Being *Undisciplined*; or Traversing Disciplinary Configurations in Social Science and Humanities Databases: Conceptual Considerations for Interdisciplinarity and Multidisciplinarity

Jean-Pierre V. M. Hérubel, Associate Professor of Library Science, Purdue University

International Federation of Library Associations, Social Science Libraries Section, Satellite Conference

Disappearing disciplinary borders in the social science library - global studies or sea change?

University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada
6-7 August 2008

Sponsored by:

CQ Press
Worldwide Universities Network (WUN)
Center for Global Studies (CGS) at the University of Illinois
University of Illinois Library
University of Toronto Libraries
Faculty Information Studies, University of Toronto

Abstract: Within the domain of social sciences, various distinctive disciplines occupy positions of respective intellectual authority. Disciplinary orientations capture and configure scholarly research and eventual publication according to their respective definitions of what constitutes disciplinary knowledge. Using a typology of disciplinary definitions, this examination attempts to frame and utilize an approach to traversing various databases in the humanities and the social sciences to illustrate the need to both utilize traditional disciplinary definitions, and to thinking beyond demarcated disciplinary boundaries to capture the essence of scholarly research and publication. Examples from art, communication, and philosophy topics that fall within the purview of social sciences subject orientation, i.e. art markets, international news and information flow, or philosophy of technology and bioethics, form the basis for discussion. Intellectually traversing disciplinary boundaries offers richer approaches to seeking information, yielding richer results, and perforce greater utilization of disciplinary knowledge.

I. Introduction and Rationale

Before starting, several important definitions need to be understood, so that one

has an awareness and appreciation for how knowledge is created, and published in the

social sciences and humanities, and eventually appearing in databases. Knowledge is

best characterized as amorphous until it is given form by scholars--in the social

sciences and humanities this is accomplished through their respective disciplines, i.e.

history, philosophy, political science, etc. The easiest way to demonstrate this is

morphologically-the social sciences and humanities constitute domains of knowledge;

that is, they are large groupings of phenomena. To make sense and be useful, they are

broken up into various groupings called disciplines, i.e. sociology, anthropology, or

economics, etc. Courses and research are often based in such disciplines, where

information and knowledge generation, valuation, and eventual dissemination occur.[i]

The following operative and general propositions offer guidance for this discussion.

Each of these examples has specializations, better known as subdisciplines, i.e.

economic history, political history, or the history of science under the discipline of

history, ethics, logic, social philosophy, or the philosophy of science under philosophy. All disciplines have subdisciplines, reflecting the nature of specializations in the university. Their different approaches to information and knowledge are fundamentally characteristics derived from consensus-driven protocols, vetted systems of valuation, all grounded with epistemologically acknowledged, accepted and maintained by adherence to disciplinary allegiance.[ii] Each disciplinary morphology conforms to such operative approaches to discovery of knowledge and to its dissemination; techniques, perspectives, and execution of research all adhere to and mutually support these disciplinary prerogatives.[iii] Knowledge, not a product of each discipline's special fix on domains of knowledge will not constitute verifiable and legitimate knowledge. Each discipline functions as the special preserve, ascribing intellectual worth to knowledge that epistemologically subscribes to these respective disciplinary protocols.[iv] For example, sociologists approach their research differently from anthropologists, and historians differ from literary scholars, in how they discover knowledge and in how they write about their findings, which later become published scholarship, the very books, journals, and vetted websites one uses for researching and writing.[v]

To effectively understand the nature of contemporary social sciences and indeed, the nature of why the social sciences have become fluid, one needs to appreciate the nature of disciplinary boundaries and how they are represented in databases. Databases, as either bibliographic utilities, or as full text repositories of vetted information, perforce, conform to our perceptions of what constitutes bone fide disciplines. Often, databases are seen to reflect, mirror-like the true discipline and its representative knowledge, i.e. *America: History and Life*, *Art Bibliographies Modern,*

ArtIndex, *Anthropology Plus***,** ComAbstracts, *Historical Abstracts**,** Philosopher's Index**,***

