

Who Wants to be a Discipline?

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Naomi S. Baron

Department of Language and Foreign Studies, American University, Washington, DC, USA

In October of 1976, the newly-organized Semiotic Society of America convened its first conference. The attendees – literature professors, anthropologists, popular culture specialists, French teachers, art historians, linguists, philosophers – each seemed to have a personal reason for coming. Some were fans of Charles Sanders Peirce (an early figure in American semiotics) or Umberto Eco (at the time, the maverick spokesman for Europe’s longstanding fascination with the study of signs). Others were looking for an intellectual escape from their academic home, which sometimes dismissed their work as falling outside the disciplinary pale. There were also a handful of well-meaning souls who probably did not belong at the meeting, but were welcomed nonetheless because the fledgling society was too polite (or needy) to turn anyone away.

Though the organization never achieved a commanding presence in the academy, the “discipline” it represented enjoyed a burst of popularity in American universities in the 1980s, gradually settling into a small but generally respected niche. In the US, the modern “discipline” has its founding figure (the linguist Thomas Sebeok), a small professional society that meets annually, two free-standing journals, a profusion of books, and a scattering of graduate programs, though most students of semiotics are found not in departments of that name but in other academic enclaves – where their professors can

earn tenure. (In the interests of full disclosure, I was president of the Semiotic Society of American in 1987, so I have something of an insider perspective.)

Why do academics seek to establish new disciplines? Some motivations are intrinsic to the subject matter at issue, while others are extrinsic, reflecting more political goals.

Oversimplifying somewhat, there are two intrinsic motivations for attempting to forge a new discipline. The first is a felt need to look at old disciplinary questions in new ways. For example, both human languages and human societies have been around for millennia, and the disciplines of linguistics and of sociology are each roughly a century old. However, not until the 1960s was there a push (largely from anthropological linguists) to create a new “hyphenated” domain of study. Is sociolinguistics (initially called “socio-linguistics”) a discipline or a field of study? While it clearly has its own courses and journals, academic practitioners have remained happily ensconced in their original homes, not feeling the need for a distinctive identity. Themed sessions at the annual meetings of the Linguistic Society of America, the American Sociological Association, and the American Anthropological Association? Yes. Separate organizations and academic structures? Not really. (More disclosure: I’m a linguist by training.)

A second intrinsic motivation for banding together under a new academic flag is that a field itself is new. Computer science programs commonly surfaced in the academic world as offshoots of physics and applied mathematics departments or business schools, though it quickly became obvious that the world of computer hardware and software (not to mention artificial intelligence) was sufficiently novel to warrant its own academic identity. Similarly, the once-hyphenated field of psycholinguistics (essentially, a union of

some psychology and some linguistics) achieved disciplinary distinction under the reconceptualized rubric “cognitive science” when a groundswell of interest in the human brain, coupled with new brain imaging techniques such as MRI and PET scans, lifted an old-fashioned recombination of academic interests into what has come to be recognized as a domain unto itself.

But we should not assume that the standing of a domain of study is solely determined by the nature of the problems being investigated. Academia is renowned for being a political battleground. “Fields of study” typically do not get much university funding. Rarely do they garner separate office space, secretaries, or funding for graduate students. Since the early days of the twentieth century when academic majors were first introduced into American colleges (at Harvard, by President Abbott Lawrence Lowell), savvy faculty have known that institutionalized departments are the basis for university budgets, and that it helps to be a discipline to have a shot at becoming a department. Outside funding is also vital. Cognitive science got on the disciplinary map in part because of the large amounts of external grants that psychologists and linguists, along with an infusion of computer scientists, philosophers, and sometimes anthropologists, managed to procure.

However pure one’s contentive arguments, whether a domain of intellectual pursuit is dubbed an “area of inquiry”, a “field”, or a “discipline” tends to have less to do with the nature of the academic endeavor itself than with politics and the comfort levels of practitioners. Computer scientists and cognitive scientists often got their own buildings and budgets; semioticians and sociolinguists did not. Do the former represent more legitimate disciplines than the latter? Hardly. In fact, many times, core practitioners in

newly-recognized disciplines happily reside in their original academic homes. To wit: many cognitive scientists – and semioticians – remain in departments of philosophy, though sometimes with joint appointments.

Is Internet research a field? an area of inquiry? a discipline? To a significant degree, the answer depends upon the institutional aspirations of its practitioners. (In linguistics, we cite Max Weinreich's observation that a language is a dialect with an army and a navy.) Do we want our own physical space on campus? Are we unhappy with our present disciplinary affiliations? Do we feel intellectually isolated? Do our departments value our work? These are questions we will need to address both individually and collectively before deciding whether a declaration of independence is in order.

