

Introduction: Internet Research as It Isn't, Is, Could Be, and Should Be

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The call for this special issue posed this question:

One now often hears people talking about the “field” of “Internet research” while its practitioners continue to be housed in departments and schools of library science, business, information science, communications, and others. Something clearly seems to be afoot. But what is it?

The articles included here are a self-reflexive effort by a diverse group of scholars to answer this question. Among the specific queries authors were invited to consider were the extent to which Internet research is an academic “field” or “discipline,” what it means to label this field, whether “Internet research” is the right name, and what this field might learn from the histories of other interdisciplinary fields. The essays collected here provide a remarkably consistent portrait of this emerging domain, offering a collective critique of what we have created, what we should become, and what we fear becoming.

The motivation for this issue arose through my work with the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR), an association I helped to create and which I served as president during the time this issue was crafted. As recently as late 1998, AoIR was only an idea batted around by a small group of young scholars feeling somewhat out of place within their disciplines. When we began our mailing list, *air-l*, in November 1998, we had 14 subscribers. Two years later, we held our first conference, which Jeremy Hunsinger and I organized, at the University of Kansas in Lawrence. We dreamed of an international conference bringing together top scholars from multiple disciplines all around the world. We hoped in our more realistic moments for a crowd of at least 100, some of whom might come from outside the midwestern United States. We were not prepared to see our vision manifest itself in the group

of over 200 scholars from more than a dozen disciplines in more than 20 countries. These people made their way to this unknown event in a place most had never thought of going because it offered a new opportunity to foreground an identity as an “Internet researcher” rather than that associated with their disciplinary homes. The success of that event, as well as the success of *air-l* (which now has approximately 1500 subscribers), our subsequent annual conferences, and AoIR itself, reveal the hunger many researchers examining the Internet have for an opportunity to meet and share ideas with those outside their usual spheres of contact. At the same time, the issues AoIR faces provide a microcosm of the challenges facing those who study the Internet as we try to organize ourselves in ways that honor this central interest while managing diverse sets of institutional and intellectual demands. In this introduction, I pull together the primary threads woven throughout the contributions published here, bringing the experiences of cofounding and running AoIR to bear.

IS “INTERNET STUDIES” A DISCIPLINE?

The answer to the question of whether Internet studies, or information and communication technology (ICT) research more broadly, might be considered a discipline is a clear “no.” Although there are ways in which we may be coming to resemble one, there are many more ways in which we are not. Together, the essays here provide an extensive catalogue of criteria that constitute “a discipline.” Disciplines have clear organizational forms. There are departments, research centers, office spaces, support staff, letterhead stationary, and perhaps even endowed chairs. Internet research has none of these. Disciplines generally have scholarly associations, regular face-to-face conferences, and flagship journals. Internet research does meet some of these criteria—we have an association that offers face-to-face meetings in AoIR, and an increasingly wide range of journals, including this one, as well as *New Media & Society*, *Information Communication and Society*, *Cyberpsychology and Behavior*, *Social Science Computer*

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Review, Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology, and others. However, AoIR is far from achieving the “essential” status that often characterizes affiliations and meetings associated with disciplines. While some of AoIR’s members wouldn’t miss a meeting, there is no onus on any of us to attend AoIR to ensure that our institution is well represented, as is the case, for instance, in my home Department of Communication Studies when the National Communication Association meets. The career benefits of claiming membership in AoIR are murky at best. The journals that have come to focus primarily (although few exclusively) on Internet research provide central rallying points, but none has attained “flagship” status. Furthermore, a tremendous amount of Internet research is published outside of these journals, in publications that are more directly associated with established disciplines, a point made by Kluver and Yang in regard to Chinese Internet research, and implicit in the content analysis of bibliographic databases in Rice’s article. The fragmentation of Internet research is particularly clear in Englebrecht’s selective list of 17 of the economics journals in which Internet research is routinely published. It is no wonder that Internet researchers so often work in ignorance of one another’s contributions.