Sociological Abstracts etc. Each discipline is represented by its own database, upon

which disciplinary researchers base their primary search strategies. Even

multidisciplinary databases such as *Arts and Humanities Citation Index***, a**nd *Social*

Sciences Citation Index, or databases provided by Wilson Indexes, conform to the

necessary provision of disciplinary-based indexes to effectively cover the disciplinary

topography.[vi] To be certain, these database services are incredibly useful and

necessary for the provision of information and knowledge emanating from disciplinary

activity; however, the need to transcend disciplinary orientation and thinking is required

if effective information seeking and appropriation of critical knowledge is to capture

emerging research discoveries and other approaches to disciplinary orientations. As

knowledge has become more multidisciplinary, and interdisciplinary, databases need to

be seen as collection of possible approaches to knowledge that may represent

knowledge that may be critical to research, not identifying itself as adhering to a single

disciplinary orientation. As research has become more dynamic it crosses various

boundaries, especially as it interacts with other forms of knowledge in relation to other

disciplines, especially those of the humanities.[vii] Where more and more intellectual and

epistemological divisions begin to blur, and open disciplinary definitions, such

phenomena can be observed in databases.

Disciplinary Morphologies and Definitions

        This approach will rely upon the following general typology for illustration.[viii]

Disciplines constitute respective morphologies that are animated by consensus,

particular perspectives, methodologies and techniques, as well as philosophies that verify knowledge. In actual presentation, the fluidity of definition will be explored as nuance assumes greater visibility in disciplinary databases entertained in this discussion:

Disciplinary Morphology and Typology

Disciplinarity--A highly honed approach with focused objectives, and specific methodological and technical characteristics. Specialized nomenclature and consensus-driven protocols and procedures are maintained.

Examples--History, Philosophy

Sub-disciplinarity—Highly specialized approach within a disciplinary framework concentrating on specific objectives, utilizing unique methodologies and techniques. Often, a particularistic area of interest is considered within the greater spectrum of a discipline.

Examples—Environmental History, Philosophy of Science

Multidisciplinarity—Several disciplines involved, providing their unique perspectives without actually melding. Disciplines come together to explore phenomena and work on stated objectives, while retaining their singular characteristics.

Examples—African Studies, American Studies

Interdisciplinarity--Two or more disciplines actively engaged, synthesizing their efforts within a given range of objectives and conditions. Techniques and methodologies mesh and meld in order to accomplish objectives.

Examples—Bioethics, Ethnic Studies

Trans-disciplinarity--Disciplines focused upon objectives, become   comprehensively melded within a higher conceptual perspective. This demands a nearly seamless integration of former disciplinary characteristics.
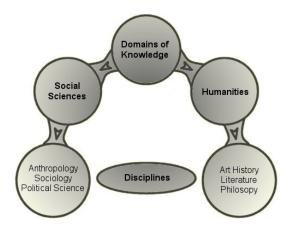
Examples—meta-criticism

Illustrations Using Social Science and Humanities Databases

As illustration, examples of fluidity of disciplinarities offer additional permutations which permit one to begin thinking across various disciplinary orientations, where knowledge and its construction affects the approach taken to understanding the fluidity of disciplinary borders and their particular approach to knowledge generation and its distribution within scholarly communication. Such examples will treat art and design, communication, as well as philosophical pursuits within a social science perspective, i.e. art market, art journalism, politics and media, or bioethics, etc. by using subjects as they appear in social science and humanities databases.

Discipline: When an area of human phenomena is demarcated and conforms to rules of consensus governing, methods, approaches, and techniques. Generally, individuals engaged in disciplinary activity conform to the discipline's culture of viewing information

and knowledge as agrees to general principles characterizing a discipline, i.e. history,
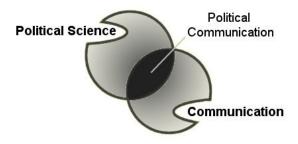
political science, or sociology.

