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Internet Indiscipline:  
Two Approaches to Making a Field<sup>1</sup>

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Internet research, like most other intellectual areas, has no real beginning. If we need one for symbolic or ceremonial reasons, we can date it from the smashing successful first meeting of the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR), in Lawrence, Kansas in the year 2000. Of course, a large number of individuals were already doing work in the area, but one would like to have a mythic origin. You could do worse than honor the Free State of Kansas—seat of the Civil War struggle won by abolitionists—to study technologies that promise freedom from the constraints of time and space.

AoIR is a professional society, but also a symbol of the field of Internet research. My aim is to outline two approaches to making a field, two ways of thinking about this as an area of research and scholarship. For want of adequate prior labels, I will call them ‘disciplined’ and ‘indisciplined.’ But I also want to suggest one of them is better than the other. You would have guessed which from my title.

I am an Internet researcher, a sociologist, and an STSer—acronymic jargon for ‘science and technology studies person.’ My main expertise in the development of fields and their associational symbols comes from having served as Secretary of the Society for Social Studies of Science (4S) for the past 17 years. There are parallels between 4S and AoIR that are worth noting in considering the extent to which Internet research is a field. The founding of 4S in the mid-1970s is a key event in the development of STS, along with the journal Science Studies (later Social Studies of Science<sup>2</sup>). While philosophy of

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<sup>2</sup> Though the name of the journal is almost identical to the name of the society, it is not the official publication of 4S, a fact that causes no end of confusion. Science, Technology, and Human Values is the society journal (<http://4sonline.org>). I would unhesitatingly recommend that should the AoIR ever develop a journal, it should be called the Journal of Internet Research. Why make life complicated?

science, history of science, history of technology, and sociology of science are older, the 1970s and 1980s were an important era for the field of science and technology studies. The association, annual meetings, the first Handbook, a journal, and a newsletter began to draw together a group of scholars from established disciplines (sociology, history, philosophy), students from within other scientific fields (physicists, chemists, biologists), and others outside the academic and educational sectors (government, public interest groups). I think there is an important parallel for Internet research today: AoIR has been a significant stimulus in the consolidation of the field and its annual meetings exemplify an exciting cross-section of work.

What is Internet research? The question could have been asked about science studies in 1980, and was addressed in numerous times and places as the field grew, as interdisciplinary programs of study were created at various institutions, as the U.S. National Science Foundation recognized the field with funding programs. Two answers could have been given, answers worth debating in the newer field of Internet research as well.

The first approach holds that Internet research is a new discipline. Speaking quite broadly, a new discipline should have its own publication outlets (journals, books, collections, proceedings) and meetings (conferences, workshops), but also a distinctive organizational niche within the institutions of knowledge production. In the American academy these are programs and departments within universities and colleges. The advantage of this strong form of institutionalization is that when successful, such a discipline is stable and resistant to external perils. The strong form of field-building involves tenured professors with a recognized disciplinary identity, employed in a

network of similarly named, funded, and structured organizations, who train their successors, that is, the doctoral students who themselves have some realistic expectation of careers in the same area. Such a discipline, over time, grows embedded in a stable and mutually supportive network of organizations, with intersecting constituencies, stable funding, and lobbying bodies. In times of scarce resources, or political pressure, it might be threatened, but is almost impossible to dislodge. A diverse set of individual and collective interests are tied to its success.

While intellectual effort is spent on boundary work, the actual level of consensus on intellectual matters is fairly low in the social and humanistic disciplines. In this first, disciplined approach, there is much talk about traditions and paradigms and indispensable methodologies, many accusations about the absence of real theory (translated “not my approach”), and an unconscionable amount of energy wasted on arguments about core problematics that must be related to classic authors and works. The discipline is a collection of overlapping problem areas, since organizational rather than intellectual factors are the underlying unity. Claims and arguments about proper disciplinary focus arise significantly when personnel or funding is at stake, but most of the time are untouched and untroubling. When a Department of Sociology prepares to hire an Assistant Professor, it is virtually impossible to consider someone with a Ph.D. in Science Studies or Criminal Justice. Professors with investments in credentials perpetuate such disciplines—not unreasonable behavior under the system of career tenure.

