

*Paper published in  
Australian Journal of Communication, 2012, 39(3), 41-63.*

## **On taking communication seriously**

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### **Abstract**

In the first part of this paper I look back over the field of communication studies in Australia, drawing on material from the AJC and personal experience over the past thirty years to do so. While the field has clearly grown, there is much that is wanting; most notably a tradition that treats communication *per se* seriously. In the second half of the paper I look forward to consider what it could mean to treat communication seriously, relying on notions of intersubjectivity, agency and praxis, and offer reasons why we might want to do so.

### **Positioning myself: from the margins**

In the early 1970's I began what was probably one of the early doctorate studies of communication in Australia. At the time there were no university departments or degrees in communication and my work was conducted under the auspices of a psychology department. I still recall being told I had little likelihood of being awarded a PhD if I pursued my interest in communication in the way that I did. In the event, my advisors were wrong. I was awarded a PhD (from overseas examiners), offered postgraduate work overseas and had my PhD work published as a book, again overseas (Penman, 1980).

When I returned to Australia in 1980, I was excited to discover the burgeoning interest in the idea of communication and enthusiastically joined in the early flurry. I was involved in establishing one of the earlier degrees (Canberra), was a foundation director for the Communication Research Institute of Australia, acted in various capacities for the Australian, and then New Zealand, Communication Association (ANZCA) for over twenty years culminating in a Life Membership in 1999, and was an Associate Editor of the *Australian Journal of Communication* (AJC) from 1984 to 2003.

The AJC symbolized our early commitment to the idea of communication and has continued to publish papers on human communication research, theory and practice over more than three decades: often going out of its way to publish provocative papers and to find a niche for new work (Petelin, 2008), especially from Australian and New Zealand authors. Recently I have had cause to reflect on the developments of the field of communication studies over the past thirty-odd years in Australia and have drawn significantly on the AJC to do so. This paper is the outcome of those reflections.

In the first part of this paper I take stock of the field of communication and media studies in Australia and, to some extent, New Zealand. While what I have to say about new possibilities for communication studies is of relevance to scholars in both Australia and New Zealand I do not feel sufficiently familiar with the New Zealand academic scene to be inclusive throughout the paper. As such, my failure to mention New Zealand, especially in the first part of the paper, should be read as an acknowledgment of my ignorance rather than any intended snub or slight to New Zealand colleagues.

In laying out the observations, and analyses here, I am also acutely conscious of the fact that I do so from the margins. From my early PhD research to my contemporary writing, I have continually found that neither mainstream psychology in the early days nor mainstream communication studies more latterly had much to offer in my deliberations: neither took communication seriously. Moreover, having largely removed myself from the academic arena in more recent times my stance certainly is not one from within that arena. Yet, regardless of my dissatisfaction with the academic mainstream, my abiding scholarly interest and commitment to the idea of communication has not waned.

Once again, then, I write from the margins and I do so because I am convinced that there is a critical role to be played by the dissenting voice, especially in the asking of good questions. Good questions preserve an orientation to openness, reflect genuine curiosity, are concerned with practice and are, most importantly, asked in good faith. In the very asking of such good questions we open up new pathways and generate new possibilities for going on (Penman, 2008). In the second part of this paper, I attempt to do just that: ask new questions that point to new possibilities, for the field in Australia and New Zealand and to potentially revitalize an interest in communication *per se*.

## **Taking stock: from outside looking in**

### **Diverse and amorphous**

There have been a number of significant reviews of the status of the field of communication studies in Australia, most of which were published in the *AJC*. A sampling of those reviews in each decade provides a snapshot of the developments over the past thirty years or so.

The diversity of the field, in particular, has been a common theme in repeated reviews of the growth of communication studies over the past three decades. In the early days, this diversity was captured in the idea that there were two distinct approaches or paradigms that were incommensurate with each other: the US dominated administrative/social science/empirical tradition typically associated with interpersonal communication and the UK dominated/humanities/critical/cultural tradition typically associated with mass media (eg Bonney, 1983; Lewis, 1982; More, 1988). This same duality was the theme for the famous "Ferment in the Field" issue of the US based *Journal of Communication* in 1983 and formed the basis of the "turf wars" for some period in Australia (eg see Maras, 2004).

