

**Disciplinary Brakes on the Sociology of Digital Media:
The Incongruity of Communication and the Sociological Imagination**

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v. 1.3.2023

Word count: 4,290

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Acknowledgments

I am grateful to the reviewers, graduate students, and faculty from sociology and communication, who provided feedback on drafts of this essay. These key informants were instrumental in helping me to clarify my arguments.

Abstract

This paper draws on my experience over two decades as part of an early generation of scholars who graduated with a Ph.D. in sociology into a career as a researcher and teacher in the multidisciplinary field of digital media. I reflect on my experiences to offer an assessment of the state of digital media scholarship within sociology and the field of communication. The study of digital media remains underdeveloped within sociology. In part, this is due to disciplinary failures, an array of relevant, specialized areas within sociology have yet to fully realize the role of digital media. Sociological perspectives are also constrained through a dominant “communication perspective” at the center of the field of communication. Communication is home to most digital media scholarship and uses its institutional dominance to arbitrate what qualifies as scholarship. Whereas communication serves as a plural disciplinary catch-all for the subjects of the social sciences, it often does so without crossing the boundaries of a relatively homogeneous, epistemological framework. That framework does not adequately represent sociological perspectives on digital media. I point to key differences between sociology and communication that tend to marginalize sociological perspectives. These differences have also served to render the field of communication less relevant to sociology (and likely to other disciplines in the social sciences). I stress the importance of building institutions and practices that support (multi)disciplinary representation in the field to strengthen sociology and other perspectives and avoid a myopic lens on our understanding of digital media and social life.

**Disciplinary Brakes on the Sociology of Digital Media:
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With the introduction of the Internet and related media, for a time there was a great deal of optimism that sociology would break from its great famine of research on communication and media (Gans, 1972). It was hoped that the study of these emerging media would find a home as a vital and thriving area within sociology and serve as an integrative project that would extend across sociology's diverse specializations. Sociology would take its place among a network of social sciences that would contribute to a shared understanding of digital media and social life. At least, that was the hope of a small number of graduate students who, like me, were working toward their Ph.D. in the late 1990's. We were confident not only that every department of sociology would be clambering for faculty in this area but also of the influence that sociological perspectives would have on this shared field. (I refer to this area as "digital media," although it has been called new media, social media, Internet studies, information and communication technologies, and other names). Although the sociological study of digital media has grown, a quarter century later its growth within the discipline has been muted, and the new field that many envisioned is maturing into a less multidisciplinary enterprise than imagined (Dutton, 2022). Notably, the field of communication has emerged as the dominant home of scholarship in this area. Although this field has multidisciplinary origins, sociology has lost prominence within communication, and the "intradisciplinary interdisciplinarity" (Katunarić, 2009) of the field can be ill-disposed to sociological perspectives. These trends not only risk diluting the influence of sociology on the scholarship of digital media, but they render the field of communication less relevant to sociologists. Ultimately, this will narrow the lens, the theory, and the methods used to understand and shape our understanding of digital media.

It was an honor to receive the 2022 William F. Ogburn Career Achievement Award from the American Sociological Association's Section on Communication, Information Technologies, and Media Sociology (CITAMS). One of the benefits of this award is the opportunity to prepare an essay for the section's annual special issue of *Information, Communication & Society*. For more than twenty-years I have been, and remain, a sociologist working as a faculty member in the multidisciplinary space that applies social science to the understanding of how digital media are related to the well-being of individuals and society. Despite earning a Ph.D. in sociology (University of Toronto, 2001), I have never held more than an informal, courtesy appointment in a Department of Sociology. In the years since earning my doctorate, I have held faculty appointments in a Department of Urban Studies and Planning, a College of Communication, a Department of Communication, and most recently, a Department of Media and Information. As one of the first generation of sociologists to graduate into a career as a researcher and teacher of digital media, I was an early entrant into the landscape of disciplines that laid claim to the study of this area. As a participant observer working to develop sociology and to develop as a sociologist in this new area, I reflect on my experiences to offer an assessment of the state of sociology and what is becoming of the broader field that studies digital media.

