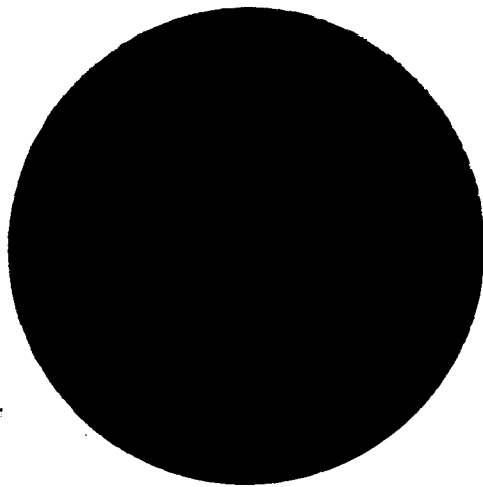

**Educating the University
About Communications:
An Agenda for Students,
Society and “The Usual
Suspects”**

Everette E. Dennis



**Gannett Center for
Media Studies**

A Gannett Foundation Program
at Columbia University

Educating the University About Communications: An Agenda for Stu- dents, Society and "The Usual Suspects"

remarks by Everette E. Dennis

Communications studies in the American university are beset by a curious paradox: there is hardly an intelligent person alive who doesn't readily agree that communications are central to human enterprise and existence, but few are aware that there is a field devoted to communications research. Many might even agree that the role of the media is becoming even more important as events in China and Eastern Europe so clearly demonstrated last year. Having returned only recently from Central and Eastern Europe, I am acutely aware that the revolutions of 1989 and 1990 were profoundly influenced by communications and communications systems.

In the countries I visited not only was communication a vehicle for the revolution (and the supplier of many of its leaders), but also an object of revolution. Remember that the media were the central nervous system of the old Communist order that was largely replaced during the several revolutions — some of them velvet, and others with harder edges. As we look at the present leadership of countries like Czechoslovakia and Poland, for example, we see presidents, prime ministers, foreign ministers and others who have come from the media to their new posts.

Well beyond the case of Eastern Europe, none would seriously argue that it is possible to understand electoral politics, consumer behavior, or any of the many facets of public life without understanding the role of communication media and the process of communication itself. Is there a subject, a field, a phenomenon,

Speech delivered at a colloquium of the department of communication at the University of Michigan, October 4, 1990.

where communication does not play a leading role? The answer, I think, is evident in this inquiry, which reifies our dependence on communication.

Still, there seems little link between general public understanding of the role and impact of communication and its role in the American university. To the extent that communication is recognized as a field of study, or even a discipline, it exists in a somewhat sleepy, stable state, hardly on the cutting edge of what most universities regard as their most important endeavors. Indeed, I can only think of two or three university presidents in the United States who publicly acknowledge that communications study is high on their personal agendas.

The problem with communication education is, I believe, twofold: there is a serious identity problem and a credibility problem. This was pointed out to me recently in a conversation with the long-time head of research at McGraw-Hill, Dr. David Forsyth, who is now head of the department of communications at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah. Dr. Forsyth said that when he told colleagues in the media industries that he was going to head a communications department, they asked him what that was. When he mentioned the various components — journalism, broadcasting, communication research, they instantly understood.

This inspired him to do a study asking people in universities, the media industries and other institutions what “communications” in the university context meant to them. He also looked broadly at what various “communication” departments in the United States call themselves and found a wide nomenclature.

In further conversations with university colleagues, he was told that a communications department is presumptuous because it claims so much of the territory covered by psychologists, sociologists, political scientists, philosophers and many others. Those Dr. Forsyth spoke to thought that in the face of presumptuous claims of competence (and territory), that communications departments deliver too little. In what is often an administrative convenience, journalism and speech-communication departments come under an umbrella called “communication” even though the term does not communicate clear information to university colleagues, let alone the media industries or the general public.

“To the extent that communication is recognized as a field of study, or even a discipline, it exists in a somewhat sleepy, stable state, hardly on the cutting edge of what most universities regard as their most important endeavors.”

