Communication
in Question

Competing Perspectives on Controversial
Issues in Communication Studies

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INTRODUCTION

In a seminal essay, communications theorist John Durham Peters (1986) provocatively asks why the discipline of communication has failed to offer a coherent vision of itself in relation to other social sciences. To encourage debate about the field’s past, present, and future, Peters suggests that as an institution, communication studies suffers from an identity crisis born out of the myriad “conceptual confusions” regarding its central intellectual tasks. More than twenty-five years have passed since Peters’s influential paper, although his argument continues to resonate. Book-length studies (Katz, Peters, Liebes, & Orloff, 2002) and conferences have been devoted to the questions of what makes up communication’s vision and central intellectual tasks, but no definitive answers exist. It is disputable whether there are definitive answers at all, and whether all the hand-wringing that sometimes accompanies these debates is even worth it. Intellectual exercises such as those Peters advocates are not unique to communication studies—similar debates remain unresolved within other social science disciplines as well (in the case of sociology see, for example, Brady, 2004; Burawoy, 2004; and Gans, 1989). In the end, Peters modestly proposes that the task of communication studies should be to create the “conditions that help foster a higher quality of mind” (1986, p. 552).

We agree with this objective, but a fundamental question for us remains: In what ways might communication studies actually go about doing this? Or, more to the point, how might we, as teachers and researchers, encourage our students to think differently about the central place of communication in their lives and to reflect critically on how it informs their actions in the world? Peters does not identify which steps ought to be taken, preferring instead to “pose questions that need to be asked,” and to provide “a sense of how to answer them” (1986, p. 528). His questions are important for students in communication and media studies to think about: What is the discipline’s position within the broader university structure and how does communication differ from other fields? What is the status of communication as a profession? What are the intellectual consequences of not taking these questions seriously? To Peters’s list we might also add: How can we mobilize our knowledge and understanding of communication to encourage more thoughtful and inclusive discourse, more responsive policy, and more equitable technologies and practices? How can we encourage students to apply communication theories and methods to solving the key social problems of our time? Although no singular answer or approach exists to deal with these questions, we suggest there is opportunity to forge a vision for communication by presenting the field as an open, fluid assemblage of approaches that allow us to explore both the extraordinary and the mundane aspects of everyday life.

American sociologist C. Wright Mills, an important figure in the history of critical communication studies, offers valuable insight into these questions and themes. Mills was the most widely read social scientist in North America at the time of his death in 1962 (Keen, 1998). He was a visionary, an uncompromising dissenter, and a renegade intellectual who believed that critique—the imminent questioning and challenging of assumptions and arguments—was a fundamental prerequisite to the development of a truly democratic society. Drawing inspiration from a number of classical thinkers (including Karl Marx, Max Weber, Thorstein Veblen, and John Dewey), Mills believed that academic work should be seen not as a science per se, but as an
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intellectual craft. Intellectuals should endeavour not to separate their life from their work, but rather to integrate personal experience with professional interest in order to enrich understanding of both. As a craft, communication research should be critical and reflective, as well as dealing with the substantive problems and experiences of everyday life. And in terms that anticipate Peter’s argument almost thirty years later, Mills suggests that what is needed “is a quality of mind that will help (citizens) use information and to develop reason in order to achieve lucid summations of what is going on in the world and what may be happening within themselves” (1959, p. 6).

We find much value in Mills’s vision for research and argue that it is as crucial for students today as it was for students in Mills’s era. Mills believed that all individuals have the capacity to be intellectuals, whether they are professors, students, or people outside the formal institutions of higher learning. He developed the “sociological imagination” as a concept that could apply well beyond the discipline that bore its name to encourage within citizens a capacity for critical thinking and analysis of the personal problems and societal issues that constitute their lives. We heed Mills’s wisdom and encourage students to develop a communicative imagination to establish connections between their everyday experiences and encounters with communications media and the broader policies, social structures, and historical forces that condition the emergence of these media, the ways in which they are used, and how they transform our lives.

Key Controversies in Communication

Envisaging the relationship between critical inquiry and everyday life is the coordinating theme of Communication in Question, Second Edition. Indeed, the genesis of this book came from our informal conversations about the challenges we face in engaging undergraduate students to think critically about the richness of issues and topics they can pursue within the field of communication, or to think about the communicative dimensions of issues and topics with which they are already familiar. Our universities (like others, we assume) boasts no shortage of students who enroll in communication courses because they want to learn about the latest innovations in new media technology. Yet, when it comes to establishing connections between, for example, the rising popularity of social networking sites with policies that enable the development of digital technology and the increasing tendency toward privatization of information dissemination, retrieval, and storage, student interest often wanes.

