

# **Disciplining the Disciplines?**

Kaarle Nordenstreng

Elaborating

my earlier reflections

in...

ROUTLEDGE



# Internationalizing MEDIA STUDIES

Edited by Daya Kishan Thussu

## Media studies as an academic discipline<sup>1</sup>

*Kaarle Nordenstreng*

---

The concept of 'media studies' or 'media and communication' is widely used in referring to an academic discipline established in universities as a major or minor subject, a department or institute and sometimes even a school or college. It is typically implied that this relatively young field is by now a discipline in its own right alongside such traditional disciplines as history, literature, sociology and political science. However, the nature of the discipline remains unclear, while it is determined by administrative convenience and market demand rather than analysis of its historical development and scholarly position within the system of arts and sciences. This chapter discusses the nature of the discipline, using examples from Finland and other Nordic countries.

### **The field expanded and diversified**

Throughout the past fifty years, the field of media studies has expanded perhaps more than any other academic field, apart from computer science and biomedicine. This may be a wild generalization – not based on systematic data covering all disciplines around the world (hardly available anywhere) – but it is supported by other colleagues (notably Donsbach quoted below). In any case, the status of media studies has been consolidated, next to the old-established fields, but its expansion has also led to friction with the old 'ivy league' sciences, which often view this rising and popular field as 'Mickey Mouse studies' (see the British debate in the *Times Higher Education Supplement*). The conflicts are not just based on prestige and jealousy but literally on the vital prospects of each field – not least the old and established – in the midst of the so-called structural adjustment of universities.

In its expansion, the field has become more and more diversified. Different media (newspapers, magazines, radio, television, cinema, etc.) and different aspects of communication (journalism, visual communication, media culture, media economy, etc.) have emerged as more or less independent branches of the field. This multiplication process has not been halted by the convergence brought about by the digitization of media production and distribution.

# Discipline or Field?

## *Soul-searching in Communication Research\**

KAARLE NORDENSTRENG

### **Abstract**

The terms of (mass) communication research and media studies are widely used to refer to an academic discipline, usually established in universities as a major or minor subject, a department or institute and sometimes even a school or college. It is implied that this young field is by now a discipline in its own right alongside such traditional disciplines as history, literature, sociology or political science. However, the nature of the discipline often remains unclear, while its identity is typically determined by administrative convenience and market demand rather than analysis of its historical development and scholarly position within the system of arts and sciences. This chapter discusses the nature and terminology of the discipline, with examples of Finland and other Nordic countries, and it advocates the need for a continuous self-assessment of the research community.

**Key Words:** communication research, media studies, academic disciplines, philosophy of science, Nordic research conferences

### **Introduction: The Field Expanded and Diversified**

Throughout the past 50 years, the field of communication research has expanded perhaps more than any other academic field apart from computer science and biomedicine.<sup>1</sup> Its status next to the old established fields has been consolidated, but its expansion has also led to friction and conflict between the old “ivy league” sciences and this new and popular “Micky Mouse studies”, as it is called by opponents in the UK debate (a regular topic in the British *The Times Higher Education Supplement*). The conflicts are not based on mere prestige and jealousy, but literally on the vital prospects of each field – not least the old and established – in the middle of the so-called structural adjustment of universities.

In its expansion, the field has become more and more diversified. Different media (newspapers, magazines, radio, television, cinema, etc.) and different aspects of communication (journalism, visual communication, media culture, media economy, etc.) have emerged as more or less independent branches of the field. This multiplication process has not been halted by the convergence development brought about by the digitalisation of media production and distribution. On the contrary, new media, Internet, etc., have entered as further specialities in media studies, often gaining the status of another study programme, major subject or even a discipline of its own.

Placed in a broader perspective of the history of science, such multiplication is quite problematic. The field is both deserting its roots in such basic disciplines as psychol-

# FERMENT IN THE FIELD: NOTES ON THE EVOLUTION OF COMMUNICATION STUDIES AND ITS DISCIPLINARY NATURE

KAARLE  
NORDENSTRENG

## Abstract

One of the questions addressed by the colloquium focused on the changing status and character of communication and media studies in universities. This article follows that institutional perspective about communication research in general and critical media studies in particular. First the evolution of the field since the 1950s is reviewed through a number of stages, which coincide with the history of leftist thinking – six ferments, one for each decade. Then the disciplinary nature of the field is discussed, with special reference to the ongoing reform of higher education in Europe known as the “Bologna process.” An illustrative case is provided by a survey of the field in the Scandinavian countries. The conclusion is that there is a need for radical reflection about the discipline in the contemporary world, calling for an approach to media studies in terms of the philosophy of science. The article presents notes for further thought rather than suggests final scenarios, and this is done from an admittedly personal and national perspective – as a veteran of the field and as a member of the Finnish community.