As the researcher pursues research objectives, he soon discovers articles, books, and

websites are with the specialized reader in mind. The language and the nomenclature,

i.e. specialized vocabulary reflects the nature of the discipline being read.[ix] Sociology,

anthropology, political science, or philosophy, possess their own sets of vocabulary and

communication habits and traditions. Specialists from sociology, economics, or history,

or philosophy may be addressing the same topic, and read and sound so differently.

They may speak and write the way they do as they conform to their respective

disciplines, even as they may be dealing with the very same set of research problems.
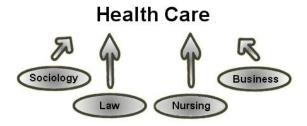
Different Kinds of Scholarly Activities

Subdisciplinary: When a discipline has a highly specialized approach and methods for examining specific areas of interest, i.e. economic history.

Interdisciplinary: When two disciplines or more come to together to examine a topic or set of topics and meld into a permanent relationship, i.e. history and philosophy of science or political communication.

Multidisciplinary: When several disciplines come to together to share approaches and methodologies on a specific topic, or set of topics, from different disciplinary perspectives without ever becoming permanently involved, i.e. national health care policy or international news flow.

Health Care

Sociology · Law · Nursing · Business

Complexity of Information and Knowledge

As the nature of knowledge becomes more and more complex, so do the ways in which we attempt to understand human phenomena. Often, it is simply very difficult to perform necessary research without considering interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches to successfully conduct research. Whether the researcher is studying political communication and presidential elections or politics, or trying to explore symbolism in film and social history in Latin America, casting one's research net beyond the familiar database to discover and examine different materials from different disciplines, may prove critical.[x] Sophisticated, if not nuanced consultation of different disciplinary databases, addresses the need to think beyond comfortable disciplinary affiliations to capture the breadth of possible phenomena pertinent to the researchers' interests. As the researcher pursues databases the use of disciplinarily-oriented databases, i.e. *ArtIndex*, *Anthropology Plus*, *ComAbstracts*, *Historical Abstracts,* or *Philosopher's Index* should be judiciously complemented by other pertinent databases. This requires both librarians and users to go beyond their zone of intellectual comfort and move into the intellectual configurations of knowledge contained and identified via other disciplinary nomenclature.
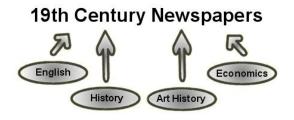
As illustration, to effectively pursue the rise of the newspaper in 19th century America, one may have to consult reference tools that lead to specialized journal

articles and monographs in political science, journalism history, American Studies,

economics, media studies, United States history, and even literary studies, among other

possibilities. The newspaper is so crucial to American cultural practice and life that

many different disciplines could be consulted for their valuable perspectives, insights,

methodological and technical tools. This approach could entail a very multidisciplinary

activity looking like this:

19th Century Newspapers

English   History   Art History   Economics

II. Art or Aesthetic Research

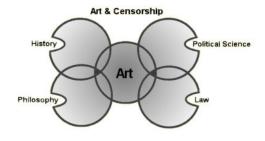Art is perhaps as old as humankind and accompanied human beings as they have

evolved through time and many cultures. The systematic study of art is less old and

has developed particular characteristics that form art appreciation or art history proper.

Multifaceted and complex, the fine arts lie within the humanities:

Humanities

Arts & Music   Literature   Religious Studies   History   Philosophy

Depending on how art and aesthetics mingle with other areas of life and human activity, art can merge with other disciplines and bodies of knowledge, without which nuances and deeper and richer comprehension would not arise. Using other disciplinary knowledge intersects with art and aesthetic phenomena as societal, historical, political, economic, or communication aspects require elucidation.[xi] Research requiring studies of economic cycles in art production, sociological conditions of the art market, and/or perception studies of aesthetics genres, requires other approaches to examination found in *ArtIndex*. The following examples of disciplinary alliances, opens the research field:

The following are examples of using databases in tandem with *ArtIndex* for various

