

Chapter 11. Pictures from an Institution

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A Harvard and Columbia graduate, Jefferson Pooley departed from his advisors' expectations and taught successfully at a small liberal arts college in Pennsylvania. He also developed a research and publishing career with special achievement in launching new digital publishing sites in communication studies. After two decades, he is launching a new path, combining teaching at the University of Pennsylvania with developing publications and archival sites.

The year 2024 was the right year to take stock of a career that, rather suddenly, had taken a sharp turn. That spring I left my full professor position at Muhlenberg College after 20 years. I had spent my entire teaching career at Muhlenberg, a small liberal arts institution in Allentown, PA, since joining the faculty as an ABD (all-but-dissertation) graduate student in 2003. In the two-decade interval on Muhlenberg's faculty, I had balanced the college's steep teaching demands with an evolving research program. A media scholar by training, my course portfolio reflected the topical breadth demanded by undergraduate teaching: Media & Society, Popular Communication, and the like.

My main scholarly preoccupation was always a partial mismatch; from the dissertation onward, my work centered on the history of communication research, and the would-be discipline's memory of itself. By 2010 my interests broadened to the history of social science. Neither of these were fit topics for an undergrad media & communication major. My work life had become bifurcated, divided between Muhlenberg and the invisible colleges that claimed my research attention. Most of my campus colleagues directed their energies to the brick-and-mortar college. They were, in Alvin Gouldner's (1957) terms, "locals"—and I had become a "cosmopolitan."

Then I added a third track when I founded a small open-access press in 2018. I remained a committed teacher and a scholar, and now I was an editor and publisher, too. Since the mid-2010s I had taken to writing about scholarly communication in what felt to me like an extension of my other interests. The press was my attempt to learn about the academic publishing ecosystem from the inside.

Despite negotiating a reduced teaching load and attendant pay cut, I found the triple burden—the juggling act—to exceed my capacities. Coming off a department chair stint in 2019, I started to think seriously about leaving my teaching post. The pandemic, meanwhile, accelerated financial pressures on non-elite liberal arts colleges like Muhlenberg. A new normal of austerity, contraction, and sapped morale made the campus increasingly unpleasant.

So in spring 2024 I left the only academic job I've ever held, after a year's experimental leave. I had lined up paid work: archival projects at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication and a part-time fellowship gig at Knowledge Futures, a nonprofit developer of scholarly publishing software. The idea was for those roles to subsidize my research and editorial commitments, with the prospect of additional income from the press.

As it happened, I couldn't quite make up my already-reduced Muhlenberg salary, although I earned enough to get by—together with my wife's income as a professor at nearby Lehigh University. In part to retain an academic title, I reached out to the Annenberg School with an offer to teach as an adjunct. Here I am, in the classroom again, teaching still-broad courses to undergraduates. The proportions have changed, but I find myself working, again, on three tracks, as a 48-year-old para-academic.

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I grew up in Silicon Valley, or slightly above it, in a hilly, faux-pastoral town separated from Palo Alto by the Stanford campus and the university's open-space preserves. I had strangely deep Palo Alto roots on my mother's side: Her grandparents owned a 17-acre chicken farm in the city, sold off and developed long before I was born. My mother was raised instead in Marin County, north of San Francisco. Her father, a radiologist and closeted gay man, divorced her mother, a severe manic-depressive, when my mother was in her teens. She met my father in Paris, while the two were studying abroad as college juniors—in the 1968-1969 academic year, as it happened. He was from Wilmington, Delaware, the fourth of four boys in what was an intellectual household of sorts.

His father had a high school education and worked in an electric plant. But this grandfather was an autodidact and avid reader, and his four sons were good students. One became a professor of Chinese history, another was an English teacher, and the third a self-styled inventor.