A decade later, the field of communication studies had developed and its part in the higher education sector solidified (Putnis, 1993a). While the simple duality of approaches could no longer be cleanly detected there were (and are) still extant threads of the different "camps" visible in both academic papers and communication course descriptions in Australia. Nevertheless, there was some spirit of good will

expressed towards the different camps and some effort to acknowledge the different stances as equally legitimate (Putnis, 1993b). A seeming acceptance of pluralism had emerged. As Warwick Blood described it in the mid 1990s, “we are more inclusive in accepting various perspectives and positions” (Maras, 2003, p.9). Again this trend towards greater tolerance, if not inclusivity, was reflected in a parallel debate in the US and captured in the two issues in 1993 of *the Journal of Communication* on “the Future of the Field—Between Fragmentation and Cohesion”.

In Australia, in the 1990s, the field of communication studies also held, for want of a better word, hope. This is captured succinctly in Peter Putnis’ account (1993a):

*Here was a new multi-disciplinary field of study which dealt with the contemporary issues and which, in its inclusiveness, could accommodate both the traditions of liberal education and the growing demands for ‘vocational relevance’. Here was a study which appeared to accommodate both theoretical and practical concerns, and which, depending on one’s disciplinary/professional background and stance, could be a platform for social critique, a training-ground for professional communicators, or a new discipline which could address human communication in a way which transcended traditional disciplinary boundaries.* (no page, electronic journal)

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, this promise remained unfulfilled. While there was no doubt that the field had continued to diversify, the diversity was such as to raise doubts about what actually defined the boundaries of the field of communication and media studies (Putnis & Axford, 2002). There was also no doubt that the term communication itself had become increasingly polysemic (Galvin, 2002). Along with growth of the field, then, has come some ambiguity of what the field is, can be, or will be. The hoped for ‘cohesion’ expressed in the 1993 *Journal of Communication’s* theme and in Peter Putnis’ 1993a account has not emerged.

### **Along with a partial eclipse**

While there have been no more reviews of the state of the field published in the AJC since 2002, ensuing articles over the past decade clearly show that diversity in the field continues: both in terms of topics addressed and disciplines drawn upon. However, my own evaluation of articles in both journals sponsored by ANZCA, and of the latest university degree offerings, indicates that there also has been a change of focus, with some early topics and approaches being eclipsed by later ones.

While my primary focus here is on communication studies, it is not possible to fully separate that study from media or cultural studies in the contemporary Australian university context. This was not always the case. In the 1970s and 1980s in Australia, the earliest academic developments adopted the term communication studies and this was reflected directly in the naming of the Australian Communication Association. In the first instance, then, communication was seen to be the overarching category and contexts such as media, organisations and the like were subsumed within that category. This focus on communication per se can be seen in the titles of the papers documenting the early history of the developments (eg Putnis, 1986; Lewis, 1982; Irwin, 1998)—viz. all talk about “communication studies”.

However, when we move into the decade of the 2000’s and beyond this has changed noticeably. For example, Peter Putnis and Beverly Axford (2002) write about the field of “communication and media studies”. Maras (2003) takes this expansion of horizons

one step further when he writes about the “entire field of communication, media and cultural studies”. In a similar vein, Murray (2006) refers to the rise to prominence of “communication, media and cultural studies”.

By the second decade of this century, the continuing eclipse of communication studies appears even more apparent. In 2010, three senior Australian academics contributed to an ICA panel session on “Australian and New Zealand communication research in an international context”. Terry Flew (2010) presented a succinct and well-argued critical account of “communication studies” from his perspective as a critical media theorist. Stuart Cunningham (2010) argued eloquently for the alignment of the cultural policy debate and creative industries concept with “communication, cultural and media studies research”. Finally, Sue Turnbull’s (2010) thoughtful analysis showed how much “we are ... already firmly located within what Stuart Cunningham defines as a Creative Industries approach in Australian communications research and teaching, even when it looks and sounds like cultural studies or may actually be called Media Studies” (p.25).

I quote at length from Sue Turnbull above because she points directly to the ironic twist in the tale of that ICA panel. Communication has become little more than an empty word that, in humpty-dumpty fashion, we can twist to make it mean whatever we choose. Yet, much like the analogy of a duck, if it looks and sounds like cultural and media studies then that is what it is. It is also of some importance to note how the conjunction between communication, media and cultural studies slips and slides throughout the three papers described above—and in many others as well—and that in many instances “communication” segues into “communications” as if it is of no consequence. And, from what I have read it is not—at least within the mainstream, contemporary framework of media and cultural studies.

