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Toward a Transdisciplinary Internet Research

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Given the expanse of the Internet as a topic for research, the need for transdisciplinary research becomes evident. This paper introduces and expands on the problems of Internet research and how some of those can be resolved by pursuing transdisciplinary research. Issues introduced are the fragmentation of understanding, the disunity of research, and the public reception of that research.

Keywords Internet research, public understanding of science, transdisciplinarity

Internet research as a field is somewhat indefinable. The subject of research is so extensive and ever-changing that we have generalized the referent “Internet” to encompass nearly every perspective in relation to the technology. The field is rapidly changing and could become incomprehensible as a whole to both its academic and public audience. The contestation and divergence of the axiomatic and conceptual foundations of Internet research fragment our understanding, and a nascent disciplinarity, either imported from existing disciplines or developing around the topic itself, will quickly reproduce traditional problems of translation and interpretation among fields of knowledge. By recognizing these ongoing problems in the development and structuring of disciplines in relation to bodies of knowledge, we can see we need an inspired solution for it, the development and implementation of transdisciplinary Internet research.

Internet research is slowly building a body of knowledge that is pertinent to many disciplines. Likewise, many disciplines strive to say something about the Internet and to map an understanding of the Internet into their discipline. Disciplines have borders and display a “rec-

ognizable continuity” (Becher, 1989, p. 21). The disciplines encapsulate and defend a territory of knowledge, some of which is heavily contested among the disciplines. This territoriality also leaves gaps and unclaimed spaces. In the contested territories, interdisciplinary possibilities arise and encapsulate certain issues and topics that cannot be captured by the disciplines alone. These disciplinary and interdisciplinary spaces are important specialties for Internet research, and their perspective in regard to the Internet is beginning to be recognized by larger audiences.

Disciplinary and interdisciplinary research map well onto some aspects of Internet research, but they are not the only options. There has been a movement toward transdisciplinary research in fields such as information sciences, policy studies, geological sciences, and even disciplines like biology in the last 30 years. Transdisciplinary research attempts to approach the object of study beyond and across disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives. The challenge for us is to think of research as a field that comprises several independent disciplines and interdisciplinary endeavors that can be combined into a whole, transdisciplinary field (Dickens, 2003, p. 97). A transdisciplinary field is one defined by the globality of its object of study, combined with the complex, emergent, and changing nature of that object (Genosko, 2002, p. 26). The very nature of the Internet as an object of study is its incomprehensibility as a whole from disciplinary or interdisciplinary perspectives.

By building into each research endeavor an integration with transdisciplinary discursive and axiological systems, we increase the possibility of dialogue and mutual exchange. Realizing that no single perspective will capture the territory, we need to develop and integrate inclusive models that can bring understanding to the greater whole (Genosko, 2002, p. 25). This project of translation among disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives is already occurring in Internet research in many of the journals and colloquia, and it will continue and become more vigorous should we actively encourage its development.

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As Internet research has expanded, disciplinary and interdisciplinary forms have become more institutionalized as subdisciplines and specialties, as centers, departments, and sections in universities and research institutes. Without concerted effort, transdisciplinary efforts will be minor sidelines instead of major practices. Transdisciplinary research breaks the heavily normalized disciplinary boundaries, hierarchies, and stratifications normally found in academic knowledge production. This research creates a *locus communis* or commonplace that develops into a common set of understandings across the fields in transdisciplinary pursuits. This knowledge production should over time create a core body of knowledge that will define what we know about the Internet. Without a stable core that provides for integration, knowledge will fragment (ISSC, 2003, p. 3).

Internet research could end up being fragmentary, and to some extent unintelligible as it progresses. This means we should consider what the core of Internet research will become and how it will make sense not just to researchers and experts, but also to a broader audience. Recontextualizing for multiple disciplines our research and mixing the axiological systems of our research to make sense of and bring understanding and interpretation to the complexities involved in researching the Internet, we progress from disciplinary and interdisciplinary understandings toward a transdisciplinary understanding.

