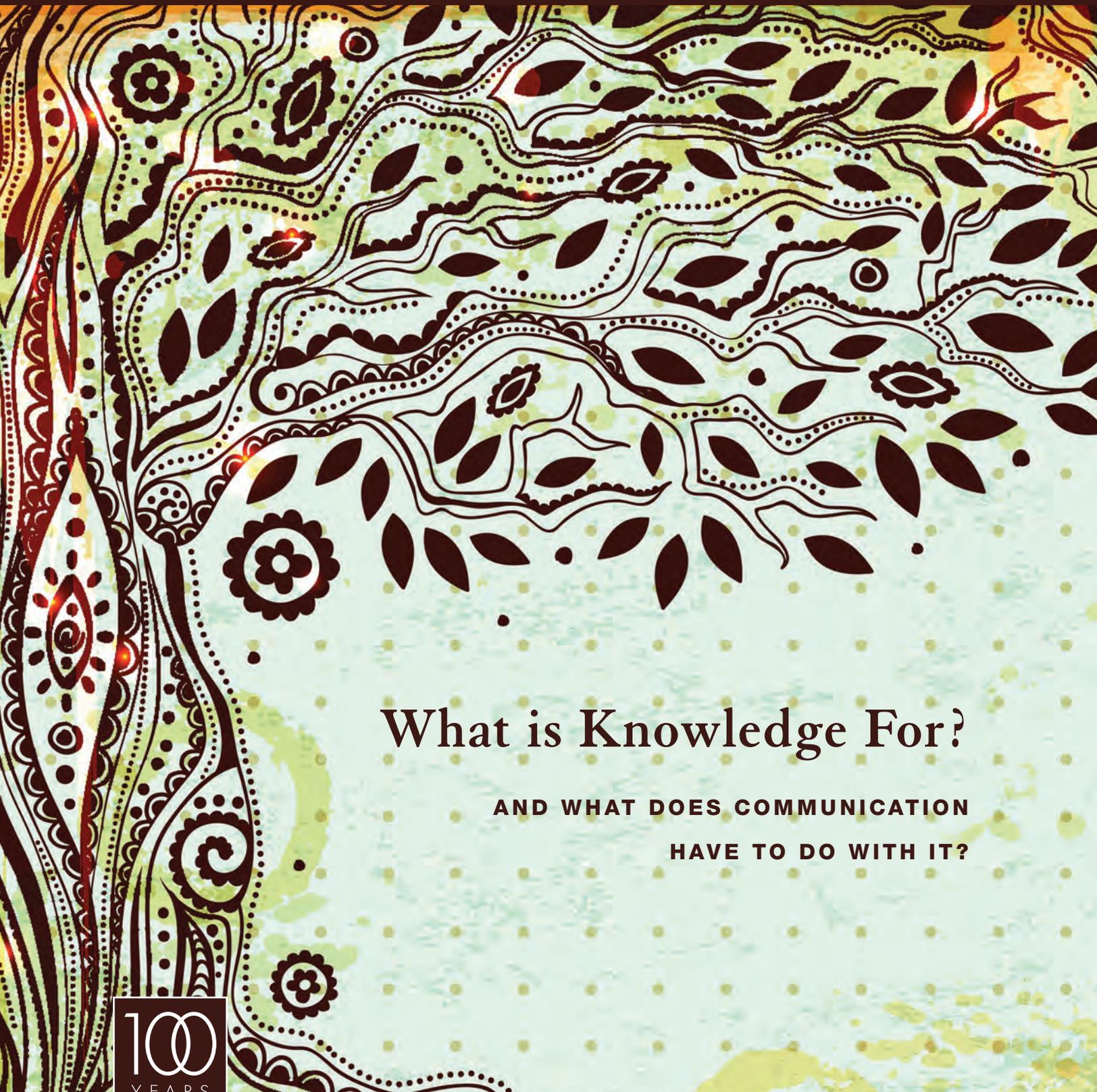


CARROLL C. ARNOLD DISTINGUISHED LECTURE 2014



What is Knowledge For?

AND WHAT DOES COMMUNICATION
HAVE TO DO WITH IT?



JOHN DURHAM PETERS
UNIVERSITY OF IOWA



On October 8, 1994, the Administrative Committee of the National Communication Association established the Carroll C. Arnold Distinguished Lecture. The Arnold Lecture is given in plenary session each year at the annual convention of the Association and features the most accomplished researchers in the field. The topic of the lecture changes annually so as to capture the wide range of research being conducted in the field and to demonstrate the relevance of that work to society at large.

The purpose of the Arnold Lecture is to inspire not by words but by intellectual deeds. Its goal is to make the members of the Association better informed by having one of its best professionals think aloud in their presence. Over the years, the Arnold Lecture will serve as a scholarly stimulus for new ideas and new ways of approaching those ideas. The inaugural Lecture was given on November 17, 1995.

The Arnold Lecturer is chosen each year by the First Vice President. When choosing the Arnold Lecturer, the First Vice President is charged to select a long-standing member of NCA, a scholar of undisputed merit who has already been recognized as such, a person whose recent research is as vital and suggestive as his or her earlier work, and a researcher whose work meets or exceeds the scholarly standards of the academy generally.

The Lecture has been named for Carroll C. Arnold, Professor Emeritus of Pennsylvania State University. Trained under Professor A. Craig Baird at the University of Iowa, Arnold was the coauthor (with John Wilson) of *Public Speaking as a Liberal Art*, author of *Criticism of Oral Rhetoric* (among other works), and co-editor of *The Handbook of Rhetorical and Communication Theory*. Although primarily trained as a humanist, Arnold was nonetheless one of the most active participants in the New Orleans Conference of 1968 which helped put social scientific research in communication on solid footing. Thereafter, Arnold edited *Communication Monographs* because he was fascinated by empirical questions. As one of the three founders of the journal *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, Arnold also helped move the field toward increased dialogue with the humanities in general. For these reasons and more, Arnold was dubbed "The Teacher of the Field" when he retired from Penn State in 1977. Dr. Arnold died in January of 1997.





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NATIONAL COMMUNICATION ASSOCIATION
100th Annual Convention | Chicago, Illinois



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What is Knowledge For?

AND WHAT DOES COMMUNICATION HAVE TO DO WITH IT?