I have encountered this identity problem on a number of occasions over the years. One vivid memory I have was at the University of Oregon, where a proposal to merge two well-established university departments under the name "communication" brought protests from mathematicians, sociologists and speech professors, who thought that communication was clearly their domain.

Beyond this "what's in a name" matter, which speaks to identity, there is within the university and the professional community a continuing problem of credibility. In Gertrude Stein's phrase, our colleagues often ask whether "there is any there there?" The problem is not that there is too little territory to traverse, but that there is too much.

We claim at times to have a mastery of interpersonal and group communications, of mass communication and media studies, of journalism, advertising, public relations and visual communication. We merge and blend substantive areas of scholarship, such as the history, economics and sociology of our field, with professional practice. We acknowledge in broad contours two ways of knowing: that derived from professional experience; and that derived from systematic study, from scholarship. Yet, within each of these categories is vast diversity.

For example, when we speak with pride of the professional media credentials and the experience of our faculties we speak of high-, intermediate- and low-level experience in various media. We blend reporting with editing and management expertise. And we don't distinguish differences very often.

As for scholarly preparation and experience, we eclectically accept both social scientific and humanistic backgrounds. We recognize such tools as historiography, survey research, content analysis, legal analysis, econometrics, literary criticism and critical studies.

Stepping back from our real world and academic embrace of communications, we might ask whether we are appropriately celebrating eclecticism, or rather are mired down in meaningless fragmentation. In short, do we know what we are talking about and is there evidence to prove it?

Although we now see few "state of the field" reviews of the kind that scholars like Wilbur Schramm and Bernard Berelson used to deliver, we are benefitting today from the work of scholars who

"... at the University of Oregon ... a proposal to merge two well-established university departments under the name 'communication' brought protests from mathematicians, sociologists and speech professors, who thought that communication was clearly their domain."

want to uncover the roots of communications research and media studies, and who in the process make us proud of our origins and the yield of our multi-faceted, patchwork-quilt field. In recent years colleagues like Everett Rogers, Jesse Delia, Ellen Wartella, James Carey, John Peters and James Anderson, just to name a few, have begun exploring the history of communications research, opening an important self-examination about the role and quality of our work.

As we reflect on these and other assessments, it is plain to me that we need to state clearly just what we are. Our dual identity and credibility problem is both clarified and confused by stating that we are what we do. Think of it when we declare, that:

- We are the curriculum: that is, we are what we teach or say we teach.
- We are the yield of our research and what it says.
- We are a reflection of ourselves in our service: that is, what the outside world sees of our efforts.

Another way to focus our field is to examine communications curriculum we provide for students. How coherent is that pathway as we are driven by consumerism (teaching what students want to take) while trying to defend vital subject matter (that which might not be popular or valued)?

In contrast with a traditional academic discipline like history, which knows what it is, we often fall short, organizing our resources and commitments on the basis of what students say they want. It has been this consumer-oriented thrust that has expanded the public relations component of communications departments, while diminishing journalism. It has favored how-to craft courses over seemingly less urgent conceptual courses.

We need to ask more often whether there really is a core that all students of communication must have. Is there a settled body of knowledge, however it is delivered — whether in courses, texts, or other means — that all students must have to be educated persons in the field of communication? If there is we don't say so very often, nor do we adequately debate and codify our field.

We have the experience of journalism education, of which I am

“In contrast with a traditional academic discipline like history, which knows what it is, we often fall short, organizing our resources and commitments on the basis of what students say they want.”

familiar, where the tension between craft and concept, between the market and the academy, between the ideal education and job-readiness, leads more often to confusion than to coherence and agreement. I am not saying this is a bad thing but it does represent a very real challenge to organize the results of such discourse into a curriculum and a research agenda that inspires public confidence and allows for a clear identity.

