Soft Disciplines

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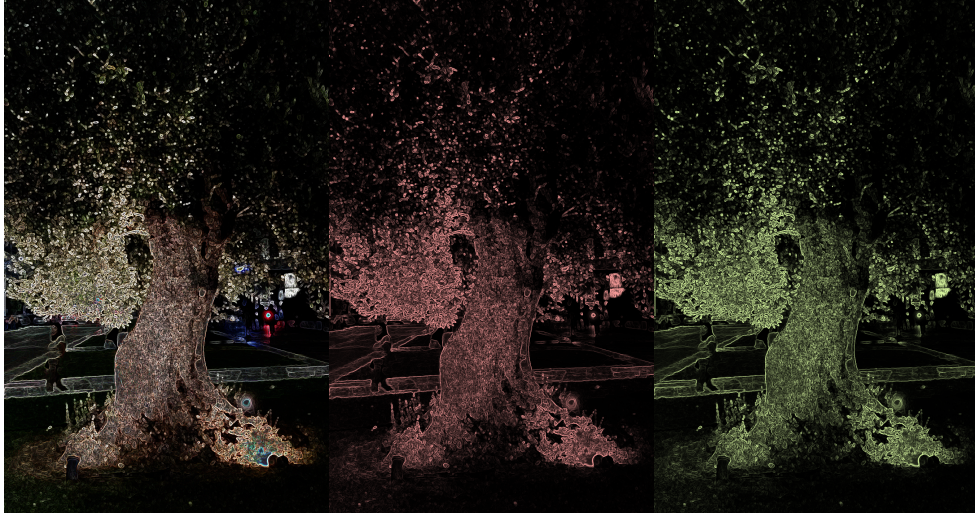*University of Illinois Chicago,* zizi@uic.edu

Image author's own, of 400-year-old olive trees gathered from all over Greece and transplanted in Thessaloniki, author's hometown. Over 850 centuries-old trees were saved in this way, thus given new life and giving life to urban landscapes. The trees are now in full blossom, 2022.

As a PhD student, my lead advisor tossed me a copy of Melvin DeFleur's famous essay titled "Where Have All the Milestones Gone?" He asked me to write my prelim exam in response to DeFleur's thesis. I was recently cleaning up old files and came across my response, the writing of an earnest and passionate kid—I was 25 at the time—who did not want to say goodbye to milestones. I wanted to achieve milestones of my own, and I wanted them to be about the Internet, the medium I was fascinated by. It was a medium that looked very different in the late last century. My proclamations that "One day, the Internet will feel as ubiquitous as walking into a room and turning the lights on" often resulted in blank stares from senior ranking faculty I interviewed with. My prophetic declarations that "Newspapers will not die, but paper will; you will be reading the news in the future, but on a different platform" invited chuckles. My conclusion that "Amazon will do okay, they just need better distribution centers" flat-out exasperated academics who had given me the time of day shortly before we entered the 21st century.

Of course I argued, at that time, that milestones are not gone. I am a realistic optimist now, was a plain optimist then. It would be against my DNA to argue otherwise. Milestones can be found, I said. They just do not lie in the academic terrains we were occupying at the time. There are milestones to be unearthed, we just need to move elsewhere, and we will find them. I talked then about how disciplines grow, evolve, and adapt. I was fascinated by the history of disciplines. What especially captured my interested was the tendency for fields to be pan-disciplinary at their

inception. Galileo, da Vinci, Descartes, among so many others, were polymaths and pan-disciplinary thinkers. Science requires that, for both inspiration and validity.

Disciplines evolve as knowledge advances and multiplies. It is only natural to divide knowledge up into specialized schools of thoughts. For each discipline, then, the time comes to look inward and develop in micro, meso, and macro avenues for inquiry. This move facilitates growth, literacy, education. It permits disciplines to evolve and adjust to changing worlds and new methods of inquiry.

At which point does this inward trend stop being generative and become static? Esoteric thought, interdisciplinary irrelevance, and even entropy can be consequences of disciplinary navel-gazing. We divide to conquer and explore. How do we unite to take stock, compare maps, and grow further?

I can't escape this question in my now nearly 25 years in academia. I return to it frequently. I wonder how it's possible that scholars in communication have been studying a medium like the Internet that my colleagues in the humanities, political science, and sociology have only recently discovered? Why is it that they begin inquiry from a point that assumes they are first to colonize the academic territory of the Internet? I am baffled by colleagues who claim not understanding or being confused by the Internet and the platforms it supports. I do not fathom how one can be a scientist and be out of touch with something that is such a massive conduit of how people, and especially the young adults we educate, communicate. I realize that it is difficult to know everything, but in my naïve headspace, I always thought that we are supposed to "know a little bit about everything, and a lot about a very tiny area of expertise," as my advisor often said.

I worry that we work within disciplines that have assembled rigid boundaries and stern vernaculars. Hard disciplines with structural foundations that feel like cement. Not tree roots that evolve, bend, and sustain a tree for more than half a century. I often wonder how we can render our disciplinary roots flexible, so that they can grow underground and connect us, at the core, to our disciplinary friends.

I further imagine that within our own discipline of communication, we might one day remember, but also learn to forget, immovable boundaries of mass, interpersonal, computer-mediated, human-machine, political, policy and so on. From my vantage point, it looks like there's more overlap than difference.

So, I will make a radical call for abandoning all disciplinary boundaries, intra and inter. And a less radical call for going after soft, but rigorous, disciplines. Soft, yet deeply rooted and interconnected theory. Arguments that stand strong like trees, but bend to the wind without breaking. Trajectories that are not colonially motivated. That are not about deciding who is right and who is wrong, for that is the basis of

colonial thinking, and we fall into its trap time and time again in academia. Instead, let's be academic astronauts. Like intergalactic navigators, we must know something about all sciences to let us tread light but sure-footed, and in this way look for milestones in worlds new and old, past and future, linear and non-linear.