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TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARY COLLOQUIUM: CULTURAL AND COMMUNICATIONS

STUDIES SECTION

Navigating Interdisciplinarity as a Precarious Early Career Researcher

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Equal parts honoured and terrified to have been invited to speak at the Twentieth Anniversary Colloquium of the Cultural and Communication Studies Section of the Australian Academy of the Humanities, I turned to my natural instincts as an anthropologist and decided to share ethnographic stories, to recount how I navigated interdisciplinarity as a precarious early career researcher. Having recently been fortunate enough to be permanently ‘jobbed’ after a long period of sessional work and short-term contracts, I also took this opportunity to reflect on the everyday logistical struggles of claiming to do Cultural Studies, which often feel overshadowed by intellectual abstractions of ideological histories and institutional politics. In this essay, I present a short biography of my journey as an early career researcher to recount five lessons I gleaned from five career stages (undergraduate, postgraduate, post-PhD sessional work, post-doctoral fellowships, permanent/continuing position), while navigating through various institutes, departments, and disciplines while researching in Cultural Studies.

Renarrativizing Intellectual Limitations as Logistical Pragmatism

During my undergraduate years in Singapore, I had intended to pursue Gender Studies as a major only to learn that it was not offered as a discipline in the University. Operationally, the administrators I spoke to suggested I major in the closest related discipline of Sociology and pursue a minor in Gender Studies by copping together a series of units from various departments. Intellectually, the academics I spoke to disseminated sincere advice about pursuing ‘a degree with more mileage’ such as Sociology, and while they appreciated my eager interest in Gender Studies I was counselled to be more pragmatic and select a major that could

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be mapped onto an extensive range of potential jobs. They added that even if I had intentions to pursue academia and hone my thinking in Gender Studies later on, it would be sensible to anchor and develop myself in a more thematically expansive and historically established discipline first – perhaps focus on the Sociology of Gender – lest my narrow subset of skills excluded me from academic jobs in the future. Thus I learnt early on to re-narrativize the limitations of my desires as pragmatism, where it was pertinent to consider employability before, or at least alongside, intellectual pursuits.

Ditching Disciplinary Boundaries to Develop Field-based Expertise

I then pursued my PhD in Perth in a department of Anthropology and Sociology to study how young women were fashioning themselves to become internet celebrities and influencers. My first three years were a struggle as my department then had focused on more traditional anthropological milieu such as kinship and migration, and I was not exposed to literature on contemporary digital phenomena; where I wanted to learn more about how young women were toying with ideas of shame online, the anthropological canon took me to intellectual approximations of shame and placenta burial rituals in remote villages. It was only after attending an interdisciplinary winter school on digital cultures and being mentored by senior scholars from media and communications that I saw the capacity to retain my methodological roots in ethnography and anthropological theory while developing a thematic and field-based study of a phenomenon. Thus, in the fourth year of my PhD I jointly enrolled in Media and Communications and found myself a Cultural Studies supervisor who generously adopted me as an intellectual refugee, and introduced me to a buffet of ideologies and concepts that I was free to pursue in order to hone my expertise.

Following this ‘awakening’ of sorts, I took up a visiting fellowship in a research centre that specialized in digital ethnography but comprised of multi-disciplinary scholars. This was a refreshing experience because dozens academics from various intellectual trajectories and leanings were bounded only by our interest in and expertise on a range of digital methods. With methodological expertise replacing disciplinary theory as the lowest common denominator and operating vocabulary, our daily conversations rewired the way I computed and Boolean coded the phenomena I was tracking. I should also add that the fellowship took place in Melbourne where there were many more universities, departments, and colleagues with whom to network, and where public transport facilitated this ease. It then dawned upon me that the tyranny of distance (not helped by the less developed public transport network) between the handful of universities in Perth was another boundary that discouraged corroboration and the exchange of ideas.

