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Disciplining the Future: A critical organizational analysis of Internet Studies

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(draft of forthcoming article in *The Information Society*, 2005)

Abstract:

This article provides a critical, cautionary stance toward the future structure of "Internet Studies" as a field. A social constructionist reading of the process of organizing reveals the ways in which apparently obdurate structures are constructed and negotiated through everyday discursive practices. Subsequent structures and practices function ideologically to control organizational members in a concertive fashion by shaping and directing the conceptual frameworks for inquiry and action in a seemingly natural way. Definitions and metaphors construct conceptual boundaries of meaning for the field of inquiry, delimiting and protecting over time what counts as Internet and Internet Studies. Over time, origins of knowledge are hidden within the structure of the organizations and a culture of unobtrusive control emerges. Unless radical measures are taken to reflexively interrogate everyday routines and habitual ways of talking in academic environments, the future field of Internet Studies will not transcend the traditions of the academy but will be entrenched in and reproduce traditional structures and a traditional scholarly enterprise.

An institution can be thought of as the social equivalent of a personal habit. . . . Over time. . . routine takes on a life of its own. (Stanley Deetz, 1992, p. 126)

For purposes of this article, one prediction and one premise is necessary. Predication: Internet Studies will, at least in the United States, take on many of the practices if not the structures of other academic disciplines. Premise: Everyday communication practices structure ideologically-based social relations and institutions. Within this prediction and premise, various questions arise: What are we talking about and with what potential future effects? What political and organizational consequences accompany the public/published communication of knowledge related to internet research? What boundaries are being created to define and encapsulate this enterprise? How will the organizational structure of the field of Internet Studies come to impede or enable praxis? Is it possible to resist typical organizing tendencies to sustain an enterprise that remains deliberately unruly, flexible, and transformative? Do we want to? If so, how do we go about avoiding the mistakes that so many other organized entities have not?

Regardless of the officially designated shape of this field in respective institutions of higher education, "Internet Studies" is functioning and evolving as an organization and should be examined as such. By offering a critical organizational communication viewpoint on this issue, I seek to illustrate some of the ways Internet Studies (or any name it is given), will, through habit and ideology, shift quite subtly and apparently naturally from an open, flexible, and empowering structure to one which is closed, inflexible, and disabling.

Commonly, 'organization' is associated with 'progress': An excellent example of how a group of people interested in the study of a particular set of phenomena can become unified and stable, enjoying the privileges given to academic disciplines with a name, a tradition, and a canon. Examined through a

different set of lenses, this process can be critiqued as one that builds normative structures and strictures whereby research premises and practices adhering to the central tenets are privileged and those falling outside the center are marginalized. The argument offered here is by no means new; this topic has been addressed in much artistic, political, scholarly and philosophical discourse¹. Yet, there is value in presenting these concepts in the context of the emerging discipline of Internet Studies if the reading of it can function in a preemptive rather than merely predictive fashion. My purpose in raising this issue is to start conversation. The arguments herein represent only a partial view; many perspectives, additions, and corrections should be made by readers. The objective is to provoke rather than to describe or explain in an even-handed fashion. Indeed, although the future path of Internet Studies described here is not unfounded, I hope to be proven wrong in my predictions.

The following argument is laid out in three interwoven layers:

1. Everyday discursive practices construct and perpetuate particular ways of seeing and framing information and communication technologies. Definitional boundaries are already being drawn around what the Internet “is” and therefore what is and is not part of the field of Internet Studies.
2. Typical processes of organizational development shape and delimit sensemaking processes for organizational members. Choices and patterns evolve, over time, into normative grammars for behavior. Whether Internet Studies cuts across disciplines or achieves separate status as its own discipline, certain practices and principles will be privileged through ongoing organizational processes.
3. All action is embedded in ideological structures of power that privilege and protect dominant interests. The structure of Internet Studies will function to naturalize and neutralize the ideological foundations of the field, closing off or marginalizing discourse that would oppose the accepted structures of knowledge.

To weave this argument, I pull strands from various scholars who have written about how social structures are constructed and reified through discursive practices, including Lakoff and Johnson’s theories of how metaphor functions in cognitive sensemaking, Karl Weick’s theories regarding the social psychology of organizing, Stanley Deetz’ analysis of how ideology functions in organizational discourse, and Donald Schön’s arguments about the generative function of metaphor. Foucault’s arguments about the way individuals and social structures are disciplined through discourse and power/knowledge comprise a strong thread in this discussion.

Two caveats and some justification for my argument: First, I take an unabashedly U.S. viewpoint on these issues because it is the system I am most familiar with. The core elements of the argument have widespread application but the details are specific to U.S. institutional and educational structures. Second, I do not intend to criticize any individual’s or group’s particular actions and I do not argue against the development of this field, either as a specific discipline or organization that cuts across disciplines. I have found thoughtful and wonderful colleagues while conducting research in this arena and I value highly the power of our diverse yet collective voice in furthering knowledge which can influence and enhance design and policy related to information and communication technologies. Moreover, I would love to be a member of an Internet Studies unit. As enthusiastic as I am, however, I

am compelled to offer a cautionary tale. The study of new communication technologies is stronger if it remains as open and interdisciplinary as possible, yet our understanding of organizational theory teaches us that the most common practices of organizing work directly against flexibility and interdisciplinarity.