Kaarle Nordenstreng is professor of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Tampere, Finland, e-mail: [kaarle.nordenstreng@uta.fi](mailto:kaarle.nordenstreng@uta.fi).

**COMMUNICATION RESEARCH IN THE UNITED STATES:  
A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE**

BY

KAARLE NORDENSTRENG

After completing a tour through twenty American university faculties representing communication research (mainly departments of journalism, speech or sociology, institutes for communication research etc.) plus a number of private bases for American broadcasting and advertising research, a European observer is both impressed and upset. He is inspired because of the huge and ever-growing amount of manpower and money devoted to communication research in the USA, and he is stimulated by the impressive variety of different methods in studying the communication phenomena in the USA.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, however, he is disconcerted in thinking about the resources for communication research in his own continent: there are relatively few European communication researchers and studies outside the routine audience research in broadcasting and advertising, and few are the European university programs with emphasis on the systematic analysis of human communication. Compared to the United States, Europe seems to be an underdeveloped country in the area of communication research; and compared to the rest of the world, the USA really proves to be 'greatest in the world'.

Nevertheless, the present author is tempted to think — after a year of thoroughly digesting his travel experiences and keeping up with recent literature in communication research<sup>2</sup> — that this 'greatness' of American communication research is rather superiority of *amount* than superiority of *quality*. Paradoxically enough, it was only after personal contact with that impressively abundant American communication research field that I began to understand Bernard Berelson's famous argument about the lack of new

---

<sup>1</sup> An impressive example of the effectivity and extensiveness of American communication research is the collection of studies *The Kennedy Assassination and the American Public, Social Communication in Crisis*, edited by Bradley S. Greenberg and Edwin B. Parker (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966).

<sup>2</sup> The most recent inventory of the field of mass communication research is done by Percy H. Tannenbaum and Bradley S. Greenberg in *Annual Review of Psychology*, Vol. 19, 1968, pp. 351-86. Another though a bit older general view is presented by Alex S. Edelman in *Perspectives in Mass Communication* (Copenhagen: Einar Harcks Forlag, 1966).

And recalling  
my participation at platforms of  
the Annenberg School...

# Communications Technology and Social Policy

---

UNDERSTANDING THE NEW "CULTURAL REVOLUTION"

Edited by

**GEORGE GERBNER**  
**LARRY P. GROSS**  
**WILLIAM H. MELODY**

A WILEY-INTERSCIENCE PUBLICATION

JOHN WILEY & SONS, New York • London • Sydney • Toronto

Copyright © 1973, by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.



# Contents

36 chapters divided under

Part I What can the new technology do? The dimensions of change

Part II Institutional powers and controls: The directions of change

Part III Communication and education for the full employment of human potential

Part IV The new field of urban communications

Part V Global communications

Part VI Tracking the future

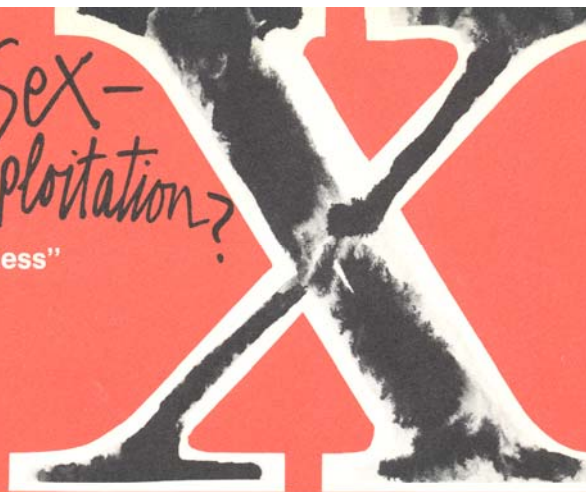
Explicit Sex -  
Liberation or Exploitation?

Danish "Permissiveness"

"Topless Radio"

Playboy vs. Playgirl

The Social Content  
of Pornography



Journal of  
**Communication**

Winter 1976

Volume 26, Number 1



After  
Thirty  
Years -  
Detente?