Photo by Veikko Somerpuro, Finland

I am deeply grateful to Carole Blair for the invitation and feel intensely both the honor and burden of the occasion. Since my first published article in a communication studies journal almost three decades ago, I have been a skeptic or dissident about professionalized knowledge, including the very idea of a discipline of communication studies, and so I confess to feeling some dissonance as I consider how to celebrate the 100th anniversary of one of its premier professional associations.¹ To be sure, what began one hundred years ago in this city one Saturday morning on 28 November, 1914, as The National Association of Academic Teachers of Public Speaking, was a milestone. Few people in the history of this planet have understood so deeply what the human capacity for speech entails. Much honorable and sincere work has been done under the banner of NCA, and I would be helpless if I had to detail its considerable collective accomplishments. Let us toast to all logos-animals, beings endowed with speech, as Aristotle called us!

THE UNIVERSITY AS A MEDIUM

Carroll Arnold, like many key figures in the NCA tradition, had an interdisciplinary vision, and thought that studying speech required us to study the processes by which human beings apprehend truths about themselves and their environment.² In preparing for this talk, I have been impressed by the vision of the founding figures and find much of it still vitally suggestive. Taking a cue from this vision, I want to ponder the institutional habitat in which we apprehend such truths, namely, the university. By reconsidering the sometimes contradictory norms and ideals that govern our work as scholars and teachers, I hope to contribute to renewal for the next 100 years. I do not expect all of you to agree with some of my views. Consider it a minority report from one who has spent his life hanging around and thinking about universities.

The university is one of the most important inventions of the past one thousand years. As Michael Schudson notes: "The university itself is one of the greatest communication technologies ever invented."³ As an institution, a set of program genres, and a shifting set of sometimes fickle audiences, it has been a topic of great fascination for a long line of media scholars, including me.⁴ Let us, in the spirit of Harold Innis, the great Canadian historian and theorist, analyze the university as a medium of communication. It is surprising that scholars so rarely reflect on the university compared to other culture industries, despite much high-quality research on the history, philosophy, rhetoric, and sociology of academic knowledge. Maybe it is time "to show the zoo to the animals," as a recent volume on the university edited by Barbie Zelizer suggests.⁵

We all get the appeal and excitement of the university. I love the architecture, the open green spaces for taking a nap or tossing a Frisbee on the pastoral American campus, the Gothic splendor of Oxbridge, or the densely packed cityscapes of the universities of Amsterdam, Athens, or of Helsinki, where I spent the last year. Universities are places of possibility, little bubbles of utopia full of young people facing an openness of life choice. Destinations of learning beckon like ships in the harbor. For me, the university is a family business; I am fourth in a line of five generations of professors so far. I am as susceptible as anyone to the sentimental nostalgia about college days that has been one of the chief cultural and economic achievements of American universities over the past century. A September day when the morning air is just a bit crisp, the leaves on the trees are on the verge of turning and the students are milling about before the semester's grind has set in—what a heady brew that is! Or the beginning of the lecture, when the visiting professor ascends the podium, and you sit with expectation that some light will be cast on this big dark universe—what a thrill that is, unfortunately not always fulfilled!

The central analytic problem is the clash between the university's official ideal of progress with its cycles of regeneration. As a young child in Virginia, I recall being deeply perplexed when I asked about the bugs that were making so much racket and was told about the seventeen-year locust. The insects, I learned, had emerged from their long slumber to mate and die, leaving the next generation to rise again in seventeen years. What was the point of this lather, rinse, and repeat cycle? To understand the meaning of the seventeen-year locust would be, I now think, to understand the meaning of life. Are we scholars not a bit like locusts in our proverbial conclusion that more research is needed? How do we square the festivals of regeneration that govern academic life (such as 100-year anniversaries) with our professed ideal of ever new knowledge? Is progress or renewal our basic ideal?



THE CURRENT CRISIS

But before ideals, some hard facts. The university today is in crisis. The problems are well known: we face the erosion of tenure-track positions and the imposition of management models and accounting systems that increase transparency but not necessarily intelligence. Transparency, like visibility, is a trap! Diminished funding leads to increased tuition fees, the aggressive pursuit of international student dollars, and a shift of general education courses to community

colleges, which risks weakening the core humanities curriculum. Academic publishing follows an absurd economic model with publicly funded research being given away for free to privately owned corporations which then sell it back to universities at enormous profit.⁶ Changing habits of reading, writing, and learning in a digital age push fundamental realignments in pedagogy, libraries, and information management.⁷ The basic unit of reading for many of my students seems to be the *screenful*.

In his "Plea for the University Tradition" from 1944, Innis warned of the encroachments of the state.⁸ Political pressures remain real but today we probably need to worry more about the market.⁹ Scholarship, which was long a communist enterprise, as Andrew Abbott—a superb guide to the sociology of academic knowledge—notes, is being increasingly claimed by capitalist interests.¹⁰ Google, Microsoft Research, Bell Labs, the military, political think tanks, and corporations adorned with Chief Knowledge Officers don't need academics to persuade them of the value of research for its own sake; they understand its value all too well.¹¹ Indeed, some of the strongest advocates for open-ended learning come from business; TED talks, for instance, are symptomatic of a culture among high-tech elites that mixes smarts and money, with some California cool stirred in for garnish.¹² It is curious that universities are often expected to behave like businesses (i.e. as engines for economic growth) while businesses such as Google—with its "campus" headquarters and nerdy culture of offbeat creativity—want to look like universities. University presidents and deans today are fundraisers first and only secondarily academic leaders, let alone visionaries. Money is just as unevenly distributed in universities as it is everywhere else in our society, with great luxury at the top and scraping

and scrimping at the bottom. Consider these words: "The great event in the history of an institution is now likely to be a big gift, rather than a new investigation or the development of a strong and vigorous teacher. Institutions are ranked by their obvious material prosperity.... The imagination is taken more or less by the thought of this force, vague but potent; the emotions are enkindled by grandiose conceptions of the possibilities latent in money." That was philosopher John Dewey in 1902, writing a few miles south of here at the young University of Chicago, launched thanks to Rockefeller's oil fortune.¹³ Obviously, money is a great servant, but a terrible master.