If this article serves its intended purpose, readers will reflexively interrogate both the liberating and encapsulating features of current individual and institutional discourse. There is much power wielded--consciously or not--by those who come early to this field of inquiry and converse about the potential shape and scope of this thing called Internet Studies. Our everyday words about the study of information and communication technologies function ideologically to privilege particular objects and endorse particular ways of seeing and understanding. The organizational frameworks that emerge from seemingly neutral conversations warrant our skeptical and critical attention. Only by struggling to keep discourse open and actively self-critical will the future discipline of Internet Studies be able to resist itself.

Ideology, discourse, and Organizing

Over the past half century, the study of organizations has shifted significantly from product to process. From a meaning-centered approach, cultural processes such as the performance of everyday life emerged as important focal points for researchers (see, for example, Pacanowsky & O'Donnell Trujillo, 1982, 1983). To study organizations as cultures, scholars turned to interpretive ethnographers such as Clifford Geertz, who articulated his concept of culture as essentially semiotic. Understanding culture, according to Geertz, is like reading a literary text. "Believing, with Max Weber, that man [sic] is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs" (1973, p. 5). These webs of significance shape and limit the possibilities for movement, provide sustenance, and mark territorial boundaries. As Pacanowsky and O'Donnell Trujillo aptly note, these webs are residue of the communication process (1982, p. 123). Relevant to this discussion is the idea that although organizations are primarily perceived and responded to as if they are objective and rational objects, they may be more fully scrutinized if one considers the communication processes that organize us. As this special issue demonstrates, we are embedded in this process of organizing and questioning our own social construction.

To view social construction as a neutral process would be to note, as did Burger and Luckmann (1967), that social structures are habits writ large. Unfamiliar situations require deliberate responses but over time, these responses can become routine. Eventually, the choices that informed the routines are forgotten and behavior adheres to an emerging set of rules.

A more critical view tells us that the processes of construction and reification are never value neutral; the rule systems governing behavior privilege certain groups over others. As the field of Internet Studies gains structure, power functions not just at the surface of action but in the structural elements of organizing. For Foucault, the more important questions about power do not focus on *who* has power as much as they focus on *how* power functions to establish and organize certain relationships in social relations, rule systems, institutions, and so forth (Barker & Cheney, 1994, p. 23).

Consequences of our everyday discourse can be individually or institutionally profound, when considering both the impact on the structure of relations and the power or control embedded in those relations. Many critical social theorists have built compelling arguments about how discursive practices function ideologically in society (E.g., Althusser, 1971; Giddens, 1984; Gramsci, 1971; Foucault, 1972,

1978a, 1978b, 1980). They and many others offer various lenses through which to see the process by which ideology, power, and discourse operate together to construct and maintain frameworks within which individuals and institutions filter and make sense of their worlds. What counts as truth, knowledge, science, healthy, morally correct, and so forth is constructed discursively both consciously and unconsciously.² The extent to which scientific knowledge is determined through rhetorical means is well articulated by Kuhn (1970) and others.

Critical theory has been for the most part targeted at the state level; only in the latter part of the 20th Century were corporations or not-for-profit organizations scrutinized by organizational scholars through the lens of critical theory (Frost, 1980). Interest in the hidden features of power grew in the 1980s as scholars examined taken-for-granted practices in various institutions. Gramsci's (1971) notion of hegemony helps us understand the way that control systems can be consensual but not conscious. Yet his arguments were developed and operate best within a context whereby certain interests *intend* to have power and control non-dominant groups. Lukes' (1974) arguments better clarify the ways in which power can be examined as a part of an organization's deep structure. Ideology functions most powerfully when embedded in the structures of organizing. As well, power is least visible and most manifest when embedded in everyday discourse (Foucault, 1972). These are key points when trying to understand how groups of very smart and affable people can unintentionally be involved in the creation and maintenance of organizational structures that privilege certain interests and dismiss or marginalize others.

Later, I return to a discussion of how this process of organizing functions ideologically to enable certain actions for members but more importantly for purposes of this argument, constrains freedom and limits creativity. Meanwhile, I have arbitrarily selected two processes to explore some of the means by which we are disciplining our future: Through definition and through metaphor.

Definition and Metaphor: Disciplining Processes

Discipline through Definition

As much as scholars decry the term "Internet" as an oversimplification of the multitude of social and technical aspects associated with information and communication technologies, the use of this term as an umbrella which encapsulates and frames understanding will continue. To say so is not to be pessimistic but realistic. Humans are creatures of habit. "The Internet" is a useful way to refer to many things at once. It stands in for and provides a shortcut to any number of specific, context-based phenomena.

The phrase allows organizational members to have a somewhat unified frame of reference within a diversity of approaches and practices. Eric Eisenberg (1986, 2003) offers the phrase "strategic ambiguity" to talk about how logos or jargon phrases can, in their ambiguity, be defined by individuals within their own conceptual framework yet be considered universally defined across organizations or institutions because each person perceives a unified understanding. Rommetveit (1980) reminds us that much of what we call "understanding" is nothing more or less than a *shared faith* in a common understanding of what is meant by what is said. This usefully allows diverse groups to have unification and individuality simultaneously. Whether strategically implemented or not, ambiguous discourse can

function strategically to create a sense of alignment among organizational members (Eisenberg and Goodall, 2003).