Disciplines are also characterized by the degrees they offer, and the pedagogy used to train students in those degrees. There is funding for graduate students and the potential for those students to get jobs in the field. All of this provides a means for the field to continuously self-replicate. As things are now, graduate students doing Internet research are often the ones training their faculty in what they do. There are very few institutions offering a degree named “Internet studies” at this time, and the programs that do share this title share little else.¹ Nonetheless, there are Internet researchers in many fields who are training graduate students, and the field does see a continuous influx of new blood. AoIR has proven thus far to be a relatively youthful association, attracting more graduate students and junior faculty than senior faculty. One wonders if this is due to a lack of senior mentors within their home programs, and also how many of these people will continue to remain involved in the association once they attain senior status themselves. Although AoIR has several senior faculty who do participate and attend, their relative paucity points again to the lack of institutional rewards for attending or being part of a new association without a clear disciplinary niche. The near-complete absence of scholars from some disciplines (e.g., psychology, economics) points further to the lack of incentive many Internet researchers have to identify themselves as such, and the problematics of creating a discipline that could cover the breadth of what those who study the Internet do in practice.

In addition to these institutional structures, disciplines share intellectual cores (although, as several of the authors

in this collection note, within disciplines there is often considerable disagreement over these cores). Disciplines share central themes, shared terminology with (assumed) common definitions, a canon of literature considered essential. There are agreed-on methodologies, theoretical structures, and evaluative criteria to assess research and ultimately to decide career advancement. Ideally, as Sterne argues, disciplines can claim at least one clear hallmark contribution that defines a niche for themselves in what Monberg calls the organizational structures of knowledge. As these essays discuss at length, and as I return to later, these are the issues that engender the most concern amongst Internet researchers as we contemplate what it would mean to become something more like a discipline. As it stands now, there may be some central themes (as Rice’s content analysis of AoIR conference content indicates), but there are clearly no overarching theories, methods, or evaluative criteria. As Hine puts it in her Kuhnian analysis, there is no organizing paradigm. Instead, she argues it is a field “colonized by representatives of previously coexisting but largely incommensurable world views.” If we are to judge by the accounts offered herein, this is how many Internet researchers would prefer it remain.

IF WE’RE NOT A DISCIPLINE, THEN WHAT ARE WE?

All this said, then, we are left with the fact that there is *something* going on here. Many of the writers in this issue self-identify as “Internet researchers”; they all use the term “field” without questioning it. As Markham argues in her piece, Internet research is an “organization,” a point demonstrated by the listing of qualities we do share with disciplines already described. As Shrum puts it, we have a “symbol of the field” in AoIR. We have a core problem area (the Internet) and we have research exemplars to emulate, as Hine discusses. We seem to have core themes, as Rice uncovers, although as Kluver and Yang and Campbell argue, there remain considerable gaps in Internet scholarship. There are opinion leaders, and, if not a canon, then at least a few texts with which most people can be assumed to be somewhat familiar (how many have not at least heard of Jones’s 1995 collection, *Cybersociety*, for instance, or, more recently, Wellman and Haythornthwaite’s 2002 collection *The Internet in Everyday Life*, that many of these authors cite?).

Internet research is a field that has global reach, although as Kluver and Yang demonstrate, different nations and on different continents engender different foci. The international dimensions of Internet research have proven an ongoing challenge for AoIR. Despite continuous conscious efforts to be international, and an executive committee that is only half American, AoIR is too often perceived as an American association. Entire continents are missing

from AoIR's membership roles and conferences. Many of the assumptions about disciplinary forms, rewards, and processes made by the authors in this collection are particular to the United States and apply to greater or lesser degrees in other nations. For instance, as AoIR debates whether or not to create a journal that might serve as a flagship Internet research journal, Americans express serious concern about whether publishing in such a site might get them credit toward promotion and tenure, while those in other national academic systems often find this an alien and unrepresentative concern. Seemingly simple issues of where to hold conferences become fraught with politics. Our status betwixt and between disciplines, approaches, traditions, nations, and so many other forces leaves many of our practitioners with some sense of anxiety (Hine) and a felt need to build a clear sense of identity (Markham), a point that may account for this special issue.