My father went to law school at Columbia, living with my mother on food stamps near campus. A summer stint at a Palo Alto law firm led to a post-graduation job; this was the early 1970s, when the region won its Silicon Valley moniker. He specialized in trade secrets and made a successful career representing litigious tech firms. Teaching part-time at Berkeley's Boalt Hall, he authored treatises on trade secrets law and later took up a post as deputy director of the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) in Geneva. He was, as an extension of this work, something of an IP maximalist—demanding, for example, that my brother and I purchase video games that we had copied from friends. My own involvement in copyleft and open-access worlds has, I now recognize, a Freudian character.

My mother worked as a travel agent and raised my brother and me as a single parent after she and my father divorced in my early childhood—though we divided time between the two households. I was a serious student and voracious

reader. Soon I was taking a cross-country road trip to study at Harvard, where I became interested in the social impact of the mass media.

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It turns out I was lucky that Harvard had no communication or media studies program. At the time, the study of media was divided between researchers in the organized field—an aspirational discipline often called “communication”—and scholars from everywhere else. The departments and schools of communication that housed the first group were, then as now, shunned by most elite universities, including Harvard.¹

The field was established, instead, at big Midwestern land-grant universities after World War II, often by burrowing from within existing journalism schools and speech departments (Chaffee & Rogers, 1997). These units suffered because they flourished, their lecture halls filled with future ad men and broadcasters, who—on the plus side—bankrolled each school’s PhD programs and research-faculty hires.

The same undergrads, though, sapped the discipline’s legitimacy, hellbent as they were to get on the other side of the glass. Often relegated to the university’s professional-school margins, self-identified communication scholars had jobs but no respect (Pooley, 2011). Theirs was a Faustian pact, the field’s vocational riches traded for prestige and coherence. UK sociologist of media Jeremy Tunstall (1983) captured this point 40 years ago: “The fact that a single individual can teach courses in, say, magazine editing and research techniques in social psychology is a tribute to human adaptability, not to a well-conceived academic discipline” (p. 92).

So the discipline-bound scholars toiled away in well-heeled obscurity and—to some extent—self-reinforced mediocrity. The *other* media scholars were sprinkled throughout the mainline departments at the university’s reputational core. This was the media and communication studies that I encountered at Harvard, through a patchwork of courses in English, comparative literature, and political science. I liked the self-stitched approach enough that I aimed for something similarly undisciplined when I searched for graduate programs a few years later. And this issue—the loose fit between the organized discipline and the intellectual field—would become my main scholarly preoccupation.

I majored in Harvard’s social studies, a cross-departmental program modeled after Oxford’s philosophy, politics, and economics (PPE) degree, which combined heavy doses of social theory with a license to graze across six or seven social science and humanities disciplines. I was, at the same time, a member of a tiny

1. The exceptions—departments or schools at Stanford, Cornell, and the University of Pennsylvania—each have interesting histories that explain their rule-proving exception status.

community of campus radicals. While writing for, and helping to edit, Harvard's left-wing monthly *Perspective*, I became disillusioned by my fellow students' apathy. I began to steer my courses to those English and sociology offerings centered on the mass media, having convinced myself that television and advertising explained the campus-wide indifference to politics. My senior thesis (Pooley, 1998) took up the issue from a different angle, criticizing the then-voguish "public journalism" movement for its willful embrace of a useful fiction—that of a flourishing public sphere.

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After graduation I moved to New York City with no job and no debt. My fiancé, a Wellesley student with whom I recently celebrated a 25th wedding anniversary, was jobless and debtless too. Back in Boston, I had an interview with the legal-media mini-mogul Steven Brill, for an editorial assistant post at his soon-to-launch magazine *Brill's Content*. He and Michael Kramer, his editor, confronted me about a misspelling in my resume; my panicked retort was to point to two typos in their *Harvard Crimson* ad. They apparently liked the pushback and offered me the job a few weeks later.