Shortly after, I took up a second visiting fellowship in an international business school in Jönköping, Sweden, where I once again learnt to reframe my research expertise. This time, instead of rendering new conceptual or disciplinary lens, I instead honed skills around promoting the output of my research. While I was more focused on the socio-cultural and procedural aspects of becoming internet celebrity, my business colleagues who were involved in industry work were more focused on specific outputs such as business models and income generation routes. And such was my first foray into heavily considering the ‘public good’ and industry applications of my research, as I packaged and repackaged my work to the press and various sectors of industry partners. To be frank, this also constituted a conscious engagement with ‘buzzword politics’ and various ‘millennial jargon’ in order to attract industry

and topic-specific grants. For instance, where popular media were trending ‘internet memes’, ‘woke youths’, and ‘selfies’, we laboured to bridge the public discussions with scholarship on participatory cultures, political consciousness, and self-representation. It was also at this juncture that the preoccupations from the early years of my PhD reading around abstractions and prefixes of disciplinary policing – inter-, multi-, trans-, anti-, post- – seemed to fade into the background as I learnt to socialise and summarise my research to the general public for whom such intellectual wars mattered little.

Upskilling Precarity as ‘Flexibility’

In the post-PhD rut of multi-tasking sessional vocations and short-term contracts, I found myself simultaneously managing up to seven institutional email inboxes (and various intra-university platforms such as invoice systems and payslips) at one point. This was not a time to be picky, and ‘the work you do for rent’ was urgently prioritised over ‘the work you do for your heart’. While many of my peers ‘dropped out’ of academia for other work, those of us who had the material means and cognitive perseverance to stay on often commiserated over being glamourized secretaries; our own research took a backseat to copyediting, transcribing, project management, and even ghost writing for piecemeal pay, and we comforted ourselves with mutual encouragement that we were developing expert administrative skills.

I also recall presenting at conferences – often self-funded but informally supported by empathetic academic acquaintances who offered spare beds and couches – and accurately listing up to three institutional affiliations in my opening slides. But a few times I was candidly mocked for presenting myself as being ‘so sought after’ or aspiring to be a ‘superstar’. In reality, these multi-institutional affiliations were important not only for a legitimate by-line in academia (it is a public secret that ‘independent academics’ often experience stigma), but also because we were piecing together ‘benefits’ from various universities: some provided casual RA work, some allocated teaching hours, some paid for marking scripts, some offered office space and library access, and still some offered intellectual mentorship from senior scholars and communal camaraderie with other junior scholars.

During this yearlong period, I found myself teaching and researching in Anthropology, Asian Studies, Business, Communications, Cultural Studies, Film and Theatre, Gender Studies, Internet Studies, Media Studies, and Science and Technology Studies. Becoming this makeshift ‘Jack of All Trades’ entailed strategies such as preparing a basic set of foundational slide decks for introductory lectures on a range of topics, much like itinerant preachers, and then improvising or altering these ‘template’ talks for specific disciplines or units. As such, this ‘hazing period’ truly stretched the limits of precarious early career scholars’ logistical and intellectual flexibilities.

Overcoming or Sidelining Systemic Incongruencies in Publishing Pressures

My first and second postdocs were a yearlong stint in Sociology in Singapore, and a two-year industry-funded stint in Media Management in Sweden. While teaching in the first postdoc allowed me to comfortably return to the canon theory and ideologies I was first schooled in, teaching in the second postdoc in a new discipline meant that I had to rely on the field-specific expertise drawn from my multi-disciplinary background thus far. Conducting research and publishing while in these two fellowships, however, proved to be more challenging.

By then, my track record and CV was a mixbag as I had transited through and published in several disciplines. Where I was praised for my extensive list of publications, I was also chided for not having developed a coherent disciplinary trajectory. In informal feedback for a failed job application, one senior professor remarked that I seemed ‘disciplinarily promiscuous’, while another assessor praised my cutting-edge work on emergent internet phenomena but queried if I had theoretical rigour. Some peers of mine who were in the same boat offered that perhaps the ‘old guard’ did not understand that we were intentionally honing ourselves as experts on a specific field, topic, or phenomena, which necessitated expansive forays across disciplinary boundaries. Discouraging as they were, such feedback also felt disingenuous as early career researchers were constantly encouraged to network and collaborate with others on the one hand, but were short-changed when departments and bureaucracies were purist in privileging discipline-specific journals over others on the other hand. We felt pressured to pigeonhole our research framing, theorizing, and writing for journals regarded as prestigious by ‘the powers that be’, rather than allowing the research to organically flourish before seeking a publication home.