Innis believed the university had always been surrounded by villains and distractions.¹⁴ Paperwork and workflow, email and PowerPoint, impact factors and assessment, sitting in front of screens all day and writing letters of recommendation: when did we agree to all this? Of course, none of this is new to any of you. Such topics are our daily bread. A passion for our work goes together with a culture of complaint and cynicism among university faculty, mirroring a society-wide ambivalence about the professions. What accounts for this sweet and sour mix? As George Bernard Shaw noted: "every person who has mastered a profession is a sceptic concerning it, and consequently a revolutionist."¹⁵ Complaints can carry an implicit critical inclination toward truth and justice; they imply ideals we can use to hold the institution accountable. James Carey, following Innis, observed that the university and journalism are similar: both institutions have the job of delivering truth but both are marked by routinized modes of production, ruled by money and status, and torn by petty squabbles. And yet somehow truth does get shaken out of the bushes every now and then.¹⁶ Let us celebrate these sightings and figure out how to make them more frequent. Nothing else we do matters in the tremendous buzz of academic work if we are not discovering and disseminating truth.



IN PRAISE OF FOLLY

Let's face it: There is something profoundly and even delightfully absurd about our whole enterprise, like that of the locusts. Despite the urgency of the current situation, human problems in higher education are perennial, and I know of no better vantage point to observe the human circus than the campus. A glance at classical rhetorical education impresses one how steadily the academic drama has rotated through a few basic themes. As my Iowa colleague in Classics Craig Gibson

shows, ancient professors were beset by the temptations of celebrity, jealousy, and money, and ancient students by booze, love affairs, and laziness. The pursuit and spread of truth, both now and then, involved charismatic teachers and ambitious students interested in money, influence, study abroad programs, letters of recommendation, the building of professional networks, and careers in law, politics, and business. Lack of discipline among students and melancholia among professors were both well-known hazards.¹⁷

On island habitats, as the biogeographers tell us, organisms tend to evolve to extremes, and academic life has a cast of characters as diverse as Galapagos finches. In the words of my late colleague Bruce Gronbeck, to whose memory this lecture is dedicated and who was a dancing master of lightness and irony about his own craft, the university is a state institution for smart people. (As Thoreau quipped, it is not always easy to tell the half-wit from the one and a half-wit.¹⁸) A long history of academic satire stretches from the Greek sophists and comic playwrights, though Erasmus and Nietzsche, to the postwar campus novel. Humanism started as, among other things, a critique of scholarly vices.¹⁹ We are a tribe with curious ticks and we produce loamy mounds of material ripe for comic treatment.

The cast of academic characters is by no means unique to communication studies but is common to the university habitat, and any resemblance of the following to persons living or dead is purely coincidental. We all know the empire-builder. The self-promoter who just may have written a detailed Wikipedia entry about his or her contributions to scholarship. The earth-mother therapist. The brilliant scholar with lots to say who publishes too little and the churner

with little to say who publishes too much. The mentor-tormentor. The chill nouveau-grooveau dude. The young striver, dressed for success. The sleek mean grant-getting machine. The old burned-out volcano who checked out years ago but refuses to stop saying supersmart disruptive things just to show that he was once a silverback. The intriguer straight out of a Renaissance court. The indefatigable service contributor. The wizened churlish gnome too smart and too fearsome to disrespect. The glossolalic theory-spinner. The earnest grinderman, self-citing articles published decades ago. The bean-counting administrator. The aloof aristocrat trying to stay above the battle but unsuccessfully concealing disdain for his or her colleagues. The diva. The hipster armed with superfine distinctions about food and politics. The curmudgeon. The Facebook maven contentedly churning on the latest outrage. And, best of all, the mensch, and I hope you have known as many as I have. Of course, a diversity of roles is one of the great things about the academic game: there are so many positions to play.



WHAT IS KNOWLEDGE FOR?

How do we reconcile the university's claim to hold all knowledge with this diverse cast of characters and endless variety of isms and approaches? How do we square the comic vision of the university as a zoo with the lofty ideal of discovering truth and disseminating that strange thing we casually call knowledge? What is knowledge and what is it for?

These are not easy questions as over two and a half millennia of philosophical debate on the topic show. But I take knowledge to be a species and individual requirement. All humans by nature desire to know, said Aristotle, a desire that can be erotic in its intensity. Jürgen Habermas's definition has not, to my mind, been surpassed. Knowledge, he said, is tied to three fundamental human interests: the theoretical interest in controlling nature, the critical interest in fighting power whether internal or external, and the interpretive interest in understanding each other. We need knowledge, in other words, for prediction, liberation, and communication. Knowledge is intertwined with what he called "the objective self-formative process of the human species."²⁰ Note the words *objective* and *species*, which will be important in what follows.

Where is knowledge located? Obviously the individual brain is an inadequate candidate, sleeping and forgetting so prodigiously. Some will object to the claim that knowledge exists anywhere else, but an individual can only possess a thimble-full of the ocean of knowledge. Most knowledge is hidden to any single knower. There are many, to wax Rumsfeldian, with some help from Žižek, unknown knowns—things known to someone, but not to me.²¹ Unknown knowledge heats our homes and keeps airplanes afloat, feeds our bodies and makes this gathering possible. If something goes wrong with our car, computer, or cardiovascular system, we call in an expert who possesses the knowledge that we lack but nonetheless depend on. Embedded in every shoelace or laptop, every light bulb or medication are years of labor and research, most of which we are privileged to take for granted. Modern life rests upon vast encyclopedias of knowledge we have not read and cannot explain. Indeed, many thinkers have described modernity as the retreat of knowledge from our immediate lifeworlds and the need to put our trust in expert systems. Our technological and social infrastructures embody accumulated knowledge known perhaps to a few but unknown to almost everyone.²²

If the individual is an inadequate carrier of knowledge, should we locate the sum total of knowledge among all living humans or among some subgroup such as the professoriate? Alas, all that is known collectively by all living humans would not add up to all possible knowledge. The living human species cannot contain all knowledge because much knowledge has been lost and even more has yet to be discovered. With every death the world grows poorer.²³ Many things have been known that are no longer known, and many secrets lie moldering in the grave. Second, most of what there is to know has never been known at all, at least to human beings. The cosmos

is full of knowledge we haven't even thought to ask about—the domain of Rumsfeld's "unknown unknowns." Perhaps in some sense the universe already knows or at least holds everything that research will ever discover. Plato's idea of unforgetting (*anamnesis*) was one version of the belief that we never really learn anything new—we just lose our forgetfulness about what has always been known.



THE MATERIALITY OF KNOWLEDGE

Two domains of knowledge, then, surpass our collective brains: the domain of all that is yet to be known and the domain of what once has been known. The first, consisting of unknown unknowns, is virtual, but the second, consisting of unknown knowns, is material. We need not subscribe to Platonic or other versions of philosophical idealism to believe that knowledge can exist outside of individual brains.

