An inclusive way forward: A review essay

Ian Sheinheit
University at Albany, SUNY

Brienza, Casey, and Matthias Revers. 2016. "The Field of American Media Sociology: Origins, Resurrection, and Consolidation." *Sociology Compass* 10(7): 539-52.

Chen, Wenhong. 2018. "Abandoned not: media sociology as a networked transfield." *Information, Communication & Society* 21(5): 647-60.

Earl, Jennifer. 2015. "CITASA: intellectual past and future." *Information, Communication & Society* 18(5):478-91.

Revers, Matthias, and Casey Brienza. 2017. "How Not to Establish a Subfield: Media Sociology in the United States." *The American Sociologist*: 1-17.

Wellman, Barry. 2006. "Sociologists Engaging with Computers: Introduction to a Symposium on the History of CITASA, 1988-2005: From Microcomputers to Communication and Information Technologies." *Social Science Computer Review* 24, 2 (Summer, 2006): 139-149.

Media, communication, and information technologies are ubiquitous in the social world and they impact individuals, groups, organizations, institutions, and states across the globe. Thus, it is imperative that sociology address questions, or problems as current section chair Wenhong Chen (2018) terms them, concerning mediated communication. The five pieces cited above, despite some disagreements, understand this fully. The question for CITAMS is how to flourish as an intellectual community as well as an institutionalized presence within ASA, one of the most important associations of sociologists worldwide. This requires not only vibrant interlocution but also organizational bureaucratic work. In the end, we need an active community that buys into this mission.

Over the past three years there has been debate and reflexivity that concluded, as Casey Brienza and former section chair Laura Robinson astutely describe above, with a name change for our section. In part due to this process, four excellent pieces have been written over the past three years to discuss the past, present, and future of CITAMS in particular, and the place for studying media, communication, and information technologies in sociology more generally. This dialogue has been very useful and productive. Not only does our section have a new name, which should engender more inclusivity, it also inspires questions regarding the field of sociology.

Former section chair Barry Wellman (2006) notes that the section (under various names) has always been the home of sociologists concerned with the intersection of computers and society. Jennifer Earl (2015), also a former section chair, argues that CITASA, before the name change, was implicitly and empirically the home for media sociology. As the nexus of cross pollination, Earl notes, CITAMS grew from its initial concerns with computer programming and then computer interaction to a "section that richly embraces broad sociological concerns for communication processes, media, and/or information and communication technologies (ICTs)." She highlights three areas of inquiry our intellectual insight can engender. First, is the proliferation of computational social science. This area of inquiry is most connected to the

incipient stages of this section's formation and is vital for future research endeavors. With the explosion of big data and the massive reserves of textual data in digital form online, using computational methods to collect, organize, and code provides a treasure trove of opportunities for sociologists writ large. Second, sociologists have much to offer in understanding how computing connects to the social. Lastly, Earl briefly discusses communication and media systems as another important avenue for sociological inquiry. This is the area of study with which Brienza and Revers (2016) are most focused.

Matthias Revers and Casey Brienza (2016) map out the terrain of media sociology. Distinguishing between the study of media as inward and outward they argue that, though important and complex, focusing on the triad of mediated communication: production, text, and reception, is not enough. Media sociologists must take a step further and understand the outward impacts of these processes on social life. This is exemplified by the work on mediatization. Importantly, our interactions are becoming increasingly mediated and a media logic is permeating all aspects of social life. While concerned with media more broadly, this maps nicely onto Earl's (2015) discussion of the impact of computing on society.

Brienza and Revers (2017) followed up their 2016 article with another that elucidates the process with which media sociology did not become a sub-field in U.S. sociology. They argue that there were a few opportune moments for the institutionalization of media sociology but a variety of cultural and structural constraints thwarted its establishment. First, a consequence of the public opinion research conducted at Columbia University was that sociology jettisoned media as it was presumed to have limited effects. Second, media sociologists have not consistently connected media to larger and more foundational sociological questions. Third, the historical context and connected structural positioning of media sociology places the field in a precarious position. Without associational representation (i.e. specified journals) or charismatic leaders (many potential leaders in the 70s were integral in forming the culture section which has one of the largest memberships in ASA), media sociology did not gain an institutional footing. Lastly, the overlap between the culture section, which is concerned with mediated public meaning systems, and the proliferation of communication and media studies programs also had a preventative impact.

While failure to create an institutionalized subfield titled Media Sociology in the form of an ASA section is apparent, this does not mean that sociology has been peripheral to the study of media. Communication and media studies scholars necessarily have to engage with sociology. Further, as Wenhong Chen (2018) demonstrates, when we think of media sociology as a globally networked transfield, it is clear that sociology is entrenched in the study of media. Moreover, Chen argues that when we focus on problems, structural holes, and wash away boundaries we can transcend material, economic, political, technological, or cultural reductionism.

After assessing these pieces three things are clear. First, there is a vested interest and intellectual curiosity in regard to media, communication and transmitting information technologies. This is pivotal, but as sociologists we need to take a step further and ask questions about how these processes impact social life. Second, this dialogue, and the resultant name change, has been very productive, as it required reflexivity and concretization. Media and communication are now inextricably linked to information technologies. The boundaries between old and new media have become increasingly blurred. Further, our data are increasingly collected or analyzed through ICTs. This places our section's members in a unique position of expertise as we attempt

to untangle these complex processes. Third, through these pieces we can clearly see an inclusive way forward that is attuned to our sections' strengths, which are vast. As our society becomes more mediated and technologically integrated, and our methodological techniques take advantage of the computational, CITAMS, with all that its new name indicates, is the proper home for a wide ranging diverse set of scholars. While we cannot predict the future, the scholarship represented in this newsletter and a quick look at the table of contents of the most recent issues of AJS and ASR bodes well.

Being trained by the same media sociologist as Revers—Ronald Jacobs at University at Albany, SUNY—I am sympathetic to Revers and Brienza's perspective. As Brienza highlights above, there are so many ASA sections that not having one designated to one of the most important institutions and purveyors of socialization—media—has seemed problematic to say the least. Yet, in part because my own research is focused on the impact of digital communication technologies on mediated political communication, I have always found an engaging and warm community within the CITAMS section even before the name change from CITASA. Now, through these pieces, we can follow the trajectory of our section as a self-reflexive, networked transfield with a big tent.