

**THE STATUS OF COMMUNICATION AS A DISCIPLINE IN THE U.S.:
HISTORICAL INSIGHTS AND CURRENT STATUS**

William F. Eadie
School of Journalism and Media Studies
San Diego State University
5500 Campanile Drive
San Diego, California 92182-4561, USA
weadie@mail.sdsu.edu

This paper is submitted for presentation at the international conference Communication as a Discipline and as a Field: Sharing Experiences to Construct a Dialogue, July 9-11, 2015, Department of Integrated Communications, National Research University Higher School of Economics, Moscow, RUSSIA.

William F. Eadie is professor *emeritus* of Journalism and Media Studies at San Diego State University. This presentation draws on work more fully developed in his book, *When Communication Became a Discipline*, in preparation.

THE STATUS OF COMMUNICATION AS A DISCIPLINE IN THE U.S.: HISTORICAL INSIGHTS AND CURRENT STATUS

Abstract

Communication became established as a discipline in the U.S. around 1982, but interest in communication phenomena can be traced to the turn of the 20th Century, if not earlier. In this presentation, I will trace the development of communication study in the U. S., provide some lessons learned from analysis of historical events, and comment on the current state of the communication discipline.

There are three histories of communication scholarship in the U.S. One encompasses the development of journalism to include the study of mass communication and media. A second encompasses the development of speech to include communication study. A third builds on early theoretical efforts anchored in sociology.

Communication evolved as a topic of study by scholars from a variety of social science disciplines. The earliest theories the effects of new technologies. Public opinion and propaganda also emerged as the primary topics of study. Those who researched communication topics were often “big thinkers” who did not fit into traditional scholarly roles.

Meanwhile, faculty in academic departments of speech and journalism also pursued communication topics to a degree. Communication became progressively more associated with each of those disciplines, and by the beginning of the 1960s interest in communication among speech and journalism faculty had reached a critical mass. Scholarly associations in speech and journalism reacted differently to these developments. The Association for Education in Journalism (AEJ) grudgingly gave communication scholars a place at their annual meeting, while the Speech Association of America sponsored a 1968 conference on communication and

quickly incorporated many of the conference recommendations making communication a central part of its identity.

Over time, communication scholars pursued five general lines of research: (1) communication as shaper of public opinion; (2) communication as language use; (3) communication as information transmission; (4) communication as developer of relationships; and (5) communication as definer, interpreter, and critic of culture. Journalism and speech faculty also developed communication curricula and formed academic departments with “communication” in their names. By 1982, AEJ added “and Mass Communication” to its title, and enough students were enrolled in communication curricula in U. S. universities that a claim to the establishment of a communication discipline could be made.

Since being established, scholars have expressed anxiety over the discipline’s legitimacy and scope. While scholarship continues to be generated for each of the five lines of research, there is worry that together they constitute a domain that is too large to be practical. Scholars have also worried that the use of multiple methodologies produces insights that lack heuristic value. Scholars are concerned that too many theories have developed, thus producing findings that are too specialized to be useful. Nevertheless, curricula continue to be refined, and the popularity of areas of study ebb and flow as expected.

While it would be nice to have a succinct “elevator speech” about the nature of communication, scholars seem relatively happy with the current state of the U.S. discipline.