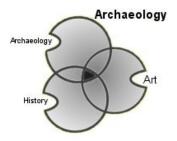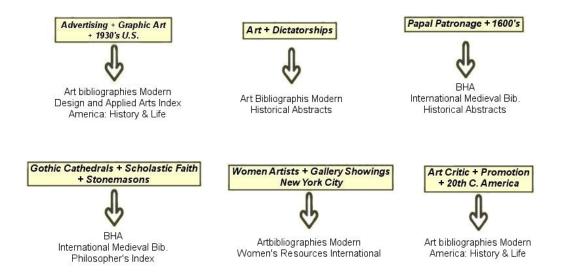subjects requiring deeper and richer analyses:

Advertising + Graphic Art + 1930's U.S.	Art + Dictatorships	Papal Patronage + 1600's
⬇	⬇	⬇
Art bibliographies Modern Design and Applied Arts Index America: History & Life	Art Bibliographis Modern Historical Abstracts	BHA International Medieval Bib. Historical Abstracts

Gothic Cathedrals + Scholastic Faith + Stonemasons	Women Artists + Gallery Showings New York City	Art Critic + Promotion + 20th C. America
⬇	⬇	⬇
BHA International Medieval Bib. Philosopher's Index	Artbibliographies Modern Women's Resources International	Art bibliographies Modern America: History & Life

III. Communication and Media Studies Research

Communications is a very broad field covering many different disciplines and

methodologies. Communications and media studies reflect both the social sciences

and the humanities:

Since human communication is so complex, there are many approaches to research in

communication and media research. Communication and media studies cover many

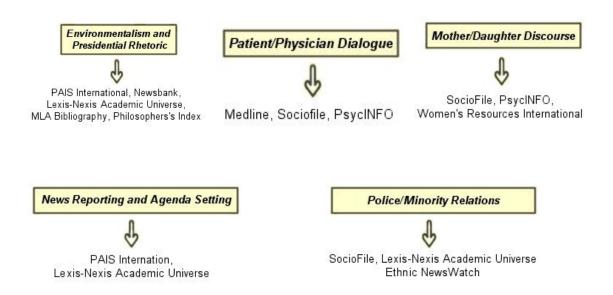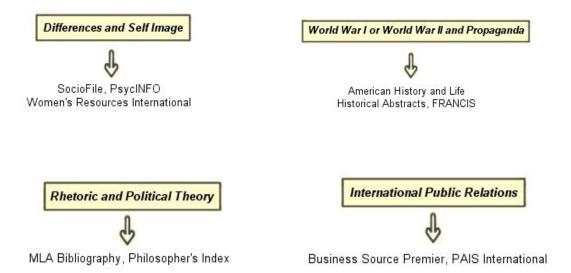specialties: advertising, mass communication, journalism, public relations,

organizational communication, inter-personal communication, among others. One

single database, no matter how deep and comprehensive in nature, can offer the

possible approaches derived from other disciplinary approaches that may enhance

communication and media studies.[xii]

Databases covering such disciplines as history, political science, economics,

psychology, modern languages, as well as others may index useful articles, conference

papers, and monographs critical to a thorough research objective. Communication *is* an

interdisciplinary field that crosses many disciplines. Thinking in terms that allow for

latitude may garner greater and effective knowledge, necessarily reflecting

perspectives, methodologies, and insights generated by other disciplinary orientations.

The following are examples of using databases in tandem with *ComAbtracts*:

Environmentalism and Presidential Rhetoric	*Patient/Physician Dialogue*	*Mother/Daughter Discourse*
⇩	⇩	⇩
PAIS International, Newsbank, Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe, MLA Bibliography, Philosophers's Index	Medline, Sociofile, PsycINFO	SocioFile, PsycINFO, Women's Resources International

News Reporting and Agenda Setting	*Police/Minority Relations*
⇩	⇩
PAIS Internation, Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe	SocioFile, Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe Ethnic NewsWatch

Differences and Self Image	World War I or World War II and Propaganda
⇓	⇓
SocioFile, PsycINFO Women's Resources International	American History and Life Historical Abstracts, FRANCIS

