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Dominique Trudel, Juliette de Maeyer

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Dominique Trudel, Audencia Business School, France
Juliette De Maeyer, Université de Montréal, Canada

send correspondence to Dominique Trudel (dtrudel@audencia.com)

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ABSTRACT: Building on recent works emphasizing the "post-disciplinary" status of communication research, this article explores the implications of this thesis for the intellectual history of communication. While most of the existing historiography is soluble in the disciplinary framework, the post-disciplinary thesis raises new theoretical, methodological and empirical challenges. In order to meet those challenges, we argue that historical research should be redirected toward intellectual and institutional projects that existed before and beyond the institutionalization of communication as a discipline. To this end, we revisit the contribution of American journalist Franklin Ford (1849-1918) to the intellectual history of communication. Based on archival research, our approach emphasizes how Ford's ambitious project diverges from the received disciplinary histories: its object is the circulation of information; the institutional form it favors is a radical reconfiguration of the press and the universities in connection with society; and its normative horizon is a government by communication.

KEYWORDS: historiography; intellectual history; journalism; normative theory; political theory; post-discipline

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Remarking that communication research is increasingly fragmented among many subfields and theoretical approaches (Craig, 2015), commentators have recently declared communication a "post-discipline" (Waisbord, 2019; Tenenboim-Weinblatt & Lee, 2020). In this article, we explore the implications of the post-disciplinary thesis for the intellectual history of communication. We argue that historical research should be redirected toward intellectual and institutional projects that existed before and beyond the institutionalization of media and communication research as a discipline. To do so, we revisit the curious case of Franklin Ford (1849–1918), an American journalist, media theorist, and entrepreneur. Several decades before communication research embarked on a disciplinary-building trajectory, Ford defined a theoretical and institutional project designed to interconnect media, technologies, universities, and society. This project, we argue, is different from what became the mainstream preoccupations of communication-as-an-academic-discipline. In that regard, Ford's singular version of "communication research" offers a glimpse into an ambitious pre-disciplinary (and non-disciplinary) path not taken.

Communication History and the (Post-)Discipline

Historical inquiry has a complicated relationship with the discipline of communication, which has always been focused more on the future than on the past. For many years, the historiography of the field was notoriously weak and dominated by the intertwined narratives of the "founding fathers" and the "powerful-to-limited-effects." These two origin myths were useful in the process of institutionalizing and legitimizing a would-be discipline in search of academic credentials. They were created by academic entrepreneurs on the front line of the battle for scientific and institutional recognition, such as Wilbur Schramm and Paul Lazarsfeld.

These narratives have attracted a lot of criticism, but none that really called the disciplinary angle into question. Critical historical works such as Gitlin's famous article about the "dominant paradigm" (1978) and the "new history" of communication (Gary, 1999; Glander, 2000) offered necessary nuances and original empirical insights. New national and international histories that have blossomed since the mid 1990s (Simonson & Park, 2016; Arnold, Kinnebrock & Preston, 2020) were accompanied by rich methodological and epistemological reflections on the complex relationships between communication, media, memory, and history (e.g. Zelizer, 2008; Natale, 2016; Maurantonio & Park, 2018). The "new history" may have shifted our focus to highlight different periods, timelines, actors, or motivations, but it still mostly took the discipline as the starting point of its inquiry. Proponents of the "critical" or "new history" movements still painted the same landscapes as the retrospective creations by Schramm and Lazarsfeld. In these narratives, communication research is still born in the context of the Second World War, and it still focuses primarily on media effects from a sociological and psychological standpoint.

In sum, most of the intellectual history of communication is the history of a discipline, even if it is increasingly "the discipline of communication writ large" (Simonson, Peck, Craig & Jackson, 2013, p. 13). As such, the history of communication research should be read as a form of disciplinary discourse that plays a key role in the (re)production of knowledge by hailing disciples and enforcing disciplinarity (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2000; Zelizer, 2016).

In our post-disciplinary era, communication history seems to be at a crossroads. We argue that the history of communication as a post-discipline should aim to uncover intellectual projects that existed outside of, beyond, before, or alongside the efforts to make communication research a discipline. A discipline, with its canons, departments, scholarly associations, and journals, is only one specific, historically situated way to organize knowledge (Zelizer, 2016). Communication research has gone beyond this straitjacket and continues to do so, as illustrated

by a rather small set of works that show how communication history can excel outside of disciplinary narratives (Peters, 1999; Simonson, 2010). Keeping in line with the archival-based approach defended by the new historians of communication, we propose to look at a pre-disciplinary moment, without trying to turn this moment into a prehistory of communication-as-a-discipline.