Sociology of Digital Media

In 2001, I chaired an ad hoc committee to rename and redefine the American Sociological Association's struggling section on "Sociology and Computers" as the section on "Communication and Information Technologies." During the following few years, membership more than doubled but quickly plateaued at approximately 350 members (Rohlinger & Earl, 2018). It has not seen a major expansion with the addition in 2015 of the "media" moniker (Revers & Brienza, 2018). In terms of size, the renamed section ranked 23rd from the bottom out

of fifty-three ASA sections in 2022. The discipline's specializations have been slow to include digital media, although digital media are deeply intertwined in all aspects of everyday life and are relevant to all areas of sociology, including inequality, education, criminology, organizations, health/medical, sex and gender, race and ethnicity, and urban and community. Despite some early indications that the network of CITAMS members had more potential for integrative collaborations in comparison to other ASA sections, such as Methodology (Witte et al., 2018), the section's membership is not especially cross-cutting. The ASA's 2021 membership matrix puts CITAMS at the median in terms of the membership's out-degree connectivity. Sections, such as the Sociology of Law and Sociology of Sexualities, are similarly integrated, whereas sections such as Theory and Methodology are among the most integrated. Comparatively, Witte et al. (2018) found that CITAMS members were less likely to be asked to review papers or to submit papers to the ASA's flagship journals. A more recent analysis of articles in U.S. and European flagship sociology journals found that media in general are very rarely mentioned, and digital media are almost never the focus (Kuipers, 2018). Scholarship within sociology related to digital media remains underdeveloped, it is more of a small niche than a large, integrative project.

To many, this is unsurprisingly consistent. Despite prominence as a topic within the Chicago School, the study of media and communication within U.S. sociology faded after the 1950s (Pooley & Katz, 2008). Elsewhere in the social sciences, interest in digital media has grown exponentially. Communication programs/departments experienced extensive growth in this area (Waisbord, 2019). These programs are now home to the majority of scholars, as well as the most central journals and conferences in digital media. A number of sociologists (including myself) have found a home within departments of communication. However, despite that

sociology played a significant role as one of the founding disciplines to the field (Pooley & Katz, 2008), communication and sociology have a fraught relationship. As much as media and communication have not historically flourished within sociology, sociology has also struggled to thrive within communication.¹ Communication perspectives are as poorly received within sociology as sociological perspectives are received within communication. This situation limits the potential influence of sociological perspectives related to digital media.

The Intradisciplinary Interdisciplinarity of Communication

Although the field of communication was founded through multidisciplinary (Waisbord, 2019), it has evolved from its origins as a home for diverse disciplinary scholars, including those from linguistics, sociology, and psychology, into one that is largely self-replicating. Most contemporary communication programs consist of faculty who are graduates of departments of communication or related programs in media, advertising, journalism, etc. The number of faculty in these programs with a Ph.D. from sociology is small and declining. Faculty with a Ph.D. in sociology represented 2.5% of all faculty in these programs in in 2007 (Barnett et al., 2010) and 2.1% in 2014 (Mai et al., 2015). Between 2015 and 2019, just thirteen faculty with a Ph.D. in sociology were hired, representing 2% of total hires (Xu, 2021).

Like sociology and many of the social sciences, communication has experienced fragmentation and hyper-specialization. In comparison to sociology, there has been less convergence on a common canon (Katz et al., 2002). Some interpret this arrangement; the lack of a common canon, multidisciplinary origins, and internal specialization; as evidence of multidisciplinary or that communication is a “post-discipline” (Waisbord, 2019). However, although there is diversity across programs, especially when one includes related programs in advertising, marketing, and journalism, the field has a dominant core. That core is found most

often, but not exclusively, in U.S. scholarship that coalesces around areas known as persuasion, media effects, and interpersonal communication (see relevant discussion in Pooley & Katz, 2008; Waisbord, 2019).

As the study of media and communication within American sociology faded, the field of communication took a distinct turn toward psychology (Pooley & Katz, 2008). Even a cursory reading of communication's flagship journals and conference programs reveals that communication scholarship is heavily based on the theoretical foundations and analytical approaches of psychology. Citation analysis of communication's flagship journals verifies the difficulty to discern communication from experimental and social psychology (Park & Leydesdorff, 2009). Psychology also cites communication research more than any other discipline. Although communication does look to other social sciences for topics and theory, its approach to knowledge development is one of "intradisciplinary interdisciplinarity" (Katunarić, 2009). That is, communication is a plural disciplinary catch-all for the subjects of the social sciences, but it most often does so without crossing the boundaries of a relatively homogeneous, epistemological framework. This outlook promotes a specific "communication perspective" that does not adequately represent sociological perspectives on digital media.

A Discipline by Any Other Name

In the words of Elihu Katz, a founding figure in communication, and sociologist, communication has "lost touch with the disciplines from which their teachers were recruited" (2009). In many ways, communication now resembles a discipline. The standards of any discipline define background knowledge and assumptions, phenomena worthy of study, the methods to be used, the types of causal claims, evidentiary standards, and research goals (Brister, 2016). Like disciplines, communication uses its institutions in the form of departments, professional

associations, and journals as sources of power to observe, normalize, and examine scholarship in the field, with the goal to correct or reform those who do not meet standards (Foucault, 1995, 2005). Power is manifest in the curriculum to which students are exposed and the composition of comprehensive and qualifying exams; the reviewers, editors, and organizers of journals and conferences; and in hiring, reappointment, promotion and tenure committees. The goal is to identify outsiders and develop insiders through conformity and exclusion.

