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“Isn’t that interesting!”: The Danielson Style

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Our symposium is being held to honor Wayne Danielson and his contribution to research. In thinking about my own contribution to our day, I wanted to consider what issues are exemplified by Wayne’s approach to research, and to the field of communication research, in particular. Those people in our field who really stand out have found ways to combine their scholarship with their personality in a way that strengthens both and helps develop an integrated life. So, much of what comes to mind regarding Wayne is not so much the actual findings of his research but the style he has adopted in his approach to the academic project. And that includes in his research, in his teaching, and in his administrative leadership. All have been guided by “the Danielson style,” an enthusiasm for the life of the mind that should be mandatory for anyone seeking to enter the academic profession.

I can’t document this precise quote, but I have a strong memory for a phrase that Wayne has used many times in my presence, and no doubt with others in discussion of research. With his innate curiosity and enjoyment for finding out new things, Wayne will remark, “Isn’t that interesting.” I can visualize him saying it now, or something very close to it. I think that phrase, innocuous though it may seem, embodies the Danielson style, a curiosity about the world and an enjoyment in finding out about it. Many times I recall Wayne working on some new project—whether some research findings or something he’s been able to do with the computer. He will insist that you see what he’s found, and that you give him the enjoyment of explaining it to you. That kind of enjoyment of discovery and learning, as exemplified by the Danielson style of optimistic curiosity, is what makes the academic life so rewarding.

The early questions in Wayne’s research reflected a curiosity about how the news process works: How readable was a story? How much did audiences recall of it? How quickly did they learn of it? How complete was the story? I suspect Wayne’s early entrance into administration worked against his establishing a specific theoretical area associated with his name. Methodologically, he has been identified with the content analysis approach, but he is in many ways a generalist. That style has been marked by a basic curiosity about interesting questions in our field. And beyond research his work also largely has been to leverage his ideas through academic leadership, with students, and through collaborative work with colleagues. Wayne can get just as excited about the possibilities in a student’s research as with his own. He

has as much fun finding new ways to teach as in finding an initiative that might work in an academic program. I have certainly been the beneficiary of those efforts, and my comments are based on a 21-year association with Wayne as a faculty colleague and collaborator, and I would like to share some of my observations. I locate the “Danielson style” within the larger historical context and tendencies of journalism and communication research.

The Dark Side of Journalism and Communication Research

Research in journalism and communication draws some stylistic tendencies from journalism itself. Journalists are often cynical, suspicious, and prone to believe the worst. It’s an occupational trait. I know when I was growing up, I always enjoyed reading books in the muckraking tradition, like Ralph Nader’s *Unsafe at any Speed*, Vance Packard’s *The Hidden Persuaders*, and Joe McGinniss’s *The Selling of the President*—books about risks, manipulation, and cynical marketing strategies. In a more futuristic sense, I was drawn to books like Paul Ehrlich’s *The Population Bomb*, with its gloomy preview of scarcity. These were books, I thought, by clear-thinking writers who refused to be taken in by the rosy scenario. Later in my career I found much to admire in the tough-minded sociology of C. Wright Mills, in *The Power Elite* and *White Collar*. Like my role models, I could see myself looking beneath the surface of social phenomena to see who was “sticking it” to whom.

Indeed, in social science as in journalism a skeptical mind is a useful occupational trait, as is the willingness to be a debunker of the common wisdom. Research can usefully challenge the commonplace assumptions, and in this respect research in our field usefully follows what sociologist Herbert Gans says should be the case for sociology. Researchers should be professional debunkers, as he says he was, for example, with his work, *The Levittowners*. That book debunked the idea that suburban dwellers were robotic clones of each other, as their homes so closely resembled each other, living alienated and unconnected lives. Gans showed that it was not so simple (Reese, 1994). But this debunking style can easily merge into a tendency to believe the worst, even though nothing dictates that the conventional wisdom be either positive or negative. There’s no reason that debunking cannot substitute a more positive vision for a negative one.

That hasn’t been the case in our field, which has often taken its questions from the dark side of communication. As I have tongue-in-cheek said to my undergraduate communication theory class, my technique for making the class interesting is to focus on the big three: “sex, violence, and Nazis.” That facetious comment is based on the reality that much of the research that is interesting in the field has dealt with the dark-side outcomes of mass media: effects of explicit sexual content, effects of violent media (and the combination of sex and violence that characterizes many media products), and, of course, the interest in fascist and totalitarian propaganda, with the more experimental studies in attitude change among American soldiers during World War II. In more recent years, we have dealt with “knowledge gaps,” diffusion of innovation with its “laggards,” and the “scary world” hypothesis has expanded beyond the effects of televised aggression to perceptions about danger and the prevalence of law enforcement officials in the community. The notion is that

media implicitly create the environment for a more authoritarian society. As a side note, I notice that one of my colleagues in speech communication has a course called "lying and deception;" maybe we'll have one someday with a more positive framing called "truthtelling and honesty."