After a brief literature review that highlights how the disciplinary narrative leads to a partial account of Ford's contribution to the intellectual history of communication, we outline the theoretical and methodological principles we followed to build our non-disciplinary approach. We then describe three moments of Ford's life and work. In doing so, we argue that his intellectual project shines out by its qualities that contrast with the mainstream disciplinary history. It differs in its object (the circulation of "intelligence," not media content and influence); its institutional form (a radical reconfiguration of the press and universities that favors their connection with society, not the carving out of a disciplinary niche within universities); and its normative horizon (a self-regulated society that benefits the general interest, not the influence of minds and public opinion).

Historiographical Knots: Franklin Ford Enters the Discipline

Most existing work on Ford focuses on a single episode of his life, between 1888 and 1892, when he became acquainted with philosopher John Dewey and a few of other budding academic superstars (George Herbert Mead, Robert Park, Charles Horton Cooley, and Fred Newton Scott) at the University of Michigan, where they unsuccessfully tried to launch a newspaper called *Thought News*. In the brief literature review below, we argue that the treatment of Ford is symptomatic of the disciplinary focus that we have described above: he matters because he is associated with some of the "founding fathers" that communication history

repeatedly imports from more prestigious disciplines, and because he is part of some of the major legitimacy-building narratives such as James Carey's take on the "Chicago School of Social Thought" or Wilbur Schramm's "founding fathers."

An important part of the literature on Ford stems from fields such as philosophy and the history and sociology of ideas. These works concentrate almost exclusively on the Ford–Dewey relationship during the *Thought News* episode. White's *Origin of Dewey's Instrumentalism* (1943), which affirms that the episode "presages Dewey's break with idealism" (p. 102) is possibly the first scholarly account of *Thought News*. Other early works include Savage's (1950) detailed description of the controversy surrounding the project and Feuer's (1959) analysis of the religious and revolutionary underpinnings of *Thought News*. Subsequent book-length studies of Dewey's work (Coughlan, 1975; Westbrook, 1991; Rockefeller, 1991) refer to *Thought News* and to Ford, sometimes adding historical details or offering a slightly different interpretation of the "impact" or "influence" on Dewey, which is the central question around which these works revolve.

In communication, the interest in Ford and *Thought News* was sparked by James Carey's campaign for disciplinary refoundation according to his own cultural approach, which he situated in line with Dewey's pragmatism and the Chicago School tradition. In 1976, Carey and Sims tracked down the *Thought News* episode and stitched together a biographical profile of Ford based on primary and secondary sources. This essay is also one of the first to cite extensively Ford's *Draft of Action* (1892), a 58-page manifesto detailing the larger implications behind *Thought News*, alongside some little-known opuscules. Later, Carey would cast Ford's ideas as a

source of Dewey's pragmatism[1] and *Thought News* as the founding event of American communication research:

> Research and scholarship on communication began as a cumulative tradition in the United States in the late 1880s when five people came together in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Two were young faculty—John Dewey and George Herbert Mead—and two were students at the time—Robert Park and Charles Cooley. The final element of the pentad was an itinerant American journalist by the name of Franklin Ford, who shared with Dewey—indeed, cultivated in him—the belief that "a proper daily newspaper would be the only possible social science." (Carey, 1989, p. 110)

Following up on Carey and Sims's work, McGlashan— one of Carey's student at the University of Iowa— contributed two pieces about *Thought News* (1976, 1979). Published shortly after, Czitrom's (1982) treatment is based mostly on secondhand literature and emphasizes Ford's eccentricity. Peters (1986, 1989) sees *Thought News* as an early manifestation of the progressive fascination with expertise, in line with Carey and Sims's 1976 argument. Central to the project was "the wish to socialize the means of intellectual production to make each citizen, as it were, a social scientist" (1989, p. 252). Peters (1986, p. 76) positioned *Thought News* in the intellectual lineage of Herbert Spencer and Auguste Comte and evoked the possible influence of French sociologist Gabriel Tarde, who developed similar ideas in the early 1890s and saw the newspaper as an "organ of statistics." According to Peters (1989, p. 254), the key feature of *Thought News* was to provide society with an accurate image of itself, actualizing what Spencer dubbed the "coherent heterogeneity of society" and Comte, the "positivist age."

Since the mid 1990s, mentions of Ford and *Thought News* have been more frequent. The episode now plays a minor part in the discipline's remembered past. It has found its way into widely read books such as Schiller's (1996) *Theorizing Communication*, Hardt's (1992) *Critical Communication Studies*, and Schramm's (1997) posthumously published memoirs, which cast

[1] The extensive correspondence between Ford and Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. (see Burton, 1980), a central figure of classical pragmatism, gives weight to Carey's later reading of Ford as a pragmatist.

Thought News as a newspaper reporting change in public opinion that anticipated the development of polling and survey research by thirty years. In Schramm's revised version of disciplinary history, Ford strategically plays the role of a "forefather" to the field's "four founding fathers."

