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Special Issue Introduction

The Strengths of Our Methodological Divides: Five Navigators, Their Struggles and Successes

This special section of *Keio Communication Review* had its impetus at a plenary session at the 2004 annual meeting of the International Communication Association held in New Orleans, Louisiana, USA. Wolfgang Donsbach, then ICA president-elect and program chair for the 2004 meeting invited me to develop a plenary program that would highlight the strengths of the many methodological divisions that too often are seen as dividing communication researchers into diverse and often isolated camps -- quantitative versus qualitative, administrative versus critical, objectivist versus interpretive, culture vs culture, context vs context, and so on. Given a plenary as a venue and normative practices, we all thought immediately of identifying a single speaker but what we finally decided upon was quite different. A brief history of the process is useful in understanding the outcome as it is presented here in this special section.

Twenty years had passed since the landmark 1983 “Ferment in the Field” issue of the *Journal of Communication*, the first and still most notable compilation of the different and back then often hostile and contesting methodologies by whatever names they might be called -- perspectives, approaches, and methods -- that were increasingly claiming the study of communication as their own. Eighteen annual meetings of the ICA had intervened between 1985 when ICA’s annual meeting theme was “Beyond Polemics: Paradigm Dialogues” explicitly bringing together for comparison, contrast, and hoped for dialogue the many competing perspectives. Fifteen years had passed since the publication of the two volume set entitled “Rethinking communication” which was itself given impetus by the 1985 meeting (Dervin, Grossberg, O’Keefe & Wartella, 1989a,b). In 2004, residues of these past conflicts and divisions still marked the field (and still do today). Donsbach, wisely however, saw beyond these residues.

To plan the 2004 plenary I started by interviewing more than 35 communication scholars/researchers representing as many differences as I could including every continent of the globe as well as the main field divisions in methods, perspectives, and substantive foci. The results of the interviews surprised me. On the one hand, the animosities and competitions of the past were still present although as one interviewee commented “they tended to run silent and separately”. The field had grown markedly and differences that in 1985 could not have avoided each other now had developed entire departments nested around their chosen foci and approaches.

Further, the field had also grown in complexity. Whereas in 1985 virtually

everyone named the major polarities dividing the field as qualitative versus quantitative, administrative versus critical, and objectivist versus interpretive, in 2004 my 35 interviewees named an astonishing array of divides with an even more astonishing array of labels. Further, when asked who might be ideal plenary speakers to address the strengths of our divides, the 35 interviewees named more than 100 possibilities with only three nominees being named more than once. At the same time, it was clear that most of the younger researchers were entirely unaware of this contest-filled history and in many cases blissfully unaware of the alternative approaches that only 20 years earlier had collided and attempted to dialogue.

On the surface then it appeared as if the calls for dialogue had failed and what had resulted was the building of separate castles with very wide moats. Given the very nature of the academy and the ways in which discourse communities grow and rigidify around those pursuing common interests in common ways, this was a not surprising change. The surface of the change, however, belied a more complex underpinning.

Those I interviewed for the most part had developed a separate-but-equal stance toward the field and its many divides. The majority of those I interviewed were what I came to call “method purists” -- researchers who maintain an allegiance to a particular sub-set of methodological approaches in relative ignorance of alternatives. Here we have researchers and scholars practicing their specialties within their relatively closed discourse communities without knowledge of or disregard for those who might be studying the same phenomena in different ways using different vocabularies and assumptions in different discourse communities.

One example of the degree of isolation manifest among method purists came from a quick retort from one world-renown interpersonal scholar who when asked if he was aware of any interpersonal scholars who used critical approaches replied “That critical stuff, oh you mean what was in that special issue of the *Journal of Communication*.”

Surprisingly, the purists outnumbered what I came to call the “method segregationists” -- researchers who are at least marginally informed about alternatives and the underlying philosophic debates but who ardently believe that competing research methodologies are incommensurate. With this group, of course, ignorance sparks a stereotyping which is seen as unfair and hostile by those stereotyped, as, for example, when quantitative scholars reduce all qualitative research to merely “exploratory” or qualitative researchers conjure statistics without understanding what statistics can and cannot do as the enemy of holism and thus the enemy of any attempts to speak of humans humanly. Beyond ignorance and stereotyping, however, among the method segregationists we find a substantial number of communication researchers and scholars who genuinely believe that competing approaches are incommensurate and therefore must exist in isolation from each other. Any attempt at integration would by definition be folly.

It is fair to estimate that the method purists and method segregationists represent the majority of researchers in the communication field. This should not surprise us. The methodological choices for studying communication are many and finely nuanced. If we take the host of polarities which now drive these methodological choices and toss them into n-dimensional space, we can conclude, at least for now, that the resulting incomprehensible map is the methodological map for the study of communication and, to be fair, for the social sciences generally.

Surviving in the academy is not easy. One must find a center and a direction and a discourse community home and to do this amid the complexity of this n-dimensional space requires choices. It is small wonder then so few people have tried to traverse these divides by bringing multiple methodologies to bear on the practices of their research.

What is remarkable about the field of communication, however, is that we have more researchers attempting to traverse this “in-between” than other fields and that even amid method purists and segregationists the pulse of the in-between journey remains even if almost inarticulate a still present hope. I call the researchers who traverse the “in-between” method integrationists. What was most interesting about the interviews I conducted was that virtually every interviewee could name one person -- even if they saw that person as seriously deluded -- whom they saw as attempting to traverse the divides. And, virtually every department no matter how otherwise pure had one member of their faculty who held out the hope for method integration.

One conclusion, then, was that any attempt to address the strengths of our methodological divides had to come from integrationists who were themselves as dispersed and potentially isolated from each other as were the method purists and segregationists. A second conclusion was that whoever these persons might be, what would be instructive to learn from them would not be a traditional account of directions for doing research in an integrationist way. Rather, what would be instructive would be a more intellectual-autobiographical account of the journeys they have traveled. It was this conclusion that led to the calling the selected integrationists “navigators” and asking them to focus on their journeys and their successes and their struggles in finding strengths in the methodological divides of the communication field.

To identify the five navigators whose essays are presented here, a review was completed of articles in communication journals that focused on field divergences and convergences. The essayists were purposively selected to represent diverse foundations -- very different specialties, very different phenomena of interest, and very different cultural roots. What the five essayists have in common is that their career lines all have shown repeated forays into integrating perspectives, approaches, methods -- methodologies by whatever names they may be called. And, each has carved out something genuinely new and different by journeying in this in-between

way.

The individual essayists tell of their travels in some detail in the essays that follow. Suffice it to say that each engages for us the intersection of their personal journeys with their intellectual journeys, the implications and impacts of their choosing communication as an approach to studying the social and behavioral phenomena of their own interests, and the ways their attentions to multiple and sometimes competing inputs have informed their inventions,

The essayists describe their journeys in very different contexts -- thinking about communication theory (Craig); studying audiences and users communicatively (Dervin); reaching across paradigmatic divides to understand media and their effects (McQuail); developing new and culturally relevant approaches for measuring public opinion (Ito); and, studying journalism in a more fully communicative way (Zelizer);

What binds the five essays together despite these differences is their common attentions to solving research problems by risking travels down unfamiliar roads and their willingness as authors to open for us a small window into how they have navigated across sometimes seemingly impossible divides.

Brenda DERVIN

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