COMMUNICATION & SOCIETY

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How to cite this article:
Kane, O. (2016). Communication studies, disciplination and the ontological stakes of interdisciplinarity: a critical review. *Communication & Society 29*(3), 87-102.

Communication studies, disciplination and the ontological stakes of interdisciplinarity: a critical review

Abstract
Building on an in-depth analysis of the core literature grappling with the philosophical problematization of communication, this article examines the oft-asserted interdisciplinary nature of communication studies by assessing some of its underlying presuppositions at the ontological and epistemological levels. The article evaluates the coherence of our *fragmented* discipline through the articulation of the categories of the One and the Multiple in ontological and epistemological directions. In doing so, the recurrent conception of communication studies as an interdiscipline is criticized while recognizing the importance of undertaking interdisciplinary research within the field. Are especially considered the historical roots of interdisciplinary advocacies, namely the institutional demands for interdisciplinarity that have often resulted in conceptions of communication studies by communication scholars themselves as a crossroads or a service discipline. Building from Ernst Cassirer's developments regarding the "theory of the concept", the author contends in the final section of the paper that the solution to the lack of coherence of the field lies in the necessity for communication studies to *discipline* themselves in order for the research undertaken within the field to acquire a common framework of intelligibility.

Keywords
Interdisciplinarity, disciplinization, ontology, theory of the concept, Ernst Cassirer

1. Introduction

In the following pages, I examine efforts emerging from theoretical literature that are concerned with the problematization of the field of communication studies in its current state of development. First, I propose a few approaches for articulating what appears to be a consensual understanding of the current state of the discipline: we have

a field characterized by a deep process of *fragmentation* at the epistemological level as well as at the level of objects and theoretical approaches.

From this perspective, I then address the problem of disciplinization and illustrate the significant difficulty communication scholars have in organizing the field despite the existing theoretical potential for constructing disciplinary coherence, a difficulty that arises from the diversity I examine in the first section. Certain risks are identified and linked to the central thesis of the article which, through a critical reexamination of the systematic advocacy for interdisciplinarity emanating from a number of communication scholars as well as from colleagues in neighboring disciplines in the social sciences, aims to assess its consequences at the ontological and epistemological levels. I consequently trace the genesis of this advocacy and the institutional role it originally played. Then I detail some of the dangers that an "inconsequential interdisciplinarity" risks exposing communication research to if it does not properly engage with the aporias such an approach may introduce. I address the reasons why I consider fragmentation to be a problem and the ways I believe more coherence can be achieved at a disciplinary level making use of propositions rooted in epistemological and ontological grounds. Finally, I show at length how Ernst Cassirer's "theory of the concept" allows us to identify possible solutions on epistemological grounds through an articulation at the level of the research undertaken rather than the discipline itself.

2. Communication and the problem of *disciplinization*: between ontological deficit and epistemological pitfalls

Foucault provides a few useful hints for understanding how a discipline comes to exist and the role that discourses of a certain kind play in this process:

> "(D)isciplines are defined by groups of objects, methods, their corpus of propositions considered to be true, the interplay of rules and definitions, of techniques and tools (...) For a discipline to exist, there must be the possibility of formulating – and doing so ad infinitum – fresh propositions" (1972: 222–223).

Through the examples of botany and medicine[1], he shows how the birth of every discipline necessitates a certain tropism that allows it to believe certain propositions to be pertinent and to exclude others. Despite its interest, this view can be challenged on at least two grounds. First by considering that any discipline can better be understood as an arbitrary assemblage whose coherence is subsequently reconstructed at a higher level than an inherently coherent and logical body of knowledge. Second by contending that communication studies are a historical counter example of the mainstream model of disciplinarization in the social sciences.

Notwithstanding these important issues, the challenge with which we are confronted is that of understanding the current state of communication studies, a state of development that seems to defeat this model. In part, this is due to the fact that, because of its broad statistical dispersion, there does not yet exist a "discursive policy" (Foucault, 1972) in communication studies according to which one can distinguish "what is in the field" and "what is not". Thus the role of the discipline is to control, to literally *discipline* the production and proliferation of discourse as a pretension to scientificity. It is an

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[1] Medicine sought to constitute itself as a discipline by "basing itself first on natural history and, later, on anatomy and biology" (Foucault, 1972: 233). The situation of communication and its proximity with sociology or psychology is thus not unique in the history of sciences. Another parallel can be established with political economy, which stood out as "the analysis of wealth" before itself becoming the economic discipline with the contemporary ramifications with which we are familiar.

exclusionary principle that produces scarcity, something that communication studies currently fails to incorporate.

Fragmentation, in effect, has been seen to be evident and widespread in communication studies (Anderson, 1996; Donsbach, 2006; Littlejohn, 1982; Pfau, 2008; Rosengren, 1993). Some consider this to be unwelcome (Shepherd, 1993; Martino, 2003) while advocates of the interdisciplinarity of communication studies usually see it as a positive element. Pearce (1989) acknowledges the existence of multiple and incompatible models of communication. He refers to the "honourable precedent" of the treatment of light both as a particle and a wave in physics to argue that the same diversity should stand for communication studies. This plea for considering the actual diversity in the field, however, is tied directly to his statement that communication is a perspective, not a thing. In a certain way, Pearce sociologizes the epistemology of communication studies: "communication models are heuristic devices or theoretical strategies used to legitimate the modeler's interests" (Pearce, 1989: 10).