Of course, the disadvantage of this approach is its inflexibility.<sup>3</sup> New phenomena such as the Internet will remain at the fringe of these disciplines because they are not part

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<sup>3</sup> Another major disadvantage—only evident to those that value inter-disciplinarity as a source of creative inspiration—is that there is none. To the extent that a field succeeds in disciplining its practitioners they

of the traditional problematic. They can be addressed insofar as they relate to traditional topics (inequality, democracy), but not in their own right. They came too late.

But they can employ another approach with greater success. In the mid 1970s, one of the most active areas in science studies dealt with the development of scientific specialties, paradigms, fields, problem areas. It is easy to identify that work with Thomas Kuhn, since the second edition of The Structure of Scientific Revolutions stressed the scientific communities that were the social underpinning of these intellectual entities. But it would be more accurate to see the study of fields as an ongoing area of interest that surged during this period owing to such developments as American network analysis (Diana Crane, Nicholas Mullins), German finalization theory (Peter Weingart, Wolfgang Krohn), and British empiricism (Michael Mulkey, Steve Woolgar). One important distinction was that drawn between various kinds of specialty areas, including those based on particular techniques or methods, and those based on subject-matter. In the physical sciences the latter tend to grow around new discoveries (pulsars, molecular genetics), while in the human sciences, subject-matter specialties are as likely to arise because the subject matter itself is new. This is the case with Internet research.

The upshot of this approach is a simple acknowledgement that new subjects such as the Internet do not need a new paradigm, a new set of academic departments, or any complex intellectual or organizational underpinning. Scholarly associations are low cost institutions that require only human effort. To be honest, it requires a lot of human effort to organize and hold meetings. Associations usually generate a lot more than meetings, because smart people who get together tend to have ideas about what to do. The

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begin to engage in exclusionary boundary work that then requires a new interdisciplinary enterprise to perform the spanning function.

difference between the two approaches is organizational. In the first, there is a need for organizations to respond with new units and Ph.D. programs, and provide for institutional discipline. In the indisciplined approach, there is no importance attached to unity of perspective or method because there is no need to engage in exclusionary boundary work. There is only a shared commitment to the importance of systematically analyzing a new phenomenon, even if that phenomenon changes. That has characterized the field of science studies and 4S over the years. I hope it will continue to characterize Internet research and AoIR. The motto is simple: everyone is welcome, no matter what your perspective, no matter whom you cite, no matter what method you choose for your research.<sup>4</sup>

Not everyone in 4S agrees with me on this, of course. Many in science studies argue that there is, or should be, an “STS perspective” or equate “science studies” with constructivist controversy analysis. More than a quarter century ago people argued that there was, or should have been, a “sociology of science perspective” or equated “social studies of science” with Mertonian stratification analysis. The meetings of 4S have changed in character over this period. They have become more interdisciplinary and more international, where once they were dominated by American sociologists. It has always been exciting to be part of an indiscipline that is forever shifting and seeking new problems. There is nothing intellectually unrigorous about intellectual disunity. The bright past of 4S and future of AoIR is a superior subject matter—whatever denies the importance of science or the Internet must surely be joking. But please come to our meetings. Feel free to disagree with any of our claims, approaches, or methods.

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<sup>4</sup> Two important means of implementing this motto are a relatively loose policy for the acceptance of meetings papers and a relatively aggressive policy of internationalism in recruiting officers and committee members for the association. Together, these help to insure a diversity of perspectives.

I have stressed the importance of indiscipline in the development of scholarly fields. But tradition, even among academics convinced of its contingency and committed to its flexibility, remains important. For years, among the active members of the Society for Social Studies of Science, there had been calls for a change of name that would reflect the increasing importance, even dominance, of technology studies at the annual meetings and published reports of research. However, at the turn of the millennium, the 4S Visions Committee and Council overwhelmingly voted to retain “of Science,” rather than add “and Technology.” It had been the name of the Society since its inception. Everyone either knows or can very well see that technology is a major focus of our research. And that was the end of it. As Internet Research develops, there will be new ICTs, other forms of remote telecommunications, added to the mix of interests at AoIR and published in this journal. Some of these may even come to dominate meetings and publications for a few years, but it will not matter. Internet research is here to stay.