Rhetoric and Political Theory	International Public Relations
⇓	⇓
MLA Bibliography, Philosopher's Index	Business Source Premier, PAIS International

Depending upon the complexity of subject pursued, using several databases, and exploring subjects across various disciplines, may be key to viable and more enriched research. Even if materials are appearing in journals not identified as Communication or Media Studies, they may still offer critical insight, useful techniques, or philosophical perspectives heretofore, unknown or previously seen as irrelevant. Another discipline's particular methodologies and approaches can stimulate and even affect a research agenda, laying open unexamined research questions. These are equally valid, especially if empirical results are relevant, and not available through traditional communication literature.

IV. Philosophy or Philosophical Research

As the oldest of human intellectual pursuits, philosophy is devoted to examining

fundamental questions that may reflect nearly everything -- as everything can be
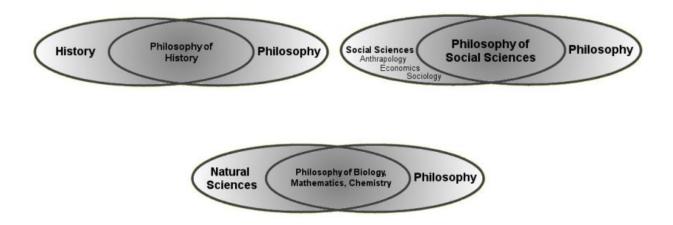
philosophically examined.
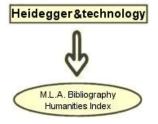
Primary Branches of Philosophy:

| Aesthetics | Epistemology | Metaphysics |
| Philosophy of Language | Ethics | Logic |

Within these basic branches, specializations such as bioethics, cosmology, or ontology

are found.[xiii] Philosophy is extremely fluid in how it can shed light on other disciplines

and their respective topics of interest. Firstly, it is firmly placed in the humanities:

Humanities
- Arts & Music
- Literature
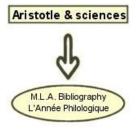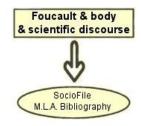- Religious Studies
- History
- Philosophy

Secondly, it interacts critically with other disciplines in both the humanities and the

social sciences, and with the natural sciences, depending upon subject pursued:

As one of the humanities, philosophy examines all human and natural phenomena; indeed, all is capable of falling under philosophical examination. Since philosophy perforce examines everything, it accedes to strict and carefully honed perspectives, methodological rigor, and executed techniques of analysis. Philosophers and researchers searching for philosophical literature normally use *Philosopher's Index*- the most comprehensive index devoted to philosophy. International and multilingual, it covers publications from 1940 to the present. It includes books and articles with abstracts for all specialties--aesthetics, epistemology, ethics (pure& applied), history of philosophy, logic, metaphysics, philosophy of mind, social & political philosophy, as well as schools of thought, i.e. analytical, continental, feminism, postmodern, subspecialties, such as philosophy of science, law, language, or medicine. Although the philosophical researcher naturally gravitate toward the *Philosopher's Index*, searching across disciplines requires both *Philosopher's Index* and other databases to effectively locate pertinent knowledge vetted by other disciplinary orientations.

Often subjects transcend disciplinary affiliations requiring interdisciplinary or

multidisciplinary consultation of databases that may also reflect philosophical

scholarship. This is especially critical with subjects concentrating on such topics as

applied ethics, bioethics, political, social philosophy, or philosophy and history of

science.[xiv]

Concluding Observations

Databases perforce reflect the stated protocols and disciplinary nature of the

disciplines they represent. Their intellectual construction addresses the needs and

objectives of bibliographic services aligned to disciplinary acculturation and disciplinary

prerogatives; yet, knowledge is not created within a vacuum, nor is it housed within

prescribed and humanly demarcated bibliographic utilities. Although the veracity of

disciplinarily-constructed and oriented databases is not at question, their singular use by

researchers should be complemented by the incorporation of other databases, at least

those within the intellectual constellations of respective domains of knowledge, i.e.

humanities and social sciences. These introductory observations relating to disciplinary

formation, and attendant disciplinary databases address the growing mingling of

disciplinary knowledge that moves beyond the confines of disciplinary alignments.