Given its institutional dominance, communication often serves as an arbiter of what qualifies as scholarship within digital media. It decides what articles are accepted for publication, who is hired into communication faculty positions, who receives promotion and tenure, and ultimately, what knowledge is valued in the field. Of course, there is variation; not all reviewers are the same, some departments are more diverse than others, and journal editors vary in their exposure and acceptance of different disciplinary perspectives. (For example, two relatively recent editors of flagship communication journals were trained as sociologists (Ling, 2018; Waisbord, 2019)). However, such influences tend to be rare, uneven, and ephemeral.

There are two primary epistemological differences between what I see as the dominant form of communication scholarship and sociology in the empirical study of digital media. These differences often serve to exclude sociological perspectives and, at the same time, also reduce the applicability of communication scholarship to sociology.

First, communication scholarship privileges experimental methods. Demonstrating causation or a communication process is often considered more important than demonstrating generalizability. Generalizability is assumed through the “fundamental nature” of the process under study. This is reflected not only in the preference for experiments, certainly relative to qualitative approaches, but in the use of other quantitative methods. For example, survey

research done within communication is heavily weighted toward the use of self-selected, student samples (Basil, 1996). This is justified by the belief that communication scholarship reveals universal psychological processes that are not dependent on representativeness and can be observed without much emphasis on context (Arnett, 2008). This contrasts with sociological approaches, which are fundamentally concerned with context and inequity in experience. To understand context, sociologists often deploy qualitative approaches. To demonstrate generalizability, sociologists focus on representative samples from specific populations. Sociologist's methods are rarely experimental, and student samples make sense of something about schools or students and little else. Reviewers for communication journals often react to statistical approaches that are common within sociology with a guttural response of "too many variables" or "the model is too complex." Like other psychologists, communication scholars are comfortable with multiple variables combined into latent, psychometric-type measures, but much less so with multiple, observed variables used to control for potentially spurious relationships.

Second, communication scholars tend to evaluate theory relative to what might be called the expectations of "small-t" theory, whereas sociologists are more likely to focus on "big-T" theory. The capitalization does not signify importance but differing lenses used to view the world.ⁱⁱ Small-t theory articulates a relationship between at least two variables. Much of this scholarship is focused not just on specialized lines of inquiry but on especially narrow puzzles within these areas (Waisbord, 2019, p. 52). Small-t theory is not just a general description of how variables are related but is often directly testable. To many sociologists, these look like hypotheses and not a theory at all. In contrast, big-T theory tends to focus on a particular social phenomenon, general frameworks, an interpretation of the social world, or a set of ideas. Big-T theory offers an explanation of a phenomenon, and may even offer a causal explanation, but is

often a more general proposition than a specification of change in variables x and y . To those trained primarily in the production and testing of small- t theory, big- T theories often look untestable and wishy-washy; they are not a theory at all.

Some of this divergence in how theory is evaluated between communication and sociological perspectives can be attributed to micro vs. macro or individual vs. society approaches, but this does not fully mark the distinction. In many respects, the divergence is an issue of application. Communication scholars often focus on their identity relative to the confrontation between Lazarsfeld-Adorno and their “administrative” vs. “critical” approaches to communication research (Katz & Katz, 2016). However, it is the clash between Lazarsfeld’s “abstracted empiricism” (administrative) approach to “psychologism” and Mills (1959) “sociological imagination” that best distinguishes the communication and sociological perspectives (Summers, 2006). Although some contemporary communication research can be understood as a reconciled, blended version of the administrative and critical approaches (Napoli & Friedland, 2016), and the critical approach persists, the abstracted empiricism of the administrative approach has strong resonance within communication’s core. There is a heavy focus on a professional or service orientation that aims to improve communication outcomes. Sociology has its parallel internal conflicts related to the role of a professional sociology (House, 2019), but the administrative approach is decidedly unfamiliar to most contemporary, empirical sociology that more easily resonates with Mills (1959) focus on big problems and connecting individual experiences with larger social structures in historical context.

In line with the administrative tradition, small- t theory is often applied directly to personal troubles as individual personal deficiencies and in ways to rectify a specific problem. Examples include tailoring a message for an outcome (e.g., smoking cessation) or adjusting

media behaviors to reduce depression (e.g., self-regulation). This contrasts with sociological perspectives of personal problems as “public issues” (Mills, 1959), which tend to focus on setting, history, and inequality. Big-T theory can seem outside the realm of what an individual or researcher can accomplish to rectify a problem. In the same way, small-t theory can be applied more easily to novel situations, such as specific types of interactions or unique technology platforms. Big-T theory is inherently focused on those things that seem mundane or the experiences of everyday life. This can give the impression to communication scholars that sociological scholarship is less current, uses “old data, or is not focused on the latest emerging media, whereas for sociologists, communication research is often see as exaggerating the pace of social and cultural change (Hampton & Wellman, 2021).