The almost systematic advocacy for interdisciplinarity and the consideration of communication studies as a interdiscipline can be better understood if, in addition to epistemological statements, we take into account three sets of factors related to the trajectory of the researchers and to the importance of power relations and scholarly associations in the establishment of communication studies. The first set of factors is linked to the "high rate of immigration into the field of researchers who retain strong ties to the disciplines or other fields in which they were trained" (Calhoun, 2011: 1488). A second set of factors is linked to the multiplicity of competing professional associations that gather together researchers working on similar objects and utilizing a common analytical scale. This institutional specificity allows them not to consider making connections with other subfields is important, let alone necessary. A third, transversal set of factors can be linked to the importance of calls for interdisciplinarity in the field. This is demonstrated, among others, by the seminal contributions of psychologists, sociologists, or political scientists to the constitution of communication studies in the United States and the subsequent symbolic force of that mainstream history in other national institutional reconstructions. One of the result of this overall process has been the absence of the perception of a need for communication researchers to consider establishing links with other traditions within communication studies as part of their work.

The subsequent diagnosis of communication studies as suffering from a disciplinary deficiency is therefore often related to the absence of a core of knowledge shared between peers. Other times it is due to the lack of a proper ontology of communication studies in that communication studies is systematically conceptualized under the concept of flow and in the category of the transitory[2] (Shepherd, 1993). For Shepherd, there is a serious gap between the ontological necessity tied to the existence of all disciplines, and the conceptualization of communication phenomenon as a non-being. He contends that the more urgent task of communication theoreticians should be to tackle the issue of crafting the core foundations, i.e. the epistemic objects central to the discipline. Put like this, the problem of communication studies is more ontological than epistemological:

> What the fields of study we call "disciplines" have that communication does not are not more narrow and knowable subjects, longer histories for the establishment of knowledge, shared

[2] Proceeding with an etymological analysis of the term *discipline,* Shepherd (1993) notes that there is not an English-language term for designating somebody trained in the discipline/doctrine of communication, in other words, *properly disciplined*. This is not insignificant given that we have physicians, sociologists or biologists who account for other branches of scientific knowledge. In French, the term "communicologue" raised the hackles of many who prefer the expression "chercheur en communication".

methodological commitments for testing knowledge, and the like, but unique ontologies they forward as materially essential to Being, and a corps of disciples committed to the foundationalist nature of their beliefs (Shepherd, 1993: 85).

This *ontological deficit* explains the subordinate position that communication studies occupies in the contemporary scientific landscape. For John Locke, modernity needed the vision of a *non-essential* communication, stripped of all substance and *at the service* of all, whether it be individuals and their ideas, other disciplines, or institutions. The communication to which Locke referred was linguistic communication, *Nullius in Verba*. In testament to this heritage, the ontology of communication is deployed in the following manner:

> As a cross-disciplinary field of study, communication thus becomes a place where disciples of various disciplines congregate. The research products of this field may tell us much about the existence of the self, the essence of society, the foundation of culture, and the like, but they cannot, by virtue of the definition the field has accepted, tell us much about communication-for little can be told of nothing (Shepherd, 1993: 88).

Since modernity has left us with such a legacy, what opportunities does it present us with for *re-thinking* the status of communication? Starting from an ontological perspective, three possibilities present themselves given the dualist bifurcation between being and non-being that constitutes the background of all the existing and emerging disciplines (Shepherd, 1993). The first possibility offered to communication studies is the *interdisciplinary* response which accepts the diagnostic of communication studies as a non-being as being inescapable, understanding communication studies to be at the service of other fully-formed disciplines. Many supporters of the constitutive interdisciplinarity of communication studies rely upon this often-implicit ontology. The second, *anti-disciplinary*, possibility is to accept the modern premise but to invert it in order to question the very pertinence of an ontological approach to science. Similar to postmodernists, it aims to challenge any essentialist approach in scientific research. The third possibility for re-thinking communication is to consider that, just like other disciplines, communication has its own ontological foundation. That allows it to legitimately make its own statutory claims as a fully-formed discipline. This is the *disciplinary* response that would help solve the problem of the ontology of communication research.

The classic response of communication scholars is inscribed, and continues to be inscribed in a recurrent manner according to the first possibility noted above, in the form of repeated demands for interdisciplinarity. Incidentally, these demands constitute attempts to bypass an ontological/epistemological analysis in that they consider communication studies as a meeting point or crossroads, thus eliminating the question of the specificity of communication through the use of a spatial metaphor. In considering communication as an interdiscipline, one recognizes the claim of those who see it as lacking its own objects of study as well as specific tools and procedures for analyzing these objects. Communication thus loses any solid grounding upon which it can claim specificity. This approach is one of "surrender" according to Shepherd (1993). It is thus important to examine the institutional effects of the recurring calls for the interdisciplinarity of communication studies[3] before evaluating the epistemological implications of such a statement.

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[3] This is quite distinct from undertaking interdisciplinary research within the constitutive discipline of communication. Between Swanson's (1993) proposal that *communication is interdisciplinary* and Shoemaker's (1993) proposal that *communication is particularly hospitable for interdisciplinary research*, there exists an entire world. It is a fact that communication intersects with other social science and humanities disciplines. Following from this, to consider that communication itself is an interdiscipline is a step to take quite prudently.

