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In Danger of Dilution?

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In danger of dilution?

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When the Qualitative Studies division was founded in the 1970s, it was envisioned as a cutting edge alternative to the prevailing empirically grounded positivism that saturated the field of mass communication research. At the time, AEJMC was a philosophically conservative organization,

with strong ties to industry, and a belief in the power of quantification.

From its inception the Qualitative Studies Division programmed theoretically informed cultural and critical research and provided scholars with a venue through which to present work that challenged the reigning ideology of AEJMC.

For years, the division was unique. It purposefully distanced itself from the majority of the other divisions and fought to provide a program that was specially suited to its membership.

THINGS BEGAN TO CHANGE in the 1990s. QS interests and concerns began to percolate throughout the organization. AEJMC also grew unwieldy, with far too many divisions and interest groups vying for time on an overloaded program.

In an effort to reduce the total number of sessions and streamline the program, divisions were encouraged to jointly program some of their research sessions.

At that time, I was a QS officer and I cautiously supported the joint programming plan. At the time QS board

members felt that if we continued to design programming specifically for our members and attempted to “sell” our ideas to other divisions that QS’s visibility might be increased. But foremost in our decision was the intention to always maintain programming control.

These days, the Cultural and Critical Studies division (the renamed QS division) is seen throughout the program, co-sponsoring all of its panels and most of its research sessions.

WHILE SOME MEMBERS might see the added visibility as a positive development, what troubles me is that there is no longer anything to distinguish our division from the rest of the organization.

Many of our sessions have not been designed with our members in mind. We regularly lend our name and support to sessions that are in direct conflict with what the division represents, and I fear that C&CS now risks becoming merely another pedestrian AEJMC division.

THESE DAYS, EVEN when C&CS mem-

bers design a research panel, that session often becomes watered down and less meaningful by the inclusion of panelists who do not share our division’s perspectives. When was the last time you attended a C&CS session that you would describe as cutting-edge?

C&CS is at a crossroads. We can continue to be good citizens of AEJMC, forging alliances with other divisions and interest groups and playing the chip game well. However, if we continue to follow this course, it is my feeling that our small division will soon outlive its usefulness. The existing membership will become increasingly distant and removed and many of our members will probably chose to focus their efforts on another division.

THERE IS, OF COURSE, another alternative. We can reinvigorate C&CS and can strive once again to be known as the rabble-rousers of AEJMC. I believe that it’s imperative for each of us to start thinking about issues and topics that we want to focus on in the upcoming years.

We could devote a column in the

newsletter to member feedback on future programming. That feedback could culminate in a lively discussion during our business meeting at which time several specific topics and issues are chosen to explore for our next convention.

IN THE SPIRIT OF STARTING the discussion, I'd like to share a few of my own suggestions.

Our name change to Cultural and Critical Studies gives us the perfect opportunity to design a series of panels that address theoretical trends in cul-

tural studies and critical theory and their particular relevance to contemporary communication research.

One research panel for example, might consider the potential usefulness of the "founding fathers" of British Cultural Studies (Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart, and E.P. Thompson) to current media studies.

Another panel might assess connections between critical theory and political economy. Still another panel might assess the relationship between post-modernism and cultural studies.

While some of these topics might

potentially be of interest to other division members, the general popularity of our sessions outside of our division should be of little concern to C&CS.

NOW, SOME OF YOU might like my suggestions and others might prefer that we focus on other things.

Yet, what I'd like for each of you to do is to begin a conversation with C&CS board members about what you want our division to focus on. As a former head of the Qualitative Studies division, I'm not ready to give up on our division. I hope you aren't either.❖