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One Journey Through, Across and Around Communication

by Barbie ZELIZER

Whenever the topic of methodological and disciplinary divides is broached, one presumes a need to place or situate oneself on one side or another, regardless of which terrain is being sectioned. Placement involves selection, identifying with a presumed perspective and marking boundaries. It requires decision-making about identity that divides the rest of the world into insiders and outsiders and is accompanied by labels that appear natural and self-evident -- between quantitative and qualitative researchers, empirical and interpretive scholars, or behaviorist and cultural enclaves.

At the time of its invocation, claiming placement in the academy makes sense for a variety of reasons and strategic purposes. It helps communicate to others who one is and with whom one can generate conversation most easily. But in the long run, proclamations about placement can become predictable, static and even counter-productive. They take on a fatigued and overly familiar cast that can undermine the larger field that they originally seek to define. Thus, the notion of thinking about one's placement in the field as a journey rather than a sequestered and time-honored position is valuable. It offers a way to think alternatively about scholarly identity and how one fits into the broad range of a discipline in a manner that sits well not only for individual scholars but for the field of communication as a whole.

This paper traces my personal journey through, across and around the field of communication. Recognizing that each of us reflects the strategic decisions that we have taken in our personal and professional lives, I argue here that it is critical to value the broad, contradictory and often idiosyncratic nature of our identity as scholars and our consequent placement alongside other scholars as a way to maintain the vitality of our field. Moreover, I argue that it is on the margins of the areas of inquiry we inhabit that we can most effectively keep the field of communication vital and responsive to the concerns of the public sphere that put us here from the onset.

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Placement as Journey

The word “journey” is popularly referenced as the act of traveling from one place to another or the time and distance involved in doing so. Suggesting an action taken in search of a defined aim or objective, realized incrementally, journeys connote a sequencing of action over time and space, a sense of direction, and often a consistency of purpose.

Thinking about one’s place in the field as a journey draws on three related observations, which have both literal and figurative dimensions:

- | One’s placement is not static, but changes.

- | One’s placement today is impacted not only by where one has been before but by the people one meets and the issues one encounters. It is also impacted by the people one does not meet and the issues that are not encountered. In other words, who one meets on one’s journey directly shapes the places one inhabits in the field. Placement is, therefore, both constructed and contingent.

- | Who one is today is not who one will be tomorrow. Alongside any recognition of placement needs to be a similar recognition of the certainty of change and the need to accommodate unknown trajectories as one sets and resets boundaries.

These notions, while commonsensical to many, have not been intrinsic to how academics “place” themselves in the academy. Rather, we tend to fall back upon a degree of nearsightedness, by which one’s place in the field becomes somewhat sanctified. It is presumed to be static, to emerge from a pristine process of knowledge acquisition, and to bear a somewhat lofty, steady and often uncritical guardianship over the field’s future. By contrast, when seen as journeys, academic trajectories can be thought of as less certain entities. They are more porous and more accommodating to one of the overarching tensions involved in being an academic – how to manage the uneasy co-presence between internal consistency and the inevitability of discrepancy and change. In a field like communication, which is widely impacted by changes in technology, in institutional settings and in the public’s perceptions of and relations with the media, this is no small feat.

Journeys, however, do not take shape in a random fashion. They draw upon perceived expectations. In Biblical usage, the word “journey” referred to the permissible distance one was allowed to travel on the Sabbath: According to Jewish tradition, one was permitted to travel the equivalent of 2,000 paces from the city walls without violating Jewish law (Exodus 16.29). Such an example has much to say about the fact that journeys proceed within marked though often unarticulated boundaries, according to certain rules, and around presumed violations. They are thus only recognized as journeys when they work within prescribed expectations.

Such has long been the strength and weakness of communication. The field’s strengths have derived from the fact that certain journeys have been vastly successful

and thus widely repeated. Such journeys have charted the territory in ways that have allowed us to etch out a coherent field alongside the more longstanding areas of inquiry, like sociology and psychology. But the field's weaknesses have emerged too: certain journeys have become so naturalized that they are now recognized as "places," while other journeys, less central to the field's sense of self, have been turned into "places" that remain marginal to the field's center. There is, then, an unarticulated consensus of what matters – and what does not – in terms of the field's definition, that draws from the notion of placement and codifies journeys as places often to the field's detriment.

How all of this has played out in my own journey is the topic of this essay. I address it by first offering a partial personal biography, drawing from the assumption that how one frames questions derives directly from who a given scholar is. I then explain how that biography links up with my sense of what the larger issues in the field perhaps need to be. The basic point of doing so is to demonstrate that it is primarily on the margins of our consensus with others that we can think most productively about the value of what we hold as constant. Disciplines become somewhat tiresome, predictable and wither when there ceases to be active discussion of the givens that constituted them to begin with. This is particularly the case with communication, a case made more crucial by its role in serving the public interest. In other words, withering is not something that communication scholars can afford to do.