3. Interdisciplinarity and its problems

In the 1970s[4], interdisciplinarity came to be seen as a means of escaping the "disciplinary wilds". However, the term emerged earlier, at the end of the 1940s, to identify practices and research characterized by a certain complexity that demanded to be better understood through the "interdisciplinary" juxtaposition of disciplines. In this context, the synthetic and holistic perspective was thought to be superior to the analytical one which was considered reductive and improper for taking into account the complexity of the phenomena under scrutiny (Kesteman, 2004).

At the institutional level, an analysis of research funding shows an early advocacy for interdisciplinarity in the United States with respect to mass communication research, which at the time was situated at the intersection of basic and applied research.[5] Post-war research was funded by private foundations[6] and focused on interdisciplinarity. Starting at the end of the 1950s, U.S. federal funding (National Science Foundation[7]) became more important, privileging disciplinary contributions and the specialization of knowledge in connection with the importance of health concerns and the National Institutes of Mental Health (Pooley & Katz, 2008: 772). In France, ironically enough, the initial denomination of information and communication sciences as an interdiscipline in the 1970s was the result of a battle between more legitimate disciplines, which demanded this recognition from the *Conseil Consultatif des Universités* (Boure, 2005; Kane, 2010). Pooley and Katz (2008), in their history of Chicago School research, attempt to show that the research undertaken here[8] is part of a broader questioning of the social order.[9] Later, the gravitational center of research would shift from Chicago to New York with the Columbia School. The main object of research would then be "public opinion", considered by Pooley and Katz to be an "interdisciplinary research field"[10] due to the fact that political scientists, sociologists and psychologists were jointly interested in it.

Liberal education, which embodies a very strong tradition of orality whose highest aim is to emphasize public expression regarding what is considered of value to the city, is a line

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[4] Hyperdisciplinarity having demonstrated its limits, new approaches were explored as a means for getting "beyond" disciplines. The term "interdisciplinarity" emerged in this context and has been very successful (Kesteman, 2004: 106).

[5] Interdisciplinarity is historically partially connected to the technical application of knowledge and has been instrumentalized in management settings in modern societies. For Kesteman (2004), the interdisciplinary turn aimed to make scientific work more efficient through the accrued specialization of work, including intellectual work.

[6] In his evaluation of mass communication research - which he regretted that the mass communication elite had divested themselves from - Berelson (1959) considered that this work must be managed by a research elite, financed by private foundation funds, characterized by a strict methodological rigor and *interdisciplinary* (Pooley & Katz, 2008).

[7] This is also the case of the National Research Council, which Lincoln (2010) criticizes for exercising pressure on researchers who use mixed methodologies in order to force them into the conventional orthodoxy of disciplinary research.

[8] With the concepts of mass, crowd, public and, later on, audience.

[9] In the middle of the 1930s, with the work of the *Bureau of Applied Social Research* at Columbia University, researchers distanced themselves from the Chicago School sociological approach and adopted an individual and psychology-oriented perspective (centered on persuasion). The central scientific vehicle would be the journal *Public Opinion Quarterly* and Paul Lazarsfeld was at the helm as "entrepreneurial social scientist" (Pooley & Katz, 2008: 770).

[10] Berelson authored the 1959 the requiem of communication research following the retirement of the founding fathers – Lasswell, Lazarsfeld, Lewin and Hovland (Kane, 2010). In the same issue of *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Schramm replied to Berelson that the field was full of life despite the departure of the founding fathers, as his own (Schramm's) work attested. This led Pooley and Katz (2008: 772) to ironically state: "Berelson's corpse, to Schramm's eyes anyway, seemed full of life." These divergent interpretations of the history of the discipline led to the highly Contested memories (Park & Pooley, 2008).

of inquiry that has been of great importance in the institutionalization process of communication studies through its insistence on learning communities and the centrality of pedagogy (Kimball, 1986). In the early 1950s, several researchers made efforts to broaden the interests of the Speech Association of America (SAA) to the analysis of wider phenomena of communication. The National Society for the Study of Communication (NSSC) emerged fro the SAA, and became the International Communication Association (ICA) in 1969. The transformation of the SAA into the National Communication Association (NCA) is underpinned by complex relationships between Speech Studies and Communication Studies studies as evidenced by the significant role played by researchers like Ralph Nichols, Paul Bagwell and Elwood Murray who attempted to institutionally link teaching and research in communication to those of the rhetoric (Kane, 2010: 98).

The institution of the PhD degree and the new importance within modern universities of research *and* teaching are important steps in the disciplinary trend and the correlative rise of specialization in the academia (Altbach, Berdahl & Gumport, 2005). This overturned the older interdisciplinary academic model rooted in diversified training and the sharing of a classical body of knowledge. Subsequent to the rise of the PhD, the meaning of the liberal arts was eventually reviewed and the possibility of specializing in new concentrations or majors outside the classical curriculum emerged (Calhoun, 2011).

Pleas for disciplinarity are not without their dangers because they sometimes come with calls to conform to the dominant epistemic canons. In others terms, *disciplinarity* sometimes equals *disciplination*. The existence of this risk should not lead communication theoreticians to reject any coherence call as undesirable. Rather, to conceive of communication studies as an interdiscipline is to risk validating its ontological insignificance while affirming the importance and the primacy of what passes through it, which itself is considered primary matter, conforming to Locke's instrumentalist thesis. Communication is thus considered to be important, not in and of itself but in that it constitutes a *locus* where or - even better - by which, pass epistemic objects originating in other disciplines. This is the classic ancillary vision of communication at the service of disciplines in possession of an ontological dignity far beyond its own, a vision implicitly carried forth by those who advocate for communication to be seen as an interdiscipline, i.e. a crossroads.