I appreciate that to many Australian and New Zealand academics teaching under the rubric of communication, media and/or cultural studies the above observations may provoke no more than a “so what?” However from my position on the margins, reviewing the past thirty years in Australia I am somewhat taken aback. Where did those heady days in which communication seemed to matter go? How did media and cultural studies almost totally eclipse communication (at least communication as I know it)? Moreover, what can the word “communication” actually mean in the above context now? Amongst other things, the rather loose usage of “communication” and “communications”, along with the intimation that these concepts are interchangeable or commensurable with “media studies” and/or “cultural studies”, suggests a series of logical category mistakes. Such category mistakes occur when one set of facts are taken to belong to one logical type, when they actually belong to another. In this instance, the mistake arises from talking/writing as if communication, media and culture are of the same logical type.

While the identification of category mistakes may seem merely like philosophical nit-picking, there can be quite profound consequences. Gilbert Ryle (1963) drew attention to one such profound consequence arising from a category mistake in his analysis of the concept of mind. Ryle showed that the mind-body dualism presumed in Cartesian thought rests on the belief that they are of the same logical type. However, through a series of logical steps he demonstrates that mind and body are not of the same logical type and the Cartesian doctrine is, as Ryle describes it, “one big mistake” (p.17) arising from a category error. It seems to me that we could be, in similar vein, making “one big mistake” when we blithely refer to communication(s), media and cultural studies as if they are in the same logical category. At the very least, it would seem that media is

subordinate, as a category, to communication. What the additional relationship between communication and culture may be is very much a function of the theories and perspectives held about each of the concepts. However, to treat them as if they are in the same logical category is highly questionable. While we continue to confuse the logical typing of these concepts and continue to blithely lump them into one loose category, we will never be able to see our way to treating communication seriously.

### **Going where?**

The ascendancy of media and cultural studies, along with the rather higgledy-piggledy use of those concepts in association with communication(s) studies, can be accounted for in various ways. Of value to the current argument is the sociology of science approach described by Maria Löblich & Andreas Scheu (2011) in their analysis of the histories German and US communication studies. From their review, they propose that intellectual histories, individual biographies and institutional characteristics interweave to influence the history of a discipline.

In Australia, in particular, the institutional context appears to have played a pronounced role. In the very first instance it was the changes in the higher education scene allowing for new course development in non-traditional institutions (CAEs) that provided the opportunity for communication studies and acted to shape the field (Irwin, 1993). As Peter Putnis aptly described it, communication studies emerged in Australia as a curriculum idea (Putnis, 1993a). This is in contrast to the emergence in the US, where the early institutionalisation arose from research and not teaching programs (Maras, 2006).

Steven Maras (2006) explored the theme of communication studies as a curriculum idea in the Australian context, offering supporting case material from Harry Irwin on the developments at the then Kuring-gai CAE. This theme is further corroborated in the accounts of various ANZCA presidents (Maras, 2003) put perhaps best captured so straightforwardly by Bruce Molloy: "I'd like to say we planned Communication because it was going to be a world-shaping, world-improving innovation, but that wasn't the real reason". Rather, "as General Studies lecturers, teaching English Expression and things like that, there was no great career track for us" (Molloy in Maras, 2003, p.4). In order to have such a career track, they needed a terminating degree and so it was called Communication Studies. This motivation for the development of communication studies was reflected in many of the newer tertiary institutes of the time, where the development of communication studies as a degree area provided the opportunity to redeploy staff from liberal arts and teacher education areas (Putnis & Axford, 2002).

In Australia, then, the institutional context and the associated pragmatic exigencies of developing a field and ensuring jobs (for both academics and students) go a long way in accounting for developments up to the current day. Although in this day, now, the industry drivers and academic responses have changed somewhat. According to Stuart Cunningham (2010), we now have a focus in which the themes of creative, industry and policy dominate. Furthermore, the core intellectual development for this "creative industries" trope has increasingly come from the humanities and the arts. Hence the increasing focus on media and cultural studies and not communication studies.

It could be argued that this orientation to creative industries is a "natural" development from the earlier communication studies approaches. However, when we consider both the intellectual histories and individual biographies dimensions that contribute to the history of the field (Löblich & Scheu, 2011), it could equally be suggested otherwise. As early as 1990 Michael Galvin observed that the growth of the British critical/cultural

studies influence in Australia was directly attributable to the number of academic appointments in the field from the UK. While the class-specific British paradigm has lost purchase since Galvin's observations, the growing influence of cultural studies has not. In other words, the absolute numbers of those from that field of study appointed to academic positions has contributed to the very growth of the (sub)field. My point here is not to disparage such appointments but to emphasize the important roles played by practical and personal factors in the development of a field. It is not so much that the better theory wins out as it is the number of (wo)men playing.