Examples of discourse functioning in this way abound in virtually every sphere of public discourse. *Any* ambiguous and well known phrase undoubtedly functions at some level to unify diversity and promote unified action. Take the “War on...” phrases so common in U.S. political discourse. Arguably, the American public has been unified under the highly ambiguous set of phrases: “War on Poverty” in the 1960s, “War on Drugs” in the 1980s, and “War on Terrorism” since 2001 (see Zarefsky, 1986 for an excellent analysis of the rhetorical function of the “War on Poverty”). Whether or not American citizens individually believe in the policies behind these phrases is only partially the point here. People interpret terminology using a combination of their own experience, contextual conceptual references, and prior frameworks. In everyday interactions, a person operates under the general and largely invisible assumption that his or her understanding of a common phrase matches others’.

According to Burger and Luckmann (1967), people perceive that their own understanding of knowledge and reality is valid and universal. Individuals don’t tend to reflect on the origins of definition or conflicts in meaning, they simply use definitions to ease confusion. Acronyms, clichés and jargon phrases further distance the individual from the origin and context of everyday language. In corporate America, for example, key principles guiding employee behavior are embedded in such mysterious acronyms as TQM or ambiguous phrases as “Quality is Job #1.” Presumably, the meanings of words within the phrases are individually conceptualized. But to understand these terms in the workplace is to find the meaning in the already determined structures and norms: Either one is told what TQM (Total Quality Management) means in training, or one looks it up in a dictionary or manual, or one learns through error, by being reprimanded for non-compliance. In most social contexts, sensemaking regarding specialized language includes the assumption that there is a meaning out there somewhere, whether or not one has access to it. Thus, people can engage with others using these phrases as if they are universally understood. ICT or CMC, for example, are shortcuts that not only save time, cognitively speaking, but also provide the illusion of consensus and helps us get along. Over time, the locus of meaning of these acronyms is sought in previous iterations (read: published works or classic texts) and understood to be most authentic in these external doctrines of knowledge.

The smooth existence and use of phrases such as “Internet Studies” or “the field of Internet Research” illustrates the extent to which the differences in definition or the interruption of the working frame must be quite significant in order to be noticed. We operate within the presumptions of order and shared meaning (Rommetveit, 1980). Still, the point remains: definitions shape social knowledge and organizational structures. From a critical perspective, definition functions to construct a certain set of ideals associated with the terms and, whether deliberate or unconscious, provides a particularized intellectual landscape and an associated understanding of boundary which shapes and delimits the field of inquiry.³

Discipline through metaphor

Another way to examine the social construction of Internet Studies is to look at conceptual meaning systems invoked by particular metaphor use. Our language is primarily metaphorical, according to contemporary metaphor theory (see Ortony, 1992 for a good cross-section of theory).

Metaphor is both a constructive and prescriptive process whereby individual and institutional sensemaking occurs. Initially (and in a traditional sense), metaphors can be seen as linguistic devices used to fit unfamiliar phenomena into familiar categories. For example, if we do not understand what “Internet” means, we link it with something familiar. Internet as a tool, network, portal, frontier, superhighway: these conceptualizations help us make sense of something quite unfamiliar (see, e.g., Raymond Gozzi’s (1999) analyses of various Internet metaphors).

The metaphors that now explain the Internet may still be somewhat novel in that we can debate over their meaning and the extent to which the comparisons between the tenor and the vehicle hold, illustrated by a 2004 mailing list discussion of the Association of Internet Researchers about the meaning of “cyberspace.” One member’s declaration that cyberspace doesn’t exist prompted scholars to reflect on and consider their own and others’ conceptions of the term. The process was metaphoric through and through, a rare moment when the negotiated, intersubjective process of social construction could be witnessed in progress.

Over time, metaphors tend to become less a choice and more a matter of convention. “As our metaphorical conceptualizations of the term “Internet” become more concrete, walls of meaning are constructed around us, reifying a “box” that we will be asking ourselves to think outside of in the future” (Markham, 2003). To understand the power of metaphor is to examine everyday language for what are called “dead” metaphors. Metaphors that are obvious are considered “live,” as in the phrase, “Love is a journey,” or “Institutions across the nation have jumped on the bandwagon of distance education.” However, over time and use, metaphors can shift from “live” to “dormant” to “dead,” which does not mean they no longer have meaning but quite the opposite—the meaning is not at the surface level of the sentence. Metaphors that have been absorbed into everyday usage become invisible frames that inform our attitudes and actions (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Ortony, 1979).⁴ As I have noted previously:

Over time, these metaphors become frames that shape and delimit our perceptions of and responses to these technologies. Ultimately, the understood “reality” of the Internet is taken for granted within these frames. As others encounter phenomena which are pre-labeled “Internet,” they are unlikely to make sense of these new technologies from scratch; they use terminology already developed, which pre-determines the frameworks for sensemaking (Markham, 2003, p. 3).

Metaphors create frames through which we see and make sense of the world. The less we question the comparisons we have made, the more these frames exert power over our ability to think differently. We step into and therefore stop seeing the frame.

