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## Digital Media – between Disciplinarity and Interdisciplinarity

**Abstract:** In the context of the proliferation of new media studies, seen in increasing number of courses, academic departments, journal or projects, this article analyses the status of this field. Is this an already crystallized domain, a well-established discipline, with all the benefits and limits of this label? Or, rather, it is an interdisciplinary field, with little reasons for disciplinizing? The paper deals with the tension between interdisciplinarity and discipline, explaining the “status” of digital media in the academic canon.

**Keywords:** new media, digital media, discipline, interdisciplinary, communication sciences.

### 1. Introduction

In the past half of the century, communication and media studies have expanded in an impressive manner: numerous sub-domains had emerged and different aspects of communication (visual communication, interpersonal communication, electronic communication) have developed in independent branches of research. The technological progress has accelerated even more this phenomenon and the need to explain the significant relationships among media, economy, politics or everyday life was obvious. The Internet had moved things forward and faster: new university programs, curricula and research projects emerged and gained a lot of attention and support. Also, the way of living and the daily routines of the contemporary people were deeply affected by the means of digital communication, changing behaviours, styles of communication or identity representations. Even if we see the present media in a long history of communication and technology, their implications seem revolutionary (Manovich 2001). Their complexity and their embedment in almost every aspect of our life require knowledge from other domains (computing, psychology, politics, arts) in order to satisfactorily grasp the field of communication today. It is notorious that research teams in this area are composed of specialists in multifarious disciplines, many subjects being caught across many disciplines. Thus, it

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is not surprising that the theorists began to wonder in very pragmatic and also meta-discursive ways what the future for communication research would look like. In this vein, I will select some relevant ideas of this debate, especially those that refer to the tension between the interdisciplinary and disciplinary character of this domain.

## **2. A slight detour: interdisciplinarity at work**

Being almost a buzzword of our contemporary academic discourses, the interdisciplinarity represents more than an umbrella term. Its potential is still open, and taking a squint at biosciences for instance could give us a hint about the power of interdisciplinary thinking. Integrating the separate or canonical knowledge, creating boundaries among disciplines and providing complex explanations for sophisticated problems are just a few advantages of interdisciplinary approach. Moreover, it requires collaborative teams, critical exchange of views and creativity. Producing an interdisciplinary culture has never been easy only if we think that the interdisciplinary researchers were educated in disciplinary methods and paradigms. The tensions between originality and tradition, cooperation and competition, sharing and secrecy, distinctiveness and belonging are just some examples of multiple issues that occur in producing a functional interdisciplinary structure (Derrick et al. 2011, 8). In the same time when the interdisciplinary research seemed to resolve many limitations of some traditional topics, many other problems such as legitimization or authority occurred.

In terms of vocabulary, a plethora of terms used in discourses shows some difficulties in properly defining the interdisciplinarity. The contrast with the notion of academic disciplines is often involved, but even their homogeneity has been questioned. A discipline is seen as a strong structure of knowledge, with serious tradition, characteristic language, methods and a community. Beside these, “its distinctiveness is recognised institutionally by the existence of distinct departments, chairs, courses and so on” (Squires 1992, 202).

Disciplines have their own lens in order to see and interpret the world. As Thomas Kuhn (1962) put it, they create paradigms of thought that constitute frameworks of thought, mental models that orientate research. Every discipline has its cognitive and methodological “maps” that assure the activity of a “normal science”. Thus, the community of scientists has a clear toolbox to approach certain problems of their field. Even if a new paradigm could explain better the phenomena, the paradigm shift is always a dramatic change, people struggling in preserving their concepts, procedures and vocabularies. Also, the paradigms tend to be incommensurable, a trait that raises many epistemological, but also practical challenges for the researchers. The importance of the scientific communities that form around a

ground set of values, concepts and methods is overstated by Apostel (1972, 147), who considers that “a discipline does not exist. A science does not exist. There are persons and groups practising the same science or the same discipline”.

In the same time, the revolutionary work that many times happens in the margins of disciplines, in hybrid zones, seems possible after a deep specialisation in the foundational core of a discipline. There is a dimension of power in the presentation of disciplines as knowledge keepers and guardians of truth. As Foucault discussed the concept of discipline in general, they can also be constraining and restrictive, sometimes barriers to free thinking: “the disciplines characterize, classify, specialize; they distribute along a scale, around a norm, hierarchize individuals in relation to one another and, if necessary, disqualify and invalidate” (Foucault 1991, 223). In the same vein, Parker (2002, 374) emphasizes that a discipline represents “a complex structure: to be engaged in a discipline is to shape, and be shaped by, the subject, to be part of a scholarly community, to engage with fellow students – to become ‘disciplined’”. Disciplines preserve knowledge and are defined by rigour, normativity and a sense of certainty. In the same time, they can lead to an “imperialistic” view, leaving unexplained “interstitial gaps” (Chettiparamb 2007, 9).