In all, the brief history of communication studies in Australia can to a large extent be accounted for by particular "opportunity structures" (Morrison, 2008) that have fostered the increasing dominance of cultural and media studies over communication studies *per se* and have led to the dominance of certain paradigms and intellectual traditions that draw on the humanities and the arts more than other disciplinary arenas. Interestingly, the rise to prominence of "communication, media and cultural studies" within the humanities disciplines has been seen as a rare instance of humanities' success in recent times in Australia (Murray, 2006).

Moreover, the rise of new media, and the particular increasing popularity of social media, will continue to provide further "opportunity structures" to shore up the latest academic developments. It is all too easy to see issues arising from new media use as being not only of importance to, but in the province of, media studies and many degree programs have responded to this opportunity with alacrity, offering new specialisations such as internet studies and the like.

In making the above observations, I am quite cognizant of the fact that academics have increasingly had to become responsive to pragmatic considerations that pivot on student numbers and future job prospects—for students and academics alike. Nevertheless, such practical exigencies in the academic teaching context need not, and should not, preclude scholarly considerations that treat communication seriously. By seriously, I mean a sense of communication that doesn't wander between singular and plural, that does not lend itself easily to residing in the same category as media and cultural studies, that does not perpetuate the "one big mistake" identified by Gilbert Ryle (1963) and, most importantly, that does recognize communication as a significant social practice that has consequences for human affairs, both practical and profound.

In what follows I want to reconsider the idea of disciplinarity and what could be the core features of a communication discipline that would follow as consequence of taking communication seriously. As a prelude, however, to the following proposals and arguments I want to make two things clear. First, I am concerned with taking communication seriously for scholarly and practical reasons, and less so for academic teaching or training reasons (although it is by no means excluded). The arguments are for theory development, not course development (although, again, the latter would readily follow). Second, I am not arguing against the relevance or importance of cultural or media studies. Issues of the importance, relevance, or otherwise, of cultural and media studies are matters for scholars within those fields and I am not one of those. Rather, I am a scholar of communication and it is from that stance and to that notion I argue.

## Towards a communication discipline

### Does discipline matter?

In 1993(a) Peter Putnis described the field of communication studies in Australia as offering the possibility of, amongst other things, “a new discipline which could address human communication in a way which transcended traditional disciplinary boundaries”. By 1998, Harry Irwin saw this possibility as having come to fruition in his description of the discipline of communication as “mature and relatively stable” (Irwin, 1998, p.283). However, Irwin would be in the minority and later papers continue to argue that we have no established discipline in Australia (eg Wilson, 2001; Putnis and Axford, 2002; Molloy in Maras, 2003). From my own reading, I would concur: we have no discipline of communication. We may have an academic subject matter, although even that is receding in some regards, and a field of study in which topics of interest generally appear to fall under the rubric of communication, along with media and cultural studies. However, we do not have a communication discipline, any more than I believe we have a cultural studies or media discipline.

The failure, if it is that, to develop a discipline of communication is not unique to Australia. In the aforementioned overview by Löblich and Scheu (2011), they conclude that the field of communication studies in Germany, as well as in America, is characterized by a lack of consensus on its subject matter arising, amongst other things, from the heterogeneous academic backgrounds of its scholars. As Mel Stanfill (2012) sums up, “it is almost a truism at this point that communication is a contentious and divided field” (p.1). For Stanfill (2012), this is reflected in the competing and contradictory ideas about how to pose questions, conduct research and provide explanations in communication studies that arise from the heterogeneity of disciplines occupying the field.

Typically, the solution to this divisiveness and fragmentation in the field is to search for coherence in common ground, usually expressed in the idea of a discipline. In other words, arguments in favour of a discipline often evoke the need for coherence and integration of the field. Yet, as Helen Wilson (2001) has observed for Australia, having gained academic status without a discipline we could well ask whether it is any longer necessary to strive for disciplinary status. Instead, why not pursue the development of inter-disciplinary, multi-disciplinary or even post-disciplinary communication studies?