The body of knowledge constituted by Internet research will continually refresh in light of the field as a whole, creating transdisciplinary knowledge as it will inform both expert and lay researchers alike. For laypersons, heavily disciplined or even interdisciplinary knowledge can be hard to interpret, and harder to utilize in any meaningful way. Transdisciplinary knowledge, because it has been recontextualized for the broader audience of multiple disciplines, is more accessible and interpretable. This interpretability and transdisciplinarity will allow Internet research to retain its relevance to a broader audience, and with that encourage a sustaining public interest and possibly the future growth of the field.

Public reception and relevance are becoming important issues to consider in Internet research because the technology is slowly disappearing from the public view. The desktop computer is rapidly devolving toward an everyday appliance like a refrigerator, and few people specifically study refrigerators anymore. This is not to say the refrigerator is not important to everyday life or individual research agendas, but it is to say that refrigerators, like all appliances, are usually understood as part of a system of objects, technical system, or similar theoretical assemblage. These theoretical assemblages are particularized to certain disciplinary discourses, which define and limit the understanding of the objects of enquiry. These

discourses impart a salience to particular facets of the object's understanding. Each facet emphasizes certain issues that fit into their homogeneous subject matter and seemingly forgets others (Briggs, 1977, p. 2211). This "facetization" of understanding is the fate of the common appliance in the disciplines. Each discipline develops and polishes its facets without full cognizance of the greater transdisciplinary whole. Between the perspective-oriented aspects of disciplinary research, and the disciplinary tendency to homogenize, systematize, and normalize, appliances become ordinary, everyday, and dismissed as part of the disciplinary discourse. They are forgotten as objects of study and within the individual disciplines because they become hidden in the abstracted, systemic understandings of the disciplinary perspectives and theoretical assemblages describing them (ISSC, 2003, p. 3).

While disciplinarity is a threat to the Internet research in some respects, it is not the only issue. The fast rate of change has become an issue for Internet research. Parts of Internet technology, such as Wild Area Information System (WAIS), are already forgotten as research topics. As researchers become more specialized and technologies differentiate, some topics will become popular and others less. Beyond the worries of disciplinarity, we need to be careful not to lose the referent of the Internet to specialization, commodification, and technological development, if we are to maintain a field of Internet studies and retain its relevancy to our audiences.

As the Internet and telephony combine in the form of cellular phones and Internet telephony, certain parts of the Internet become less visible. The networks are already very much invisible to the every day user. As topics of research become less publicly visible, they become less relevant to the audience, and in the end may even lose their definition. This can have tragic consequences for our growing body of knowledge. Internet research could become a subset telecom research, digital studies, or something else, and when it takes on the identity of the other, it will surely lose some of its current richness.

At what point, though, are we no longer studying or researching the Internet? And if we are not, then what are we studying: interfaces, computers, network effects, or something else? If the topics of study that comprise Internet research are in fact independent disciplinary endeavors in themselves, then where is the place for Internet research? The place for it is in the broader discussion, the bringing together the various and sundry disciplines and interdisciplines into a place where they talk to each other. It is a place for realizing that we need a common ground on which to build an audience, and an understanding. In short, we need transdisciplinary research. Transdisciplinarity resolves the problem by establishing the commonality in "unconnected or partially interacting disciplines," (Briggs,

1977, p. 2211). The transdisciplinarity can create the topic of study; it can realize its objects and the continuance because it develops the axioms, understandings, and discourses that construct relevancy both inside and outside of academia.

With this short introduction to transdisciplinarity, it is my hope that I have introduced a real possibility for the future of Internet research. I have introduced several issues that transdisciplinarity helps to solve. But we need to be circumspect as researchers so that our research reaches beyond our disciplinary and interdisciplinary communities to the broad audience that our research addresses, including those that are determining the nature of the Internet and its future. We can with effort recontextualize our research and pursue transdisciplinary research in order to allow the broader audience to better understand the complex, global, and ever-changing nature of the Internet as a whole and as such continue doing the work we enjoy for years to come.

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