On the other hand, one must consider, at the ontological-epistemological level[11], a *territory* from which the contribution of communication to scientific knowledge may be deployed while doing justice to the diversity of the discipline in terms of objects, theories and methods. Consequently, an orientation must be adopted towards ontology of communication that can serve as a foundation for a *discipline* of communication deemed ancillary and ontologically devoid of any substance. Some propositions have been advanced in this regard:

> In such a view the "sticks and stones" that break bones in a child's nursery rhyme would no longer be contrasted with "words," which by their immateriality, "can never hurt." Rather, words would viewed as the ontological force, where language constitutes existence, and communication makes Being be; where the essential character of sticks, stones, bones, and the chair in my room is "communicationally" constructed; where communication rather than cellular structure, energy or mass, aesthetic quality or commodiousness, is the foundation for Being. This is the view of Being that communication disciples would offer as alternative to the views of other disciplines... Rather, the disciplinary field would research the general grounding of Being in

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[11] There is a close relationship between ontology and epistemology that justifies that the question of the specific status of the objects of communication research (ontology) be treated in a concomitant manner by theoreticians with the question of the production of valid scientific knowledge in the domain (epistemology).

communication, and query the ways in which particular manifestations of existence (e.g., individuals, societies) are "communicationally" constructed (Shepherd, 1993: 90).

However, in acknowledging that in focusing upon ontology in order to think about the foundations of the discipline, Shepherd (1993) retains but one of the four categories conceived by Anderson (1996) to re-think communication studies. For Anderson, an accounting of ontology must be complemented by epistemology, praxeology and axiology.[12] The positions taken relative to each of these categories can be linked to two ideal types situated at the extremes of the continuum. In terms of ontology,[13] the positions may be linked to the ontological independence of the physical world, at one extreme of the continuum, and to the social determination of studied objects at the other end. Epistemologically speaking, the two positions are symmetrical to those of ontology, and flanked by a foundationalism[14] for which knowledge is a correspondence between cognitive content and the materiality of objective reality, and a constructivism that postulates that all knowledge is a social construct.

At the level of praxeology, the division opposes quantitative and qualitative approaches, even if a cleaner dividing line might group quantitative and qualitative empirical approaches in contrast to a more Platonic analytical approach for which knowledge follows "ideas". Finally, at the axiological level, the two opposing positions are those of objectivism, which claims that research should be exempt from all contamination by values, and subjectivism, which considers that no claims to neutrality[15] can be valuably made (Anderson & Baym, 2004: 590-591).

Based on these four ideal type reconstructions, Anderson and Baym (2004: 601-602) propose a typology that permits for the identification of three distinct ontologies in communication theories. The first, *foundationalist*, is primarily objectivist and operates according to Cartesian positivism. Here, communication has a tendency to be seen as playing the instrumental role of the vehicle in relation to a preexisting reality. The second ontology is called *communicative* and sees humans as subjects that construct themselves through social interactions. Here, knowledge itself becomes the product of intersubjective practices submitted to a process of justification, the contours of which Habermas (1987) has well documented. The second ontology, *discursive*, borrows from postmodernism, positing that there is neither a solid ground (foundationalist ontology) nor consubstantiality between language and action (communicative ontology); there exists nothing more than the recursion of signs and discourse which overlap in a permanent cycle of precession (Baudrillard, 1989). The third ontology is called *communicative* and sees humans as subjects that construct themselves through social interactions. The objects, artefacts, forms, and institutions allowing these human interactions can therefore be considered, following Shepherd (1993) as privileged dimensions of any communicational process.

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[12] The following questions spring forth: What are the objects of our analysis? What are the characteristics of the knowledge we have pertaining to them? By what means have we acquired this knowledge? What is the value of the acquisition of this new knowledge?

[13] "On one side, which we call the foundational, the real is assumed to be constituted by material objects that display discernible boundaries and exist within relatively stable and observable patterns of relationships. On the other side—the reflexive—the objects of inquiry make their appearance within localized patterns of human practice, language, and discourse" (Anderson & Baym, 2004: 590).

[14] Those who, consciously or not, work according to this category, tend to have an instrumental conception of communication as something that simply delivers a content preexisting in the natural or social world.

[15] The evolution of advocacies with respect to axiology can well be seen in the opposition between the modern rationalist claim to an objectivity considered not only to be attainable but also desirable, and a postmodern orientation that considers that objectivity may appear to be supportable to some but that it is, in fact, illusory and unobtainable (Anderson & Baym, 2004).

Some disciplines or branches of knowledge thus have long played the role of "service disciplines", "auxiliary disciplines", or "ancillary disciplines" in scientific practice. This process has historically been accompanied by *interdisciplinarity advocacy*. According to Hacking (2010), though, it is less interdisciplinarity that poses a problem than the disciplines themselves, which must enter into dialogue and establish collaboration. This process takes place on the basis of disciplinary contributions rather than on the basis of an alleged interdiscipline aimed at establishing epistemic bridges. Similarly, Sperber (2010) has noted that the analysis should first grapple with the disciplinary level and that in failing to do so, one inverts the terms of the problem, resulting in a "cosmetic interdisciplinarity" preoccupied with a need to respond to institutional demands rather than one rigorously founded upon the scientific basis of scientific interdisciplinarity. Thus, we must jointly consider what is bound up in the "interdisciplinary turn" to which communication studies as a discipline is submitted, and the demands of interdisciplinary research, which make no substitutes for the need to evaluate the ontological and epistemological foundations of our discipline.