Susan Herbst (2008) certainly endorses the counter-argument to a discipline, arguing that any answer to greater coherence is not to be found in the search for a discipline since the field of communication studies has actually been post-disciplinary since inception. For Herbst, this post-disciplinarity is characterized by a determined eclecticism about method and subject matter and where the organizing structures of disciplines do not hold. This is not a novel argument and I am readily reminded of the earlier anarchic claims of Paul Feyerabend (1975) that when it comes to method “anything goes”. In like vein, John Fiske has argued that “theoretical poaching” is one of the great strengths of cultural studies (cited in Dreher, 2002).

While Herbst (2008) cautions us that post-disciplinarity cannot mean “sloppiness, a light touch, or avoidance of conventional scholarly standards” (p.608), it all too easily does because of the very lack of standards that have been rejected with the idea of disciplinarity. Herbst's (2008) failure to offer us alternative (non-disciplinary?) standards by which we can make judgments of excellence leaves me unconvinced of the virtues of post-disciplinarity: it may foster imagination but all too often lacks rigour. Moreover,

the very eclecticism that characterises post-disciplinarity is one of the major sources of the roots of incoherence in the field (Craig, 1999).

Others, in contrast, have argued for the importance of developing strong inter-disciplinary threads. For example, in yet another review of the status of the field in the US, Michael Pfau (2008) argued “communication scholars are well positioned to capitalize on cross-disciplinary pursuits” (p.600). Others (eg Shoemaker, 1993) have also observed how readily the field of communication studies naturally lends itself to interdisciplinary research. This makes particular sense when it is considered that the concept of communication has become a central theme in global culture (Craig, 2008).

On the other hand, the very centrality of communication noted by Craig (2008), offers another compelling argument for treating communication seriously and, at least, exploring the possibility of a discipline. As a starting point to this exploration, we need to develop a sense of communication that allows us to talk about it, research it and teach it in such a way that distinguishes it from other human phenomena. Moreover, communication scholars subscribing to this disciplinary development would need to agree on what “it” is. That we could well benefit from such an agreement is implicated, for example, by Putnis & Axford’s (2002) summation of the field in Australia as amorphous. It is also supported by Galvin’s (2002) observations that if the semantic slippages in the use of the term “communication” continues, the future of the field could well be more problematic than the recent past may indicate. Agreeing on what we are studying, however, is not a simple matter of definition, but a practically important one of what is possible and what is not. The way in which we conceive of communication sets the constraints on what we study and what we don’t, and on the ways we engage in communication and the ways we don’t. The way in which we conceive of communication also acts as the basis for determining both the status for and the direction of any discipline of communication.

In developing a particular sense of communication, we also have to believe that the act or the process of communication matters and it matters in serious ways. Stuart Sigman (1995) talked about this in terms of the consequentiality of communication. Sigman argued that we have a critical choice about communication: we can assume that the important “stuff” goes on behind the scene of communicative behaviour on display (in our heads, in our culture, and even, in our technology) or we can assume the process of communication itself is consequential to human affairs. How we communicate, and how we don’t, have consequences and these consequences matter to the conduct of our social lives. When we choose to see communication as mattering in real and material ways, we are accepting that communication is fundamental to our way of being. It is in and through communicating that the world as we understand it is brought about.

Treating communication as consequential to human affairs has been my choice for some significant period of time (eg from Penman, 1988 to Penman, 2013) but it is not a choice shared by many in Australia—hence my comment in the preamble about writing from the margins. Moreover, I suspect that this choice, if it is not dismissed outright, is too readily seen as being relevant only to interpersonal communication and the like. However, this is not the case: a view of communication as consequential to human affairs can be applied to any of the traditional communication contexts, including mediated ones. This has been argued at length elsewhere (eg Penman, 2013; Penman & Turnbull, 2012) and is briefly discussed in a later section of this paper.



### **A unique communication view**

To place communication at the centre of our focus is to treat it as something far more than a mere vehicle for the conveyance of ideas as portrayed in the classic empirical/administrative transmission model or the semiotic/cultural studies encoding-decoding model. Both of these models and their associated historical traditions share the same foundational presumption that communication can be seen as simply an instrument to bring about an effect. Most notably, both traditions separate people from their activities in the meaning generation process and ignore (or deny) the relational or interactive nature of the process (Penman, 2000).