As initiatives are designed, institutions created, and theories developed, certain assumptions and organizational structures take root and are privileged as the “taken-for-granted” premises of Internet research. The issue takes on more significance when one examines the influence of metaphor on academic enterprises, institutional structures, and public policy. Globally, governments and private foundations spend billions yearly on Internet-related technology initiatives. The hope is that these initiatives bear fruit. Yet many public policies related to Internet development have been conceived in haste without the benefit of careful reflection or years of thoughtful research and development.

The nearly frantic uptake of the phrase Digital Divide by governmental and non-profit organizations in the mid-1990s provides a powerful example of how metaphor can shape social policy.

The metaphor of the Internet as digitally divided, along with vivid depictions on magazine covers, news reports, and political cartoons in newspapers, evoked strong visual images involving canyons, cliffs, and impassable chasms. On one side of the divide, there are 'the connected': people experiencing ready access to vast networks, from which knowledge flows, presumably. On the other side, predictably, there are 'the unconnected': people experiencing the contemporary equivalent of the dark ages with no access to the knowledge of modern society. If we take seriously the rhetorical function of language, these metaphors function not only to describe but also to generate the shape of the problem by emphasizing particular attributes and foci (Schön, 1979/1993). The particularized nature of the problem is reproduced by multiple factors, including the strength of the comparison to articulate a specific conceptual framework and its resonance with other meaning systems (Black, 1979).

Several years and millions of dollars later, policymakers and social scientists are critically examining the conceptual foundations of this issue, recognizing that the phrase "digital divide" hardly encompasses the complexity of the problem and that solutions must involve much more than simply providing broadband and free computers to 'the unconnected.' Initially, there may have been keen analyses. But as the mass media and pop culture coverage grew, the metaphor of "digital divide" highlighted certain aspects of the problem (e.g., access to computers and the Internet, speed of connection) and simultaneously hid the more complex underlying issues (e.g., education, knowledge, gender and ethnic inequalities). The response was wide-scale, swift, and expensive. All good intentions notwithstanding, it would not be surprising to discover that more money fell into a chasm than built a bridge between the privileged and the marginalized. My point, of course, is not to critique the scholars whose careful research informed action but to demonstrate the alacrity with which some metaphoric frames are taken up and run with by policy makers anxious for a buzzword and a quick fix.

Metaphors are working theories. Without the rigor of theory building and testing, metaphors serve the same powerful function as any theory: To shape what we see when we look at unfamiliar phenomena, how we approach them from a research perspective, and how we respond to these phenomena as policymakers, educators, and users. They function to shape what we know of as "the Internet." They also function to frame the theoretical premises undergirding the study of Internet related phenomena. More to the point of this article, metaphors function to delineate what is and is not a part of Internet Studies, thereby limiting the discipline within particular boundaries.

Prominent terms to explain "The Internet" tend to focus on the 'tool' and 'container' features of phenomena (see Markham, 1998, 2003). These metaphoric frameworks have held because they make sense and fit with our historical conceptualizations of technology. To view the Internet as a web, a superhighway, a transmission medium, and so forth is to conceptualize it as a conduit or pipeline. This conceptualization is amenable because it describes accurately very important features of what we know of as "the Internet." To think of the Internet as a container is to consider, unconsciously perhaps, the fact that containers have walls to hold things in and apart from other things. When describing the Internet, this comparison may not make literal sense, but it still has high resonance with an associated conception of information as a unit, piece, or an object. Over time and use these useful comparisons become definitions which give a priori shape to the central conception of Internet-related phenomena. The origin of this sort of metaphorical conceptualization is not as important as the consequences. Bottom line, the

meaning structures facilitated by the conduit metaphor give emphasis to the transmission features of communication technologies.

The conceptual boundaries of contemporary institutions are enabled and constrained by these same metaphors. The question remains: In the arena of Internet Studies, in the United States, can we sustain debate at the level of the conceptual frameworks in order to spark productive change and maximize inclusiveness? One might note a lot of debate occurring within various mailing lists, conferences, journals, and hallway conversations and wonder: Aren't we already doing this? By virtue of its interdisciplinarity, is Internet Studies overcoming the systemic tendency toward encapsulation and homeostasis? This is an intriguing question: Most of us would hope that various views would have equal weight in determining how phenomena get studied and that variety is not lost over time, through the important practices of collaboration and bridging of distinctions. We would hope that the reading lists for graduate students continue to be diverse.

Several ideas about the way social structures evolve and operate tell us this is a false hope. Systems theory teaches us that organic and social systems tend toward homeostasis, a state of relative balance. Following this tendency, Internet Studies will continue to evolve as a system. In this process, it will dismiss more and more alternatives, seeking to centralize around core themes and theories, using core terms and definitions. This may be quite subtle, seen simply as a process of refining what is studied, which makes the field of study more tangible, more fundable (in that it appears coherent), more feasible (in that one department can specialize), more sensible for student applicants, and generally easier for people to understand. We see this tendency in keynote addresses at conferences, who make pleas for unifying theories, reification of the ways in which conference papers are thematized (themes that become more standardized and expected as the years pass), the development of anthologies, the labeling of certain texts as classic, and the appearance of journal issues seeking to overview and describe the field of inquiry. A recent issue of *New Media & Society* offers a glimpse of the state of Internet research. Along with various reviews of where we've been and where we're going, readers receive calls for essential readings, core theories, and a canon. This issue of *The Information Society* functions in somewhat the same way.