My run as a journalist was brief, though the magazine—*Brill's Content* focused on the media—served as a popular proxy for media scholarship. I was promoted to staff writer, then columnist, though my column—aptly titled "Media Studies" and centered on recent media scholarship—was short-lived. The truth is that I was poorly equipped, dispositionally, for journalism. The role had me calling up seasoned *New York Times* reporters to question their stories; they did not hide their disdain. You can't do without intestinal fortitude in adversarial journalism—especially if your subjects are adversarial journalists themselves. So I decided, early in my *Brill's* tenure, to apply to graduate school.

My search was for a doctoral program in media and communication, with the aim to find one that would mimic the department-less freedom of Harvard's social studies major. Columbia's brand-new, cross-disciplinary PhD in communications was, in that key respect, a match. Housed in the Journalism School and governed by a university-wide committee, the program had few dedicated courses and a skeleton staff. The idea, instead, was to sample from Columbia's media-related offerings across the arts and sciences departments and professional schools. I took that program's flexibility—really a form of benign neglect—as license to roam further still, via New York City's inter-university doctoral consortium. In the end, over half my coursework was completed at NYU and the New School; I sought out scholars whose work I admired, including Steven Lukes, Todd Gitlin, Richard Sennett, and Craig Calhoun—all in NYU's sociology department—and philosopher Charles Taylor, then spending an annual, condensed fall term at the New School. It was, in effect, social studies all over again.

I arrived at Columbia determined to work on media and the problem of consent. It was the question that had motivated my leftist activism as an undergraduate: Why do people consent to their own exploitation? That's the framing used by a loose lineage of so-called Western Marxists who, in effect, blamed culture and the mass media—by distracting, drugging, or diverting the masses' attention.

I was enamored with these figures, devouring books by Perry Anderson (1976) and Martin Jay (1984), among others. I arranged for an independent study with Gitlin, who had—in his post-New Left, late-1970s work (Gitlin, 1978, 1980)—explained the U.S. system's containment of protest through a Gramscian lens. Gitlin, I soon learned, had long since drifted to the center-left and stated, flatly, that these questions held no interest; the *mensch* that he was, he agreed to re-read this material with me anyway. My master's thesis (Pooley, 2001) was a half-baked attempt to revive this tradition for critical media studies. Its first sentence—"It cannot be stated too bluntly: Everything hinges on the rescue of false consciousness, that dangerous and indispensable idea" (p. 1)—gives a sense of its earnest portentousness.

The topic brought me, circuitously, to the work I'm still doing now, on the history of media research within the history of the social sciences. I pitched a dissertation on the history of leftist media and cultural analysis, with the stated aim to recover a theory of "communicated quiescence" shorn of the Marxist tradition's epistemological hubris.

As I began to read in the historiography of U.S. communication research, I was struck by its thin, justificatory character. One strand of the literature provided, unblushingly, an origin myth for the aspirant discipline, complete with a quartet of founding fathers. Other part-time historians—most of them still active in what was, after all, a young field—drafted usable pasts to supply a legitimate lineage for their favored approach. Another common tack was to deploy history to assign contemporary disputants to a discredited past.

The most pervasive strategy, I found, was to draw a sharp, unflattering contrast to a body of predecessor-scholarship—not just in literature-review summaries, but also in core articles and book-length historiography. As a result—or so I thought then—the field's remembered past was strikingly airbrushed and whiggish, even relative to the history of mainline social sciences. I had a theory that the field's youthful insecurity raised the legitimation stakes. Senior figures in the field, I concluded, had used history to buttress a discipline with bricks but no mortar.²

So I changed course. I swapped the leftist project for a history of the field's memory. I selected what was among the field's most durable narratives: the claim that rigorous social science during and after World War II had supplanted a naive and impressionistic interwar belief in media potency. Sophisticated studies

2. One uncomfortable irony was that a majority of my committee members were themselves field-historians in this mold: my advisor, Columbia journalism scholar James W. Carey; Gitlin; and Elihu Katz.

conducted at Columbia's Bureau of Applied Social Research, the story went, had shown that the effects of mass media tend to be weaker than previously held. This powerful-to-limited-effects storyline was adopted by the newly organized discipline of communication, busy lodging itself in U.S. journalism schools in the 1950s and 1960s. My dissertation (Pooley, 2006a) traced the formation and uptake of that two-stage plot, showing how shorthands for naive faith in media potency—analogized to “magic bullets” and “hypodermic needles”—remain textbook staples (see also Pooley, 2006b).