In contrast, a unique communication view offers accounts of human behaviour in terms of intersubjectivity, agency and praxis. From this viewpoint, communication is taken to be a process of joint action between active agents who, in their engagement, generate new understandings and knowledge. Prime examples of such a view can be found in the theoretical work labelled as social approaches to communication (eg Leeds-Hurwitz, 1995) and as social constructionism (eg Pearce, 1995, 2007). Moreover arguments for the foundational assumptions abound in various philosophical traditions, some of which I mention by way of example below in order to establish the significant scholarly underpinnings for the claims I am making regarding the tripartite theme.

Intersubjectivity is a key term used across disciplines and theories to conceptualise the relation between people. However, in the development of a communication discipline it lends itself to a particular meaning that captures the essential “socialness” of human existence. For example, Heidegger argued that we are first and foremost a situated interpreter, understander, or sense-maker and, as a situated interpreter, “a person is irreducibly relational not individual, social not psychological” (Stewart 1995, p.27). Similar arguments can be found in the pragmatic philosophy tradition founded by Dewey (1981) and in newer arguments of the social constructionists (eg Pearce 1995; Shotter 1993, 2005). In other words, the concept of intersubjectivity here takes on the dual role of focusing on relations between people and of giving primacy to the relationship over the individual.

This concept of intersubjectivity also has direct import for how we view language use and meaning. Rather than assuming language is the system of rules as described by Saussure or a system of sending (or listening) to signals to indicate ideas in the minds of individuals, language becomes something we inhabit and something we inhabit jointly (Stewart, 1995). Wittgenstein (1953) is perhaps the most significant philosopher to address this issue with his notion of a language game. Other philosophers have explored the intersubjectivity of language and meaning through the concept of dialogue. Mikhail Bahktin is widely acknowledged as one of the leading proponents of this view (Morson & Emerson, 1989) in his descriptions of language as essentially dialogic because it orients to a listener. Hans-Georg Gadamer (1992), and other hermeneuticians, adopt a similar approach. For them dialogue stands for a particular way of thinking and questioning in the relationship between the interpreter and the text. For Gadamer in particular, the process involved in spoken dialogue reflects exactly the task of hermeneutics—that of entering into a dialogue with the text in which a truth emerges that is neither that of the interpreter or the text, but that of the joint action. Similarly, John Shotter has written extensively about the role of joint action in negotiating understandings, using phrases like “the dialogical, relational-responsive view of language use” (1998, p. 185).

In engaging in joint action, we are also implying that the people involved are doing so with agency, where agency here is simply referring to the capacity of humans in joint action to make choices. There is, in essence, a certain willfulness involved in acting in communication but not one that allows a predetermination of the path of the action. This idea of agency reflects the spirit in Mead's philosophy of action arguments (eg Mead, 1938). It is also reflected in Arendt's (1958) discourse on the human condition where she argued that action is the highest form of human activity that is predicated on being able to initiate, to set something in motion and which inevitably goes hand in hand with speaking. Agency then, is the capacity of people to use their will to initiate joint action and to continue to act jointly within the process.

One of the more important consequences arising from the assumption of agency and the associated concept of joint action for a discipline of communication is the limitation placed on our capacity to generalize. Our very willfulness in acting into communication means that we always have more than one option open to us and we make voluntary decisions on how to proceed. As a consequence our actions are neither fully predictable nor generalizable. This, by necessity sets constraints on the nature of theory that can be generated and I say more about this in the next section.

For the moment, however it is also necessary to acknowledge that the theory that can be generated is premised on a particular form of understanding, specifically that arising out of praxis. The notion of praxis comes originally from Aristotle's three-fold distinction of knowledge types between scientific, technical and practical. Praxis or practical knowledge specifically arises out of the doing of things and it is for philosophers like Gadamer (1992) the most relevant for understanding the human social realm. In other words, practical knowledge, or praxis, is the mode of understanding we use as participants in the process of communicating. It is also the most appropriate mode for making sense of the process of communicating in which wilful people engage in essentially indeterminate joint action.

John Shotter (1993), drawing on a line of philosophers from Vico, through to Vygotsky and Mead, describes this practical form of knowing as a "knowing from": it is knowledge that comes from our relations with others. "Knowing from" is the kind of knowing that is only possible from within a social situation and which, by necessity, takes into account/is accountable to the others in the social situation. Colleen Mills (2006) drew upon these ideas of practical knowing from John Shotter in her 2006 Presidential address to the ANZCA conference. There she appealed to participants to embrace the notion of "witness-thinking" that has, at its heart, a relationally responsive form of understanding that comes out of being in communication with others.