Thus, the concept of “discipline” was considered “artificial” and a new “postdisciplinary world” (Turner 2006) was declared. The democratisation of knowledge and the need of a more complex view were stated as necessary steps in widening the disciplinarity ways. E. Pharo and K. Bridle (2012) analyzed the possibility of interdisciplinarity behind the facade of disciplines, pointing out that the discipline-based structure represents a major “obstacle” to collaboration and interdisciplinary opportunities. Also, they provide a synthetic understanding of the key terms that predominantly appear in discussions. Thus, “informed disciplinarity” refers to the use of other information from other disciplines in order to illuminate a specific content, while “cross-disciplinarity” is when the aspects of a discipline are explained in terms of another discipline (“the physics of music” or “the politics of the literature”). The multidisciplinary supposes the “coexistence of more than one discipline side by side in a way that adds knowledge together without integration” (Pharo and Bridle 2012, 67). It recognizes the validity of disciplines and the fact that many ideas occurred in various disciplines in relative the same period of time. The interdisciplinarity represents the next complex step, because it integrates two or more disciplines that “may range from simple communication of ideas to the mutual integration of organizing concepts and practices in a fairly large field” (Pharo and Bridle 2012, 67). In education sciences, following the works of Lattuca, the researchers differentiate between “synthetic interdisciplinarity” and “conceptual interdisciplinarity”. In her literature review, Angelique Chettiparamb

(2007, 19-20) mentions Heckhausen's typology of interdisciplinarity, in order to indicate the complexity of the concept: "indiscriminate interdisciplinarity" (encyclopaedic knowledge), "pseudo-interdisciplinarity", "auxiliary interdisciplinarity", "composite interdisciplinarity", "supplementary interdisciplinarity" and "unifying interdisciplinarity".

The interdisciplinary perspectives can occur within disciplines also, as a profound characteristic that already exists in every discipline, because "the space of interdisciplinarity is not just *out* there – interdisciplinarity activity these days may be *in* the heart of disciplinary practice" (Klein 2000, 8). Thus, the interdisciplinarity is not seen as producing itself in the exteriority of blamed disciplines, in a new, aseptic frame, but it becomes to grow inside the disciplinary contexts. The problem remains the modalities in which we can measure the interdisciplinarity and its possible levels (Patraş 2017).

Nevertheless, transdisciplinarity seems to be the highest form of integration, dissolving the disciplinary boundaries and imposing a new way of thinking, and most of the time, creating a new research field. Basarab Nicolescu acknowledged the work done by Jean Piaget, who developed the concept of transdisciplinarity as the lack of "stable boundaries between the disciplines", but he observed the risk of transforming this notion into a "super- or hyperdiscipline, a kind of 'science of sciences'" (Nicolescu 2010, 20) wanted to surpass this issue in order to keep transdisciplinarity open, "beyond disciplines". Thus, transdisciplinarity "concerns that which is at once between the disciplines, across the different disciplines, and beyond all disciplines. Its goal is the understanding of the present world, of which one of the imperatives is the unity of knowledge" (Nicolescu 2010, 22). In sum, multidisciplinary enriches a discipline by introducing different perspectives from other areas for a certain subject, while interdisciplinarity concerns mainly the transfer of methods at three levels: applicative, epistemological and in order to generate new disciplines, such as chaos theory or quantum cosmology.

### **3. Digital media's tensions**

The interdisciplinary nature of new media<sup>1</sup> research is fundamental for understanding of this domain. From the beginning, new media have been situated at the crossroads among computing, communication and content. They depend on the binary language of computers and on the capabilities of the micro-processor, becoming "a mix between existing cultural conventions and the conventions of the software" (Manovich 2003, 18). This emerging field grew in amplitude by 1990, becoming a major focus of theory and research, one reason being exactly its multistratified constitution. A symptomatic point is represented by the inner difficulty of its definition, the

multifarious perspectives, domains and theories involved making its depiction a hard task. Thus, new media are

information and communication technologies and their associated social contexts, incorporating: the artifacts or devices that enable and extend our abilities to communicate; the communication activities or practices we engage in to develop and use these devices; and the social arrangements or organizations that form around the devices and practices. (Lievrouw and Livingstone 2002, 7)