Journalism as a Road Toward Communication

I started my professional life somewhat out of the fold – as a journalist. And it was as a journalist that many of the concerns germinated that have occupied me as an academic ever since. Questions about whether journalists had the right to provide authoritative stories about the world were primary in my days as a wire service reporter, when I saw numerous instances of that authority being mishandled, misshapend and ultimately misreported.

To this day, I remember reporting on a certain Palestinian demonstration on the outskirts of Bethlehem, which made it onto the front pages of the U.S. press. The story that was published barely resembled what I had witnessed, and to make matters worse, the featured version bore the names of reporters who had been nowhere near the scenes on which they reported. I remember feeling both bewildered and somewhat cheated, in that I knew that few others had the on-site knowledge to critique what was conveyed as the story of that demonstration. Moreover, I wondered how many other news stories were put forth with a similar set of disjunctions.

From such a background I gravitated toward the academy, where I thought I could pursue the questions that were bothering me as a reporter. Pragmatic questions about how journalists had the power to report the world in the way they did propelled

me toward an academic engagement with journalistic authority, seen through the prism of communication.

On my journey, I went in unexpected directions. I dabbled in the academy both abroad and in the United States, receiving a wide-based exposure to European and U.S. derived approaches to communication. In Jerusalem, I worked with Elihu Katz and Daniel Dayan at the Hebrew University, where I was able to broach empirical sociology and semiology in a way that sensitized me to the fact that different kinds of scholarship had different strengths and weaknesses and that no complete answer could ever be provided by one type of inquiry. By the time that I came to the States to study for my doctorate at the University of Pennsylvania, I was acting on that observation, taking classes not only in communication but also in folklore, anthropology, sociology, literary criticism and linguistics. Studying with a wide array of notable scholars – Larry Gross, Roger Abrahams, Charles Bosk, Dell Hymes, Bill Labov – I learned that journalism needed to be accounted for as a phenomenon that imploded disciplinary nearsightedness, and the value of my training suggested that such was the case regardless of what one studied.

This meant that by the time I was ready to declare myself a full fledged academic, I was an interdisciplinary rag doll. My multiple perspectives – borne out by a PhD in communication with an emphasis on performance studies in folklore -- made sense to me but not necessarily to others in the academy. I had a degree in communication and I studied journalism -- both points which would seem to have a clear resonance to others in the field -- but not in ways that many others recognized. This was because I was invested in tracking journalism through linguistic, cultural, visual and interpretive prisms that were not part of the most frequented frame for thinking about journalism as part of communication.

Thus, I faced a definitional problem from the very beginning. In my case, I was wedged in between two definitive populations – journalists, on the one hand, who were not very interested in anything an academic had to say (even if she had formerly been among them) and academics, on the other, who in both the broad and narrowed analysis of journalism did not readily use the methodological or epistemological tools that I had come to favor (see, for instance, Zelizer 1993a and Zelizer 1998). Specifically, here I refer to what might be called the default setting of journalism scholarship, shaped by two fields – sociology and political science (for more on this, see Zelizer 2004).

Sociology set the stage for thinking about journalism, tracking the structures, organizations, and institutions that guided journalists' work as well as the relationships and work routines involved in gathering and presenting news. Extending largely from the newsroom ethnographies of the seventies (Tuchman 1978; Gans 1979), this work was responsible for developing a focus on the structures, functions and effects through which journalists worked (ie., Tunstall 1971, Curran and Gurevitch 1991). Elsewhere, political science tended to think about journalism through an emphasis

on its public impact – that is, seeing journalism through its effect into the political process (ie., Entman 1989, Patterson 1993). Promoting a largely normative interest in journalism that derived from longstanding expectations about journalism acting in primarily capitalist democracies as government’s fourth estate, this inquiry assumed an interdependency between politics and journalism and queried how journalism “ought” to better serve its publics under optimum conditions.

Neither lens reflected what I was most interested in studying. I wanted to force a pause into the process of academic inquiry, to look at how journalism made sense to journalists and how they imported their collective knowledge into the material we call news. Journalism, to me, was both a craft, a way of thinking and a lived practice, and I wanted to find a way to accommodate such nuances in my scholarship. Though these issues drew the greatest degree of interest from journalists, they did not exactly want to give me a say in speaking about their world. And while certain academics were looking at things in a way that resonated with me (especially Carey 1989, Schudson 1995), they still remained few and far between. To make matters worse, though I was not trained as a historian, I gravitated toward thinking about journalism in earlier times and saw journalistic practice as connected with collective memory, and so my insistence on temporal nuances made me even harder to place. And through it all, issues of public interest – of thinking about journalism and how and why it went wrong and right and what this meant for the body politic – remained at the heart of my concern.