In sum, replicating a common disciplinary trend, communication scholars "imported" most elements of the *Thought News* story line from neighboring fields, replicating an inherited "topography of disciplinary prestige" (Pooley, 2016, p. XII). Communication scholars' work on primary sources is inversely proportional to their interpretative effort to "situate" Ford in their own version of the history of the discipline. Most of the time, Ford is the site of a low-intensity skirmish in the larger battle for historical and disciplinary authority revolving around the Chicago School and the pragmatist tradition.

The wealth of references to Ford, as well as the fact that he is attached to some key disciplinary narratives, can give the impression that Ford is "done," as he is part of a (minor) canon. But Ford had a whole career before and after the *Thought News* episode: there is much more to his story than his role as an eccentric journalist who got young John Dewey in trouble with his revolutionary newspaper project. This paper therefore asks the following question: what is Ford's contribution to communication history, if we release him from the limitations of disciplinary narratives?

Toward a Non-Disciplinary History of Franklin Ford

Untangling the intellectual history of communication from disciplinary history is not an easy task and will probably never be fully achieved. As communication researchers trained in the discipline, we are unlikely to escape the objective conditions of our professional identities and activities, which largely derive from the existence of a discipline called "communication." We

only tend toward non-disciplinary history, like many other communication historians whose work is helpful in tracing this path.

Our inquiry is guided by three interconnected principles that have theoretical and methodological implications. First, *choose an object outside of the historical canon, or push it outside of the canon borders*. This is difficult, as the question of the "canon" is up for debate and as the discipline is so wide that its "canons" are numerous. The canon can be defined by a combination of discrete elements that derives from power relations and hegemonic positions within the discipline. What is canonical is most often "Western," "American," "male," "white," and "ICA-friendly." Those issues have been addressed by recent works on local and international cases that are on a path to de-westernize communication history (Simonson & Park, 2016; Averbeck-Lietz, 2017); but also by works that invoke the "canon" with clearly critical hints (Katz, Liebes & Orloff, 2002).

Ford will remain an American white male who is part of a somehow minor canon of disciplinary history, no matter what our analysis uncovers. Still, it is possible to approach his work without making it conditional on his relationship with prominent figures and to focus on episodes other than *Thought News*. We also emphasize how Ford's research is at odds with the foundation of a discipline and point out that the type of "communication research" he envisioned is deeply anti-disciplinary.

Second, *rely on archival-based research.* As Pooley (2008) notes, the legitimacy-building historical narratives of communication-as-a-discipline are rarely driven by a close reading of archival documents, as opposed to the archival-based inquiries that characterized the "new history" from the mid 1990s. The movement toward the professionalization of communication history, based on archival-based inquiries, shaped a critique of the discipline and an exploration of its margins that is congruent with the post-discipline thesis.

Ford's archival traces are scarce and scattered across dozens of archival collections across the United States, some of them difficult to access and most not digitized. Most of Ford's work disappeared in October 1914, when a fire wrecked his Columbia University office. At the time, the press lamented that "papers representing the work of twenty years are believed to have been ruined in the office of Franklin Ford" ("Blaze Ends Fire Peril at Columbia," 1914, p. 10). Without an archive collection dedicated to Ford, it is not surprising that most existing works rely on very few primary sources and that most of Ford's work and activities before and after the *Thought News* episode have been ignored. As Peters (2008) points out, knowledge of the past is a question of media, and in particular, of archives. Without archives, history lacks its essential "primary facts," as well as the institutional legitimacy and practical conditions of its existence.

Our contribution first takes the form of a homemade archive—that is, an organized collection of documents written by Ford or closely related to his activities. Creating our own archive was not only a matter of necessity, but also an answer to Douglas's (2011, p. 9) invitation to create our own archive in order to "counter-balance the ones created by institutions." If all archives are biased, the ones created by institutions clearly lean toward disciplinary knowledge. Our own archive doubtless has many gaps, but it also has the advantage of being partly accessible online and through digital tools ([removed for peer review]), unlike institutional archives whose access is often restricted or difficult. Among the many interesting documents that we gathered are pieces of the correspondence between Ford and people such as Columbia University Librarian James H. Canfield, University of Michigan President James Burrill Angell, and economist Edward Atkinson. In addition to his correspondence, we were able to locate 30 documents authored by Ford, most of which have so far been ignored by the historiography. We also identified 91 newspaper articles, spanning from 1874 to 1918, attesting of Ford's activities. Altogether, those documents amount to around 1,500 (digitized) pages.

Third, *seek contrast instead of continuity*. Disciplinary histories often rely on narratives that emphasize historical continuity, in, for example, the maturation of one's theoretical framework or concept, the refinement of methodological tools, or the growing recognition of the discipline. Although historical continuity is real and must be acknowledged, it is also the effect of a retrospective gaze that smooths the past into a coherent narrative. Wary of continuity, media archeologists have emphasized a relation with the past that is not solely "historical" (Huthamo & Parikka, 2011; Ernst, 2012). Methodologically, media archeologists focus on "strata." They value the inner coherence of these and at the same time the contrasting qualities of each in order to understand other "strata," be they "historical" or not. Our approach is guided by a similar archeological/genealogical impetus as we focus on the inner coherence of Ford's work, situated in its historical and technological context, and on its value in contrasting disciplinary history to non-disciplinary history of communication research.