I recall a visit to Rutgers University a few years ago when the fields of communication, journalism and librarianship were being organized under a single administrative structure. Disparate elements were brought together probably more for administrative convenience than for common intellectual ground, although one could argue that all of the joined elements were concerned with the acquisition, processing and dissemination of information. I was greatly impressed by a document issued in this department at the time of the merger of speech and journalism that rather effectively articulated underlying and unifying purposes.

In a sense, we are blessed by the ever-expanding subject matter of our field. Just a few years ago, it was possible to describe the typical university department of communications with a few buzz words describing curriculum, research and service imperatives. Today, we have added the economics of communication; media sociology; technology studies; policy analysis including public and private sector connections; regulatory issues; communication law; and international communication; and even such specialized arenas as environmental communications, health communications and cultural studies.

Amid these evolving interests, it is important that we not forget our principal obligations to students, the university and to society. For students we ought:

- To draw a conceptual map of the field and require mastery of the nature, scope and range of communications studies, typically with specific knowledge in a single area; for undergraduates this means an "acquaintance with" the field and its meaning; for graduate students, more rigor and depth;

- To connect communications studies with the rest of the university, helping students see their complete education through a communications prism;

"We have the experience of journalism education . . . where the tension between craft and concept, between the market and the academy, between the ideal education and job-readiness, leads more often to confusion than to coherence and agreement."

- To link communications studies to careers, and even lifestyles, as well as society itself. We ought to be able to help students use communications to achieve their own personal goals and objectives whether they enter the field professionally or not.

We typically try to do these things through majors, minors, cognates and concentrations. I believe it might also be useful to offer helpful consultation to students as they consider the communications teachings of other fields. How many know whether the view of politics and the media as presented in the field of political science squares with the best contemporary research? Or whether advertising as portrayed in economics courses connects with interpretations from media studies?

In many universities there is little consistency between other "communications teachings" and those in the communication or journalism department or school itself. I am not suggesting that one view is right and another wrong, but inconsistencies of interpretation and ways of knowing ought to be pointed out to students.

It might also be useful for communication faculty members to take this conversation beyond their offices and engage in an active dialogue with colleagues from other fields. This would also have the advantage of letting others in the university know that there is a body of knowledge in communication with something to offer.

As for society, we communications scholars have an obligation:

- To foster understanding of communication phenomena for individuals and for institutions;
- To assist citizens in developing critical media consumer skills;
- To promote better use of communication in public life for problem identification and solutions.

These goals for students and for society are noble, but just how do we accomplish them? I submit that teaching, research and service are not enough. We must add public scholarship to the list. I believe we need to be more effective public scholars in a

"In many universities there is little consistency between other 'communications teachings' and those in the communication or journalism department or school itself."

fashion that links systematic knowledge to public discussion and possibly even public policy.

We might do this in several different ways. In my own experience at the Gannett Center for Media Studies, we accidentally got into public scholarship as the result of high profile conferences, seminars and publications. The work of our fellows and staff began to attract public attention and got covered on its own merits.

This also attracted attention in the media and led to a continuous flow of phone calls, letters and other inquiries about media and media issues. We decided to handle these inquiries in a systematic way, providing background information, database searches and informational interviews. In many instances, when we had neither the expertise nor the resources to be helpful, we relayed the inquiry to other sources in the academy, industry, think tanks and various institutions we knew to be expert and competent on the subject. This daily dialogue at the Gannett Center now results in hundreds of inquiries each month, all which get a courteous response and often publications, briefing papers and other assistance.

We see our role as that of sense-maker, explaining when we can what parties are interested in a given public issue, whether it's a cable bill before Congress or an economic trend affecting the newspaper industry. We try to sort out issues and offer analysis and context. Typically, we don't take positions, believing that there really are multiple ways of knowing, though some sources and positions are based on sounder evidence than others. We'd like to think that we are impartial in these responses. From the standpoint of the Gannett Center, while the staff and I try to play a neutral role, our fellows are free to take forceful positions as long as they don't purport to speak for the institution, which is funded by tax-free dollars.