Critical theorists teach us that even loosely coupled and globally networked organizations are bound within certain ideological structures whereby certain interests are sustained while others are ignored or silenced. Whether or not we presently see such social structures or practices, history tells us that if there is anything to be gained by the creation and maintenance of defined structures and disciplined practices, attempts will be made to do so. More subtle are the invisible ideological frameworks that operate to legitimate certain ideas and practices while limiting or prohibiting others. Even inertia works to bind sensemaking such that both efforts and outcomes are predicted, if not predetermined, by the taken-for-granted premises and norms for thought and action.

The presence of this issue of TIS and other similar self reflections indicates that Internet researchers are seeking to make sense of themselves as a collective, or at least what it means to be a part of a group. Interestingly, we can note also that the presence of this conversation implies that certain uncertainties have been reduced. For instance, the question of legitimacy for this field of inquiry no longer constitutes an uncertainty. The initial trial enactment of "we are legitimate" has been proven

successful because associations and academic posts and journals continue to grow in size and reputation. As Weick (1979) notes, the discipline of Internet Studies has organized to the point of having internalized the framework of legitimacy, which means this definitional norm is incorporated into the organizational rulebook for future use. "Legitimate" is now considered a defining feature of the organization. Unquestioned, it becomes part of the frame and will be applied as an a priori response to future anomalies. For example, if a future event fails, it will be considered an anomaly and tested against the prior frame of "legitimate." Only if it happens repeatedly will the organization consider shifting its organizational framework.

Actions that reduce uncertainty successfully tend to be incorporated into organizational practice and later, become concrete parts of the organizational rule structure. Thus over time, an organization stabilizes and also continues to evolve. The organization appears as an object or entity with obdurate qualities because its evolution has slowed down. It appears to be a relatively solid structure because it emits a sense of constancy and balance. When the patterns are disrupted by an anomalous phenomenon, the process versus product qualities become apparent and the culture must actively make sense of this phenomenon.

Habitual actions become normalized and internalized as "standard operating procedures" (Barker & Cheney, 1994, p. 21). Once-upon-a-time choices become embedded in the everyday discursive and embodied processes of "getting things done." Returning to the discussion of ideology, power, and discourse, one can begin to see the potentially negative consequences for creativity, flexibility, and agency.

Concertive Control and Discipline

The process through which certain practices and ideas get privileged can be explored by a close examination of power, discourse, ideology, and organizational structure.⁵ While one can focus on the overt authoritative bases for control and discipline, the structural features of control reveal patterns that function to control organizational members under the surface level of discourse. "Both the whip and the watch govern our behavior . . . but the governance of the watch is the more unobtrusive and the more thoroughgoing of the two types of 'authority' because our regular submission to it is a willing, almost wholly voluntary act" (Barker and Cheney, 1994, p. 20). To discuss ideology and control so early in the organizing of Internet Studies may seem precipitous. However, early attention to exactly this process is crucial. If we hope to maintain a sense of diversity and interdisciplinarity, the organization must build self-conscious reflexivity into habitual patterns of organizational communication.

Discipline through Opinion Leadership and Reputation

From a traditional perspective of power as overt or behavioral, one can evaluate the extent to which leaders control the structure of and practices within the emerging discipline. Here, one might look at how opinion leaders shape the underlying structures governing knowledge production and everyday practice. Within most arenas where Internet Studies is organizing itself into a discipline, this may not seem a problem now, but will likely be a problem later, if history teaches us anything. Even in an indirect sense, when leaders actively do not seek to further their own cause, the definitional frameworks for organizing take the shape given to them by the opinion leaders in this arena. These 'managers' hold

great political power by virtue of their early adoption of technologies, current status as leaders in the field, and their relatively unrestrained ability to speak to an attentive audience and/or publish almost at will.

French and Raven's classic delineation of the bases of power illustrates the extent to which control is achieved, deliberately or not, through much more than coercion (1959). Control can be achieved if an organizational member: perceives that there is some reward for compliance; does something in a particular way in order to be like the leader; perceives that the leader holds expert knowledge, or complies simply because of the legitimate positions of authority held by others (1959). Even if we complexify the process by which control and compliance is gained through the addition of other theoretical treatises (i.e., the work of Michel Foucault), the point remains: Whether or not thought leaders in Internet Studies seek or want this power to define the terms and boundaries of the discipline, they wield *legitimate power* in everyday as well as formal discursive events (utterances).

Returning to the earlier discussion of metaphor, the case arises whereby metaphors used early on or by key leaders create the key foundations for what lies inside and outside the boundaries of Internet Studies. There is evidence for this when one traces the metaphoric groundwork in the development of terminology associated with Internet Studies. A term such as "Cyberspace" describes particular concepts. As a term, it emerged in a specific discourse event (William Gibson's science fiction novel Neuromancer).

A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts ... A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding . . . (Gibson, 1984, p. 51)

How many using the term can cite the source of "cyberspace" readily? This term, like many before and after it, got passed along, repeated, questioned, defined, refined, and finally reified as one of the now taken-for-granted descriptions of what the Internet is. The original definition by Gibson is decent, but in its lack of clarity is often either ignored or misunderstood. Although many use the term with insight, others may use the term as a matter of necessity more than reflection, because in some circles, it is the accepted and required term.