The fact is, however, I was already three years into a full-time teaching post by the time I defended the dissertation in 2006. I had, in a way, stumbled into the job at Muhlenberg College. Slated to give an informal talk to a class session, invited by Muhlenberg's Sue Curry Jansen after a serendipitous email exchange, I saw a job ad for the college's communication department on a listserv. Throughout graduate school I had harbored an under-informed, and fully romantic, aspiration to teach at a liberal arts college. At the same time, as a budding historian of the field, I knew that most good liberal arts colleges had no program—on the grounds of communication's grubby vocationalism. So when the Muhlenberg ad appeared, I wrote to Jansen to withdraw from the class talk, opting to apply instead. (In the end, and fittingly, the session was restored, in the form of a teaching demonstration.)

The job market in media and communication research was relatively healthy—and remains so today, mainly because of all those PR and advertising students, who underwrite the enterprise. It's a lumpy market, however, divided into three principal buckets: practitioners (journalists and film-makers, for example), social scientists, and humanities scholars—the latter typically products of film studies or English programs. The practitioners and social-science-inclined communication PhDs have it better, while the film scholars face prospects akin to those in the main humanities fields. I presented as a social scientist, one of the reasons I was able to secure an ABD post.

I would go on to spend two decades at Muhlenberg. In many ways, the school matched my image of a liberal arts college: a manicured residential campus, small classes (sometimes held on the grass), and colleague-friendships across the divisional spread. I did struggle to carve out time for scholarship, as reflected in the delayed dissertation. I spent a summer in State College, leaving my pregnant wife in Allentown for an isolated apartment close to a good library, writing furiously against Muhlenberg's too-tolerant three-year ABD allowance. I finished in time and proceeded to win—with sometimes-absurd tricks—time for research and writing. Steep service demands, the 3-3 teaching load, and norms (good ones) to spend lots of time with students beyond class made it an ongoing challenge, especially for a tortured writer like me.

The teaching was the main reward. Like many liberal arts faculty, my coursework was pitched broad and shallow, with no obvious link to my research agenda. This worked well for me, with course offerings like *Media & Society*, *Popular*

Communication, and (my favorite) Social Media & the Self. Many of the students were excellent, most of the rest seemed to care, and all of them had signed on for the discussion-based format and close faculty contact.

I was lucky to join Muhlenberg with an exceptional cohort of new hires, who remain my closest friends at the school: a neuroscientist, sociologist, dancer, and political scientist. One of the pleasures of a small residential campus is that faculty socializing, reading groups, and even collaborations are easy to find or initiate. My department (of communication, soon renamed to media & communication) was warm and supportive, anchored by the quietly remarkable Jansen—whose friendship and collaboration I treasure to this day.

I sometimes wondered if my position at a non-elite, “teaching” college imposed a credibility penalty. Perhaps, but I never saw any real evidence, and here again I suspect that the field’s loose and undisciplined character played its part. There’s never been a recognized hierarchy of departments nor journals in communication research, and since many elite institutions have long shunned the field, the spillover effects of university prestige were not widely felt.

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In 2009 I was invited to join a paper with a historian of social science, Mark Solovey, to present at a Duke symposium on the fraught relationship between economics and the other social sciences (Pooley & Solovey, 2010). The event introduced me to an inchoate community of scholars—some trained in social science disciplines, others intellectual historians, still others historians of science—working on the history of the social sciences. The symposium led to an invitation to join a grant-funded project directed by Philippe Fontaine, a French historian of economics. That project, spanning five years, involved working with a handful of others on the postwar history of the social sciences at five U.S. universities—funded, improbably, by the French government.

