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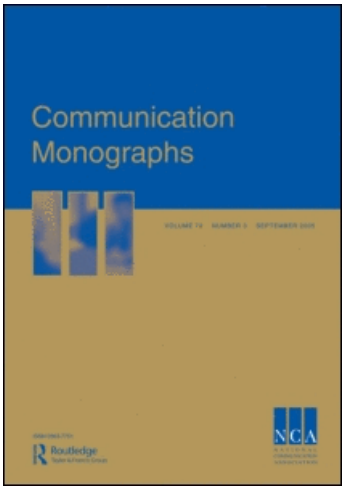

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Research as a Transdisciplinary Networked Process: A Metaphor for Difference-Making Research

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Note

[1] While it was Katriel and Philipsen's (1981) claim, "that 'communication' labels the academic discipline we practice is more or less incidental to the general point being made", I believe that we need to recognize that we work within a discipline with terms that overlap with so-called "native" terms for similar behavior. This makes it all the more important that we carefully distinguish researcher's discourse from everyday understandings.

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Research as a Transdisciplinary Networked Process: A Metaphor for Difference-Making Research

Leah Sprain, Danielle Endres & Tarla Rai Petersen

Communication scholars who seek to have their research affect communication practices and public understandings of communication should move toward a transdisciplinary networked approach. In addition to conceptualizing communication researchers as translating research results or intervening in communication practices (Frey, 2009; Hummert, 2009), the metaphor of research as a transdisciplinary networked process wherein scholars actively seek opportunities to connect people, projects, and ideas offers new insights to the conversation begun in the forum. In what follows, we define research as a transdisciplinary networked process. Then we describe how interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral networks facilitate such

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research. Our essay concludes with the implications of viewing research as a networked process and reflection on the discipline's level of commitment to difference-making research.

While our discipline is grappling with the implications of interdisciplinarity (e.g., Condit. 2009), we suggest that transdisciplinarity may be a better model for difference-making research. Whereas transdisciplinarity can be defined in multiple ways, we follow Wickson, Carew and Russell (2006) in describing it as an approach to *real world problems* where collaboration reaches across academic disciplines and nonacademic sectors. Faced with the question of how to do transdisciplinary research, the network metaphor offers some suggestions.

The network metaphor focuses our attention on process and interconnections. Rather than focus on research outcomes (e.g., peer-reviewed journal articles), networked research re-focuses attention to the process of conducting research. A network orientation privileges a commitment to making connections to other scholars, sectors, and stakeholders interested in the same problem from the beginning of a project.

A transdisciplinary network orientation assumes that *interdisciplinary networks* are a benefit rather than a liability. Creating interdisciplinary networks of people and ideas has multiple justifications and rewards (several articulated by Hummert, 2009), but two seem particularly relevant for difference-making research. First, interdisciplinary networking exposes people outside the discipline to our research traditions and insights. Second, interdisciplinary research capitalizes on these networks to address complex social problems that cannot be completely circumscribed with any single disciplinary perspective. A network orientation pushes Communication scholars to be confident about what we have to offer and curious about what other disciplines can offer us as we seek to study problems that are not contained by one discipline.

In the recently published *Why we disagree on climate change*, for instance, Mike Hulme (2009) draws on work by rhetoricians and media scholars in connection with historians, natural scientists, and philosophers to explain the dynamics of why people disagree on climate change. Communication scholars alone cannot sufficiently illuminate or solve such complex problems. But we can work with other scholars to suggest ways to communicate about climate change. Hulme's book and our own experiences suggest that natural scientists are seeking input from social science and humanities scholars because they recognize the importance of such approaches for their own attempts to make a difference.

Transdisciplinary networked research is also cross-sectoral. Networking scholars pursue projects that listen to and speak back to people engaged with prominent current issues. Although, communication scholars have considered contemporaneous discourses on torture, terrorism, homeland security, and war, for example (e.g., Ivie, 2005; Hasian, 2005), we suggest networking scholarship takes an additional step to not only connect with contemporary issues, but also to speak with stakeholders, policy-makers, and other people responsible for making decisions about these societal issues.

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Reporting back to community groups is a long-standing practice for some communication scholars. However, networked scholarship can go beyond *post facto* reporting back by networking across sectors throughout the entire research process. In line with those communication scholars who engage in scholarship that itself is guided by stakeholders (e.g., Participatory Action Research), viewing research as a transdisciplinary networked process encourages scholars to engage with people and ideas from nonacademic sectors. Endres, Sprain, and Peterson's (2009) edited volume, *Social Movement to Address Climate Change*, for example, is the culmination of a national research project that followed the Step It Up climate change campaign as it happened. Importantly, researchers created and maintained connections with organizers through the research process. As the Step It Up organizers worked on their next campaign, they periodically contacted researchers for current versions of the volume so they could read the analysis as they moved forward. Research findings gain enhanced capacity to make a difference when the research itself is connected to practitioners or stakeholders. In these cases, public audiences for research may not need to be cultivated or created; instead, they are often waiting, ready to interact with communication researchers.

Larry Frey (2009) concluded his article, "communication scholars undoubtedly want their research to make a difference" (p. 212). We're not convinced this sentiment is pervasive, especially when difference-making involves extending beyond the academy. Although our audience for this essay may adhere to this assumption, frankly, we do not assume that making a difference motivates all communication scholars. If we are to make moves toward expanding the difference-making capacities of our discipline, we must start by confronting the reality that scholars may or may not choose to engage in research that makes a difference.

Scholars who want their scholarship to make a difference—who research because of its difference-making potential—would benefit from envisioning research as a networked activity. This perspective would encourage individuals to make connections between their work and the work of others in a multiplicity of forms. Leveraging scholarship to make a difference comes through attempts to connect research to the interests of others in meaningful ways; leveraging networks can itself be a means of conducting research that has a lasting impact on individuals, institutions, and their communication practices.

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Making a Differential Difference

Charles R. Berger

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Never run into debt, not if you can find anything else to run into—Josh Billings

Publication of a forum titled *Has Communication Research Made a Difference?* in two august communication journals is perhaps diagnostic of some insecurity about the place of communication research in the Pantheon of Academic Research Enterprises. Fortunately, the four original forum contributors have provided numerous examples of communication research's impact in a variety of contexts, including education (Frey, 2009), organizations (Seeger, 2009), and health care (Hummert, 2009), although Condit (2009) raises questions about the conceptual grounding and efficacy of some health-related communication research. Some forum respondents have enumerated additional areas in which it is reasonable to assume that communication research has made a difference (Kramer, 2010; Manning, 2010). Although these many exemplars should serve to assuage any doubts about communication research's impact within at least some sectors of human endeavor, some forum respondents question the view that communication is merely as an "instrument" or "tool" for attaining desired goals (García-Jiménez & Craig, 2010; Koschmann, 2010) and the degree to which the notion of "effective communication" is culturally universal (Milburn, 2010). Still other respondents raised questions about the degree to which the domain referred to as "communication theory" is populated by theories devised by communication researchers (Condit, 2009; Harwood, 2010; Kramer, 2010). These contributors echo concerns about "communication theory" raised almost two decades ago (Berger, 1991) and give rise to the question: *Has communication theory made a difference?*

Given that this latter concern seems to be a lingering one and one that may be contributing to persistent, vague feelings of disciplinary insecurity, in the service of mollifying such unpleasant emotional states it seems worth considering the question: *How can communication researchers become more engaged in the development of communication theories?* To place this question in the desired context, several caveats

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