While the concept of a relationally responsive form of understanding, and the emphasis here on intersubjectivity and agency may seem all too readily relevant to interpersonal contexts of communication, it is by no means limited to them. Indeed, as asserted earlier, the tripartite themes that can form the foundations for a communication discipline are as readily applicable to mediated as non-mediated contexts. A prime example is the more recent development of the "listening" trope as a means of bringing the oft-neglected Other to the fore in theorizing about media. The major thrust of those arguments are captured in the special *Continuum* issue on Listening under the guest editorship of Penny O'Donnell, Justine Lloyd and Tanja Dreher (2009), convenors of the Listening Project in Australia. They argue that in much of media studies primacy has been placed on the activities of speaking up, finding a voice, and making oneself heard to the neglect of the act of listening. The Listening Project aimed to redress this

imbalance so that mediated communication could “more readily present itself as a relational space of interacting practices and identities” (O’Donnell, Lloyd & Dreher, 2009, p.423).

The questions addressed by the Listening Project and by others using the listening trope bring the very idea of communication to the fore, not as an instrumental ‘vehicle’ but as a creative, on-going process of joint action between people, even when in mediated contexts (Penman & Turnbull, 2012). Specifically, those using the listening trope acknowledge that participants have agency (eg Couldry 2006), that the ‘space’ is intersubjective’ (eg Crawford 2009) and the acts engaged therein are dynamic and on-going such that they are best understood as a form of praxis (Husband 2009). This is, in effect, a radically different notion of communication than that presumed in mainstream media studies. On the other hand, it is just the very notion that is compatible with the arguments here and that can be accommodated and considered within a unique communication discipline.

### **A practical (meta?) discipline**

Basing a discipline on the tripartite themes of intersubjectivity, agency and praxis leads to a particular challenge when it comes to theory generation: we are participating in the phenomenon of interest, communication, when we are generating theory to make sense of it (Penman, 2000). Whether we are participants in everyday social life or researchers into that everyday life, we are both participating in and creating meanings as we do so. This has quite a number of important ramifications for researchers from a communication perspective not the least of which is the need for a reconsideration of the very nature of theory in, and of, communication.

The conventional form of theory that provides universal, general and timeless accounts is simply not relevant when we recognise that, as we are generating theory, we are helping to bring about the very phenomena we are proposing. Instead, we need an approach to theory that is anchored in, and by, communication practice. The urge to generate practical theory in communication is a fairly recent phenomenon. Some of the early groundwork was laid out by Barnett Pearce and Vern Cronen in 1980 and further elaborated by Cronen in 1995. By 2001 the idea of practical theory was sufficient to have a special issue of *Communication Theory* devoted to it (see Barge, 2001) and by 2009 was presented as a “sub-field” in communication research (Craig & Barge, 2009).

There are now at least three different approaches to the idea of practical theory—practical theory as mapping, as engaged reflection and as transformative practice (Barge, 2001)—that share a common humanitarian theme. However, it is only the transformative practice approach that fully takes on board the communication perspective I have argued for here as the basis for a communication discipline. From that perspective a practical theory is a) concerned with everyday communication practices, b) provides an evolving grammar for talking about those practices, c) generates a family of methods for exploring situated communication practices that d) evolve out of the interaction between participants in those practices (including the ‘researchers’), e) changing both the practice and potentially the methods as they proceed, and f) assessed by their consequences—specifically in terms of how it makes human social life better (Cronen, 1995; Penman, 2000).

As Craig & Barge (2009) argue, the goal of making social worlds better acts to clearly differentiate the transformative approach from other approaches to practical theory, most notably because of its insistence on being directly involved to make a difference. However, this is not just a utilitarian stance; rather, it is an acknowledgement of the

moral imperatives brought about by the belief that communication is material and we live in that materiality (Brook, 2010). In essence, practical inquirers from a transformative approach take on board the moral imperative because they recognize it is impossible not to make a difference once an inquiry process starts. Given the impossibility of not making a difference, it stands to (moral) reason that we should ensure the difference we do make is one that makes social worlds better.