I'd like to see the field of communications studies, either at individual universities or through its several professional associations, do on a much larger scale what we are doing at the Gannett Center. Of course this takes resources if it is to be done with professionalism and competence.

While this is a rather elaborate and demanding approach, it is not such a complex effort for each faculty member to have a communication plan for his or her own work. I am often surprised

"I believe we need to be more effective public scholars in a fashion that links systematic knowledge to public discussion and possibly even public policy."

at what a terrible job some of our communication faculty colleagues do in promoting their own work. Not only do they not send reprints and advance copies to fellow scholars or interested professionals, but they rarely think of putting their work in the hands of media decision-makers, columnists, the trade press or other possible sources that can extend their work through public attention.

Some people prefer to opt out of the public dialogue, but far more want to be a part of it without knowing how. I can't tell you how many times I have heard university faculty members complain that nobody pays any attention to their work, but at the same time they do little to promote it or themselves. It is possible they don't know how, and in such cases it would be useful for our professional associations like the International Communication Association, the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, or the Speech Communication Association to help them through workshops and consultation services that will advance communications studies through public discourse.

It wouldn't hurt to clue the public in on media issues, especially when they are pertinent to public issues. Again, we've done this recently through our *Gannett Center Journal*, which in an issue on covering the environment engaged economists, scientists, journalists and educators in a "symposium" that looks at environmental coverage.

Sometimes it is useful to bring the public into one of our well-developed "knowledge arenas," such as health communications, and show how applied research on health awareness helped combat public ignorance about AIDS in a manner that helped shape attitudes and perhaps even behavior.

There may be less interest in our intramural discussions, like the rise of critical media studies, which is somewhat akin to critical legal studies. While this trend in our field is on the rise, few scholars or administrators are willing to discuss it in public with, for example, media professionals, fearing perhaps a kind of 1990s McCarthyism. Far better that we engage in this debate on our own terms today, however, than have it "discovered" by unfriendly critics in the future and become the stuff of a mean and punitive battle whereby academic freedom is impaired.

There are other areas where I can imagine a useful public discussion, or at least one that is pertinent within the media or

"Sometimes it is useful to bring the public into one of our well-developed 'knowledge arenas,' such as health communications, and show how applied research on health awareness helped combat public ignorance about AIDS"

media studies family. Often, though, we are too busy to consider such vital communication of our own work or concerns.

In the arena of public scholarship, I have, of course, been talking about promoting, publicizing and making more effective use of our own work and ideas. There is another service we might perform. In every university community these days there are professors expert in a given field who are mavens for the media on that subject. We see Soviet history specialists, American politics teachers and others speaking out as "expert witnesses" in the media. These folks are sometimes called "the usual suspects," because of their frequent appearance on television or in the public print media.

I understand this role quite well myself, for I do a good deal of such comment, as I mentioned earlier. It is not unusual for me in the course of a month to appear on television several times and to be quoted even more times in print media. These truncated comments are typically the result of hours of interviews and background sessions.

But I have at least one advantage over many of my colleagues in other fields who engage in this same type of activity: I know something about how media work and why. I generally know what to expect from a reporter and how to be genuinely helpful. Now what I am saying about myself is also true of many faculty members in communications studies and journalism departments. What these people have is substantive knowledge and technical expertise that can be helpful to others in the university, not just in a public relations sense, but in fostering real understanding of the media and communications as well as our role as individual sources.

The nature and consequences of media contact is something worthy of thought and analysis. Here we have real knowledge and experience we can offer to our colleagues in other fields, both to help them and to help our universities become more effective public communicators.

When once I suggested such assistance, I was told that people from other fields aren't exactly beating down the doors for such consultation. True enough. But do they know what you know? Do they know — really know — what you teach and just how this might be useful to them? There are obvious ways to make such connections, whether through personal contact, seminars and

"In every university community these days there are professors expert in a given field who are mavens for the media on that subject. We see Soviet history specialists, American politics teachers and others speaking out as 'expert witnesses' in the media. These folks are sometimes called 'the usual suspects'"