In addition to the organizing forces shaping Internet studies, and despite the absence of a grand distinctive contribution, the field also does offer distinctive intellectual opportunities. As Baron and Hine suggest, the Internet gives us opportunities to rethink our methodologies and practices, and to ask old questions in new ways. I often liken the Internet to a fun-house mirror in which some social forms look just the same, others become unrecognizably small, and forces we are used to thinking of as minor come to fill most of the frame. The Internet helps us test whether our theories are theories of social organization, or just of social organization as we have known it to date. It helps us see whether our methods are those that have developed from particular orientations and moments or whether they are those that are really best equipped to get at the answers we need most. Further, Internet research offers the potential to fill the gaps between disciplines. In an age increasingly transformed by the distribution of information and social processes the Internet makes possible, Internet research provides insight into this transformation and, as Monberg notes, can provide guidance for socially responsible interventions into the designs and policies that shape these new media.

SHOULD WE WANT TO BE A DISCIPLINE?

If Internet research is an organization with some identifiable centers and a unique contribution to make, yet not a discipline, should its practitioners seek to become a discipline? There are benefits to disciplinarity, as several authors in this collection point out. Being a known discipline offers "consecration" (Sterne) by way of an "institutional imprimatur" (Jones). It offers an institutional paradigm to fit our work (Sterne, Engelbrecht). It holds the promise of getting the kind of credit for our work that will lead to job security and institutional status. Perhaps most importantly, it offers the potential of a literal space

filled with like-minded people, overcoming the isolation many Internet researchers feel in the departments they inhabit. However, there are considerable practical obstacles to becoming a discipline, and, more importantly, there are compelling reasons not to try.

The most significant practical obstacle, one that has continually beset AoIR, is that creating institutions requires people with energy, vision, and money. Institutions do not emerge all by themselves. People have to work to make them happen. Experience with AoIR has repeatedly demonstrated that there are many who are eager to reap the benefits of an institution, but few who are willing to do the nitty-gritty work of maintaining a server, as Jeremy Hunsinger has done, organizing a conference, running for (let alone doing the work of) executive committee membership, or even undertaking the solving of lesser dilemmas such as the creation of digital resources. Far more people want a new journal than are willing to consider being its editor. It is not clear that there is anyone willing to fight the existing power structures and infrastructures to make a department within a single institution, let alone the numbers it would take to create an entire discipline recognized throughout the global academic system.

Even if there were enough people willing to devote energy to a cause with dubious career advancement potential such as this one, it is far from clear that it would be a good thing to do. The authors here sound a number of alarms warning of what disciplinarity might mean for Internet research. One problem noted in this issue was raised by *The Information Society's* late editor Rob Kling when he and I discussed his keynote address at the first AoIR conference. He expressed concern at the phrase "Internet researchers," arguing that it drew the boundaries far too narrowly. What of international banking networks, he asked, which shape society in important ways but are not "the Internet"? Sterne and Engelbrecht likewise worry about both the arbitrariness and narrowness of separating the Internet from other forms of information and communication technologies, or even from other technologies in general. This too has become a practical problem for AoIR, as members quite devoted to the association find themselves grappling with whether work on topics such as interactive gaming or mobile telephony "belongs" at an AoIR conference. Another important concern about the narrowness of the term "Internet" as an organizing moniker is that as the Internet becomes increasingly emeshed in other technologies, it may cease to be a (semi) coherent problem area altogether. As Hine argues, we need to recognize that organizational identities and foci are fluid and to remain open to change.