The same sort of process happens with Donna Haraway's (1991) notion of the Cyborg. Often quoted and often oversimplified, Haraway's terminology is privileged as a way of making sense of the connection between body and machine. Regardless of whether or not her excellent essay actually conceptualizes the cyborg in the same way as many who quote her say it does, both her term and her name are recognized by many scholars as important and expected devices for sensemaking. The invocation of the name William Gibson is also, in many ways, a code word that indicates membership in the group and adherence to a certain set of rules.

We know these code words are used in everyday society. Arguably, much more attention to this practice in our own academic enterprise would be useful. These are the practices that will function, over time, to reify the boundaries of appropriateness, adequacy, and credibility in this field. As well, reflection on the emerging characteristics of the hierarchy and the discourse of thought leaders is necessary to identify the presence of privileged and delimiting terms. Analysis of the common language used to

describe “who we are” and “what we do” can also reveal the notable absence of language left behind or dismissed, which might provide insight into “what we do not do,” “what we could, but don’t do,” or “what we might do.”

The search for encapsulating themes and core theories is natural in any field of inquiry and is not, in itself, problematic. The problems arise when theoretical concepts become embedded in terminology or associated with particular leaders and, over time and casual use, lose their historical context and have meaning only as part of the organizational discourse system. When this occurs, the meaning behind the structure is no longer an issue to be debated, but merely a premise to be followed. David Silver finds evidence for this in Internet Studies anthology indexes which privilege “what other authors have written rather than key ideas” (2004, p. 60) by virtue of citing far more names than concepts or theories.

Often, we would consider this tendency to coalesce around leaders rather than theories to be a feature of “strong organizational cultures” (Deal and Kennedy, 1982). It is largely considered to be a healthy part of the organizing process. As Cheney (1983) contends, it is also a means of augmenting and strengthening management control and employee loyalty through unobtrusive rhetorical strategies. The danger, whether in an academic enterprise or nation state, arises when ‘leader’ and ‘idea’ get conflated without reflection. Bottom line, organizational structures may be negotiated through discursive practices of organizational members, but time and habit erode the ‘negotiation’ aspect of this process. This is how organizations come to take on monolithic, real, obdurate qualities. It also helps to explain how certain practices become privileged and others are silenced or dismissed.

Marginalization through Discursive Closure

Drawing on the work of Foucault, Giddens, and Habermas, Stanley Deetz (1992) details the ways in which alternate viewpoints can be suppressed through a process of *discursive closure*. In this process, open or inquisitive discourse targeted at essential problems or conflicting ideas about organizational relations or structures is denied or suppressed, which leads an organization to reproduce itself with the use of only internal conceptual relations as part of the social construction process, rather than produce itself with the use of external, possibly contrary information and conceptions. Discursive closure exists whenever potential conflict is suppressed, arises through the privileging of certain discourses and the marginalization of others, and is present in each move to determine origins and demonstrate unity (Deetz, p. 190).

The effect of discursive closure is to “suppress insight into the conflictual nature of experience and preclude careful discussion of and decision making regarding the values implicit in experience, identity, and representation” (Deetz, 1992, p. 188-189). It is worth exploring some of the ways in which processes of discursive closure might present themselves in the organizing practices of Internet Studies, using Deetz as a guide:

Naturalization: When a group begins to conceptualize “the socially produced as given in nature” (p. 190), discussion about origins or alternatives diminishes. This works in several ways to influence the practice of Internet research. As organizational structures (associations, interest groups, departments) shift conceptually from practice to product, their qualities and defining characteristics become embedded, concretized. Organizing processes such as definition, metaphor, identification, framing, and so forth solidify in our minds the field of study as something that simply “is,” not something that was invented

and therefore changeable. Internet Studies will become, through these various processes, a predetermined category of inquiry and the demarcation lines of inside/outside, legitimate/illegitimate, acceptable/invalid will become more and more apparent. Even if not apparent, the categories will function in our decision making. As Deetz argues, the historical context of the issue is not just forgotten, it is closed, turned off, and no longer visible for inspection (1992, p. 190). Metaphors get absorbed into language and then disappear as metaphors. Terms and definitions are simply accepted, for the most part, as descriptions of what is universal and real. These definitional frameworks are used to make sense of equivocal situations, thus reproducing and strengthening the structure as is. Deetz's warning is apt: Naturalization stops discussion "at precisely the place where it should be started . . . at the determination of what it *is*" (p. 191, italics added).

Neutralization: As structures become more objective and natural, through the processes described above, they are taken as neutral and value-free. This occurs in part because the originators are separated from the structures they initiated. The obdurate qualities of institutions do not appear socially produced; apparently solid or stable organizational forms are aligned more with the concept of nature, which is not seen as a force with a particular streak for spite, need for vengeance, or desire for power.

As with naturalization, neutralization closes off discourse in subtle ways. Subversive or contrary discourse can be perceived as arbitrarily argumentative because it attempts to impose value statements in neutral territory. Within Western societies, of which traditional scholarly enterprises are a part, rationality reigns sovereign. The underlying framework is, for the most part, incompatible with what might appear to be illogical. As most organizational structures appear to be solid, objective forms, it seems illogical to perceive they represent a stance. It is therefore difficult to argue with the taken-for-granted framework. Practices embedded in the structural norms of modern institutions include reference to norms, logic, tradition, and legitimacy, all of which are perceived as non-arbitrary. Rationality, then, functions to close off discourse that critiques the arbitrary, privileging, and marginalizing practices or premises of the structure itself. While individual behaviors may be up for critical discussion, the premises of the organization or the shape of the field is not.