The notion of influence is also one of the main conceptual operators of historical continuity, and Ford does not escape this trap. The influence of Ford over Dewey and the Ann Arbor group (and of this group over the Chicago School, and of the Chicago School over…) is the main reason Ford finds his way into the canon. As communication scholars all know, influence processes are complicated to pin down. Not interested in drawing direct lines between Ford and contemporary research, and cautious about the question of Ford's influence, we choose to zoom in on contrasts. Instead of emphasizing the connection of Ford's work with the discipline, we focus on the opposite—that is, on the disciplinary anticlimax that we consider central to three different (yet interconnected) aspects of Ford's research.

Basing ourselves on the three principles that we have just described, we offer a historical overview of Ford's theoretical and institutional project around communication, a project that (1) sees information or "intelligence" as its core object (exemplified in "the news system"), (2) aims

to build the institutional connections that ensure the circulation of knowledge in society ("the movement of intelligence"), and (3) does so within the normative horizon of allowing society to govern itself ("the many-centered state"). These three moments testify to Ford's conception of communication as an all-encompassing problem and to his non-proto-disciplinary approach to this problem.

The News System, 1874–1887

There is one problem at the heart of Ford's work during this first period: information, or what he calls "intelligence." How does one make sure that facts are collected, organized, and circulated in the best possible way? To answer these questions, Ford turned to the main producers and brokers of facts of his time: the world of publishing and, more specifically, newspapers. Starting in the mid 1870s, Ford imagined ways of reforming the press, and he devised different iterations of a reformed "news system."

The first published work by Ford, *The Industrial Interests of Newark, N.J.* (1874), offers a painstakingly exhaustive factual portrait of the city of Newark and of its industries. The 271-page book, with plenty of illustrations and a fold-out map, is not a particularly compelling read, but it sketches three key elements of Ford's system: (1) the kind of facts that are important, (2) the way in which these facts should be organized, and (3) their value as a commodity.

For each manufacturer in Newark, Ford meticulously gathered what he would later call "primary facts," an assemblage of historical details; quantitative data (salaries, profits, production, etc.); fragments about the personal trajectories of those involved; and appreciative statements about the quality of the products. Ford's "facts" should not be misread as a narrow category of "hard" facts or purely quantitative information. They are the product of tedious

reporting work that involves "personal interviews with each manufacturer" and cross-verification (Ford, 1874, p. 3).

The central point of the book is that facts should not only be gathered, but also organized according to broad industrial sectors: iron, wood, metal… Such a division will remain an organizing principle in Ford's editorial projects, as he will later aim to create specialized publications for each of these industrial sectors. Such arrangements of facts in categories and in relation with each other are key in producing their "value." As Ford boasts: "No similar attempt has previously been made in the interest of any manufacturing city. That the effect of such a work is in general beneficial to the interests of a city, and hence, of great value to each individual manufacturer is obvious" (1874, p. 3).

Ford's interest in the collection and the organization of facts then switched to the realm of newspapers and publishing. We do not know much about his work for the *Baltimore Gazette*, the *Philadelphia Record,* and the *New York Sun*, but his tenure as the editor of *Bradstreet's*, from 1880 to 1887, granted Ford a practical opportunity to experiment with the value of facts. The periodicity of newspapers, as well as several technological developments, highlighted another aspect of what he started to theorize as the "news system": what mattered was not only the collection and the organization of facts, but also their dissemination—an aspect that is place- and time-sensitive.

Bradstreet's was launched as the journal of the Bradstreet agency, one of the main credit reporting agencies in New York. Contrary to other trade journals of the era, it did not publish prices, but aimed to seek "after the influences which make prices—the primary facts existing in relation to trade and finance" (Bryan, 1883, p. 24). For Ford, *Bradstreet's* was a "newspaper laboratory—a place in which [he] might experiment and conduct research into the state of publishing business" (Ford to J. B. Angell, April 13, 1887). Ford's experiments were connected

with the possibilities opened up by "new" media technologies such as the telegraph, the telephone, and the railway system. New media deeply interested Ford and were central to the business model of the Bradstreet agency. For its reporting, Bradstreet relied on the telegraph and the typewriter—still considered a curiosity in the 1870s—to process data through its "system" (Madison, 1974). Reporting could be supported by a massive archive that counted about four million reports by the mid 1880s, all accessible within two minutes (Bryan, 1883).

These technological developments shone a light on an important aspect of Ford's information-centered project: dissemination. Not only did facts need to be collected and organized, but they also had to circulate. Voicing the now well-known observation that electrical media allowed for unprecedented spatial reach, Ford observed that "a far-reaching newspaper advance had become possible—this, through perceiving that we now have the resultant of the locomotive and telegraph—the elimination of distance" (Ford to J. B. Angell, April 13, 1887).