There are in our libraries, archives, and attics inhuman mounds of knowledge unknown by most living human beings, and perhaps even by no one. To the archaeologist and geologist the earth is a treasure heap of recoverable knowledge. In our historic efforts to push back the frontier of the unknown we have piled up vast heaps of knowledge that have fallen out of individual minds but still exist objectively and externally. Knowledge can exist in matter as well as mind, in decodable artifacts as well as brains.

To speakers of English, a language shot through with empiricist and psychologistic assumptions, the notion of knowledge embodied materially can sound strange and some will recoil from what might sound to them like the positing of a supernatural or inhuman knower. That knowledge can exist objectively and materially, outside of people, living or dead, I take, however, to be a matter of common sense. Other species engage in practices that shape their habitats, but humans are the only creatures on earth who have harnessed materials to store intelligence. This domain of externalized mind we call technology, art, culture, literature, libraries, databases, the web of science, the internet, and the university. Literacy enabled the creation of worlds of knowledge that astronomically dwarf the capacity of individual mind or memory to encompass them.²⁴ The Rosetta Stone held knowledge of the ancient Egyptian language before it was deciphered. That knowledge may have been dormant, but directions for its reactivation were there for those who knew how to read them. An unread book still holds meaning. Karl Popper called this domain "world 3," a universe whose distinctive feature is that it is improved by criticism.²⁵

Material forms not only store mind passively but interact with and extend it. My pencil and I are smarter than I am, said Albert Einstein.²⁶ Without the "flat laboratories" enabled by writing, no mathematics beyond simple arithmetic could exist.²⁷ I am persuaded by diverse arguments from actor-network theory, the philosophy of embodied mind, and German and Canadian media theory that knowledge and inscription technologies are, to use some jargon, radically co-constituted. Our media of discovery and recording participate in what we know, and add to the archive of human knowledge, what Hannah Arendt called "immortality," the world of durable human things.²⁸ Such insights are native to communication studies: from the sophists to media theory, it has always been clear how instruments work upon our thoughts.²⁹

Knowledge, then, lives in the interface of material records and embodied knowers. But the world of recorded knowledge is largely dark, disorganized, and obscure. Principles and truths do not leap out of laboratories, libraries, or archaeological sites. Not everything in the record is signal; a lot of it is noise. And almost everything that was once signal becomes noise with the passage of time and drain of entropy. To me my desk is a theater of memory but to anyone else it is a muddle.³⁰ The history of data management techniques from Alexandria through Renaissance bureaucracies to Google shows that organizing knowledge and making it available has always been enormously difficult.³¹ The world is full of garbage heaps of forgotten learning. The treasures externalized in databases of various kinds are accessible only by costly time and labor. Activating the knowledge held in matter requires embodied knowers, who live by very different rules than do permanent records.



THE MORTALITY OF KNOWLEDGE

Let me offer the first premise for a syllogism: all academics are mortal. (Sometimes it is good to be as basic as possible.) This fact has enormous implications. Knowledge among mortal beings takes a very different shape than it would among immortals or beings with different lifespans than ours. Every choice of what to read or learn is for us also a choice not to read or learn something else. The dizzy, dancing way you feel in a good bookstore or choosing a new semester's courses! (Arthur Schopenhauer quipped that it would be good when you buy books if you could also buy the time to read them.) Learning exacts both transaction costs and opportunity costs. Because knowledge dwells partly in mortals, its value and meaning depend on temporal or narrative context. There is no knowledge apart from the struggle of conception, gestation, and delivery, as feminist philosophy tells us.³² Socrates saw philosophy as midwifery. The carnal and epistemological fusion of the biblical term "to know" points to the embodied stake in knowledge, and also reminds us of the familiar point that knowledge is closely tied to power and interest. Knowledge is time-bound. A knower has to be ripe for an insight. What once seemed obvious or foolish can suddenly be a great discovery to the ready mind. This means that the domain of knowledge is gummed up, seen *sub specie aeternitatis*, with the provisional efforts of finite beings to educate themselves. But because knowledge is a collaboration between mortals and the collective record, there will never be a realm of purely distilled principles apart from the labors of limited knowers.³³

Knowledge among mortals includes both contingent and lasting matter; it is surrounded by uncertainty. Basic research can never tell in advance what is a dud and a Nobel Prize: any serious scientific undertaking, said Jean-Francois Lyotard, has to risk its own legitimacy.³⁴ Our inability to predict the future enables the experimental method—most of which confirms the null hypothesis. Knowledge is open to revision, invalidation, debates, scoops, priority disputes, failure, and mess. It is a big contingent web that exists in its process as much as its findings. Knowledge is the domain of failure as much as of certified truth; it is a junk-pile of conjectures and refutations. *Experience*, a word once more closely tied to *experiment*, is the collection of dead ends. As Leah Cecarelli points out, "untrue, unoriginal science" can sometimes be a highly valuable part of discovery.³⁵ The meaning of knowledge among mortals is inseparable from its history of coming to be. Much knowledge has a sell-by date and loses relevance quickly.³⁶ The principle of recency creates enough demand to guarantee a handsome profit for scientific publishers that embargo research for one year.³⁷ Some scientists kick aside refuted hypotheses like yesterday's weather reports. Others find treasures there awaiting renewal.

One medieval scholar in 1255 noted facts that still govern all learning: "the multitude of books, the shortness of time, and the slipperiness of memory do not allow all things which are written to be equally retained in the mind..." Historian Ann Blair, who supplies this gem, notes that the medieval and Renaissance concern for the overabundance of books naturally led to the writing of more books to manage the flood such as anthologies, encyclopedias, and compendia, and the habit of producing more data to reduce a glut of data continues today. (Every literature review produces one more piece of literature for someone else to review.) Scholars always face, as Blair notes, "the pressures of too many books and too few resources, notably of time, memory, or money," and have invented a variety of practices for coping with them.³⁸ We could not even begin to measure just how much we forget and perhaps even the NSA could not ingest the vast data clouds of everything we daily flush into oblivion.



WHAT IS NEW KNOWLEDGE?