Topical Avoidance: As time goes on and an institution becomes increasingly reified, certain discussions among groups may be unpleasant because they focus on the politics of experience, contest the norms of the group, or raise unpopular ideas. This makes sense; organizing may be a communicative negotiation but one's membership in the group is predicated on a fairly common set of ideals, values, or goals. Most of us feel more comfortable working with the perception that we are a collective that functions smoothly wherein people get along with each other.

This impetus to get along, however, can result in an unstated agreement to avoid certain topics. Simply put, agreements to avoid topics renders conflict and difference mute and functions to conceal the politics of experience (Deetz, p. 192). Internet Studies is no exception, except that the topics are not so much about management practices or what happens at the company holiday parties. In the field of Internet Studies, currently, topical avoidance is more literal; even as topics for research continue to grow along with the dissemination of new technologies, certain ideas and topics may be considered unpopular.⁶

The sheer speed at which information gets passed around among scholars creates a false sense of urgency and a desire to remain on the cutting—and fashionable—edge. The casual nature of mailing

lists, essential for basic communication among affiliates of this field of inquiry, fosters an informal style of conversation among members. Along with and perhaps because of this, members of various associations may develop a keen awareness of what's being done currently and what areas to avoid. Ideologically, topical avoidance mutes alternative or contradicting discourse. In a field of inquiry desiring to span multiple viewpoints, this is more serious than the examples above indicate. As certain ideas are marginalized, the field's range and scope of analytical gaze shifts and tightens around central themes with consequences for individuals as well as scientific knowledge.

Legitimation: As "Internet Studies" grows and shakes off its quotation marks, it will become a legitimate body of knowledge which acts as a referent, marker, and measure for individual practice both within and without its walls. Legitimation is a process whereby decisions are rationalized "through the invocation of higher order explanatory devices" (Deetz, p. 195-196). In an overview of postmodern organizational theory, Parker writes: "In accepting, or constructing, a disciplinary area such as organizational theory/studies/sociology the authors discipline their writing to reproduce certain forms of knowledge. . . . [T]hey also become disciples to a heritage of writing" (p. 13). As certain modes of research and forms of presentation become habituated, alternates are shut down. In any academic discipline, the criteria for acceptability in scholarship are taken mostly from the rule system of the discipline itself, not from the context and individual but from the discipline itself.

Each of these practices can close off vital discourse and leave people outside the critical loop of sensemaking in these early stages of organizational development. Topics that are taboo, conflict that seems unwieldy and unpleasant, research that does not appear to qualify because it does not fit within the boundaries, the desire to remain unified and affable. At least in the United States, most of us avoid conflict as much as possible and want to exist in pleasant work environments with people we like. To maintain a peaceable work culture, the tendency is to engage in discursive practices that reproduce the status quo and prevent/prohibit change. Early on, these efforts are seen as an important means of building a unified body and stable organization. Over time, the resultant practices thwart discussion and function to protect the interests, values, and beliefs of certain parties over others (Markham, 1995). Translated more directly in the development of an academic discipline, this process privileges certain ways of thinking about "The Internet" and marginalizes the voices of alternate theories that will disrupt the stability of the discipline.

Although Internet Studies does not yet have structures that would readily identify it as a traditional rational bureaucratic organization, it exists squarely within and will take on the shape of the Academy. This cannot be ignored. A structural view of power holds that subjectivity is bound most strongly not by obvious or even subversive acts of power, but by the deep structures of organizational practices. Even recognizing Anthony Giddens' point that structure and agency are inter-influential (1984), the organizing features of culture--definitions, habitual practices or rituals, traditions, and other natural processes--function hegemonically to guide behavior. Combined with taken for granted language practices that, through definition and metaphor, shape and delimit what counts as important or real, organizational structures wield a great deal of control over the members. Discursive closure is just one example of how the taken for granted structures and practices of the organization can control members by diverting or shutting down those discussions that contest certain practices and premises of the organization itself.

This control is strengthened particularly if sponsored and actively reproduced by organizational members themselves who may not have the means to see the hidden structures of power beneath the surface of routine and rationality. Control is also exacerbated because the practices of Internet Studies are entrenched within larger, widely accepted (or at least not actively resisted) social structures of the Academy and the traditional practices of Science. In other words, each system is bound by the rule of the larger system within which it exists. Transcending these is not just monumental but nearly impossible, requiring constant vigilance and resistant practices. The structure privileges a narrow view, a canon, a goal of building theory, and scientific methods. These practices will marginalize people whose work does not fit.

As Karl Weick writes, organizing is a process of sensemaking, which “resembles more closely the activity of cartography. There is some terrain that mapmakers want to represent, and they use various modes of projection to make this representation. What they map, however, depends on where they look, how they look, what they want to represent, and their tools for representation” (2001, p. 9). Internet Studies is an emergent map of our attempts to individually and collectively make sense of the way we see this new world. Not only is the terrain shifting, hindering attempts to find stability, but there are many cartographers, each with his or her interpretation of what is seen and therefore what should be represented as that which is known. The difficult task is to find some balance that both organizes us and preserves our strength of diversity. We have agency and are not completely at the mercy of the webs we spin. Still, conscious efforts to create a sense of unity, cohesion, and order can shift gradually to routines, and then to prescriptive guidelines and norms for action. This is particularly troublesome for members who enter at the latter stages of reification, because they will step into an organizational structure whose rules appear to be set in stone (Barker, 1993).