The great distance erased by space-biased media was not the sole preoccupation of Ford's; time was also a concern. As the agency's network and the technologies improved, it began publishing semiannual reports, then quarterly editions, and, by the 1870s, weekly sheets. These advances were then compared to the work of a "commercial sphygmograph" monitoring the pulse of the country's economy ("Our New York Letter," 1879, p. 2), and the increased periodicity culminated in *Bradstreet's* biweekly publication. The various iterations of Ford's "news system" were fundamentally concerned with the organization of media periodicity. In 1887, Ford presented his system as a set of concentric circles that comprised weekly and daily newspapers catering to specialized or general audiences (including "ARCHIVES, a weekly newspaper presenting the documentary history of the time"— Ford to J. B. Angell, 1887, p. 7). In 1892, it was transmuted into the "intelligence triangle" that was to socialize the same "physical facts" not only in various weeklies and dailies (roughly the same as those proposed in

the "circle" model), but also in cumulative accounts meant to be published as (more durable) books.

From his "newspaper laboratory," Ford sought to put the news system into effect. He first tried to convince the president of Bradstreet, Charles F. Clark, to reorganize its publishing operations. The scheme included supplying "leading country papers with the city fact" and the launch of three "class papers": *Food*, *Metal*, and *Textiles* (Ford to E. Atkinson, October 13, 1886). For unknown reasons, these projects did not materialize at *Bradstreet's* and, in the spring of 1887, Ford was trying to implement the scheme on his own, and he toured the "chief intelligence centres" of the country in order to convince local newspapers to form a syndicate connected to his New York office-to-be (Ford to E. Atkinson, April 13, 1887). Ford teamed up with three associates to launch *Ford's Special News*, which aimed to furnish newspapers with reports on topics "not covered by the ordinary newspaper syndicates" ("What Society Is Doing," 1887, p. 5). He also planned to create an investigation department that would report on corporations—a business "not wholly unlike Bradstreet's" (Ford to E. Atkinson, October 11, 1887). The experiment lasted only a couple of weeks, as Ford "suffered a serious mental attack" and accused his partners of stealing his ideas ("The Classes," 1944, p. 258).

In 1887, *Ford's Special News* had published a particularly interesting article by historian Herbert Baxter Adams, with whom Ford remained in touch for many years and whom he called a friend. Titled "University Extension in England," the piece presented universities as "centers" radiating knowledge outside their walls and toward provincial towns. At the invitation of local organizations and based on organized local demand, university lecturers were to "go out from their comfortable cloisters to lecture to the people" (Adams, 1887, p. 748). No doubt this argument struck a chord with Ford, who was then concerned with a similar problem, as he was

trying to establish an intelligence center in New York and to forge connections with local papers across the country.

The Movement of Intelligence, 1887–1892

Following the failure of *Ford's Special News*, Ford's efforts relocated to a new battleground: universities. In his second tour of the "centers," Ford visited philosophers and political scientists at Columbia, Harvard, Yale, Johns Hopkins, and, finally, the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, where he settled between 1888 and 1892. There, it became clear that his project was not only to reform the press; it also embraced the circulation of information and knowledge in society at large—a project that Ford called the "movement of intelligence." As a result, universities and the press were to become allies, and mutually extend their activities to achieve the optimal circulation of information. But Ford's "movement of intelligence" did not exist in a vacuum, and we must situate it in its specific context: a moment of effervescence when the possible connections between journalism and the universities were starting to crystallize around the idea of college education for journalists. Against this background, Ford developed his conception of the mutual connection of journalism and universities within society.

To understand what is at stake in Ford's years at Ann Arbor, we might start with a puzzle: how did it happen that a newspaperman with no particular academic credentials spent several years at the University of Michigan, mingling with its faculty and students, rubbing shoulders with deans and presidents? Part of the answer lies in Ford's social status and life trajectory that put him in close proximity to the University of Michigan.

Ford's connections with the University of Michigan run deep and have roots in Ford's family history: Ford was born in Dundee, Michigan, 25 miles south of Ann Arbor. Ford's uncle, Corydon La Ford, was a professor of anatomy and a former dean at the University of Michigan,

where he taught for 40 years, until his death in 1894. One of Ford's brothers, also named Corydon, studied medicine at Ann Arbor. Corydon Ford was highly critical of the institution and publicly advocated for a deeper connection between the university and the community. His plea for a "clinic extension" (C. Ford, 1894, p. 165)—highly reminiscent of Baxter's "university extension"—led to his expulsion from the university. He had to complete his training at the University of Minnesota and then returned to Ann Arbor, where he was involved in the *Thought News* project. In 1883, Franklin Ford was invited by the School of Political Science to present two public lectures on municipal government. He then regularly exchanged views with Thomas M. Cooley, dean of the University of Michigan Law School and father of Charles Horton Cooley.