From Shrum's point of view, this is not as important a question. As long as the term works in practice as a way for people to self-select into a coherent organization, whether all the things they do are really all and only about the Internet does not matter. What does matter, he suggests, is a

“shared commitment to the importance of systematically analyzing a new phenomenon, even if that phenomenon changes.” Yet naming is not, as Hine and Markham discuss, a neutral matter. Foregrounding “the Internet” does diminish the centrality of other technologies. Furthermore, labeling the diversity of what we do under the umbrella term of “Internet” creates the illusion so many of us try to dispel in our work, that there is One Thing called The Internet, a thing that might be expected to have qualities and consequences that can be understood in one way. Internet researchers know better than any how many individual technologies there are in “the Internet,” how thoroughly the Internet is coming to merge with other technologies, and how very many social processes are at play and often in contradiction in the way these technologies are created, diffused, adapted, and used with what consequences.

A second set of arguments against becoming more like a discipline that many of the writers in this issue raise is more intellectual. Noting the history of other disciplines and drawing on the likes of Foucault, they worry that the more disciplined Internet research become, the tighter the boundaries will be drawn. Not only might research on other interesting and related technologies be discouraged, but so too might research on the disempowered and marginalized. Boundaries that keep a topic in, inherently keep other topics out. The more organized we become, they worry, the more “closed, inflexible, and disabling” (Markham) we are bound to be, the greater the risk that our lens becomes “too fixed and rooted” (Monberg) to see what is most interesting. When Shrum argues that there is no need for a paradigm, departments, or organizational underpinning, he points out that complaints that Internet research has no “real theory” generally mean that what theory is on offer is not how the complainer approaches the topic. Such diversity of perspectives is to be treasured rather than squelched.

WHAT SHOULD OUR FUTURE BE?

One alternative to developing further as a field, let alone a discipline, is to simply recognize that the Internet will increasingly move to the main stage in most disciplines, as Engelbrecht notes has happened in economics. Others in this issue offer alternative terms for what we might be—an “undiscipline” (Markham), “indiscipline” (Shrum), “meta-discipline” (Engelbrecht), or “transdiscipline” (Hunsinger)—or perhaps a subfield of a larger field that has yet to be named (Jones). If they cannot agree on what we might be named, the authors offer five sets of recommendations to which we should attend as the organizational implications of our work are sorted out over time.

1. We should keep Internet research contextualized within traditions of media and technology research that predates and transcends the Internet. As Sterne argues, we can’t know what is new if we don’t know what is old. If we are to make important and lasting contributions, they will need to be grounded in what almost a century of scholarship has already established.
2. We should approach our research with a sense of responsibility, asking important questions, particularly those that foreground issues of power. Monberg urges us to maintain our sense of irony and remain skeptical toward notions of progress and rationality. Keeping an eye toward power and a focus on responsibility will lead us to those questions that matter most and enable us to pursue work that betters a human condition increasingly affected by our object of study.
3. We should strive to see bigger pictures than those that seem most relevant to our local conditions. The Internet is global, and we need theoretical perspectives that can account for the non-Western world (Kluver and Yang). To quote Monberg again, we need to think broadly in order to be “sensitive to the social formations, scales of interaction, and modes of subjectivity made possible by the Internet.”
4. We should maintain the traditions we have begun of dialogue and mutual exchange of ideas. Continued interactions with those from other traditions who see things differently poses challenges, but keeps us from calcifying into narrow formations that blind us to other ways of seeing. As Hunsinger argues, we need to use language that can be understood across disciplines and by the publics whose lives we so often study.
5. We should be reflexive, asking ourselves whether or not we are upholding these recommendations. Following Markham, we need to beware of the labels we choose, and continuously explore the definitions and metaphors we use as we organize ourselves, rather than taking them for granted.

This special issue comes at one moment in the developing history of this field. I hope it can serve as a guide to help us think through and make wise decisions about the paths we forge into our collective future.

NOTE

1. I thank Denise Rall and William Boyd for the work they have done cataloguing and comparing these programs.