The governing norm of research is the delivery of new knowledge. What exactly is new knowledge for mortals? To an individual discoverer or student, almost all knowledge is new; for the material record that forms both the artificial universe of the library and the natural cosmos of all that is, perhaps all knowledge is a given. As no one can read everything in the library, let alone sound the cosmos, it is very hard to say what is new. Indeed, new knowledge is a rather anthropocentric notion; for other orders of intelligence, our research results might already be well known. The same is true, more banally, on a purely human scale: what is new for us might be old hat to someone else. It is one thing to produce knowledge that is new to everyone, and another to produce knowledge that is new to someone. The highest standard is knowledge that is new for everyone. To win a Nobel Prize you are supposed, in theory, to be the first person in the history of the human race to discover something. Being second doesn't count, one reason why scientific journals publish submission and acceptance dates (even though we know from the history of science that many discoveries are multiple, leading to fierce priority disputes). Glory can hang on a single day. In teaching and learning, in contrast, there is no loss in being the second or the billionth person to know.

Of course, "new to everyone" is almost always unattainable, despite its standard as the dividing line between research and teaching. Most of what we routinely count as new is new for someone, not new for everyone. In tenure and promotion cases, the question concerns whether the work is a contribution to the field, i.e. are you the first among your peers. By shrinking the reference group, specialties cope with the impossible pressure of producing novelty. From the 1920s to today, a period in which the population of scholars has multiplied by 10, a relatively constant ratio between the number of journals and number of scholars has been observed—around 100-150.³⁹ "Bounded novelty," as Abbott calls it, is much easier to achieve than species novelty. In this way the question is not newness for all humans who ever lived or even all scholars, but your field-mates. Most research is in practice much closer to the norm of teaching: new knowledge for someone.

By adopting the guild-model of peer-review as the standard of truth, academic professionalism in the decades around 1900 secured an autonomous space for inquiry, relatively immune to the meddling of church, state, and market. But it also made one's colleagues, rather than one's fellow humans or the collective record, the appropriate judges of knowledge. The results have been mixed. I recently listened to a talk by a moral philosopher arguing that moral intuitions were embedded in social contexts and personal histories, a point that, I thought, everyone in the world must have known except for moral philosophers. Scholars can make careers on insights that would be news only to a sheltered community. "The literature" can be a device to constrain focus enough to generate novelty. The existence of a vast archive of recorded knowledge not only makes knowledge easier to access; it makes it easier to avoid.⁴⁰ In managing their focus, specialties routinely cut themselves off both from neighboring fields and from their own pasts.⁴¹ Professional blindness and insight go together.



SPECIALIZATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Academic satirists have made great fun of specialization. Norbert Wiener (himself a legendary archetype of the clueless genius) complained in *Cybernetics* (1948): "Today there are few scholars who can call themselves mathematicians or physicists or biologists without restriction. A man may be a topologist or a coleopterist [a beetle specialist]. He will be filled with the jargon of

his field, and will know all its literature and all its ramifications, but, more frequently than not, he will regard the next subject as something belonging to his colleague three doors down the corridor, and will consider any interest in it on his own part as an unwarrantable breach of privacy."⁴² Professionalism is great if it means the highest standards of truth-seeking, but not if it means being exclusively oriented to one's peers rather than to general human questions or to all relevant knowledge. Peer-orientation risks ruining the possibility of discussion and evaluation across specialties. I agree with Carey: "The principal effect of professionalism is to erode the moral basis of society. It does this because the professions insist that each inhabits a particular moral universe, peculiar unto itself, in which the standards and judgments exercised are those not of the general society and its moral point of view, but of a distinctive code."⁴³ To be sure, criticizing specialization can be a cheap shot, since a mortal knower cannot help but focus, and any real knowledge requires a very steep learning curve and a sacrifice of time and effort. Max Weber said it best: specialization was both inevitable and tragic. Professionalization was one response to our mortal state, and bears the seeds of tragedy within it.

There are a number of ways that professionalized communities of knowledge manage the pressure of novelty. One is a tendency among scholars, and this is by no means unique to communication studies, to create "link-farms" as they are known in the online world—small enclaves of mutual citation that thereby can claim a higher profile.⁴⁴ Another strategy is what I call hipster theory, a style of thinking and argument I have noted among some young male scholars. Hipster theorists make the characteristic intellectual move of unfurling a dialectic by which a great or difficult thinker is shown to have missed the theorist's concerns and thus can be safely dismissed. One Ivy League hipster, for instance, recently told me that Heidegger's conception of technology stayed too far on the human side of the equation, when we all know that technology is an assemblage of the human and the nonhuman. Heidegger, he implied, could safely be set aside in favor of better clued-in thinkers. This move conveniently afforded him a massive saving on reading trouble. But by claiming to go beyond Heidegger, he didn't even approach him. Anyone who reads a couple of sentences of Heidegger on *Technik* will see that his starting point is precisely this mingling of human and nonhuman and that from there he winds on to ever stranger heights and depths. The hipster never even reaches the starting point of the great thinker while believing that he has surpassed it. He hits a foul ball and thinks he's hit it out of the park. This is just one example of the many ways we convince ourselves we are innovating while we stand dwarfed by the vast mountain of all there is to know.

We scholars have so many strategies for narrowing our scope. Superstars, canons, and the demand to be up to date all focus our reading lists. (Do we really think that newer means smarter?) One of the most benign strategies of coping with the impossible vastness is the use of proverbs. As Steven Shapin shows, proverbs lie at the heart of academic knowledge, despite the official doctrine that scholarship must transcend common sense. Expertise consists partly of knowing how to apply proverbs, cognitive devices that tend to outlast most sell-by dates. Garbage in, garbage out. Apples and oranges. If you have a hammer, everything looks like a nail. The personal is political. Hegemony is leaky. Follow the money. The devil's in the details. (Among dermatologists: if it's wet, make it dry; if it's dry, make it wet.)⁴⁵ Proverbs are handy media that fit our status as mortal knowers.

The claim to "jurisdictional monopoly," the core of professional legitimacy according to Abbott, is belied by the fact that there is often more variety within fields than between them, and this is intensely so in communication studies.⁴⁶ Vast patches of the humanities and soft social sciences in recent decades have been branches of Foucault Studies, cultural studies, or more recently, Bruno Latour studies. (Like most other culture industries, the university is a fashion system.) A faculty member is often more likely to share intellectual interests with someone in a different department on campus than with the departmental colleague next door. Academic departments can resemble the record album in the age of iTunes or the scholarly journal in the age of JSTOR—bundling strategies that have little relevance for how the individual items circulate.