Many university professors also face increased interest from students in their communication courses who want to know what it takes to succeed in the world of advertising, public relations, or other professions. The challenge, for those of us who don’t do advertising or PR in the purely instrumental or commercial sense, is to harness this interest by introducing students to the social, historical, and economic conditions from which their favoured ads or PR campaigns for the iPad, Volkswagen, the Gap, Breast Cancer Awareness, or the Government of Canada have emerged.

Our goal with this book is to confront this pedagogical challenge head on. The approach we take here is novel in terms of both content and style. Featuring short, engaging position papers by leading Canadian academics, journalists, and policy advocates, Communication in Question, Second Edition, is designed as a tool for generating small-group discussions and debates. Building on the first edition with revised and new debates about cutting-edge issues, the book presents twenty topics that feature competing perspectives from prominent researchers, activists, and journalists. The topics are organized to address a cross-section of five key themes, ranging from the general to the particular: Classical Debates in Canadian Communication Studies, Media and Social Issues, Technology and Everyday Life, Culture and Regulation, and Entertainment and Popular Culture. While these themes and their related topics are not exhaustive, we feel they represent a broad spectrum of interests and capture the diversity of research projects and programs that are ongoing within the field.

Communication in Question, Second Edition, presents students with an issue-oriented, topical reader that can serve as a locus for small-group discussion and debate and generate points of departure that can help students develop their own perspectives. We hope that the engaging prose of the papers and their connections to everyday issues will motivate students to formulate informed perspectives on topics with which they have either limited familiarity (e.g., media ownership, telecommunications regulation) or for which they may lack sufficient critical distance (e.g., the impact of social networking on activism and politics). The “competing perspectives” format of the reader also provides material for students to chew on and consider in relation to the more general overview of the field their instructor or other communication textbooks provide. Even if they disagree with one or both perspectives, students can use each essay as a starting position for asking more probing questions and challenging the assumptions and arguments they have been presented. The book illustrates that there are always at least two clear and reasonable positions to take regarding a contentious question about communication, through which students can develop their own positions and perspectives. Indeed, the cultivation of a more nuanced and arguably sophisticated position entails blending the strengths of each argument, recognizing that we are best served by understanding these issues in ways that are not limited to an either-or perspective.

Finally, the book is designed to provide an alternative to the innumerable American readers of this sort on the market. We have used such books in our own courses and are excited to provide an option that doesn’t require the student to spend time unpacking why, for example, Canadian media companies are not bound by FCC regulations, and instead focuses on discussing and debating actual issues in Canadian media regulation. With this in mind, Communication in Question, Second Edition, provides valuable Canadian content that we hope will expose readers to the richness and diversity of issues and perspectives that inform communication studies in this country and encourage them to think and act in a more reflective, critically informed way. The fact that almost all the contributors are Canadian and/or currently work in a Canadian university or media institution also reveals the wealth of domestic expertise on issues that transcend national borders and concerns.

Given our interest in encouraging our students to develop a communicative imagination, it seems appropriate to return to the advice of C. Wright Mills. A firm believer in the importance of education, Mills suggested that in a classroom the teacher ought to try to show others how men and women think, and at the same time reveal what “a fine feeling she gets when she does it well.” As professors we strive to inspire in our students an interest in and commitment to seeing their everyday lives not as manifestations of individual will or as the effects of powers acting on them from above, but as complex configurations of biography, history, and social structures that they have the capacity not only to understand but also to change. We hope this book embodies this critical ethos.

Josh Greenberg
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Notes
1 Paula Mathieu (2005) advocates a similar pedagogical strategy for students in English.
2 Mills was especially critical of the “abstract empiricism” that defined both social science and communication research in the early post–World War II era, represented in the works of communication scholars such as Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert K. Merton. However, Mills’s own involvement with the Bureau for Social Research (the locus of abstract, empirical scholarship to which he pathetically refers) and his proactivity for survey and quantitative methods where it suited him suggest a contradiction at the heart of his radicalism. Jonathan Sterne’s (2005) important article speaks to these points.

References

Acknowledgments
The genesis of this text was a conversation between the co-editors about the challenges of encouraging undergraduate students to see how their everyday lives are deeply shaped by communication issues, technologies, policies, and practices. While each of us had created patchworks of readings and assembled teaching materials to make communication meaningful in a way that registers with the everyday lives of our students, we wondered why a reader that could meet this need had not yet been produced. Our hope is that this updated volume will not only help to fill this gap, but also present some compelling arguments about the most current issues and challenges facing society and our field. We wish to thank our students (past and present) who have always challenged us to think differently about how to present interesting material that encourages critical thinking and debate. We also wish to thank Jessica Freedman at Nelson, who was an excellent developmental editor. And our biggest expression of thanks goes to all of our authors, whose time, energy, and contributions made this book a reality.

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