From this perspective we can easily observe the embedment of technology, artefacts, practices, devices, social configurations and organisations in the very essence of domain. Also, new media cannot be significantly grasped if we exclude the theories and frameworks that come from philosophy, economy, sciences, arts or popular culture. Beside media studies, these research areas are mandatory if we want “to begin to make sense of the cultural changes that new media are held to make” (Lister et al. 2009, 2). Thus, one challenge derives from the interdisciplinarity that imbues the specificity of new media:

Our task is further complicated by complexities that almost always require approaches drawn from the methodologies and theoretical frameworks of many disciplines – a multidisciplinary or interdisciplinarity that is itself constantly in flux. (Ess and Consalvo 2011, 2)

New media are highly interdisciplinary and that evidence asks for a new culture among media researchers, a culture that promotes critical reflexivity and epistemological pluralism.

#### **4. The state of the matter: discipline or interdisciplinary field?**

The interdisciplinary core of new media studies advances the issue of institutionalisation or education policy. Also, the entire field of communication studies deals with the tension between their inner interdisciplinary characteristics and the bias toward disciplinarisation. Actually, in searching for legitimacy, a new interdisciplinary field may become a discipline, “with its own perpetuating bureaucratic machinery” Chettiparamb (2007, 16) or not? Many theories about interdisciplinarity promoted the dissolution of disciplines, rejecting their imperialistic claim of holding the universal truth and their subsequent ideas of canon, objectivity and jargon. In the same time, the need for budget, education programmes, staff, scholarly societies, university faculties, journals, and all other benefits that come with institutionalisation are an important trigger for transforming a field into a specific discipline. The debate around the status of communication and media studies started at least since the 1980s, and the special issue of the *Journal of*

*Communication* in 1983 represents a nodal point in this inquiry. Whether or not we can talk about a discipline was the key interrogation but, as Robert T. Craig observed, no emerging consensus could arrive from this volume:

Many writers referred casually to “the discipline” as if there were no longer any question of disciplinary status or identity. Many others claimed, some quite emphatically, that the field of communication was *not* a discipline, but they differed greatly in their attitudes toward this fact and their prescriptions for what, if anything, to do about it. Some were optimistic that the field was emerging toward disciplinary status; others seemed equally certain that no such thing was happening. Some saw the continuing fragmentation of the field as a problem; others celebrated fragmentation as an invaluable source of adaptive strength. Some called urgently for efforts to define the intellectual focus of the discipline; others just as urgently insisted that any such effort to define a theoretical core would be not only useless but counter-productive. (Craig 2008, 686)

This overview reflects quite accurately the state of affairs for the majority of domains and sub-domains of communication sciences. John Durham Peters affirmed the failure of definition for this field since 1986 and also criticized the institutionalization of communication, while other authors sustained the imperative of disciplinary framework. The process of digitization created a form of convergence that seemed to unite different media into the umbrella of digital media but this apparent movement does not resolve the ambiguity of its shared scientific status. The diversity of the communication field and its rapid expansion may also raise many unresolved issues. For Nordenstreng, “such proliferation is not only normal but problematic”, because the field can lose its scholarly roots and become “more and more dependent on the empirical and practical dimensions of reality. This means that applied research is increasingly being used to service existing institutions in the field, and we are back in the old division between administrative and critical research” (2012, 1). For Nordenstreng, the popularity of the field is not a reason for celebration, but a symptom for a possible poor development that “runs the risk of becoming professionally self-centered and scientifically shallow” (2012, 3). Thus, the specialisation can represent a solution that can undo “media hubris” (Nordenstreng 2012, 3), alongside the understanding of communication in relation to the system of sciences. Also, the study of history of communication in universities may represent a modality of continuous examination of the very nature of the area, together with the social turn of technologies (Gradinaru 2016).

For Craig, the indisciplinary nature of communication science is inseparable from its essence:

No matter how intellectually or institutionally well established the discipline of communication may become, many areas of the field will continue to be highly

*interdisciplinary*. Contextually focused areas like health communication and political communication inherently straddle disciplinary boundaries. Study of the media as social institutions is unavoidably a multidisciplinary endeavor involving psychology, sociology, economics, legal and policy studies, technology studies, etc. The question is not whether communication will continue to be an interdisciplinary field, as it certainly will do. The open question is whether communication may also have a theoretical core that enables communication scholars to approach interdisciplinary topics from a distinct disciplinary viewpoint that adds real value to the interdisciplinary enterprise. (Craig 2008, 687, author's emphasis)

In this vein, the interdisciplinary status of this field is not questionable; rather, the disciplinary perspective is that which can be problematic, mostly because it supposes a coherent or even unitary dimension.