Academic specialisms do many things well, such as the generation of rigorous research programs or "generational paradigms" as Abbott calls them, but they are rarely good at synthesis. There are the old jokes about the university

as a multitude of warring specialties held together either by complaints about parking or by a shared central heating system.⁴⁷ The British Statistical Society's motto from the 1820s can stand for an underlying ideology in much normal science: *aliis exterendum*, to be threshed out by others. Charles Bazerman has shown how the evolving APA style manual evinces an ideology he calls "incremental encyclopedism," i.e. a vision of science as anonymous cumulative labor contributing bricks toward a building that never gets built.⁴⁸ Though I don't endorse the ideology of Nobel Prizes, they do invoke the species as the ultimate test of relevance. If it's only exciting to your field-mates, then it's not a serious contribution. I have never understood how scholars could accept turf as a principal of intellectual life. Yes, gregarious animals are territorial and cliquey, but the ideal of scholarship should be more transcendent. Mortality forces us to specialize by topics, but any research that is relevant should be relevant, regardless of its point of origin, even if there are few practical guidelines about how to connect across fields. Disciplines do a poor job of delivering all that is relevant on a given topic. In my view, we should take the university absolutely seriously, and rarely if ever take individual fields seriously. Discipline should be internal, not institutional. Producing for our peers often insulates us from the austere and terrifying demand of having to discover something deep and lasting, something that adds to the collective record and speaks to the species.



AGAINST THE TWO CULTURES

The ideal of progress may be problematic, but natural science implies a species address, a relevance to humanity at large. This we should learn from. Many great works of scientific innovation—Darwin's *Origin of Species* most notably—were both scientific milestones and masterworks of popular science. Even highly specialized studies in natural science can have implications in every way for how we live. There is a principle of publicity built into the sciences that the humanities, ironically, have had difficulty matching. The sciences never abandoned their cognitive claim in contrast to the disastrous, in my view, willingness of many postwar humanists to abandon knowledge to the sciences in return for being anointed as the guardians of sensibility (whether aesthetic, ethical, or political). The idea of the "two cultures" of science and literature should be given a decent and immediate burial at the dawn of the Anthropocene, a point in history which recognizes humanity as a geological agent. Studying humans and their artefacts makes little sense without a naturalistic grounding, if it ever did.

To be too telegraphic, it is now clear that the positivist story not only got the humanities wrong, it also got a lot about the natural sciences wrong (though perhaps not bench science). We humanists and soft social scientists worked so hard to show that positivism did not apply to the world of interpretation that we forgot that it didn't apply to the world of causes and effects or correlations either. Cosmology, evolutionary biology, and climatology as I understand them are good examples of sciences that are historical, interpretive, and reflexively aware that mortal humans must be constitutively taken into account in the process of knowing.⁴⁹ I follow Charles Sanders Peirce in believing that science, broadly conceived, encompasses every human inquiry and that truth is that which an infinite community of inquiry would eventually light upon. Humanists no less than natural scientists have the duty to discover and disseminate truth. Communication studies could profitably reorient its relation to science—it is a dead end to take science as either a foe that destroys understanding (as its critics say) or as a monopoly of truth to be emulated (as its fans say). Knowledge of the world in all its strangeness is our business, and communication studies could be a place for a fresh confluence of what we have called humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, and the arts.⁵⁰

To be clear, I am not saying that all modes of inquiry should be the same—they should be wildly diverse!—but rather that none of them can give up on a cognitive claim. The idea that the sciences handle nature and causes/effects and the humanities handle culture and meanings divides knowledge up in the wrong way. (As if nature had no meaning!) Compared to a century ago, we know enormously more about genetics or the history of the

universe. We also know enormously more about the context of Shakespeare's plays or the composition of the Homeric epics. But do we know more about the meaning of life or the cosmos, of Shakespeare or Homer? It is a mistake to assign progress in knowledge to science and the job of figuring out meaning to humanities. Every inquiry can both advance cumulatively and ask open-ended basic questions; every field is populated, after all, by doctors of philosophy.⁵¹ Progress is a genuine ideal, but so is renewal, and it takes a lifetime of study to even approach the level of those who have gone before us. Any real inquiry will have to serve both development and regeneration, both new knowledge and a fresh look at the old questions.⁵²



SPECIES ADDRESS

If research is usually more like teaching (in addressing a few), teaching is usually more like research (in addressing all)! A universal address is built into the structure of the university: the undergraduate students are the lifeblood of the place. They articulate the species interest, the public realm, the general point of view. Obviously, comparatively few human beings study at universities, and really existing undergraduates are not *prima facie* the most promising carrier of species knowledge, so the point is structural, not empirical: general education implies relevance for humanity at large. The core of the university tradition, says Innis, is general studies, the concern for knowledge as a whole. As a species, we need knowledge in general, not just in specialty. The question of how to reach undergraduates is also the question of how to speak to humanity at large. (Youth is wasted on the young.) General education courses, often passed over by faculty and students alike as the least interesting part of the curriculum, are actually its most crucial. Here expert knowledge faces the public and articulates the species interests in prediction, liberation, and communication. Its central genre is the lecture.⁵³

Intellectual inquiry is most difficult and open-ended among basic rather than advanced topics. Law schools will teach you about torts, not what justice is, and medical schools will teach you about the twelve cranial nerves, not what health is.⁵⁴ Mathematicians can be precise about p-adic groups or biologists about the Krebs cycle, but don't expect to get a good answer from them about what a number is or what life is! We communication scholars can talk with precision about hegemony, the third-person effect, or relational turbulence, but few of us are very good about communication in general. Again, every field, not only the humanities, implies questions of ultimate meaning. We are all undergraduates in almost every field but our own. (The secret to interdisciplinary grant proposals is to address fellow scholars in other fields as very smart undergraduates.) The smartest people on earth, as well as those who make the policy and decisions that affect us all—not always the same group!—have at best a bachelor's degree understanding of most of the world. For Innis, the point of the University Tradition was to resist the claims of specialisms and to forge a space and time in which knowledge, in its historical splendor and general relevance, could be kept alive and made new again.



RESPONSIBILITY TO TRUTH

The university, as Innis said, is surrounded by villains, but there are so many temptations from within—hallway politics, email intrigue, administrative service, salary comparisons, lamentations about this or that program not being continued or funded. William James, in a sarcastic 1903 essay called "The Ph.D. Octopus," enumerated the "secondary evils" surrounding the "Doctor-monopoly

in teaching”: “Experience has proved that great as the love of truth may be among men, it can be made still greater by adventitious rewards.”⁵⁵ Søren Kierkegaard argued, in contrast, that authors should have to pay for the privilege of writing. The regents may be ridiculous, the dean unfeeling and your colleagues obstreperous, but once you’re in the classroom, the lab, or the library, you have the rare opportunity of seeking truth in some form, of riding a steep learning curve, of adding to the growth of the universe. There are so many ways we avoid doing our core work. What stops us from delving in to the wonders of precession of the equinoxes, the law of contract, coefficients of friction, the use of the ablative case in Latin, logarithms, T-tests, how to play triplets, the poetry of Emily Dickinson, the tensions in intersectionality or the gaps between sender and receiver? Even in the most poorly funded institutions, such possibilities are open to all. A single book can open a window to the universe. The truth is always hard and always new.

