make and change policy and standards, and what do we know about its consequences for Internet users?

I do think it is important for us to attend to these matters because they remind us of the multiple layers at which power and ideology operate when it comes to the Internet. As Joli Jensen 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" (1993, . 68). This is not an attitude we can afford to mirror in Internet studies if our work is to be intellectually satisfying and to matter. If I may borrow from Thoreau, who could be considered anathema to Internet researchers if only because of his status as a quintessential Luddite, it is imperative that in our research we "drive life into a corner and reduce it to its lowest terms, and if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion" (1970, p. 61).

We must therefore, I think, understand life online and its connections to life offline in the world. Though we may not be required to be of the world we study, we are required to know it. A lot of attention has been paid by Internet researchers to areas of online interaction that are of interest to us, that seem important or are interactions in which we ourselves engage, but that in many cases are not widely employed, greatly valued, or understood by

other Internet users. Most university-based researchers have had access to the Internet for much longer than the average user and have had uses for it driven by demands other than those experienced by other users. The interactions that early Internet researchers experienced in particular (and that in many cases drove early research in the field) need to be contextualized as to time, place, and user, and the specificities of the academic experience and framework must be interrogated. This is not to say that there is no value in studying such interactions, but that there ought to be examinations into whether our investigations are less generalizable than we might even imagine, particularly if we have been inattentive to the fine grain of Internet use by not specifying what we mean, for example, when we write "chat" or "community."

Furthermore, a lot of what comes across my desk in journals, books, unpublished manuscripts, and conference papers is work done largely without regard to matters of power and ideology and often without regard to theory. There is still a surfeit of description and observation with sufficient analysis or theory building. But I do not intend this to sound like a shrill "call to theory" because theory alone is not enough. Jensen rightly warns against the "consequences of expertise" particularly in the realm of theory: "The danger is greatest, it seems to me," she wrote, "in the theoretical mode, because loyalties are to theories, not empirical evidence or lived experience" (1993, p. 73). We must remember that theory is politically and ideologically motivated. We detour through it, to borrow from Larry Grossberg.

We are also badly in need of radical contextualization and historicizing of Internet use. While online interaction is obviously new in scale and form, it is not so new in kind. To put it another way, while we have more opportunities for communication with others and new forms of communication, how much has communication itself changed and with what consequences? And, of course, how do we find answers to that question?

One important realm of consequences is the penetration of multiple modes of communication into every facet of everyday life. The development of both technological and social networks, which more clearly now than ever bind us together, is nothing short of remarkable, but the world around us seems less bound by communication than by conflict, division, and confusion.

What might AoIR do about this, in what ways might it matter, in what ways might it serve—and should it? To no small extent, AoIR is already doing something and mattering a great deal. Its interdisciplinary and international nature and the spirit that its members, attendees at conferences, and leadership bring to it have made it a most special organization of scholars. Nevertheless, as an association, an institution, not one thing will happen without the work of individuals who will commit to the tasks. And as an institution it can likely do only general things rather than specific ones, unless the general

are transformed by individuals in local settings into specific work, action, and understanding.

The general things that it might do are similar to those identified in a recent article by Robert Zemsky (2003) about the role of public higher education. He listed three goals:

1. Identify public concerns.
2. Contribute to the public good.
3. Demonstrate the value of those contributions.

What we can do as individuals, as members of AoIR, is more akin to what Frank Rhodes (2001) notes that advocates of universities may do, namely to be "the challengers of complacency, the voices of institutional conscience, the patient advocates for change, the champions of excellence, the midwives of new alliances and partnerships, the facilitators of teamwork, and the untiring exemplars of a new level of commitment" (p. 243). What this means in practice is that if we wish Internet research, and with it Internet studies, to become an equal partner among the many disciplines and fields in which we work, then it is incumbent on us to make it so and to pay the cost of making it so. The cost will include our time, particularly in regard to the administrative efforts needed to mentor graduate students and faculty, to serve on review committees, to administer programs, and to engage in policymaking at the local level (and think of the value of so doing just in the realms of intellectual property and peer-to-peer networking on our campuses).

I suspect that, even if only in the back of your mind, you may be asking, "What's in it for me?" This is a legitimate question and an important one. Our universities provide less and less incentive and reward for us to engage in matters of policy and service. Participation in governance is not encoded into the reward system. We are regularly told "to do more with less" (a demand made well before current economic realities were even dreamed), but the only definitions we are given are that "more" refers to everything and "less" refers to money. That should cause ferment in all of our fields.

And yet it does not. But it is time for us to step up, to be, in Larry Grossberg's words, "driven . . . by [our] own sense of history and politics" (1993, p. 89). The practices he identified of cultural studies can inform our own work. We must:

1. "[Be committed] to the fact that reality is continually being made through human action."
2. "[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."

3. "[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 [we imagine ourselves] to intervene. . . . cultural practices cannot be treated as simply texts, as microcosmic representations . . . of some social other." (pp. 89–90)

AoIR, young as it is, has become a home for many of us, a kind of safe harbor for the sharing of information and critiquing of ideas. In short, it has become what drove most (probably all) of us to academia in the first place. We are engaging in the production of an intellectual public sphere, in what James Carey, borrowing from Harold Innis, identified as "a plea for the university tradition" (1983, p. 7). It is our ongoing charge and challenge to continue to engage with our universities and disciplines, particularly as a good part of AoIR's value is directly proportional to the degree to which it is multidisciplinary. We have, I think, created a genuine forum for scholarly exchange. But it should not be an uncontested forum. Indeed, it ought to be one in which we eagerly and regularly debate all that AoIR is and does. Therefore, I find it appropriate to end this talk with a parallel to the thought with which Grossberg concluded his 1993 essay, "The boundaries of our disciplines can never be allowed to define the boundaries of our questions" (p. 97). The boundaries of our disciplines, and our institutions, can never be allowed to define the boundaries of our association.

NOTES

1. Some of the ideas in this keynote address were first presented at the Critical Cyberculture Studies symposium at the University of Washington in May 2003. I am grateful to David Silver for the opportunity to benefit from its presentation there and from subsequent discussion of it.
2. Notably Tompkins, 1980, and Worthen, 1991, among others.

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