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Problems and issues in new media education in Hong Kong

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The dot com trend nowadays has pushed the communication education to go more technical. The incorporation of new media into the communication curriculum is a new trend, which, however, has posed a legitimacy problem for the discipline. While the technicality of new media dilutes the professional and disciplinary boundaries, communication graduates are challenged for their incompetence in technical know-how. This paper suggests that new media education refocus on the communicative dimension and new media management. Only based on this understanding can communication educators create a new cosmos with new possibilities for industry.

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The wide popularity of the Internet creates a global atmosphere in which every industry diverts its resources to capitalize on "e-" or "I-" business and services – no matter what industries, products or services they are engaging in. The shift toward techno or digital culture is not always fruitful though. Many financial analysts report that more than 90 percent of new media business investments in the Silicon Valley - and predictably in Hong Kong as well – eventually failed, and as a matter of fact, many international and local dot com businesses are now downsizing.

However, the plight of the capitalists does not bring the e-rush to a halt. On the contrary, the continual expansion of the industry puts new demands on communication education. The rising need for new media expertise is reflected in the significant increase in advertisements in the AEJMC and ICA newsletters for job openings in media technologies and multimedia.

Asian experience follows the American lead (Kuo and Lee, 2000; Wang, 2000). The bloom of Internet and multimedia business in Hong Kong is particularly fast and so is the new media education. Multimedia or digital communication has been formally recognized as a disciplinary division in the two schools of communication in Hong Kong, the Chinese University and Baptist University. While the City University of Hong Kong inaugurated a School of Creative Media for training new

multimedia expertise in multimedia and film in 1999, the Polytechnic University launched multimedia courses to train technical personnel in 2000. Undergraduate programs - not limited to communication programs - that set up internships and placement schemes in the new online business are common.

The City University and Chinese University also launched their MA program in new media and communication in 1998 and 2000 respectively (See Table 1). These figures – which include only government-recognized degrees or diplomas — have not yet covered the immense number of courses offered by many commercial schools.

Table 1
Admissions To New Media Communication Education in 2000-2001*

MA in New Media and Communication, Dept of English, *City University of Hong Kong*	23
MA in New Media, School of Journalism and Communication *Chinese University of Hong Kong*	28
BA in Digital Communication, School of Communication, *Hong Kong Baptist University*	30
Bachelor of Social Science, School of Journalism and Communication *Chinese University of Hong Kong*	68**
BA in English for Professional Communication, Dept of English *City University of Hong Kong*	58**
BA, School of Creative Media, *City University of Hong Kong*	48**
Advanced Diploma, School of Creative Media, *City University of Hong Kong*	40**
Higher Diploma in Multimedia Design *Hong Kong Polytechnic University*	100

*The figures have not covered non-university institutions in Hong Kong, and other science and business disciplines and programs which focus on the technical side of new media.
** Students in these programs study new media as part of their curriculum.
Source: The table is compiled based on interviews and statistics given by the programme coordinators in these institutions.

Such phenomenon helps us reconsider two philosophical issues in education seriously – both in general terms and in the field of communication. First, whether education should be regarded as a kind of vocational training or as a mode of knowledge pursuit independent of the market? The answer is particularly difficult for media educators where balancing theory and professional training has been a long standing issue since the field was inaugurated. Putting this lofty-ideal aside, we still need to clarify the role of education as an institution in society.

What is the role of education in the realm of knowledge production? Now that communication education lags behind the industry in producing students to serve the needs of the latter, one could ask if a university institution should commit to researching ground-breaking terrain and advancing knowledge, and thus should lead industry rather than the vice versa? We should question the structure of our educational system and possibly devise plans to reform new media education in terms of its content, trajectories and directions.

New Media Education: Niche Or Cliche?

Admittedly, there is an indivisible relationship between sociopolitical development with the education curriculum in the West and in Asia (e.g. Ting and To, 1992 in Hong Kong). The discipline of communication, beginning with the profession of journalism has in fact originated from an industrial and commercial need and has broadened to include academic concerns. However, this does not mean that communication education should always be dependent and secondary to industry. Also, this does not mean that university professors should perform their roles as industry-serving-pedagogues rather than as visionaries.

Examining the current landscape of new media education and problematizing the convoluted and equivocal nesting between the dot com trend and communication education, this paper attempts to critically evaluate the content and the development of new media education in Hong Kong, and to propose a direction for new media education reform.