It is this urge to make a practical difference, to make a genuine contribution to improving the human condition, which is the major driver for those advocating a communication perspective and the consequential need for practical theory. It is also the major reason that you might want to pursue the possibility of a communication discipline. However, it needs emphasizing here that this pursuit of the practical is not the same as the conventional scientific understanding of applied research. The latter presumes that pure research is possible and applied is, almost disparagingly, of a lesser form. In that scientific universe in which communication is seen as immaterial, the familiar virtues of research and practice include objectivity, autonomy, accuracy and certainty. However, if we take seriously the idea that communication is material, and that we live in it, then the familiar scientific virtues fall by the wayside and must be replaced by others that celebrate reflexivity and participation (Pearce, 1994; Penman, 2013).

The concept of reflexivity has been used, amongst other things, to capture the idea that our theories about communication and our practices of it reflect on each other. As Bob Craig (2006) has observed, whatever else communication theory may be from different perspectives, it is also a meta-discursive practice that emerges from everyday discourse to provide theoretical ways of talking about that practice that are then available to further use in every discourse. In a similar vein, the concept of participation captures the embeddedness of both the scholar and the practitioner in the communication process (see Penman, 2000; 2013). It may be possible to take more or less removed positions from the process in a conceptual sense, but it is not possible to step out of it altogether. From the communication perspective offered here, stepping out of communication would be akin to stepping out of our humanity.

It has been argued that these new 'virtues' of reflexivity and participation actually provide the foundations for a meta-discipline, rather than a discipline as such. Bob Craig (1999) is a major proponent of this stance and develops his arguments on the basis of two principles: that communication is constitutive of itself and that communication theories help to create the very phenomena they seek to explain and that communication theory acts a meta-discourse. However, it is early days for this argument and for Craig's conception of a meta-discipline.

Here, I do not wish to argue for the merits of a meta-discipline over a discipline, but simply to point out this is one possible outcome of the communication perspective offered here with its tripartite theme of intersubjectivity, agency and praxis and with its consequent focus on practical theory. In the end, it is this turn to practical theory that could well provide yet one more substantive reason for pursuing the idea of a communication (meta) discipline.

While there are significant challenges arising from the generation of practical theory, there can also be significant consequences. Amongst other things, a communication perspective that fosters practical theory lends itself readily and directly to the contemporary needs of tertiary institutes and students orientated to societal relevance

and career development. This is particularly the case when that practical theory is seen simultaneously as a transformative practice.

## In conclusion

In a recent encyclopedic overview of communication, Bob Craig asked:

*Is communication merely a nominal theme that loosely connects a series of otherwise unrelated disciplines and professions? Is communication truly an interdisciplinary field in which progress in knowledge is only possible through close cooperation and synergy among several distinct disciplines composing the field? Is communication actually (despite its apparent fragmentation), or at least potentially, the object of a distinct intellectual discipline in its own right? Might each of these interpretations of the field be true in some respects?" (Craig, 2008, p. 1)*

I think he sums up the alternatives quite nicely for us in Australia and New Zealand. We do have a nominal theme loosely connecting a series of disciplines although there is a tendency for the nominal theme to include that of media and/or cultural studies and especially where the idea of "creative industries" dominates. We also have certain areas in which progress is possible through close cooperation among disciplines and here I am mainly thinking of those areas in which of the trope of 'listening' is the focus of concern. Moreover, while communication is not yet the object of a distinct academic discipline, and is certainly seriously underrepresented in Australia, the potential is still there. It is this potential that I fervently advocate.

In advocating the development of a communication discipline, I am not arguing against the thematic or interdisciplinary threads. I particularly have no quarrel with those promoting a creative industries, cultural policy, critical studies or similar approach. However I do have a quarrel with those that do not recognise the alternatives are real and equally valid. As Craig (2008) observed above, all three aspects have their own truth, in some respects. I also do have a quarrel with those that presume or assert they are studying communication when in fact they are not. There are consequences of category mistakes that, in the instance of communication, can lead us seriously astray about what counts as important and what does not.

Here I have argued that the tripartite themes of intersubjectivity, agency and praxis lead us to consider communication as a distinctive social practice in which human agents play an active role and in which we as researcher are involved in a double hermeneutic with the very focus of our concern. The challenges abound and the debate has barely begun in Australia and New Zealand. I do believe, however, that if we pursue these ideas we may well rise to the challenge of creating a communication discipline that is genuinely a world-shaping and world-improving innovation, with its specific goal of making social worlds better.

## Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Peter Putnis for his thoughtful comments on an earlier draft of this paper and Sue Turnbull for her ongoing contribution to the conversation about the ideas in this paper.

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