As we think through our aspirations, we might bear three lessons in mind. First, by trying to encompass too much intellectual territory under one's banner, would-be disciplines can end up appearing vacuous. Semiotics took all signs to be its province – from DNA code to Mayan glyphs to beer-drinking customs. Yes, such topics all deal with relationships between form and meaning, but there the connecting thread ends. The science of everything tends to become the science of nothing. What if Internet studies were to become a discipline – and a very successful one at that? Given the ubiquity of the Internet (and potentially of research involving the Internet in one way or another), would we want to risk AOIR conferences becoming as massive (and disjointed) as those of, say, the gargantuan Modern Language Association?

Second, it is critical that we distinguish between a discipline and a tool. A number of fields of inquiry have parlayed a tool into disciplinary status – computer science and linguistics (at least of the structuralist sort) come to mind. Yet it is risky to stake one's

long-term academic fortunes upon a tool over which one lacks controlling rights. Of late, neither computer science departments nor departments of linguistics have generally been noted for their growth records. It is not that students and researchers are eschewing the study of computing and of human language. Rather, colleagues in other departments have recognized the usefulness of the-computer-as-tool (e.g., in economic modeling) and language-analysis-as-tool (e.g., computational research on natural language processing), without feeling the need to become card-carrying members of the disciplines bearing those tools' names. Since the Internet is, quite literally, a tool, it behooves us to consider how existing tool-based disciplines have fared when colleagues in the next building over have appropriated these devices or methods of analysis.

Third, we need to consider the possibility that in the contemporary university climate, we might be anachronistic in believing we can decide where Internet research falls in the academic landscape. For at least a decade (in some cases, two or three), universities have increasingly turned away from defining themselves as collections of distinct disciplines in favor of interdisciplinary (aka cross-disciplinary, multidisciplinary) models. Internet research brings together trained disciplinary practitioners – many of whom appear to be comfortable in their current academic homes and not dreaming of empire-building. These practitioners skillfully use a common tool in diverse ways (qualitative, quantitative, aesthetic, etc.) to understand a wide swath of problems (e.g., social, linguistic, political, technological). While not quite “the science of everything” (like semiotics), specific genres of Internet studies seem to fairly easily domesticate into existing university rubrics. If we do not want our own real estate, if we can be intellectually stimulated by one another's company through, e.g., attending AOIR

meetings or reading journals such as this one, and if our home institutions recognize (and reward) our interdisciplinarity, perhaps our future is best one of peacefully functioning with the existing academic structure.

But what if we seek intellectual independence? Computer visionary Alan Kay wisely asserted back in 1971 that “the best way to predict the future is to invent it”. If we want Internet research to make it onto departmental scoreboards, we need to plan. We must be especially pragmatic about our timing and tactics.

Were I running the strategy room of those considering a real estate move, my short-term advice would be to retain our current interdisciplinary standing for at least a few more years. The advantages are three. First, we endear ourselves to university administrators who are generally disinclined to authorize new expenses in the current economic market. Second, we play an important collegial role by helping to revitalize some disciplines (sociology and linguistics come to mind) with our Internet research initiatives and by contributing to an important social agenda (especially with our colleagues in political science and sociology) through e-government initiatives. Third, we can maneuver into place a new generation of Internet researchers (with tenure) who (along with the earlier-tenured among us) can prepare for the next stage in the plan: structural independence.

Launching an independent academic entity, once the time is ripe, is best done as a conscious, coordinated effort. (As any presidential candidate will tell you, winning an election has, alas, more to do with financing, organization, and image management than with intelligence, ability, and personal values.) The keys to our earning a seat at the academic table (assuming we want one) include (1) procuring funding for physical real

estate and for supporting research endeavors, (2) establishing a public presence (through clearly identifiable journals and conferences), and (3) developing a professional organization that is recognized as setting the “gold standard” for expertise on Internet matters. If, as I have suggested, Internet research (like, in fact, many “disciplines”) is best seen as a tool for understanding a broad range of social or physical phenomena, then the rest of our colleagues need to perceive us as the keeper of that tool. Our research must be of excellent quality, our spokespeople must be articulate and available, and they must speak on behalf of the “discipline” or organization, rather than simply on behalf of themselves. (Steve Jones has set a superb example.)

Despite its fledgling status, the Association of Internet Researchers has made enormous headway in many of these directions, thanks to a combination of vision, dedication, and enthusiasm from a congenial group of academic mavericks who have thus far managed rather comfortably within the interdisciplinary model. Before seeking greater independence for our research endeavors, we will need to be clear that what is at stake is less the nature of our intellectual enterprise than our desire and ability to generate the venture capital necessary to get our own stationery and building on the quad. And before proceeding, it behooves us to think through carefully what, besides public recognition, we stand to gain from such a substantial endeavor.