Communication belongs to the species. As communication scholars we have been too lazy, too unambitious, too untrue to the grandeur inherent in our subject matter, too ready to talk to each other and too slow to harvest knowledge from everywhere. I end with a call for a less sheltered life, less prone to follow the fashion, more concerned with inquiry and discovery. We should be lighting up the world-wide conversation, not just talking to each other. There are persuasive arguments in favor of provincialism, such as the classic address by philosopher Josiah Royce given at the University of Iowa in 1902, who saw a “wholesome provincialism” as a form of resistant community-building against the leveling tendencies of modern mass society.⁵⁶ But I believe we should take advantage of the sharpening effects of a peripheral point of view to cultivate a wholesome cosmopolitanism.⁵⁷ In the next hundred years I’d like to see a Nobel Prize or a Pulitzer Prize won by a member of NCA—not that the prize matters, but that the general address to humanity does. NCA needs to think beyond its unexamined American orientation, the unearned premium that reading and writing in English gives us on the global scale, rather like the agricultural price supports that artificially prop up food prices in the NCA’s core region and harm the chances of global farmers.⁵⁸ How a humanist can be functionally monolingual is something that has always puzzled me. We should step out of the empire and its blindspots and learn other languages. Knowledge humiliates you sooner than it empowers you. Mathematics, music, languages, and experimentation all show you how little you know and therefore will always remain at the heart of real learning. Wonder and awe rather than pride and professionalism should be the ruling academic virtues. Let us treasure the university but distrust all specialties. As Innis said, the university is in danger when it starts to think that it has the truth rather than that its mission is to seek the truth. Let us think big and take on climate change, big data, and poverty along with gender, globalization, and democracy. The seventeen-year locusts show us what it is to be alive in the now when they sing, mate, and prepare for the next generation. Knowledge and its spread is a species requirement. Communication and its study could be a leader in this project. The truth is always new. That’s what I came to say. Thank you for listening.⁵⁹



NOTES

- ¹ "Institutional Sources of Intellectual Poverty in Communication Research," *Communication Research* 13:4 (1986): 527-59.
- ² **John F. Wilson** and **Carroll C. Arnold**, *Public Speaking as a Liberal Art* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1974), 3.
"To study speech in general or public speaking in particular is to explore highly intricate processes by which man apprehends truths about himself and his environment." On the many disciplines required to study speech, see also **A. Craig Baird**, *Rhetoric: A Philosophical Inquiry* (New York: Ronald, 1965), 18ff.
- ³ **Michael Schudson**, "The Problem of General Education in the Research University," in *Making the University Matter*, ed. **Barbie Zelizer** (New York: Routledge, 2011), 23-30, at 30.
- ⁴ Besides **Innis** and **Carey**, who are cited below, see **Friedrich Kittler**, "Universities: Wet, Hard, Soft, and Harder," *Critical Inquiry* 31 (Autumn 2004): 244-55, the authors in **Zelizer**, ed., *Making the University Matter*, and **Jefferson D. Pooley**, "Another Plea for the University Tradition: The Institutional Roots of Intellectual Compromise," *International Journal of Communication* 5 (2011): 1442-1457 (a shorter version appears in **Zelizer**).
- ⁵ **Monroe Price** in *Making the University Matter*, 11, 17, 21.
- ⁶ **Ted Striphas**, "Acknowledged Goods: Cultural Studies and the Politics of Academic Journal Publishing," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 7:1 (2010): 3-25, **Robert Darnton**, "A World Digital Library is Coming True!" *New York Review of Books*, 22 May 2014, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2014/may/22/world-digital-library-coming-true/>
- ⁷ **Anthony Grafton**, "Apocalypse in the Stacks: The Research Library in the Age of Google," *Daedalus* 138:1 (Spring 2009): 87-98.
- ⁸ **Harold Innis**, "A Plea for the University Tradition," *Dalhousie Review* 24 (1944): 299-305.
- ⁹ See the excellent book by **Juha Koivisto** and **Peter D. Thomas**, *Mapping Communication and Media Research: Conjunctions, Institutions, Challenges* (Tampere: Tampere University Press, 2010), esp. chap. 4.
- ¹⁰ **Andrew Abbott**, "Publication and the Future of Knowledge" (2008), 30; home.uchicago.edu/~aabbott/Papers/aaup.pdf
- ¹¹ **Robert W. Gehl**, "Power from the C-Suite: The Chief Knowledge Officer and Chief Learning Officer as Agents of Noopower," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 11:2 (June 2014): 175-194.
- ¹² I was flattered to receive a personal—ha ha—email from **Walter Isaacson** in July 2014 inviting me to attend the first Vanity Fair "New Establishment Summit" (slogan: "Changing the World through Ideas") in San Francisco on 8–9 October 2014 where I could hobnob with "disruptors and influencers" on the unexpectedly fresh theme of "the age of innovation" for the modest fee of \$5000. Innovation is the key term uniting learning and earning; see **Katja Valaskivi**, "Dimensions of Innovationism," *Post-Secular Society*, ed. **Peter Nynäs** et al. (New Brunswick: Transaction, 2012), 129-155.
- ¹³ **John Dewey**, "Academic Freedom" (1902), in *The Middle Works, 1899-1924*, Vol. 2, ed. **Jo Ann Boydston** (Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1976), 62.
- ¹⁴ **Innis**, "A Plea for the University Tradition," 300.
- ¹⁵ "The Revolutionist's Handbook," in *Four Plays by Bernard Shaw* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1965), 443.