In this regard, interdisciplinarity can be considered from a perspective aimed at organizing fragmented sciences for whom coherence may thus be obtained at a higher level.[16] Interdisciplinarity, though, can also be conceived of as the creation of fruitful dialogue between different disciplines that each lend clarity to a common object. In communication studies, it is this second acceptance of interdisciplinarity that is most present, but it departs from less solid ground than the other disciplines as its very disciplinary anchorage does not predate this commonality; instead is supposed to emerge from this "community of visions". This is why interdisciplinarity cannot be truly considered without an epistemological reflection upon its presuppositions and consequences, both at the level of the objects and for communication *qua* discipline.

Interdisciplinary research can be successfully undertaken, but the treatment of communication studies as an interdiscipline is ontologically and epistemologically problematic. This thesis, however, clashes with the one put forward by Donsbach (2006: 439) who identifies three ways to think about communication studies. The first is to think of it as an *integrative science*, that is, it uses the theories and methods of other disciplines to analyze its object – communication. The second way is to see communication studies as a *synoptic science*, instead using the knowledge of other disciplines to construct itself. The third possibility is to take advantage of the two previous modalities, in which case communication becomes an interdiscipline. Donsbach (2006) makes here an invalid inference (*non sequitur*), his argument only allows for the possibility of considering interdisciplinary research within the discipline, not to draw the necessary conclusion that communication studies itself is a interdiscipline. This logical type error (Russell, 1964) underlies the frequent plea of scholars advocating communication itself as an interdiscipline rather than acknowledging the interdisciplinary trend in communication research.

Interdisciplinarity is not without its troubles, no matter how attractive it may seem to communication scholars. The premise that communicational phenomena, due to their complexity, can only be adequately dealt with in the framework of vast explicative systems cannot be simply accepted without debate. Merely envisioning that a marriage of many disciplines almost immediately improves the understanding of human phenomena is a statement that is equally contestable (Charaudeau, 2010). Pursuing one of the most important problems in communication studies means grappling with the dialogue taking

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[16] For example, this is the case in cognitive sciences. Grouping natural sciences and human and social sciences, their epistemology tends to rid itself of the distinction that historically separated them while reconciling them around a federating epistemic project.

place within the discipline, not proposing that it should be treated as an interdiscipline. The following section, thus, presents a few of important communication's "communicational problems".

4. On the lack of communication in communication studies

According to Foucault (1972), a discipline defines itself by the coherence of its objects and theories and by the control of the proliferation of its statements. Attempting to apply this definition to communication, a stumbling block seems to emerge at once:

> Now, let's look at communication! Some say we are a "field" rather than a discipline, defined by a common object—namely, communication. But I doubt that we have even a well-defined object! "Communication" as the object is much too broad; almost everything in life involves communication. Moreover, not everything that deals with aspects of media communication is, in my view, communication research. For instance, research on psychological deformations as an effect of violent media content is still psychology and research on the causes of media concentration is still economics... not communication (Donsbach, 2006: 439).

This quotation precisely identifies the central "problem" confronting our discipline in terms of legitimacy. The distinction that Bourdieu (1999) proposes in reference to philosophy between *body* and *field* - the first submitted to the principle of *solidarity* and the second to that of *competition* - allows us to see that communication, sometimes qualified as a discipline, sometimes as an interdiscipline, sometimes as studies, sometimes as a science, is in any case neither a *body* (due to the breadth and statistical dispersion of researchers claiming membership) nor a *field* (due to the absence of a basic agreement upon which disagreements can be built). There has never been a common body in communication studies due to the polysemous inflation of the term and its connection with extremely varied scientific traditions. This is why the phrase "discipline of communities" is better suited than "field" in the sense that Bourdieu gives to the term. Competition is not at play because several portions of the field and many researchers do not even enter into dialogue with one another, mutually ignoring one another's existence.

That said, the question of competition/cooperation and the confrontation around shared objects and theories is essential because, in the eyes of some, these are the conditions necessary for the cumulativity of scientific knowledge.[17] For Rosengren (1993), for example, one of the most important problems that communication suffers from is a lack of dialogue between authors, theories and paradigms within the field. This results in "self-contained enclaves", characteristic of a *fragmentation* rather than a *fermentation*.[18] "It is as if the field of communication research were punctuated by a number of isolated frog ponds–with no friendly croaking between the ponds, very little productive intercourse at all, few cases of successful cross-fertilization" (Rosengren, 1993: 9). According to Rosengren, it is only possible to produce knowledge capable of advancing science through collaborative discussions, by creating relationships between a theory, formal models and empirical data.

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[17] The problem of cumulativity is at the heart of old controversies between positivists and interpretivists. Lincoln (2010), whose adherence to the interpretive approach is strong, considers that the suspicion linked to the interpretive approach is connected to the fact that *cumulative function* plays a central role in the propositional knowledge privileged by positivists. She sees the interpretive approach as not stripped of a *cumulative function*, but rather that its aims are different than those of a cumulativity that is testable according to control dimensions (positivism). As an example, she cites phenomenology when seeking to account for a singular experience. In this case, it is "knowledge of a different type" (Lincoln, 2010: 6).