In this paper, I argue that the obscurity in the direction of new media education may lead to a loss of distinct positioning of the field of communication in society, and a potential legitimacy crisis in the discipline. The new media discussed here are defined in broad sense to cover the Internet, e-commerce, multimedia production, and any other computer-related communication.

The rise of new media education is apparently a bandwagon effect emerging from the current dot com trend in Hong Kong. The dictation of the new media education by the dot com trend

however, I argue, may not be beneficial to the field of communication. To append the word "high-tech" to communication education is a cliche but it does help fresh graduates' job search and hence fills vocational demand. The drawback in the long run, however, is an erosion of the professionalism of the field of communication.

With the insight and experience in establishing and teaching the first masters level program in new media in Hong Kong, and with my interactions with the industry in consultancy on new media business, I attempt to highlight the need to re-position and re-direct new media education in Hong Kong. As suggested by the practitioners themselves, rather than merely delivering mediocre technical training on new media technologies (which is generally the current trend), new media education should aim at nourishing a group of communicators who can communicate through and manage the new media. To substantiate my arguments, I interviewed a group of senior and middle managers of various dot com businesses and major Hong Kong corporations which are involved in Internet and Intranet development.

New Media Scholarship Legitimacy

There is essentially no literature to discuss the resources and content of new media education, not to mention critical thoughts on whether communication education should touch on the business of new media.

The current dot com trend is bolstered by industries, the government and educators who have continually injected financial resources. Money, which ironically may be more of a problem in other traditional fields, is at the outset sufficient for developing new media education. And there is such an abundance of money that tempts traditional communication education to "go technical." Two main factors, human resources and the availability of content, have not been seriously considered.

There is a strong demand for communication PhDs with specialization on new media. Yet, the supply is weak. Communication technologies, generally speaking, Internet, multimedia, and networking technologies, first emerged for academic use in the US in early 1990s. This means that communication PhDs. graduated in the last decade are almost completely remote from the new net- or e-experience.

It is true that some communication scholars have strong interests in new media research in the realm of the VCR age (Levy, 1989), pay-per society (Mosco, 1989), information society (Williams, 1988; Williams, Rice and Rogers, 1988), cable TV, satellite TV and high definition television (Howell, 1986), which collectively generated some interest in academic scholarship before the 1990s.

Nonetheless, neither these technologies per se are classified into the more fashionable "new media" which nowadays represents the common understanding of the dot com people. Nor can the empirical research approach to new media be transformed into real hands-on multimedia skills, which can be readily tailored for the new personnel to meet the industry need, as opposed to the computer and multimedia skills which can easily be taught in a simple computer lab.

There emerges a legitimacy problem for "traditional" communication scholars to inculcate would-be professionals with up-to-date or pragmatic knowledge in media technologies. Even if researchers are qualified in terms of practical skills, scholars still have to self-learn to sharpen and bring their skills up-to-date. They have to demonstrate their capability repeatedly in this new field and to keep up with the pace of the new media development. This exacerbates the burden placed on the scholars.

As for the green and fresh PhDs in new communication, they are low in seniority and rank in the relevant departments and in scholarship. Their "influence" on the board curriculum on communication is minimal while they reside in departments directed by scholars who have no or relatively little expertise on new media. The command of a new media program with strong background in empirical media research may not identify the real expectation of the new industry, not to mention the ideals of new media education.

One would then ask the following questions. Why should the area of new media be a legitimate field of studies in communication? Would the increasing proportion of new media education upset the development of the discipline? Will that imply a dilution of the element of traditional mass communication and a refocus on the technicality of communication? Lastly, on what basis can communication scholars justifiably claim that new media is their area, or even the exclusive area of their education?

Challenges To The Professional Discipline

Professionalism of the field is what communication scholars have been striving for. Despite years of formal curriculum and the subsequent formation of various in-field associations, disciplines under the umbrella of communication such as advertising, public relations and broadcasting -- even within the more defined field of journalism -- can hardly be regarded as a profession. The reason is simple. Graduates with a non-communication degree can tackle the same jobs. The situation may be improving but the boundaries of the profession are still fragile and vulnerable. Communication scholars would not like to see any drastic change to the nature of communication which in turn

counteracts the professionalism of the field.

The current tendency in new media education is to insert itself into the curriculum a few technical multimedia courses. The benefit of such technically-led communication education to the communication graduates is only short-term. During a period in which voices of the I.T. are overwhelming other narratives, incorporating multimedia technical skills in the current programs is an added value and naturally makes graduates' more employable, and hence it is easier for them to shoulder duties in dot com businesses. However, in the long run this does not project a good picture for the discipline of communication at all.