- 16 James W. Carey, "A Plea for the University Tradition," *Journalism Quarterly* 55 (1978): 845-855. See also Carey's 2000 Carroll Arnold Lecture, *The Engaged Discipline*.
- 17 Craig A. Gibson, *Libanius's Progymnasmata: Model Exercises in Greek Prose Composition and Rhetoric* (Society of Biblical Literature, 2008).
- 18 Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience* (New York: Norton, 1966), 215.
- 19 Sari Kivistö, *The Vices of Learning: Morality and Knowledge at Early Modern Universities* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).
- 20 Jürgen Habermas, *Erkenntnis und Interesse* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1968), 14—"mit dem objektiven Bildungsprozess der Menschengattung."
- 21 See Slavoj Žižek, "What Rumsfeld Doesn't Know that He Knows About Abu Ghraib" (2004), <http://www.lacan.com/zizekrumsfeld.htm>.
- 22 See Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star, *Sorting Things Out: Classification and its Consequences* (Cambridge: MIT, 1999).
- 23 See Jorge Luís Borges, "The Witness," trans. James E. Irby, in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories & Other Writings* (New York: New Directions, 1964), 243.
- 24 Jack Goody and Ian Watt, "The Consequences of Literacy," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 5:3 (1963): 304-345, esp. 307-311 and 334-337.
- 25 Karl Popper, "Three Worlds," *Tanner Lecture on Human Values* (1978), 141-167, at 163.
- 26 David Deutsch, *The Beginning of Infinity* (New York: Viking, 2011), 60.
- 27 See Bruno Latour, "Review Essay: The Netz-Works of Greek Deductions," *Social Studies of Science* 38 (2008): 441-459, and Michael J. Barany and Donald MacKenzie, "Chalk: Materials and Concepts in Mathematics Research," *Representation in Scientific Practice Revisited*, ed. Catelijne Coopmans et al. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014), 107-129.
- 28 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 17-21, 55-56, passim.
- 29 See Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (1927; Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1993), 68, 358, passim, and Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophon Film Typewriter* (Berlin: Brinkmann und Bose, 1986), 290-311.
- 30 See Gregory Bateson, "Metalogue: Why Do Things Get in a Muddle?" in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 3-8.
- 31 See Bernhard Siegert, *Passage des Digitalen: Zeichenpraktiken der neuzzeitlichen Wissenschaften, 1500-1900* (Berlin: Brinkmann und Bose, 2003), and Cornelia Vismann, *Files*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).
- 32 Sarah LaChance Adams and Caroline R. Lundquist, eds., *Coming to Life: Philosophies of Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Mothering* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).
- 33 The academic prohibition against plagiarism rests on the principle that knowledge is embodied in individual labor; the proscription on copying also indirectly acknowledges the vastness of the archive of what has been said before.
- 34 Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 54.
- 35 Leah Cecarelli, *Shaping Science with Rhetoric: The Cases of Dobzhansky, Schrödinger, and Wilson* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 69-75.
- 36 Compare Max Weber: "In science, each of us knows that what he has accomplished will be antiquated in ten, twenty, fifty years. That is the fate to which science is subjected; it is the very meaning of scientific work.... Every scientific 'fulfillment' raises new 'questions'; it asks to be surpassed and outdated. Whoever wishes to serve science has to resign himself to this fact." "Science as a Vocation" (1919), in *From Max Weber*, ed. Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 138.

- 37 Darnton, "A World Digital Library."
- 38 Ann M. Blair, "Reading Strategies for Coping with Information Overload, ca. 1550-1700," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 64 (2003): 11-28, at 12. See also her *Too Much to Know: Managing Scholarly Information before the Modern Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).
- 39 Abbott, "Library Research Infrastructure," 73, and Abbott, "Publication and the Future of Knowledge" (2008), 14.
- 40 Goody and Watt, "Consequences of Literacy," 337.
- 41 Abbott, "Publication and the Future of Knowledge," 5, passim.
- 42 *Cybernetics, or Control and Communication in the Animal and Machine* (1948; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1965), 2.
- 43 Carey, "A Plea for the University Tradition," 850.
- 44 For an account of link farms, see James Grimmelmann, "The Google Dilemma," 946-7, works.bepress.com/james_grimmelmann/19/
- 45 Steven Shapin, "Proverbial Economies: How an Understanding of Some Linguistic and Social Features of Common Sense Can Throw Light on More Prestigious Bodies of Knowledge, Science For Example," *Social Studies of Science* 31 (2001): 731-69.
- 46 William Paisley demonstrated this in his "Communication in the Communication Sciences," *Progress in Communication Sciences* 5, ed. Brenda Dervin and Melvin J. Voight (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1984), 1-43.
- 47 Schudson, "The Problem of General Education," 25-26.
- 48 Charles Bazerman, *Shaping Written Knowledge: The Genre and Activity of the Experimental Article in Science* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), chapter 9.
- 49 "Astrophysics is incomplete without a theory of people": Deutsch, *The Beginning of Infinity*, 70.
- 50 I make this argument for media studies specifically in *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, forthcoming in 2015).
- 51 See my "Afterword: Doctors of Philosophy," in *Philosophical Profiles in the Theory of Communication*. ed. Jason Hannan (New York: Peter Lang, 2012), 499-510.
- 52 "The university, I take it, is a device for the work of generational renewal." Paddy Scannell, "The Life of the University," in *Making the University Matter*, ed. Barbie Zelizer, 17-22, at 17.
- 53 See Erving Goffman, "The Lecture," *Forms of Talk* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), 160-196, and Sean Franzel, *Connected by the Ear: The Media, Pedagogy, and Politics of the Romantic Lecture* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2013).
- 54 Carey, "A Plea for the University Tradition," 853.
- 55 William James, "The Ph.D. Octopus" (1903), en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Ph.D._Octopus
- 56 Josiah Royce, "Provincialism," *Race Questions, Provincialism, and Other American Questions* (New York: Macmillan, 1908), 57-108.
- 57 As I argue in "Sweet Lemons," *International Journal of Communication* 5 (2011): 1467-1471.
- 58 For a similar point, see Peter Simonson, "Review Essay: Rhetoric, Culture, Things," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 100:1 (2014): 105-125, at 123. The preliminary analysis by Raf Vanderstraeten shows an overwhelming bias toward the United States in NCA journal data.
- 59 Thanks to Leslie Baxter, Carole Blair, David Depew, Risto Kunelius, Tarmo Malmberg, Sam McCormick, Jim Mittelman, Tom Obricht, Dave Park, Ben Peters, Marsha Paulsen Peters, Pete Simonson, Jonathan Sterne, Katja Valaskivi, Raf Vanderstraeten, and Rita Zajacz for encouragement and commentary, none of whom is even remotely responsible for anything said here. The first draft was written at the wonderful Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies. Some of the ideas were discussed with Marko Ampuja, Juha Koivisto, and Sampsa Saikkonen and published here: http://mediaviestinta.fi/blogi/jd_peters/



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