[18] This is a nod to the 1983 publication of a special issue of *Communication Theory* entitled *Ferment in the Field*. The metaphor of communication as an *unfertilized field* has appeared regularly ever since. Rosengren (1993) considers that the field is nevertheless at risk of stagnation after its prolonged *fragmentation*.

Rosengren deplores rightly the fact that the great majority of theories and the impressive mass of collected empirical data are not connected to one another through formal models. This would be a relevant avenue to achieve a higher level of coherence within communication research. The mediation of formal models would be helpful in this regard. Formalization can be undertaken within both qualitative and quantitative research. According to Rosengren (1993), a problematic understanding of formalization as an exclusively quantitative tool is responsible of the non-cumulativity of communication research because of the inexistence of systematic links between theories and data through formalization. For him, this is the condition for passing the popperian test of falsifiability (Popper, 1973).

The willingness of communication scholars to propose "innovative theories" that have been previously developed is another recurring issue that partially explains the absence of dialogue mentioned above. Curran (1990: 146-147) directed such criticism at Morley (1989), and more generally at British *revisionist* communication research which, believing it was renewing research, was simply "reinventing the wheel" of user activity. What is more, this took place not in opposing camps in the field but at the very core of British mass communication scholars. This overvalorization of original research creates the conditions for the splintering of "niches" in the discipline and their lack of integration into the whole. In other words, we are witnessing a form of insularity of communication, a tendency of scholars to only ever address one another (Herbst, 1993; Donsbach, 2006). Pfau (2008) goes even further, noting that not only do communication scholars not interact with colleagues in "allied disciplines" but that dialogue within the discipline is confined to very specific "niches", hindering a genuine conversation at the disciplinary level.[19] To remedy the situation, communication must be *disciplined* while paying close attention to disciplinary intersections, thus jointly considering the unity and multiplicity that characterize communication studies. We are now turning to the solution Cassirer gives to this classical philosophical question.

5. Contours for a "theory of the concept"

Given the great diversity of schools, approaches, theories and epistemologies in communication studies, the project of globally considering the full breadth of the field is sometimes disqualified as dogmatic by scholars who would like to preserve the diversity and openness of the *field*. In contrast, a number of other scholars aim to avoid the symmetric pitfall[20] that is the fragmentation of communication studies (Hofkirchner, 2009). Following from this, must we then distance ourselves from a "foundational" epistemology and propose a communicational one in its place (Anderson & Baym, 2004)? Or, as Shepherd (1993) has noted, should we instead consider that without its own proper ontology, communication is doomed to instrumentalization by the other disciplines? What are the implications of this line of questioning regarding interdisciplinarity for a "discipline of communities" (Anderson & Baym, 2004: 609) such as ours?

One possible starting point is to pose the question if, by "communication", theoreticians understand the same thing. To clarify this central point, one that intersects with the articulation of the classic "One and the Many" problem, Cassirer's (2003) work offers an epistemological detour aimed at rethinking what seems to me to be the central question of the discipline, that it is at once "one" and "many". His "theory of the concept" allows us to conceptually bridge the unity of the field of communication studies with the

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[19] This is the metaphor of the "Tower of Babel" sometimes invoked with regard to the field of communication.
[20] In part, they correspond to the classical division between nomothetic and ideographic approaches that contrasts two epistemologies for which law or event constitute vectors of knowledge.

diversity of its objects, theories, epistemologies, methodologies, and axiologies without sacrificing the latter to the former.

Cassirer submits the very principles of conceptual production to a systematic analysis under the auspices of mathematical philosophy. Taking up the Aristotelian tripartition between theory, practice and poetics, he attacks the foundations of the work of conceptualization and its consequences in the scientific domain. In his project of rethinking the foundations of the "theory of the concept", as he refers to it, Cassirer quickly bumps into the legacy of Aristotle's logic and most notably the relationship between its metaphysics, its ontology and its logic.

> Modern attempts to reform logic have sought in this regard to reverse the traditional problems by placing the theory of judgment before the theory of the concept. Fruitful as this point of view has proved to be, it has, nevertheless, not been maintained in its full purity against the systematic tendency which dominated the old arrangement (Cassirer, 2003: 4).

In fact, for Cassirer, attempts at the reform of logic inevitably stumble because they reduce themselves to a "criticism of general doctrine of the construction of concepts" (2003: 4). These general theses, following from Aristotle's legacy, bring forth comparison, distinction and similarity to ultimately arrive at the concept contained in a given class of objects. As a progressive process of abstraction, this approach starts from the observation of the existence of multiplicities in the world in order to extract from these multiplicities classes of objects that share common characteristics. This internal abstraction process is compatible with the Aristotelian ontology as it does not endanger the stable idea of an objective world from which the concept emerges and with which it shares certain given characteristics.

The foundation of Cassirer's critique of the theory of the concept is oriented such that the concept, in order to gain a greater reach, must be evacuated of all specifics. In effect, the "breadth of its content" – in other words, the number of indices characterizing a concept – is weakened to the same extent that the concept gains in broader appeal. Put differently, the less a concept is specific (poor breadth of content), the more it can claim to unite a greater number of elements under its umbrella. The basis of the Cassirerian critique consists of contrasting this traditional theory of the concept to the following argument: while conceptualization is a process of abstraction wherein one abstracts one or several common indices of the class of elements on the basis of components that are common to all these elements, conceptualization consists, *in fine*, of the elimination of initial diversity to the benefit of a singular[21] or of a limited set of indices.