Given that the job pool of multimedia caters for a variety of disciplines such as communication, computer science, engineering, art design, languages and translation, business administration and other social sciences subjects, communication graduates' entry into the field without a specialty may imply a loss of their unique professional expertise and skills. Although we all know that communication is everywhere in all organizations and all social institutions, the notion that communication graduates can work in all areas may be pejorative to the communication field.

Besides being detrimental to the process of professionalism, the current mode of new media education may reduce the confidence of the communication students and cause doubts about the competence of the graduates. It is not uncommon that on-the-job graduates rarely meet the expectations of new employers. After being trained by class practicums in new media, communication-major-graduates are expectedly eager to implement their ideas and devote to serving their company. However, many web managers of online business simply do not give them complete trust in terms of their e-ability. The reasons are obvious. On the one hand, they are neither computer programmers who can author high-level programming features for web page (such as Java and CGI languages), nor are they computer engineers who understand the back-end transaction of the web and the network and server configuration. On the other hand, they possess no art and design background as other art designers do so as to evaluate the aesthetics of the web and multimedia design in online businesses.

On the whole, the competence and ability of communication graduates in this new business is challenged. Finally, most of them turn out to be web editors or content writers on the web. With a position centering on content writing, and technical know-how on webpage courses in HTML writing or flash design, which are emphasized (at least, as the major project and assignments in the courses) in the current curriculum are deemed to be of minimal

Non-Specialised Nature Of New Media Education

value.

Unless the field identifies itself a unique path in the new media, a legitimacy problem is posed for the field to "go technical." The emphasis on technicality dilutes – in fact squarely ignores - the traditional presence of academic and non-theoretical elements of communication. The misplacement of the essence of the new media drives the graduates into a blind alley.

Saving The Blink Of Hope

Despite the impasse, the prospects for the graduates is not at all pessimistic. As the communication graduates are at a minimum being absorbed by the industry as web editors or writers, this niche has not been totally filled up by other disciplines.

Under these titles, the graduates serve as communicators, who are like journalists, advertising account executives and public relation officers. What is different is that the new communicators are specializing in communicating in a new medium rather than in the traditional media. From the perspective of education, that is to say new media education is not an independent branch of education that is literally subsumed under the discipline of communication.

Rather, new media education is an extension of traditional communication education. Only by going "communicative" (rather than going "technical) can educators claim that new media is their field of studies. In such a "communicative" curriculum, students should absorb and exercise basic communication skills or knowledge learned in various areas of training in communication and then to apply the communicative dimension to the new medium to sustain their survival in the real dot com industry.

Learning Theory Or Practices?

The next issue is what concrete knowledge should new communicators acquire in order to meet various needs. In response to the critique of an over-emphasis on technicality in the new media curriculum, some educators may suggest that new media be taught more "theoretically" rather than technically. That is to expand the current theories of mass communication to new media communication, and derive theories from the former.

I would suggest such theoretical approach is not philosophically and practically sound. Along the lines of theoretical pursuit, researchers emphasize more or less an analytical and descriptive approach to new media. However, this approach runs opposite to the mode of prescription (Ostigan, 1999: xiii), on which the industry exactly makes business predictions.

In other words, the approach does not contribute any applied and administrative values to the industry and thus cannot hold any special fascination for the latter.

Practically, such a theoretical approach lacks concrete findings for both online and offline new media developers to draw inferences on and to make business decisions and implementations. Until now, empirically tested theories on new media, even middle-ranged propositions on new media effects, processes and audiences, have been few. Without substantial results, new media education planners must search for alternative resources for information or prediction.

Availability Of New Media Content

The information appropriate for graduates, as mentioned, is not technical programming manuals and references. There are at least two main collections on new media apropos to the new communicators. The first group of studies includes descriptive analysis of the current sociological phenomenon, with or without empirical data support. They appear as popular trade books or bestsellers. Of those contents, the most widely discussed are: the net generation (Tapscott, 1998), new lifestyle, and new initiatives and opportunities in the digital age (Negroponte, 1995). The bulk of the rest of the literature is cultural studies on network, techno society (Dijk, 1999; Downey and McGuigan, 1998), cyber culture and audience (Jones, 1998, 1997) with a special focus in relation to gender, cultural politics and class issues that these scholars have already had formative experience in.