Indeed, as more and more disciplines become fluid, so too will the need to traverse their

respective databases, assume a larger complementary role in information seeking.

---

[i] For a discussion of disciplinary morphologies and disciplinary definitional concerns, consult Hérubel, Jean-Pierre V. M., "Musings on Disciplinary Morphology and Nomenclature in the Humanities and Social Sciences: Implications for Book Selection." *Journal of Scholarly Publishing* 39 (October 2007): 318-326

[ii] See Becher, Tony. (1989). *Academic Tribes and Territories: Intellectual Enquiry and the Cultures of the Disciplines.* Bury St. Edmunds, Eng.: Society for Research into Higher Education, Open University Press.

[iii] For more insight, consult Biglan, Anthony**.** 1973. "The Characteristics of Subject Matter in Different Academic Areas." *Journal of Applied Psychology* 58:195–203; Becher, Tony. (1994). "The Significance of Disciplinary Differences," *Studies in Higher Education* 19(2), 333–346; Light, Dondald Jr. 1974. "Introduction: The Structure of the Academic Professions." *Sociology of Education* 47 (Winter):2–28.

[iv] For useful discussions of disciplinarity, Klein, Julie Thompson. *Interdisciplinarity:Hhistory,Ttheory, and Practice*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990; Klein, Julie Thompson. *Crossing Boundaries: Knowledge, Disciplinarities, and Interdisciplinarities*. Charlottesville, Va.: University Press of Virginia, 1996; Messer-Davidow, Ellen, David R. Shumway, David J. Sylvan, eds. Knowledges: Historical and critical Studies in Disciplinarity. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993; Finkenthal, Michael. *Interdisciplinarity: Toward the Definition of a Metadiscipline?* New York: P. Lang, 2001.

[v] For varied discussions to writing and publishing consult, Kipling, Kim J., Murphy, Richard J. Jr. *Symbiosis: Writing and an Academic Culture*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1992; Wildavsky, Aaron. *Craftways: On the Organization of Scholarly Work*. New Brunswick, N. J.: Transaction Publishers, 1993; MacDonald, Susan Peck. *Professional Academic Writing in the Humanities and Social Sciences*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1994; Kjersti Fløttum, Trine Dahl, Torodd Kinn. *Academic Voices: Across Languages and Disciplines*. Amsterdam; Philadelphia: J. Benjamins Pub. Co., 2006.

vi Perusal of reference guides to disciplinary literatures, often offer listings of available databases per disciplinary orientation. Occasionally, they offer titles that may bridge other disciplines.

vii For a fascinating discussion of boundary work, and the intersections of creativity appearing at the edges of disciplines, see Dogan, Mattei, Robert Pahre. *Creative Marginality: Innovation at the Intersections of Social Sciences*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1990; Dogan, Mattei. "The Hybridization of Social Science Knowledge." *Library Trends* 45 (Fall 1996): 296-314.

viii See Hérubel, Jean-Pierre V. M., "Musings on Disciplinary Morphology and Nomenclature in the Humanities and Social Sciences: Implications for Book Selection." *Journal of Scholarly Publishing* 39 (October 2007): 320-321.

ix See Becher, Tony. "Disciplinary Discourse." <u>*Studies in Higher Education*</u> 12 (1987): 261-274; Henze, Brent R. "Emergent Genres in Young Disciplines: The Case of Ethnological Science." *Technical Communication Quarterly* 13 (Autumn 2004): 393-421; Kruse, Otto: "The Origins of Writing in the Disciplines: Traditions of Seminar Writing and the Humboldtian Ideal of the Research University" *Written Communication* 23 (July 2006): 331-52.