Ford was also acquainted with the long-time president of the university, James B. Angell. During one visit at his uncle's, in 1873, Ford had met Angell, and both men remained loosely in contact (Ford to J. B. Angell, May 10, 1882). Angell had prior experience in journalism and favored the development of connections between journalism and universities (Daniel, 2002). Despite these common interests, Angell made clear to Ford that he was not convinced by his ideas. Corydon Ford (1894) later recalled how an encounter between Ford and Angell misfired, writing that "Dr. Angell drew me aside and off some distance, by sign that he wished my private ear; facing me with his back on my brother, he tapped significantly his forehead asking if our friend was 'quite right?'" (p. 158).

Despite Angell's reaction, it is clear that journalism and its relation to universities constituted an important issue at the University of Michigan, and across the United States. Ford's courtship of Angell was in fact typical of a fin-de-siècle romance that preceded the institutionalization of journalism education as we know it. The University of Michigan was the stage of some early initiatives: in the 1880s, Moses Coit Tyler—an ex-journalist and

acquaintance of Franklin Ford—wished to introduce a course in journalism, but he left for Cornell before taking up the scheme. In the spring of 1891, Fred Newton Scott began teaching "Rapid Writing," a course that included elements of newswriting. Throughout the 1880s, Michigan editors and the Michigan State Press Association cultivated their relationship with the university and lobbied for new connections, including the creation of independent schools of journalism and journalism departments (Beal, 1888).

Ford unquestionably came *from* the world of newspapers, but he was not an ambassador for journalism education. His call for a reorganization of newspapers in a systematized and "scientific" way did not involve journalism as a specialized body of knowledge (i.e., something that could be taught in universities). Ford did not worry about the professionalization of journalism because journalists are almost superfluous in his system: facts and intelligence were to circulate on their own in the different parts of the "social organism." This does not mean that human agents completely disappeared in a self-aware machinery, but simply that journalists were to assume a rather limited role. The reporting side was to be taken on by "the social organism itself"—that is, by everyone in every field of activity. "The new journalism," Ford wrote, "is to build from the soil—its organic base in the physical commerce" (1892, p. 12). In that regard, Ford was particularly attached to the figure of the "crop reporter" who "registers his county fact" (p. 12). "The citizen king is the crop reporter," Ford added, and crop reports could be "taken by telephone in a few hours" (p. 12). Therein lies the central but limited role and mission of journalists: they were "the receiver and transmitter of the price-making fact" (p. 16).

Ford's plea to consider facts in their relation to the "whole" translated in the university context as nothing less than "full social inquiry" (1892, p. 5). That function fell to "truth-men … having the right zeal for inquiry" (p. 5). Universities were a fertile ground to find such "truth-men"—a role embraced by Dewey and the others in the *Thought News* project. It should be noted

that this role is not equivalent to that of experts with specialized knowledge (who nevertheless had a role to play in Ford's system—notably, to feed specialized facts to the "class news" publications). Ford saw "truth-men" as generalists, who understood "the whole" and brought facts into relations. As noted by an article published in the *Detroit Evening News*, Ford "always want[ed] to bring everything 'into relation'" ("Who Is He?," 1896, p. 3).

In assigning that specific role to "truth-men" in universities, Ford also used the "movement of intelligence" as an opportunity to reevaluate the university's role in public life. Developing the idea of the "university extension" put forward by Adams, Ford wanted to open up the universities to civil society. He regretted the "remaining chasm between the university and life—its isolation from the people" (1892, p. 54) and wanted to break down the walls of the ivory tower. In his plea for a "distributive university" (Ford to J. B. Angell, April 13, 1887) or "integrated university" (Ford, 1892, p. 36), Ford also detailed the organizational and financial consequences of such a plan, arguing that universities would easily sustain themselves by raising taxes, a move that would be supported by the population.

The idea of a university connected to society was welcome at the University of Michigan. In the 1880s, it was rapidly growing and had just topped Harvard as the largest in the country (Daniel, 2002). The institution was then committed to an ideal of public service that was different from those of more research-oriented and privately endowed institutions such as Johns Hopkins. Ford saw this as a direct result of different financing: "without great money endowments, the University of Michigan has had no recourse save to meet the incoming life through outward movement" (Ford, 1892, p. 57). The University of Michigan was thus a fertile ground for experimenting with the "connection with life," an openness that may explain why Ford found some allies there.