Despite the fact that graduates may not commit to engaging in either sociological enquiry or cultural studies, these two types of literature are potentially beneficial to the new elite, both for researchers and practitioners. Considering the scarcity of empirical studies as well as the potential theoretical gaps left by the traditional mass communication theories, such content may fill the interim vacuum and help explore a broader horizon for this seemingly narrowly-defined area.

Among those relevant to the communicators, the former trade and (semi-) sociological literatures sensitize them to topics of legal and ethical issues, cyber crimes, hacking, security and privacy issues, the change of human interactions and communication patterns. The literature of cultural studies also provoke the communicator to "think big," pushing them to reconsider new media's implication with regard to identity, power, globalization, empowerment, freedom and social justice issues, which the new media elite will eventually have to face.

Through this new knowledge, the communicator at least can interact with both their superiors and their supported staff

with a common language, ideas and vocabularies, and make educated predictions on new media issues and grand theories of media technologies, which many management personnel or technical staffs are not aware of.

Managing New Media

Assuming that the short-term requirements of industry are satisfied with the availability of content suggested earlier, one would wonder how the long term role of education could be founded and rectified? Echoing my earlier view in this paper, education should not be led by but also lead the field.

To prepare for it, new media education should not only train communicators who deal with a specific aspect of mediated communication, but also mold them into experts to oversee the whole process of communication, between the technical staff and the management level within the same company, between the client and the company, and between the company and the public at large. To accomplish such a philosophy of "holistic new media education," it is necessary for the university to develop courses – not only on communicating through new media – but also on multimedia and online management and planning for undergraduates. And there is also a pressing need to formalize new media management programs for postgraduate education as well.

A survey of the first MA program in communication and new media in Hong Kong at City University (with 22 known responses) reflects the demand. Over 50 percent of the first year cohort of graduates indicated that they changed jobs after two years of studies and all these changes are related to the management of multimedia and online media. For those who have not switched jobs, half of them have already engaged in new media related occupations.

There seems to be a shortage within the management layer with those having a communication background to supervise and direct various private multimedia businesses and large public corporations, and to "assemble" the different interfaces, public communication, business and technologies. Business' urgent demand in business development executives, strategic planners, content and web managers and consultants foregrounds the uniqueness of the future new media education – the management expertise of new media communication (England and Finney, 1999; Strauss, 1997).

An evaluation exercise for the graduates and current students in a masters program of new media revealed that most of them spent a considerable amount of time putting up homepages or authoring CDs, which at the point of studies, they

felt "interesting" and "rewarding" (interview with the graduates working in new media business).

However, given their seniority in management on new media, a common experience after their graduation was their non-suitability and the inapplicability of these skills. Instead, they valued web and multimedia management, measurement and evaluation of web impact, online and e-campaign management, laws and regulations of new media, global e-business development and activities where they have to actually engage in during their business routine.i   It is based on this specific group of functions and experiences that communication can claim that new media as their legitimate area of study, and only based on this understanding can aspiring communication educators create a new cosmos with new possibilities for industry.

Future Of New Media Education

The Internet will sooner or later sublime into a popular medium to be utilized in every communication, advertising and public campaign like other mass media currently do (cf. Rice, 1989; Salmon, 1989). In the final analysis, after communication technology is no longer a myth, the technical modality will lose its attractiveness and novelty, and all the so-called new media education will be reduced to the basic form of communication. After all, communication technologies are important but communication education should not over-empower these technologies. This not only thwarts the development of the tradition of communication but also limits the development of new media at large.

According to some senior industry executives, managing new media-based communication is the bottleneck in the field nowadays and it will be the future nexus of the industry. There is no reason for new media education to sacrifice this valuable asset and switch to the technicality of communication. To go along the technical path not only impedes the development of the discipline but also misconceives the role of education in society since it merely serves industry and is devoid of any loftier ideals.

In Hong Kong, prioritizing communication over technologies also gives the local communication professionals an additional vantage point. With an ever-increasing integration between Hong Kong and China, it is now inevitable that the field of communication education will exercise considerable influence in the future (Chu, 2000).

Accordingly, Hong Kong, as a visionary leader and service center, needs to strategically develop a position to manage multimedia and Internet business. In light of the abundant technical labor in mainland China and their relatively low skills

of management, Hong Kong can seize this opportunity by adopting a new philosophy of new media education.

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Notes

1. The graduates and students include management levels in public corporations such as the Mass Transit Railway and China Light and Power, executives of non-profit organizations, directors of PR departments of private companies, dot com companies on finance, entertainment and portal sites (including Yahoo and hongkong.com), and senior editors and producers in public and commercial television stations and in the press.

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