In 2013, as the project wound down, Fontaine approached me and another historian, Jamie Cohen-Cole, about launching a small scholarly association to focus on the history of the postwar social sciences. We established the Society for the History of Recent Social Science (HISRESS), which has sponsored annual conferences ever since. Those meetings, and other events and commissioned papers, brought me further into this polyglot quasi-community. My writing continued to focus on the history of communication research, but now within the backdrop of the other social sciences. Fontaine and I organized a series of workshops with the aim to produce an edited collection on the various social sciences’ entanglements with U.S. social problems in the postwar (Fontaine & Pooley, 2021).

More recently, Fontaine, Cohen-Cole, and I launched a new journal, *History of Social Science*, to provide a publishing outlet for the motley group of historians working on these topics. My scholarly agenda has been re-framed as a result of these encounters with the wider social science aperture. Among other things,

I have studied the history of the so-called “behavioral sciences” movement in the 1950s U.S. academy, with special interest in the complex entanglements with funders and the national security state (e.g., Pooley, 2016a).

My interests extended, meanwhile, in a related but largely a-historical direction. In the mid-2010s I started to write public-facing essays on the scholarly publishing ecosystem (e.g., Pooley, 2015, 2016b). I was alarmed about the big-five corporate publishers’ cynical embrace of the open access movement. The likes of Elsevier and Springer had latched onto a funding mechanism, the article processing charge (APC), that only grant-rich scientists and academics at a handful of wealthy universities could afford. This struck me as the old tolled system seen through a camera obscura, with author exclusions traded for barriers to readers. The open access movement had been hijacked.

In the balance of the decade, I came to feel that my standing, and also my knowledge, was limited by a lack of experience in the publishing trenches. In 2018 I founded a small book publisher, *mediastudies.press*, predicated on the idea that scholarly publishing should charge neither authors nor readers (Pooley, 2024). It was, in the bizarre nomenclature of this industry, a “diamond” open access press—one inspired by the example of other scholar-led presses that had, around the same time, banded together in a mutual-aid group. I continued to blog and write essays about what I had come to see as the “APC scourge,” but now as a publisher, with skin in the game. Running a small press was a month-by-month education in the mechanics of 21st-century publishing—an exhilarating and demanding regimen. We started publishing in 2020, the same year I co-founded the *History of Media Studies* journal under the press’ auspices.

Here I was, in the midst of the pandemic, wearing too many hats. It all made sense to me: I was, I told myself, a sociologist of academic knowledge, and also a (part-time) media scholar. And a college teacher.

Year-by-year, Muhlenberg’s financial position weakened, until it cratered: enormous deficits, steep enrollment declines, and a drastic fall-off in “net tuition”—the amount an average student pays after competitive discounting. Most other liberal arts colleges in the Northeast and Midwest, except the most prestigious and well-endowed, are quietly suffering in the same way (with regular closures just the iceberg’s tip).

Each non-elite liberal arts college is, in effect, the enemy of all the others, in what amounts to a mutual suicide pact: desperate tuition discounting to win deposits among the fast-shrinking pool of prospective students, whose (often well-off) parents have learned to play for the best deal. Savage cuts and shameless revenue gambits lead, stepwise, to a degraded academic experience, which makes the place less appealing to the remaining prospects who are—thanks to the new admissions laxity—less qualified in turn.

I was already a strange duck at Muhlenberg. A handful of my colleagues were active scholars, against all odds. But most, by choice and by adjustment, were preoccupied with the mounting labors that the institution—now hollowed

out—demanded. Here I was, trying to juggle the teaching, the press, the journal editing, and hastily made writing commitments. It was not sustainable, as my long-suffering wife would attest.

So I left my tenured, full professor post at Muhlenberg this year. There was no plum Research 1 position waiting for me. What I have done, instead, is to mix paid work at Penn's Annenberg—an oral history project and related consulting—with the part-time position at Knowledge Futures, the platform that hosts my press. And I have picked up adjunct teaching at Annenberg, with more to come. So I am of the academy, if not exactly in it.

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