(Multi)Disciplinarity and a Sociology of Digital Media

Although not absent, much of sociology’s potential to influence scholarship on digital media remains unfulfilled. In part, this is due to the failure of sociologists within the discipline to explore the connections between sociology’s diverse specializations and the role of digital media. Sociology has become prisoner to a tradition that ignores communication and media. However, it is also because sociological perspectives are constrained through a dominant core at the center of the field of communication. Once a field uses its position to enforce the standards of one discipline and loses sight of other disciplinary perspectives, it slips into a form of intradisciplinary interdisciplinarity that perverts its own ambitions. The core enforces a communication perspective that serves to constrain the range of phenomena considered worthy of study, the methods, and the research goals of the broader field concerned with digital media. Multidisciplinarity, as it is commonly practiced within the field of communication, does not

widely support sociological perspectives. This has consequences for the growth of a sociology of digital media and for how or if communication scholarship is consumed by sociologists.

The homogeneity of the dominant communication perspective is as damaging to the field of communication as it is to sociological perspectives and the health of a (multi)disciplinary field of digital media. Sociology has rarely looked to communication for theory or method. In fact, although communication has borrowed extensively from multiple disciplines, it has generally not had a strong impact on the traditional disciplines of the social sciences (Waisbord, 2019). This might be interpreted as a classic failure of disciplinarity; concerned with its own legitimacy, sociology has failed to engage or even acknowledge the theoretical and empirical contributions of communication. However, the current situation surrounding digital media scholarship demonstrates how this is a more complex, interdependent problem. It is difficult, if not impossible, for any discipline, including sociology, to engage with a field where it sees little resemblance.

Because it can be hidden through the dominant scholarship on digital media, it is worth restating here. Sociology offers a unique perspective on digital media that enriches the field. It is more likely to focus on how participation in online platforms is inherently tied to participation in other aspects of everyday life and places individuals in the context of history and larger social structures. This is a sharp departure from much communication research that treats life online as if people do not have relationships in other settings or that online contact does not extend offline (often, even to other media). Sociologists are more likely to focus on issues of gender, race, and inequality. Certainly in terms of digital inequality, but also the intersectional relationship between inequalities off- and online. To sociologists, media use is shared use, flowing through relationships (Hampton, 2019). This approach inherently assumes that digital media have

“limited effect” (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955), at least when not viewed as mediated through relationships and social milieus, in which case the effects may not be so limited at all (Hampton & Shin, 2022). This provides an important contrast to the dominant approach within communication that rests on finding larger media effects through more precise and more differentiated measures of media exposure and use (Reeves et al., 2020).

The field may benefit most where communication and sociology naturally intersect. A sociology of digital media could serve as a point of reconnection with the field of communication (Chen, 2018; Earl, 2015). Indeed, since its inception, the annual CITAMS special issue of *Information, Communication & Society* (Hampton & Wellman, 2008), has regularly focused on such intersections (Quan-Haase et al., 2020). Confidence in multiple, interrelated small-t theories can be used to increase our confidence in a big-T theory (Abend, 2008). And, improved, differentiated measurement of media exposure will reveal media uses that are relevant, not just to personal troubles, but for broader social problems.

If the field of digital media is to thrive as an intersection for multiple, disciplinary voices, we need to build and reinforce practices and institutions that value (multi)disciplinary perspectives. Within communication, this would mean moving away from evaluating scholarship relative to an established communication perspective to the standards and criteria of the disciplines from which scholars identify. Early scholars, and especially students, would be exposed to theories and methods outside of communication, as much as they are exposed to the field’s own traditions. Within sociology, it would mean increasing students’ exposure to the discipline’s history of scholarship on media and communication, pre-famine (Gans, 1972), and by the sociological diaspora over recent and intervening years (Chen, 2018; Holz & Wright, 1979). These approaches would strengthen a sociology of digital media, make communication

more applicable to sociology (and other social sciences), and would help breed a plurality of perspectives in the field. Such change is necessary, if we are to strengthen sociological perspectives and avoid a myopic lens on our understanding of digital media and social life.

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ⁱ This statement is a somewhat narrow view of both communication and sociology. As Chen (2018) has pointed out, “media sociology” has persisted as a limited area within the broader landscape of communication programs, particularly journalism. Media sociology grew largely outside of U.S. sociology, with origins in the Frankfurt School, critical literary studies, and cultural studies (Revers & Brienza, 2018). My focus and observations primarily apply to empirical U.S. sociology.

ⁱⁱ Indeed, I am not doing justice to “theory” by reducing it to only two perspectives. See Abend (2008) for seven different things that sociologists may mean by theory.