This article seeks to sound a cautionary note not out of protest but out of a desire to witness the nearly impossible evolution of Internet Studies into an “undiscipline.” The somewhat pessimistic outlook presented in this article would suggest that, through attrition or closure, the unruly, alternative, resistant, and political views will fall away.

We may be better served by Nina Wakeford, who offers a welcome alternative to this pessimism (and possibly a better ending to this article) when she states that to resist our own boundaries, we need: “[T]o realise that partiality, multiplicity and situatedness may be our most productive ways of creating a new media studies which intervenes in and challenges, rather than merely rewrites, a new standardized set of discourses (2004, p. 136). I would add that this is only possible if we actively engage in dialogue that pushes our own boundaries and struggles against the western academic tendencies we will inevitably face.

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¹ Thomas Kuhn's *The structure of scientific revolutions* (1970) is perhaps the most prominent in pointing out that paradigms are shifted through a rhetorical process whereby the most persuasive scientists influence what we later take to be truth. Michel Foucault's work can be described as a project to study how social structures and practices become disciplined, over time, through discourse, power, and the objectification of knowledge. His notion of genealogy can be read as a means of moving back from the present to study the techniques and methods used by institutions to modify individual behaviors and to examine some of the traces of how subjects of thought become objects of knowledge. Applied to this context, one can begin to examine the extent to which current everyday discourse in emerging academic disciplines—in conjunction with the conscious or unconscious operation of power—has the potential to become historical monument or doctrine.

² Foucault's (1978a) notion of discipline and Gramsci's (1971) notion of hegemony help us understand controlling practices that are invisible or unconscious. Althusser's (1971) notion of interpellation or Deetz's (1992) treatment of discursive closure might describe the more conscious connection between power and discourse, perhaps, although the process of control is not described as such but rather taken for granted as the natural and neutral way of doing things.

³ Foucault's works, particularly *History of Sexuality* and *Discipline and Punish* provide an extensive treatment of how discursive practices become definitional and embedded in embodied routines. More specific to how academics construct normative definitional boundaries over time, see Tim Luke's analysis of the field of Environmental Science (1996), a special issue of the *Journal of Communication* entitled "Ferment in the Field" (1983, volume 33, number 3), a special issue of *Communication* (1999, volume 9, number 4), and an early 2005 mailing list debate of the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interactionism. Arguably, the field of communication in the United States provides an excellent example of the strengths and weaknesses of the argument that definition shapes practice. Certain scholars in the mid 20th Century called their endeavor "communication research" to distinguish themselves from rhetoricians. The effort to define the field of study continued later in the century when academic units made a point to distinguish Communication from Communications (plural), indicating human versus mass/media communication, respectively. Understanding of the communication process became standardized with the widespread adoption of Shannon's and Weaver's SMCR model of communication, which is now acknowledged as highly problematic yet still offered as the initial definition of the communication process in most basic communication textbooks (Griffin, 1997). The field continues to struggle with the issue of disciplinarity and has remained somewhat open to alternate visions. Inquiry in U.S. academic institutions remains bound by named and policed categories, a fact of life for many graduate students and junior rank faculty who must work within these categories or risk delegitimation. One can see similar processes in other academic units that want to resist discipline status but nonetheless argue about intellectual boundaries and debate about what should be considered legitimate or appropriate inquiry and pedagogy.

⁴ Note, for example, that my use of the phrase "metaphors that are absorbed into everyday usage" uses a dead metaphor (absorbed) to describe language (implied by the context of the sentence, not stated directly) as an object or more precisely, a container (perhaps a sponge) that can hold something else. This metaphorical conceptualization of language as a container or communication as a conduit is common. See Reddy's analysis of the conduit metaphor in the English language (1979/1993).

⁵ For an excellent treatise on the relationship of power, ideology, and discourse in organizational communication theory, see Mumby (1988).

⁶ The popularity or perceived viability of research topics will differ depending on what one's specific affiliation or field of interest is, of course. The study of leadership in the management discipline illustrates one way this can happen. Because longitudinal studies were expensive and did not yield short term findings and publications, the study of leadership as a trait dwindled significantly. Subsequently, trait theories were dismissed as a suspect explanation of leadership. Even as these theories are raised from the dead in the late '90s, they are delegitimized by most in management fields (Steven Green, personal communication, 1996). In Internet Studies, this phenomenon is more difficult to identify, as the process of organizing is younger. I have witnessed several mailing list or email conversations wherein certain threads are discouraged (a recent thread where someone argued that cyberspace did

not exist) or certain research areas are said to be no longer legitimate (study of text-based online interactions, study of online-only cultural spaces) or certain research projects are deemed too risky for the health of the group as a whole (study of ethically suspicious studies of internet).

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Date of this version:

January 28, 2005

Keywords:

Social Construction, Critical Theory, Internet Studies, Internet Research, Organizational Communication, Metaphor, Definition, Discipline, Ideology, Power, Power/Knowledge, Discursive Closure, Concertive Control, Disciplinarity, Dialogue