But Ford's success in finding allies was, again, short lived. Corydon Ford (Ford's brother, who was also involved in *Thought News*) lamented that President Angell "stood against progress on campus," and that John Dewey was prevented from fully committing to the "movement of intelligence": "clogged of the dead institution, he could not move; his salary meant that he was to keep quiet as to the overturning concepts" (C. Ford, 1894, p. 175). Ford's ties with the University of Michigan seemed definitely severed after the failure of *Thought News* in 1892, but he did not give up on including universities in his plans. After spending a couple of years in Detroit, where he operated *Ford's News Office* and was involved in the publication of *The Optimist*, a short-lived magazine deemed to be "the most revolting gutter filth under the name of literature" ("Clacks," 1896, p. 123), Ford settled in New York and resumed the organization of the "University Centre." With the help of Head Librarian James H. Canfield, Ford had an office set up for him at Columbia University, where he inquired into "the working relation between the news centre and the university" (Ford to J. H. Canfield, December 17, 1904). But universities were not the only center of gravity of his projects, and, after he left Ann Arbor in 1892, Ford's plan became more ambitious.

The Many-Centered State, 1901–1918

As we have seen, Ford's trajectory looks like the successive annexation of activity sectors. The project remains the same at heart: ensuring the flow of knowledge and information through the creation of "intelligence" centers and through their connection to the "social organism." One iteration of the project focused on the world of the press and publishing; the second also included universities. At the turn of the 20th century, Ford's project became even more wide ranging: it comprised schools, finance and credit, transportation, and also politics. In the last part of his

career and of his life, Ford (1905, 1907) spelled out more explicitly than ever the normative and political horizon of his projects: information regulates society.

From the outset, Ford's news system was a means to self-regulate the social organism. "Primary facts" about the cotton crop, interpreted by experts, served to set a fair price that shaped the relations of producers, merchants, customers, and so on. By the mid 1900s, Ford clearly outlined the political implications of this argument by regularly using the notion of "government" and by pointing to the central role of inquiry in governing. For him, "governments" as we know them, be they municipal, state or national governments, were distorting and preventing the self-government of the social organism. He gave the example of the milk industry, the self-governing of which was prevented by State regulations and bureaucratic inspections. According to Ford, the interest of the State regulators "is that the milk shall stand in constant need of inspection," and is different from the common interest of producers, distributors, and customers, which is to be discovered by inquiry and should govern their relations. In this sense, "science, exact inquiry is the source of law and government" (Ford, 1910). In a piece aptly titled "News as Government," Ford therefore concludes that in a "perfect exchange of news…there would be no need of law, and there would be a perfect ideal of liberty" (Ford, 1907, p. 4).

Near the end of his life, Ford explicitly stated what he pursued: "the organization of the State under absolute communication." The intertwined developments of credit, banking, and news that Ford observed amounted to "a new and revolutionary government" (Ford, 1909). At this point, Ford's system was no longer about building *one* central organization, but rather about developing and organizing the *many* centers that already existed organically. Ford (1904, 1909) contrasted the new "industrial state" with the old "military state." The shift from the former to the latter represents a shift in the locus of political power, which became multiple: the new

"industrial state" had many centers—among which the Credit System and the News System, but also the Railway Traffic Association, the University Center, and the like—whereas in the old "military state" all political authority was lodged in the one center, be it the king or the parliament. In that sense, Ford's project looked like a network (a term he never uses) with a few important hubs that were all interconnected and innervating the social organism. In a letter to Judge John F. Dillon, Ford noted that his terminology had "seemed strange and, therefore, difficult to some," but rejoiced in seeing his ideas "fortified by a background of European opinion," noting a proximity with a metaphor used by British legal history scholar Frederic William Maitland, that of a passage from a "unicellular" to a "multicellular State" (Ford, 1904).

Ford did not advocate for anarchism or for a political revolution. He wanted to implement incremental and practical changes that would allow news to play a greater role in government. For example, Ford wished to create a New York "City News Office" through which "the facts [could] be co-ordinated and so transformed into a governing force" (1901, p. 11). Such an office was necessary in view of the advances of the trade press and the problems raised by the diversification of its publications. The envisioned News Office would establish "co-operative relation[s]" with existing technical journals (such as the *Real Estate Record and Guide* and *Electrical World*). The News Office would aim at connecting such papers into a common "system," just as independent railroads gave way to a common railway system (1901).

He also set up various bureaus and offices that were to put the plan in action: they were called "Fords—The News Clearing House," "General News Office," or simply "Fords." He also wrote about politics, and particularly municipal government—an area of expertise that he had touched upon at the beginning of his career (Ford, 1879). His 1903 plan for municipal reform is all about the central role of organized inquiry in municipal government. He writes: "To effect any reform in government is to extend the organization of science. The measure of all

government, or social regulation, is always the extent to which exact inquiry is trained upon the object" (p. 22).

In this last period of his life, it seems that Ford did not find many allies. His various offices and bureaus existed mostly in the performative space of his letterheads. He died at his New York home on June 30, 1918. Obituaries noted that he was a "widely known newspaperman," and also an "authority on industrial and banking problems" ("Franklin Ford Dead," 1918, p. 11). He was seventy.