*Also* The Blind Spot of U.S. Intelligence

Who Sponsors TV Violence? U.S.-Chinese Dialogue

and studies of scientific writing, broadcast  
programming, children's authors, South African TV

Intercom Book Reviews

## *Helsinki: The New Equation*

by Kaarle Nordenstreng and Herbert I. Schiller

*The Final Act of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe reveals a shift in East-West balance on information flow, at least in conventional areas of communication exchange.*

For three sunny days, from 30 July until 1 August, 1975, the capital of Finland was a scene of deliberations unthinkable even a few years ago. Heads of state from 33 European nations and the United States and Canada gathered to review and sign a document, produced jointly and reflecting the consensus of all parties, calling for peaceful relations between countries and increased international cooperation in practically all fields—from commerce and industry to culture and communication.

In general political terms, Helsinki means *both* progress from cold-war confrontations to peaceful cooperation *and* changes in the strategy of ideological struggle. The new equation brings into better (if still largely implicit) balance the traditional and still continuing opposition between Eastern and Western conceptions of the role of information in international relations.

The Western approach asserts that human contacts, the “free flow of information and ideas,” and other concrete forms of cooperation are *primary functional prerequisites* for peaceful relations and therefore for international security. The Eastern approach insists that forms of cooperation—and particularly informational flows—have the nature of *secondary consequences* of an overall political situation. While Western states say that increased flow automatically advances détente, Eastern states believe that improved security will lead to

Kaarle Nordenstreng is Professor of Communications and Director of the Institute of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Tampere, Finland. He served as a government expert during the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe. He is the editor of *Informational Mass Communication* and the co-author, along with Tapio Varis, of *Television Traffic—A One-Way Street?*

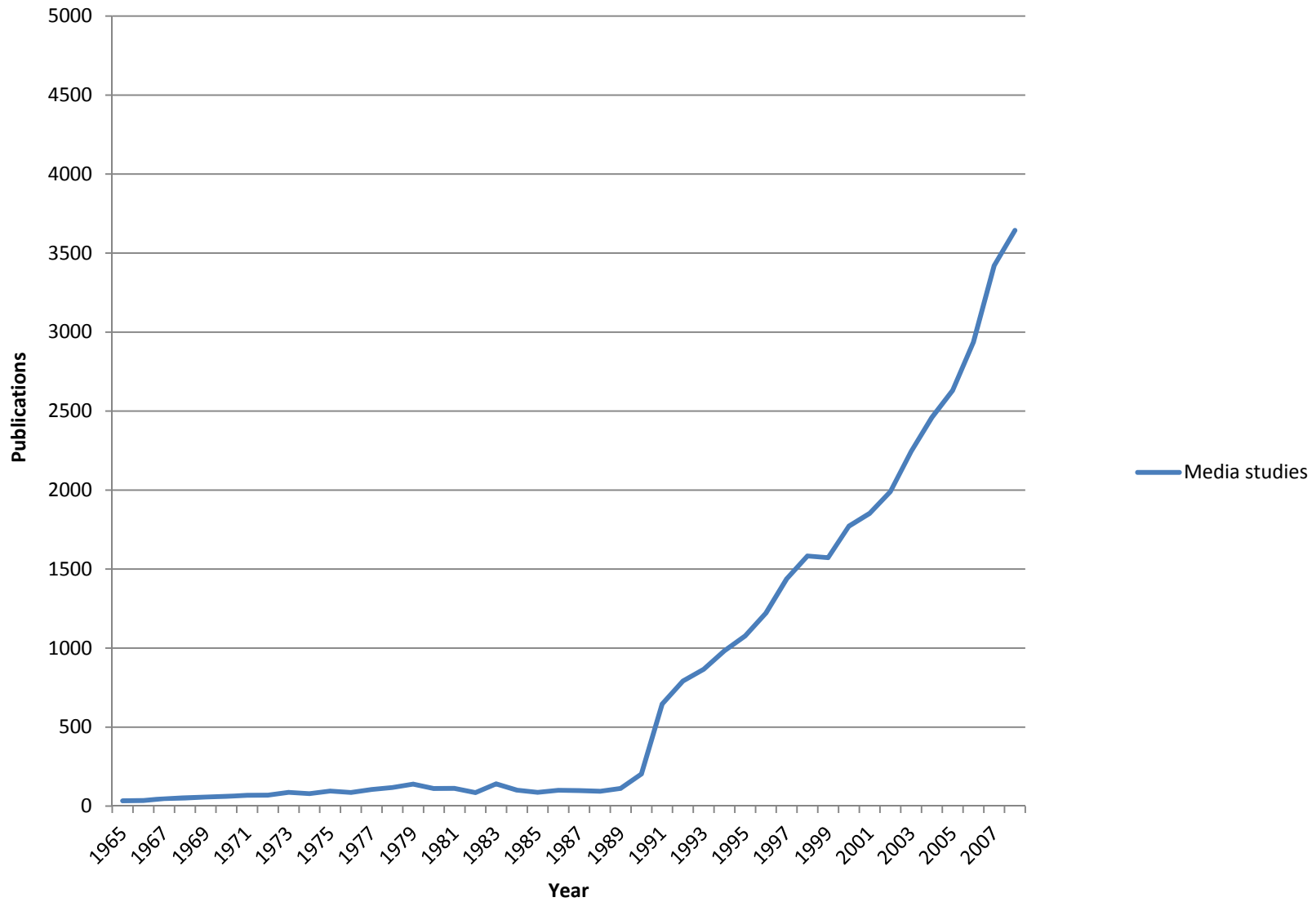
Herbert I. Schiller is Professor of Communications at the University of California, San Diego. He is the author of *Mass Communications and American Empire* and *The Mind Managers*.