Now, years later, I can reflect on all of this with a more generous degree of equanimity than perhaps I felt at the time. But I do know that it produced an extraordinary degree of navel gazing over the past 15 years or so. I have always found myself engaged in navigating around the issue of identity, and that navigation has permeated my job searches, my topic permutations, even the courses I teach. My first job was in a dept of rhetoric and communication, where, because I studied media, I was codified as a cultural studies scholar. Later when I had a stint elsewhere as a visiting historian, I had to give up my contemporary interests in journalism to focus on the past. And most recently, I served as a fellow at an institution defined by its contemporary interest in the news, which meant that I needed to drop my historical interests for the interim.

This happens to most scholars, in that we reinvent ourselves to fit the context at hand – the dissertation committee, the tenure and promotions committee, the editorial board of a journal, the foundation or government agency’s request for proposals. We are surrounded in the academy by a number of interpretive communities, each of which establishes and maintains itself on the basis of shared interpretive strategies and tacit knowledge about what matters as evidence and why (Zelizer 1993b). These interpretive strategies are neither constant or natural, but they are continually being negotiated by other people with like interests – sometimes in hierarchical or politicized ways. How they settle and resettle questions of value is central to

understanding the collective that emerges around them. Thus, not only does communication itself constitute an interpretive community of sorts, but so do the other disciplines which inhabit its borders. The subfields of communication function in much the same way. All we need consider is the proliferation of ICA's divisions and interest groups as evidence of the ways in which we have systematically learned to demarcate our boundaries as a field, to mark with whom we are willing to converse and under which circumstances.

All of this suggests that the forces that help maintain a social group's solidarity matter. Such a notion has been suggested by a wide variety of scholars, including Emile Durkheim (1965[1915]), Thomas Kuhn (1964), Michel Foucault (1972), Nelson Goodman (1978), and Mary Douglas (1986). What each of them demonstrates is that social questions matter in framing scholarship as much as intellectual ones. The more we surround ourselves with people who think like us, the less we need to challenge the strategies by which we set ourselves and our inquiry in place. Conversely, the more we encounter people who think differently than us, the more we need to revitalize the givens that have allowed us to grow comfortable and more entrenched in our received view of how we think the world works.

On Communication as an Academic Intersection

In thinking about the field of communication, these ideas bear particular relevance. Its interdisciplinary nature, the changing tides of circumstances with which it regularly must deal, and the heavily traveled roads on which it treads with other fields all suggest that communication functions as an academic intersection for many journeying across the academy. It offers a pause that can and should continue to lead in many directions. This means that keeping it porous and keeping ourselves talking about what communication might be remains not only of value but of necessity.

We need to keep asking a slew of questions that have to do not with what we know but how we come to know it and why. This includes questions like what makes us conceptualize communication in one way or another – a particularly strident doctoral advisor or some seemingly intrinsic relation with our own lives? How do we account for what we think we see, and which tools do we use to explain it? To whom do we hope to speak and under which institutional constraints? How do many of us navigate the terrain we share with others with whom we do not necessarily agree? How often do we attempt to negotiate consensus (even partial) across different ways of knowing?

As guardians of the character and future of the field, we need to keep asking these questions. Our goal should be how to keep vibrant the kind of generosity of spirit by which our own field first came into being. The numerous sociologists, political scientists and social theorists who watched our field emerge in the beginning

recognized (happily or not) that communication had enough of a core that justified it claiming its own terrain.

But there is need to recognize that the terrain is everchanging. The same generosity of spirit that allowed us to come into being needs to be kept alive us afloat. We need to be continually cognizant of and respectful towards different methodologies and epistemological viewpoints. If we do not, we shall wither.

There are many ways to accomplish such an aim – conference sessions on issues that by definition cut across methodologies, journals that track issues in ways that use more than one epistemological viewpoint, even university curricula that force an address to the varying areas of our discipline. Even when thinking about the public interest, where much of the ongoing academic intervention comes from funded research, there is need to open ourselves up beyond the obvious questions. Political activism is one way to address public interest, which has not occupied center ground in our field because it presumes a slightly different epistemological answer to the question of what communication is for and a different methodological preference for how to make that happen. As someone who falls into that part of the academy that doesn't ask questions in a way that tends to get easily funded, my intervention in the public interest has moved in directions other than funded grants: I write columns, produce essays for the media, consult on endeavors having to do with journalism in trade organizations and trade journals, and advise on professional and pedagogic curricula. There is need to recognize that all of these activities – not just some – keep the conversation going, though they take different pathways in doing so.

Being in the academy is thus in part shaped by our being in the world. It is up to each of us to figure out how to keep communication attentive to all voices and areas of the field, not just those that provide recognizable kinds of data or familiar methods for examining new data. Our negotiations over these issues will always be ongoing because the parameters of our field are always changing. Our journey thus needs to continue for as long as we call ourselves academics, shaped by a recognition that the value of navigating methodological divides is not only to address our own tensions about where we fit in the academy, how we got there, with whom we need negotiate whether we stay or move on. Rather, we need to remember that the value of navigating methodological divides is that it keeps the field vibrant, relevant and provocative. It keeps our field's eyes open to the world. Our mission in addressing the public interest means that we can do no less.

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