x For discussions disciplinary and interdisciplinary scholarship in selected and social sciences, see Buchanan, Anne L. and Jean-Pierre V.M. Hérubel, "Tracing Interdisciplinarity in Contemporary Historiography Using *SSCI*: The Case of Toynbee, McNeil, and Braudel." *Collection Building 13* (Fall 1993): 1-5; Buchanan, Anne L. and Jean-Pierre V.M. Hérubel, "Using SSCI to Map Scholarly Influence in the Social Sciences:Braudel and Annales Historiography." *Behavioral & Social Science Librarian* 12 (1993): 45-51; Hérubel, Jean-Pierre V. M. and Edward A. Goedeken, "Journals Publishing American Library History: A Research Note." *Libraries & Culture* 29 (Spring 1994): 205-209; Hérubel, Jean-Pierre V.M. and Anne L. Buchanan, "Disciplinary, Interdisciplinary, and Subdisciplinary Linkages in Historical Studies Journals." *Science and Science of Science* 3 (1994): 15-24; Buchanan, Anne L. and Jean-Pierre V.M. Hérubel, "Interdisciplinarity in Historical Studies: Citation Analysis of the *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*." *Libris: Library and Information Science Research Electronic Journal* 4 (1994): 1-13; Hérubel, Jean-Pierre V. M. and Anne L. Buchanan, "Jean-Jacques Rousseau Among the Footnotes: Mapping Interdisciplinary Research in *Social Sciences Citation Index*." *Behavioral & Social Sciences Librarian* 13 (1994): 49-57; Buchanan, Anne L. and Jean-Pierre V. M. Hérubel, "Interdisciplinarity: The Case of Historical Geography Through Citation Analysis." *Collection Building* 14 (1994): 15-21; Goedeken, Edward A. and Jean-Pierre V. M. Hérubel, "Periodical Dispersion in American:History: Observations on Article Bibliographies from the *Journal of American History* ." *The Serials Librarian* 27 (1995):59-74; Hérubel, Jean-Pierre V. M. and Edward A. Goedeken, "Using the *Arts and Humanities Citation Index* to Identify a Community of Interdisciplinary Historians: An Exploratory Bibliometric Study." *The Serials Librarian* 41 (2001): 85-98.

xi For discussions of interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary orientations in contemporary art history, see Korenic, L. (1997). Inside the discipline, outside the paradigm: Keeping track of the

new art history. *Art Libraries Journal, 22*, 12-18; ; Dowell, E. (1999). Interdisciplinarity and new methodologies in art history: A citation analysis. *Art Documentation*, *18*, 14-19; Hérubel, Jean-Pierre V. M., "Art History Dissertation Trends as a Selection Approach for Art History Collections." *Indiana Libraries* 26 (2007): 40-43.

[xii] See Block, Eleanor S., James K. Bracken. *Communication and the Mass Media: A Guide to the Reference*. Literature Englewood, Colo.: Libraries Unlimited, 1991; Tyler, David C., Signe O. Boudreau, Susan M. Leach. The Communication Studies Researcher and the Communication Studies Indexes. *Behavioral* & *Social Sciences Librarian* 23 (2005): 19-46.

[xiii] For discussion of philosophy as discipline and as scholarly activity, consult Bynagle, Hans E. *Philosophy: a Guide to the Reference Literature*. Englewood, Colo.: Libraries Unlimited, 1997; Blazek, Ron, Elizabeth Aversa. *The Humanities: A Selective Guide to Information Sources*. Englewood, Colo.: Libraries Unlimited, 2000; for examples of interdisciplinary work, consult, Glendinning, Simon. *The Edinburgh Encyclopedia of Continental Philosophy*. Edinburgh: University Press, 1999; Post, Stephen Garrard. *Encyclopedia of Bioethics*. New York: Macmillan Reference, 2004, or Chadwick, Ruth F. *The Concise Encyclopedia of the Ethics of New Technologies*. San Diego, Calif: Academic Press, 2001.

[xiv] See Hérubel, Jean-Pierre V. M., "Clio's View of the History of Science: A Preliminary Bibliometric Appreciation." *Behavioral & Social Sciences Librarian* 24 (2006): 69-91.