In my own early days, I was interested in the idea in political communication of "videomalaise," the empirically supported relationship that the more one relied on television news, the less politically active and efficacious one was. Later, I could see that many research areas had their optimistic and pessimistic scenario, with my tendencies favoring the latter. In the new communication technologies, for example, some saw their potential as liberatory while others saw a new means for repression and reinforcing existing hierarchies. In my current interest in globalization issues, the pessimistic view holds that transnational corporate media giants will increasingly privatize the global public sphere, while a more optimistic approach sees potential in new transparency and cosmopolitan outlooks around the world. Against my instincts, I decided, as Wayne might, to give that latter view a chance.

So, as we have seen, communication research has often centered on the social pathologies associated with the mass media. Within areas like journalism education, there's an easy tendency to paint a gloomy picture of the institutional context in which students hope to make their professional careers. Wayne Danielson has a different tendency and works to provide a balanced picture. Wayne and I both have taught the course in communication theory at the undergraduate level, and we talked about how easy it is to descend into a negative emphasis on the field. I took his advice on how to balance course issues with personal applications for the students. These students were, many of them, planning to enter journalism or a communication field, and they needed to know that there was the possibility of them to do good in their future profession.

Optimism in the Early Communication Field

In spite of the strong tendency in the direction of debunking and the social pathologies of media in the later development of the communication field, there is a strand of optimism rooted in the early years of its founding, to which Wayne is connected. As time goes by there are fewer among us who knew the founders of the communication field, who we may consider to be Wilbur Schramm and the ones he considered as "Founding Fathers": Lasswell, Hovland, Lazarsfeld, and Lewin. Wayne provides one of those links to this era, since he studied with Schramm at Stanford, and has gone on to do his own work to promote communication as a field of study. As Wayne has written: "The founders found a vacant spot lying somewhere between engineering, liberal arts, fine arts, the social and behavioral sciences, and the traditional schools and departments of journalism, and there they established the nascent discipline." In many ways I envy that period of time; the basic optimism of the social science fields in the 1950s was linked to a belief in the decency of the nation and its ability to progress toward consensual goals.

In those former days, it seems, there was an important communication question under every rock, and not many had yet paid close attention to them. What do children do with television? How does communication work in developing societies?

The questions seemed bolder then, more sweeping and compelling, maybe because the good ones hadn't all been taken yet. Our field may have gotten more specialized, and more professionalized in the use of methodological techniques, but this often has had the effect of pointing our vision inwards and constricting the range of our questions. Life is more complicated now, and the field has become fragmented into many specialty areas. Like in modern academic departments, it is more difficult to find consensus and believe that everyone is motivated by the same goals.

More recent scholars (and I would include myself), perhaps because they do not have this first-hand familiarity, find it easier to find fault with these founding fathers (Reese & Ballinger, 2001). As part of my debunking style, I have been interested in the newer critical histories of the field that have faulted the field for its preoccupation with the concerns of media industries, and the government, especially during wartime (e.g., Gitlin, 1978). Writers like Christopher Simpson (1994) unearthed the links of public opinion scholar Elizabeth Noelle-Neuman to the Nazi party and argued that it colored her views of the media's role in a democracy. Other scholars seemed to have lost their intellectual autonomy in their drive to satisfy the questions on the mind of their corporate and government clients, what Lazarsfeld called the "administrative style." But these early figures in the field were not unintelligent dupes; in large part, it was their membership in an optimistic and more, at least overtly, consensual generation that made complicity with the nation's government and its big business less problematic for them.

Wayne shared with me a review he had written not long ago of such a revisionist field history: *Origins of mass communication research during the American Cold War*. Author Timothy Glander was critical of the field's founders, finding them opportunistic for accepting funding from the federal government to support their research. Glander, in his book, says that Schramm as a Cold Warrior was guilty of this opportunism, playing whatever role would take him farthest. As one might imagine, Wayne objected to the uncharitable characterization of people in general, and especially of his professor Wilbur Schramm. As Wayne wrote, he thought Glander was "too critical of the motives of people who were as complex and multi-dimensional as most of us are, and, in (his) opinion, just as intelligent, creative and well-meaning."

What basic approach to the field may Wayne have derived from his teacher Wilbur Schramm? In a quintessentially Danielsonian 1988 essay in *Journalism Quarterly*, Wayne lists several principles in learning to write like Wilbur Schramm: 1. Choose a topic that matters, 2. Get the facts, personally, 3. Synthesize, simplify, and organize, 4. Give credit to others, and 5. Write optimistically, positively. I think Wayne has followed his teacher's advice, particularly in this last lesson: thinking and writing "optimistically, positively." Actually, in this respect, Wayne is a lot like that post-war period of the field's founding—believing in the basic good intentions of others and optimistic about finding solutions to problems. Indeed, it's difficult to get Wayne to say anything negative about anyone else, making it often hard to carry on an interesting conversation with him. Wayne is an optimist, and his research reflects that. Thus, he follows Schramm's belief in the media's ability "to better the lives of people everywhere."