> If all construction of concepts consists in selecting from a plurality of objects before us only the similar properties, while we neglect the rest, it is clear that through this sort of reduction what is merely a *part* has taken the place of the original sensuous *whole* (Cassirer, 2003: 6).[22]

Yet shouldn't this idea of "concept" render low-level concepts intelligible rather than eliminate them like undesirable idiosyncrasies? For Cassirer, this is where the limit of formal logic is reached to the extent that logic expresses itself according to the traditional theory of the concept, which, itself, must resort to other criteria for validation, as its own procedures are not sufficient. According to Cassirer, the role assigned to metaphysics is to

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[21] A veritable coup that retains only the criterion of similarity to the detriment of other criteria such as equality, succession or causality (p. 16). For Cassirer, the concept is thus *presumed* rather than *derived*.

[22] This is the same problem to which Foucault draws attention when he writes of "a logos everywhere elevating singularities into concepts" (1972: 228).

regularly come to the rescue of the logic whose empty vessel it is able to fill. A natural unity is thus at work between Aristotelian metaphysics and logic through the articulation advanced in the theory of the concept that is reminiscent of the primacy of substance[23] in Aristotelian philosophy. This has an important consequence, as it is the category of "relation" which is relegated[24] to a secondary tier by Aristotle. "Relation is not independent of the concept of real being; it can only add supplementary and external modifications to the latter, such as do not affect its real 'nature'" (Cassirer, 2003: 8). Primacy of substance and the auxiliary status of the relation are hence two important characteristics in traditional logic.[25]

Finally, the Cassirerian theory of the concept successfully introduces a distinction between empirical concepts (relevant for Aristotelian logic) and mathematical concepts:

> Mathematical concepts, which arise through genetic definition, through the intellectual establishment of a *constructive* connection, are different from empirical concepts, which aim merely to be copies of certain factual characteristics of the given reality of things. While in the latter case, the multiplicity of things is given in and for itself and is only drawn together for the sake of an abbreviated verbal or intellectual expression, in the former case we first have to create the multiplicity which is the object of consideration, by producing from a simple act of construction (*Setzung*), by progressive synthesis, a systematic connection of thought-constructions (*Denkgebilden*) (Cassirer, 2003: 12).

Thus, Cassirer ultimately contrasts the simple abstraction of the ontological concept (empirical) to the "free production of relational links" of the mathematical concept[26], which does not suppress the particularities. His "theory of the concept" therefore gives us the means to articulate the actual diversity of the field with the necessity to reconstruct its coherence at the disciplinary level both through a formalization process and a dialogical stance.Consequently, the difficulty of conceiving the unity of the discipline because of its actual fragmentation can possibly be overcome through the identification of what research communication has in common in terms of objects of inquiry (the ontological question addressed by Shepherd) and the process through which diversity instead of fragmentation is achieved within the discipline. Fragmentation refers to the heterogeneity of the field, measured by the diversity of traditions and subfields in communication studies on the one hand, and by the absence of dialogue between them on the other. Therefore, more dialogue and debate within communication research would help achieve more coherence and reduce the fragmentation of communication research. It is so because rather than being a byproduct of the specialization trend inside communication studies, fragmentation has a lot to do with *purification* as demonstrated by the recent history of the field and the quantitative importance of "immigrants" aggregating around objects and methodologies dominant in their mother disciplines (Calhoun, 2011).

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[23] "Only in given existing substances are the various determinations of being thinkable. Only in a fixed thing-line substratum, which must first be given, can the logical and grammatical varieties of being in general find their ground and real application." (Cassirer, 2003: 8)

[24] We see some traces of it in John Stuart Mill who "emphasizes that the true positive being of every relation lies only in the individual members which are bound together by it, and that hence, since these members can only be given as individuals, there can be no talk of a general meaning of relation" (Cassirer, 2003: 10).

[25] Nominalism and realism inherit this tension in that the focus of their conflict is the "real" status of universals. Unquestioned in this debate is the universal status of the concept.

[26] In other words, the mathematical concept is a form of concrete universality sensitive to particular occurrences and capable of producing them with the aid a law while the empirical concept emerges from an abstract universality that is blind to difference. According to his line of argumentation and in order to better demarcate himself from the Aristotelian concept of *substance*, which maintains its primacy in the empirical concept, Cassirer constructs the *function* as a modality of the prevailing relationship in framework of the mathematical concept.

A first solution to the issue of fragmentation is the one proposed by theoreticians like Craig (1999) who attempted to transform the original multiplicity into a plurality of interrelated traditions into a *metamodel*, that is he tried to transform extreme heterogeneity into controlled diversity. But in this process, some elements of the original picture are simply suppressed in the final outline (Craig, 2009) as predicted by Cassirer's developments. There is, however, another possibility, which is to instead invert the perspective by attempting to address the multiplicity of the discipline on the basis of a generative principle (or integrative function). This is a "discursive policy" function that can, as a generative principle, facilitate an appreciation of the potential diversity contained in the One (the discipline). This allows for a simultaneous consideration of the discipline and its diversity in contrast to inductive approaches that have difficulty ultimately accounting for the variety of communication research.