With regard to digital media, Jonathan Sterne (2005) discussed if the movement toward disciplinarity should really be a desirable one, in the context done by its statement: "regardless of whether one thinks digital media studies is or should be a discipline, there is no question that digital media are a concern across the disciplines" (Sterne 2005, 250). In spite of many theories, disciplines are not, in fact, so fundamentally different from interdisciplinary fields (except the institutional consecration) and, conversely, many disciplines have developed out of interdisciplinary areas. Nevertheless, becoming a discipline is many times a strategy hard to complete and many new domains emerged in the last century have not been established as disciplines. Also, it is a fact that we are living a research and academic frame that recognizes or even encourages interdisciplinary work, teams or projects.

From an intellectual point of view, Sterne rejects the disciplinary movement: "if we consider digital media studies as an intellectual enterprise, then I believe it entirely fair to say that the field is *not* moving toward disciplinarity" (Sterne 2005, 251, author's emphasis). The relations of digital media with humanities and social sciences are not very well established, in order to delineate a right "place" in this network. Another important problem is the canon of this domain that constitutes a pillar of a discipline. While a canon is formed in a very long time, digital media do not have such a long history but the speed of changes activate the rapid configuration of research traditions. Many texts have already been canonized and several journal, for instance, are milestones for this area. Also, many researchers are acknowledged as creating the main reference for the new media literature.

In terms of methodology, Sterne criticised the use of traditional methods and theories (some of them belonging to other fields) to new media objects. In the meantime, specific methods have been developed even if we cannot talk about a genuine new ensemble of objects. As a comment, the best methods come after the setting up of the object of study, needing a longer time. Also, as Cosgrave showed in his study (2019), digital methods rehash

the integrated perspective, inter and transdisciplinary. Disciplinary methods are perceived as key parts of their inner essence and they appear in many critics as a main barrier to interdisciplinarity – if methods are totally specific to a field, is hard to manage an interdisciplinary research. For Cosgrave,

there is a limited palette of methods, but an endless range of epistemological terroir. However, understanding the tools and methods which disciplines have in common can provide a practical basis for interdisciplinary collaboration. Gathering all this together would permit a more organic, evolutionary way of seeing the development of scholarly fields, rather than a confrontation between discipline and interdiscipline. (Cosgrave 2019, 9)

In the same time, it is important to notice that soft and digital tools especially created to enhance methods of various disciplines bring with them some similarities that are often treated as unique to their domains.

One of the goals of disciplines is the ability of reproducing themselves, but the existing and increasing number of courses, modules, publications demonstrates that digital media have accomplished this requirement. However, we cannot minimize the struggle for academic security and for adequate policies, even if the aims for digital media can be set differently:

the greatest hope for our field – whatever you want to call it – lies in our ability to address, reframe, or re-ask really big questions that cut across all the human sciences. In the end, disciplinarity is nothing more than an institutional promise to our field. Our work has much more important and much more pressing intellectual and political promises. Our challenge is to fulfill them. (Sterne 2005, 254)

Digital media are now the established media and the digital convergence served as a catalyst also for the academic strengthen of the field. Moreover, digital literacy becomes a necessity at the general level, being in a great social demand (courses, conferences, information). Nevertheless, its great development as form of communication does not automatically imply the same level of standardisation and clarifications in terms required by a discipline. Sometimes, the expansion of the object of study exceeds its theoretical and meta-theoretical cadence, challenging the researchers and academics in order to fill this gap.

## **5. Conclusions**

The aim of this paper was to emphasise some of the tensions that are hidden in the tissue of a very actual domain of study. The whole field of communication sciences is characterised by a massive development and a great level of interdisciplinarity. In this respect, our investigation formed around the relationships discipline – interdisciplinary field, in order to analyse the evolution of a domain that is interdisciplinary from the very

beginning and its trends toward disciplinarity and institutionalisation. Thus, we can observe that there is not only a movement from disciplines toward interdisciplinary thinking, but also the opposite, from an interdisciplinary field toward disciplinarisation. Moreover, we can tackle this issue at the grass-roots: it is always will a linkage between a meta-level of comprehension and a specialised analysis, just as between scientific cooperation regardless of the boundaries and an institutional community. Also, the inquiry about the scientific status of a domain has to take into consideration its history, tradition, and, of course, its age. Based on the stage of its development, the same domain may be in different positions of affirming its status. From a wider point of view, this tension gives us a clue about the inner negotiations of the legitimacy or the subsequent structures of power that interfere with the condition of a field.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In this article I will pass over the huge debate about the terminology of the fields and sub-fields, its limitations or benefits (digital media, new media, Internet studies and so on), choosing to refer to them as a whole marked by the same set of issues concerning their scientific status.

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