Wayne's basic optimism stands in contrast to much of the field and provides an important corrective to the inbred debunking style.

Being Opportunistic

I would like to return to a particular criticism leveled at the early figures in the field—that they were opportunistic, choosing to work on projects that enjoyed the most financial backing. Opportunism has a bad connotation, suggesting that someone exploits situation without regard for principle. In other ways, if we can detach the unprincipled element, opportunism may be regarded as a valuable skill in the academy, suggesting the ability to exploit circumstances to accomplish goals. In a large bureaucracy like a university, ways must be found to creatively deploy the many resources and talents on hand to accomplish important goals. In that sense, opportunism is a creative talent for being able to visualize productive possibilities; the more complex the institution, the more important that talent is. In Wayne's case, he has a range of curiosities just awaiting opportunities to have them satisfied. I think in my own work, I've often been reluctant to think opportunistically. I'm reluctant to jump into a project before I've got it completely figured out, probably a hold-over from the theoretical emphasis in my graduate school years. Of course, it's important to have a plan and to be clear about what one wants to study, but not at the expense of paralysis. In a pragmatic sense, it's important to begin, with the confidence that other curiosities will emerge later. I think Wayne's approach to research in our work together was a valuable lesson for me—that research is something you do to satisfy your curiosities. It extended what I had learned in graduate school, that research is fun and especially so when done with others. Wayne often has said that the academic life is like fishing, that you have to be patient and know that eventually if you cast your bait out there often enough, you'll get a bite. It's hard to predict when an idea will catch on, but one has to have patience that it will. But whatever the case, the hook has to be in the water for anything to happen.

So in this respect, I was a beneficiary of Wayne's opportunism. When Pam Shoemaker and I were assistant professors here, Wayne realized that the three of us were interested in survey research related questions, ones that could be further organized around the theme of an emerging Hispanic media audience in Texas. This subject he expected would likely be of interest to grant givers. In looking back at the project we worked on together I am pleased to recall what a productive time that was. I count four articles in *JQ* and one in *POQ* on Wayne's vita that we co-authored together, along with our colleague Pam Shoemaker and others. Had Pam and I thought more about it, we might have been reluctant to forge ahead on such a project, neither of us being experts on Hispanic issues. I was also nervous about beginning, thinking that I did not have it all figured out just yet. But before long, we were in the survey room listening to a questionnaire only recently finished, being read to people over the phones by a dozen research assistants. Wayne wouldn't tolerate fuzzy concepts and hazy reasoning, but on the other hand I think he understood that you didn't have to have all the answers before beginning; that's what research is for. We were "doing research," because Wayne had seen an opportunity in the intersection of our joint resources, abilities, and curiosities.

I was interested in the structural disadvantage of groups in Texas, including Hispanics. In the dark side tradition, I wanted to see what gaps were there in use of media and adoption of new media. Pam was interested in questions of political group legitimacy, including minority groups like the GI Forum and other Hispanic organizations. I recall that one of Wayne's question was a bit different, more open ended, more cultural: How is Spanish used in different communication settings? English it was found was more associated with official doings, news and public affairs information. For Hispanics, Spanish was the language of the home and the family. Wayne would say, "Isn't that interesting." In being opportunistic in a good way, Wayne has leveraged his academic values, basic optimism, and curiosities about communication across many sites, in his research, in the classroom, and in his leadership work within academic institutions.

Conclusion: The Danielson style

So, in conclusion, what we may call the Danielson style brings important lessons for us in communication research, and for scholarship more generally. I'll limit them to three.

1. **Be curious.** Don't forget that a basic curiosity goes a long way in sustaining a scholar in doing the kind of work necessary to get research done. That same curiosity will help communicate enthusiasm about the subject to students and others. A curiosity about compelling questions helps cut through the thicket of theoretical and methodological issues that can clutter them up. It should be the supreme compliment to have someone remark about our findings: "Isn't that interesting."
2. **Be optimistic.** Often it's better to be optimistic about social possibilities and have to temper it with pessimism, than the other way around. In seeking to debunk the conventional wisdom, remember that it may be more gloomy than the reality. Being optimistic includes making human connections with one's research, especially with students who want to know in light of what you know how they may best act as agents of social and professional progress.
3. **Be opportunistic.** Have principled goals for research, but look for opportunities to advance them, especially in finding mutually beneficial collaborative relationships with others. Like life in general, the university can be looked at as a web of constraints, limiting individual freedom to act. As a former administrator I can tell you that it is very easy to take this perspective after a few years. More productively, the university can be seen as a repository of vast resources and enabling structures that produce endless opportunities for anyone able to envision and exploit them.

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