At this stage, I had also grown confident in proclaiming my publishing ethics that focused on open access journals as much as possible, thematically-focused special issues and edited collections, and popular media versions of scholarship intended for the general public. Having learnt this, a very well-meaning senior professor at one of my postdoctoral fellowships proffered the sincere advice that I ‘should think about a more serious area of research, like housing or politics, because the internet is not going to be around forever’. Thereon, whenever possible, I took up the added labour of justifying my research fields to senior colleagues by signposting public interest and industry impact. Where such persuasion was not possible, I took comfort in the fact that these were transitory postdoctoral fellowships after all, and although my publications in other disciplines were not audited or acknowledged by these institutes, I had a clear vision of my long-term trajectory. Another source of relief was the two visiting fellowships I took up in research centres and schools focused on culture, technology, and the social sciences. My transitory visits sparked collaborations with other Cultural Studies and social science scholars, and the nature of our inter-institute corroborations sidelined disciplinary policing for field expertise.

Forefronting Interdisciplinarity to Cultivate Field-specific Niches

I now have the great fortune and privilege to be permanently based in a field of Internet Studies, where my dozen or so colleagues hail from diverse disciplinary backgrounds and fields of expertise. Apart from a handful of Cultural Studies and Media/Communication Studies conferences, I consider as my ‘home’ event the annual Association of Internet Researchers conference. My go-to journals are the likes of *Social Media + Society* that publish an expansive array of theoretical and empirical works from various disciplines and canons. This may sound optimistic, but it feels like the disciplinary wars I have learnt to navigate are behind me, as my professional milieu legitimately comprises specific fields of expertise honed through a combination of strategic and pragmatic interdisciplinary training and collaborations.

The perpetual marginality I used to feel has culminated in a sense of stability and coherence, reflecting exactly the types of ‘subversive frivolity’ that I have studied among internet celebrities – a sense that the ‘discursive framing’ of my long-term interdisciplinary practice as

‘marginal, inconsequential, and unproductive’ has effectively masked the ‘under-visibility and under-estimated generative power’ of breaking disciplinary walls.¹ While I am no sage, and am still a junior researcher in training, on reflection I would like to offer to (disciplinary purist) senior scholars three realities of early career researchers in Cultural Studies in the 2010s:

Firstly, in a market of job scarcity and a saturation of eligible candidates, we have to seek jobs across disciplines. One of the ways we do this is to practice the ‘*mukokuseki*’ or ‘cultural odourlessness’ described by Cultural Studies scholar Koichi Iwabuchi.² Like Japanese products from popular culture and the technological industry that were stripped of ethnic and cultural ‘flavours’ in order to be successfully marketed on the global circuit, early career researchers too are learning to adapt our research interests, rebrand our academic biographies, and manipulate ourselves to be jobbed in times of precarity.

Secondly, in a climate of resource scarcity, we have to self-brand our field expertise with hairline differentiation. Whether segmenting this small pie by geographical knowledge, cultural familiarity, platform proficiency and the like, we learn to develop very specific cultural capital in order to proffer original contributions where possible. At times, this may mean that we pitch our research as coming from the margins or focused on the fringes, to introduce and augment a sense of novelty and exoticism based on the contrasting or incompatible cultural capital between our research expertise and that of our imagined audiences.³

Finally, against the reality of disciplinary purism and institutional bureaucracies, we have to network with colleagues and produce outputs across thresholds. This may include publishing in the department’s preferred journals and collaborating with colleagues within disciplines to meet the traditional criteria of academic legitimacy, while retaining a semblance of such purism in order to contribute discipline-specific expertise to inter- and multi-disciplinary initiatives. This is akin to International Communication scholar Daya Thussu’s⁴ (2009) notion of ‘nation states’, where countries and nationalism continue to hold importance, police boundaries, and shape units of analysis in an age of globalisation, and are heralded as vehicles for dispersing, circulating, receiving, consuming, and shaping media flows. In a similar vein, to effectively work across intellectual thresholds is not to completely abandon disciplinary traditions, but instead to keep one foot in the ‘purist’ domain to strengthen one’s foundational ideologies and the other foot in the ‘philandering’ domain to explore exciting possibilities from the genesis of coalescence across fields.

As precarious early career researchers who are navigating interdisciplinarity while working in Cultural Studies, we learn to be exploratory with our foundational roots and confident in our intellectual wandering.

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