Capurro (cited in Hofkirchner, 2009: 364) recently attempted to grapple with this issue, proposing a few ways of potentially internally accounting for the diversity of the field. He aims to determine if, by analogy, communication may be interrogated through the use of this grid to measure the eventual divergences at the most basic level: the understanding that scholars have of the field they are working in. According to him, we are confronted by a *trilemma* that makes it difficult to choose between one of three ways for considering the relationships between the One and the Many[27]. By resorting to any of the three occurrences of the *trilemma*, we stumble upon the dreadful problem that is the target of Cassirer's (2003) attacks. Hofkirchner (2009) concludes that one must surpass these three models to successfully think about unity in difference through *integration*. In other words, one must resort to a meta-perspective and change of level in order to fully embrace the entirety of the field.

6. Conclusion

According to Resweber (1981), it is up to philosophy to propose the foundations of interdisciplinary meta-language, a position that semiotics, cybernetics or mathematics may also covet. Yet while these disciplines claim to form the general matrix of intelligibility of other sciences, communication – to the contrary – is considered a "crossroads" where each of the disciplines can find objects for its own epistemic needs. We do not believe, however, that communication has been doomed to be the "*auberge espagnole*" of the social sciences simply due to its great diversity and to the "fragmentation" of the researchers claiming to belong to the field. Communication studies need to *discipline* itself, to think about what it is that unites its great diversity without necessarily sacrificing it in the name of some sort of dogma. The pathways for this project, among which Cassirer offers us an epistemological framework of intelligibility with his "theory of the concept" needs to be articulated with a sense of what our objects of inquiry can look like: "the texts, performances, relationships, organizations, and media about which we communicate. Despite our differences in ontology, it is there that we ultimately find our greatest degree of commonality. Whether foundational or socially constructed, we agree that somehow these things are there and worthy of our attention" (Anderson & Baym, 2004: 610).

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[27] These three approaches regarding identity and difference are reduction, projection and disjunction. Reduction is the process whereby higher complexity is reduced to lower complexity, for instance when it is understood that there is one single meaning of communication that is valid for all objects, subfields, and traditions. Through projection, the difference is eliminated as in reduction but here a higher level of complexity is applied to all the elements at work, reducing them to the more complex part of the network. Disjunction is different from reduction and projection in that it builds plurality without unity, so that the elements under scrutiny have no connexion between them.

This is how we acquire the means to claim our own territory, resisting the auxiliarization of communication by neighboring disciplines, a tendency seen particularly among sociologists for whom communication and media is a sub-field. Pooley and Katz (2008), for example, regret the progressive autonomy of communication and the fact that it did not remain a sub-field as at the Chicago School. In writing a history of the trajectory of communication departments and programs in the United States, and analyzing the reasons for which the analysis of communication was progressively abandoned by sociology, they mourn the fact that communication/media studies became institutionalized and that they distanced themselves from sociology to the point that numerous sociologists who work on communication issues now hold academic positions in communication departments. Donsbach (2006) refers to an episode concerning research on the press (*Zeitungsforschung*) in Germany. Ferdinand Tönnies, then president of the German association of sociology, had in 1930 responded to promoters of the autonomy of a communication research building from *Zeitungsforschung:* "Why would we need press research within sociology? We don't need a chicken or duck science within biology" (cited in Donsbach, 2006: 439). Rather than respond rashly to the hegemonic velleities of other disciplines, communication studies must instead get down to the positive task of seriously thinking about its own coherence.

The diversity of the field is a good thing as it attests the vitality of communication studies and shows that conformity is not prevalent in the field. The integration of that diversity is an important challenge that needs to be addressed. Diversity is a important characteristics in many disciplines in the social sciences. No discipline is therefore homogenous. For example, think to the great diversity within sociology, economics, or anthropology in terms of subfields and lines of inquiry. The real question is what these kinds of diversity have in common and how a fruitful dialogue is produced and maintained between them.

Lack of coherence is a problem because it makes it impossible for relevant lines of research to encounter each other. Therefore, any mutual significance of the research undertaken within the field becomes problematic. The perception of a coherence of communication studies both within and outside the field, however, is crucial in terms of internal dialogue as well as external representation. In other words, diversity within the field is a valuable asset but fragmentation - the lack of integration - poses a challenge that affects the recognition the field receives from external actors (funders, other academics, employers, etc.), the capacity of the field to achieve and maintain high standards in intellectual work and the links between communication research and research in other fields (Calhoun, 2011: 1495).

The task of designing an epistemology and ontology of communication studies in order to reconstruct its coherence – understandably puts communication theoreticians at odds. Far from problematic, this is a sign of encouragement for the construction of an accord upon which theoretical disagreements may be constructed at the disciplinary level. This is essential and demands that communication between the perspectives take place on the basis of a understanding of communicational approaches on their own premises and not according to whatever definition or mission other disciplines provide to it. The recurrent demands for interdisciplinarity have historic and institutional functions. Rethinking interdisciplinarity at the current stage of the development of the discipline requires a rethinking at the level of research undertaken and not the characterization of the discipline itself as an interdiscipline. A *focused interdisciplinary* could thus allow for the articulation of concepts, tools and the analytical results from other disciplines to be integrated at the level of research. Obeying the imperatives of rigor and epistemological, theoretical and methodological minutia, this task can only be undertaken progressively, bringing the disciplines into dialogue with one another, one by one rather than bringing everybody together into the crossroads of interdisciplinary communication studies.

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