The Lessons of a Pre-Disciplinary Moment for a Post-Discipline

In the beginning of this paper, we argued that the case of Franklin Ford is useful for thinking about communication history outside of the realm of a discipline. Reducing the disciplinary narrative to some of its key features is necessarily an oversimplification, but communication history (be it canonical or critical, a legitimizing memory-building efforts or a professionalized "new" history) often gravitates toward certain key elements: the interest in media effects (strong or limited); a specific institutional assemblage that is characterized by a tension between vocational schools and a would-be academic field modeled after the social sciences; and a normative horizon that is preoccupied with the power of media and communication over individual minds, opinions, and attitudes in democratic societies. The different aspects of Ford's project that we have described above effectively diverge from this narrative.

With the "news system," we have shown that the primary object of Ford's theoretical project is not media content and effects; rather, it is the circulation of "intelligence." A substantial part of communication research is primarily concerned with media messages, the content of which can be reshaped at will to persuade, to influence, and to change individual

opinions and attitudes. In Ford's system, the "content" of media is not malleable. Facts cannot be right or wrong, persuasive or not: facts are just facts. Intelligence emerges "from the soil," and its ability to reflect reality is not questioned. However, facts are not mere data points; they are heterogeneous assemblages that require fine-grained, qualitative knowledge of the phenomena that are described. In that regard, Ford displays a rather broad notion of what constitutes information and an interest in the accumulation and classification of facts that is quite typical of the 19th century (Cmiel & Peters, 2020).

Taking intelligence as its main object, Ford is not particularly concerned with changes in the opinions of individuals. The level of analysis is broader, and the news system is infrastructural at heart: what matters about intelligence is that it circulates freely and adequately, both in space and time, thanks to "new" technologies. It is when it is put into movement, into relation with the "whole," that Ford's intelligence becomes meaningful and valuable.

Our discussion of the "movement of intelligence" has shown that the institutional form that Ford favored was not a disciplinary niche for media and communication within universities, but rather a radical reconfiguration of two institutions (the press and universities) to make them better connected with their societal raison d'être. Ford's project can withstand being pulled simultaneously by two forces that would end up shaping communication-as-a-discipline: the existence of vocational schools and the subsequent struggle of those who tried to bring communication into disciplinary existence despite this vocational deadweight. Ford simply did not see the point of professionalization and college education for journalists, as they occupied the rather limited role of fact recorders in his project. Moreover, Ford did not advocate for the creation of another disciplinary niche within the walls of universities, because he wanted to achieve the opposite: the de-compartmentalization of knowledge and its circulation across institutional borders. Ford's (1892) plea for "full social inquiry" constituted a reaction against the

compartmentalization associated with the rise of modern disciplinary knowledge and methods (Rockefeller, 1991). This point is clearly developed in *Outlines of a Critical Theory of Ethics* (1891), which Dewey dedicated to Ford: "The intellectual movements of the last four or five centuries have resulted in an infinite specialization in methods and in an immense accumulation of fact […] since the diversity of fact and of method has not yet been brought to an organic unity, that their social bearing is not yet realized" (p. 126).

With the "many-centered state," we have shown that Ford's normative horizon is not the control of minds or of public opinion in a liberal democracy, but rather the belief that better communication would allow society to govern itself, in the general interest. Ford's take on information has clear mercantile undertones: "Buy your facts at Fords!" was to be the motto of the news bureaus that could sell personalized reports to anyone interested. But this conception of information as a commodity does not imply an adhesion to some form of information capitalism: Ford was attuned to progressive and socialist ideas, and he repeatedly identified the "general interest" as the ultimate goal of his projects. The "free" circulation of intelligence and the organized inquiry were to benefit the people, the press, universities, merchants, manufacturers, schools, and municipal governments, but also advertisers, or the banking and transportation systems. After all, all these things were "in relation" in his organicist view: improvements in the "social organism" necessarily concern the parts *and* the whole.

By contrasting disciplinary narratives with Ford's projects, we do not mean to say that one is right and the other is wrong. To some extent, Ford's vision was naïve and has achieved only meager success. The three moments that we have described, however, testify to Ford's conception of communication as an all-encompassing problem and to his non-proto-disciplinary approach to this problem. Just as post-disciplines crystallize around problems that cut across society, such as environment or gender (Waisbord, 2019), Ford's project displays an ambitious

intellectual engagement with real-world social problems. Ford shows us (a version of) what communication as a non-discipline looks like, which may be of interest in our post-disciplinary context.

In the post-disciplinary context, it is also possible that substantial historical work does not matter anymore for communication scholars, freed from the need for grand unifying narratives (Pooley, 2021). The long-standing neglect of the intellectual history would once again prevail, and the rich intellectual developments made since the mid 1990s would appear as a kind of historical anomaly and join the vast cemetery of the fleeting intellectual fashions that marked the study of communication, alongside "cybernetics," the "behavioral sciences," and works on the "information society." By divorcing communication history from the imperatives of disciplinary memory, we aim to reaffirm the importance of the intellectual history of communication and to show that it is salutary to imagine forms of communication research that do not fit into the traditional disciplinary corset.

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