# Expansion

Throughout the past 50 years, the field of media studies has expanded perhaps more than any other academic field apart from computer science and biomedicine.

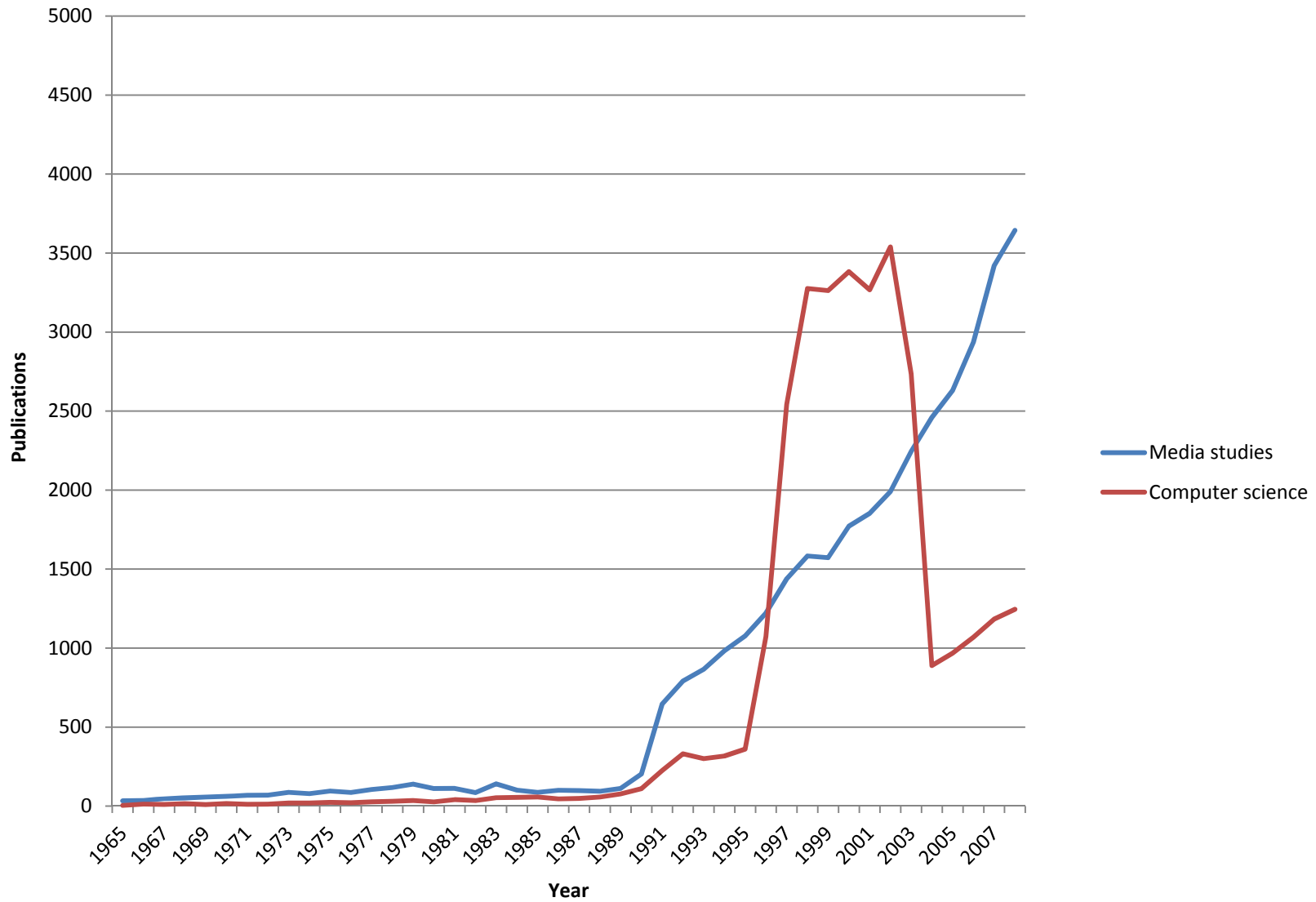
This is my wild generalization but it is supported by data on scholarly publishing:

# Growth of publications 1965-2008



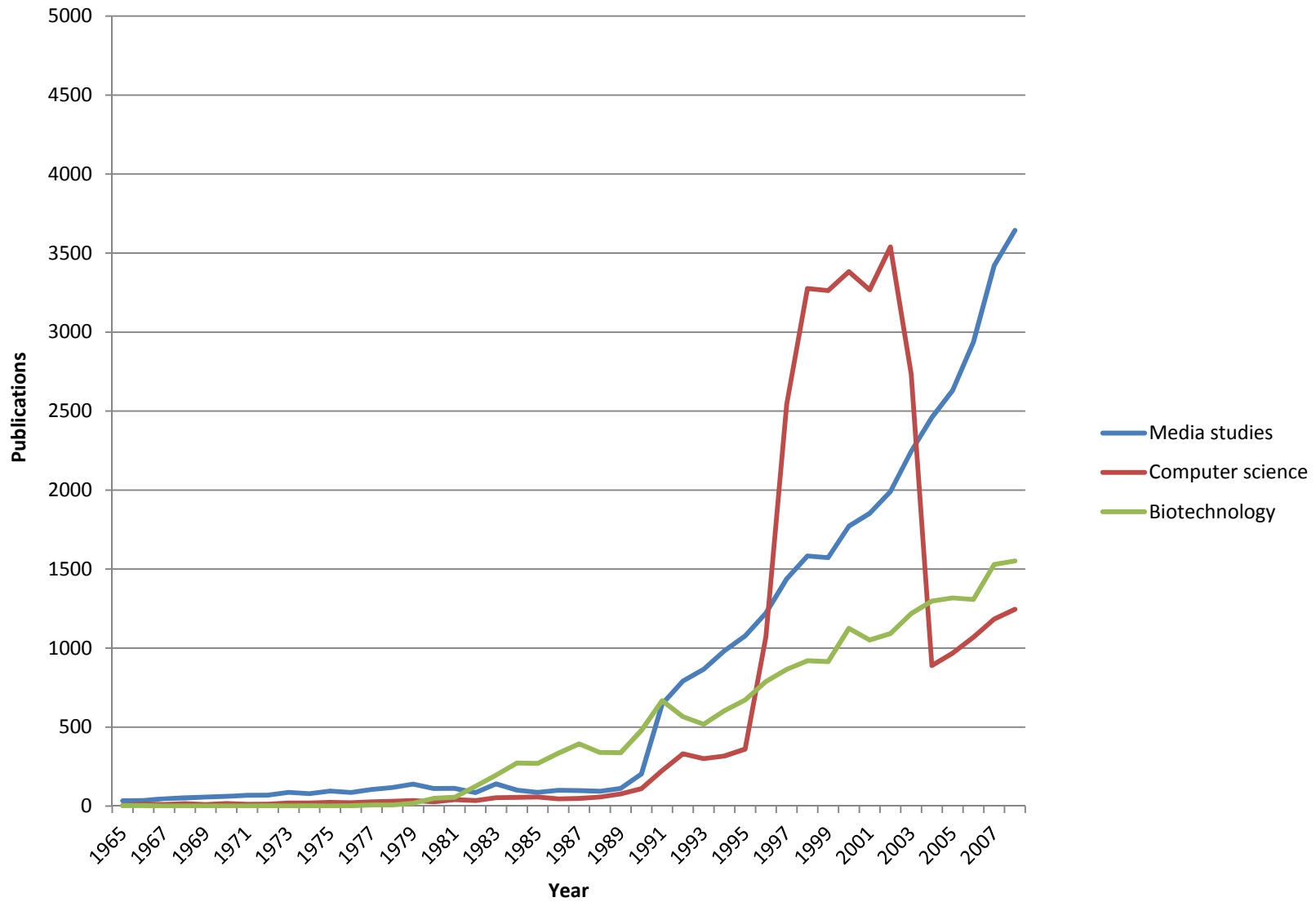
Source: Web of Science  
Maria Forsman, May 2009

# Growth of publications 1965-2008



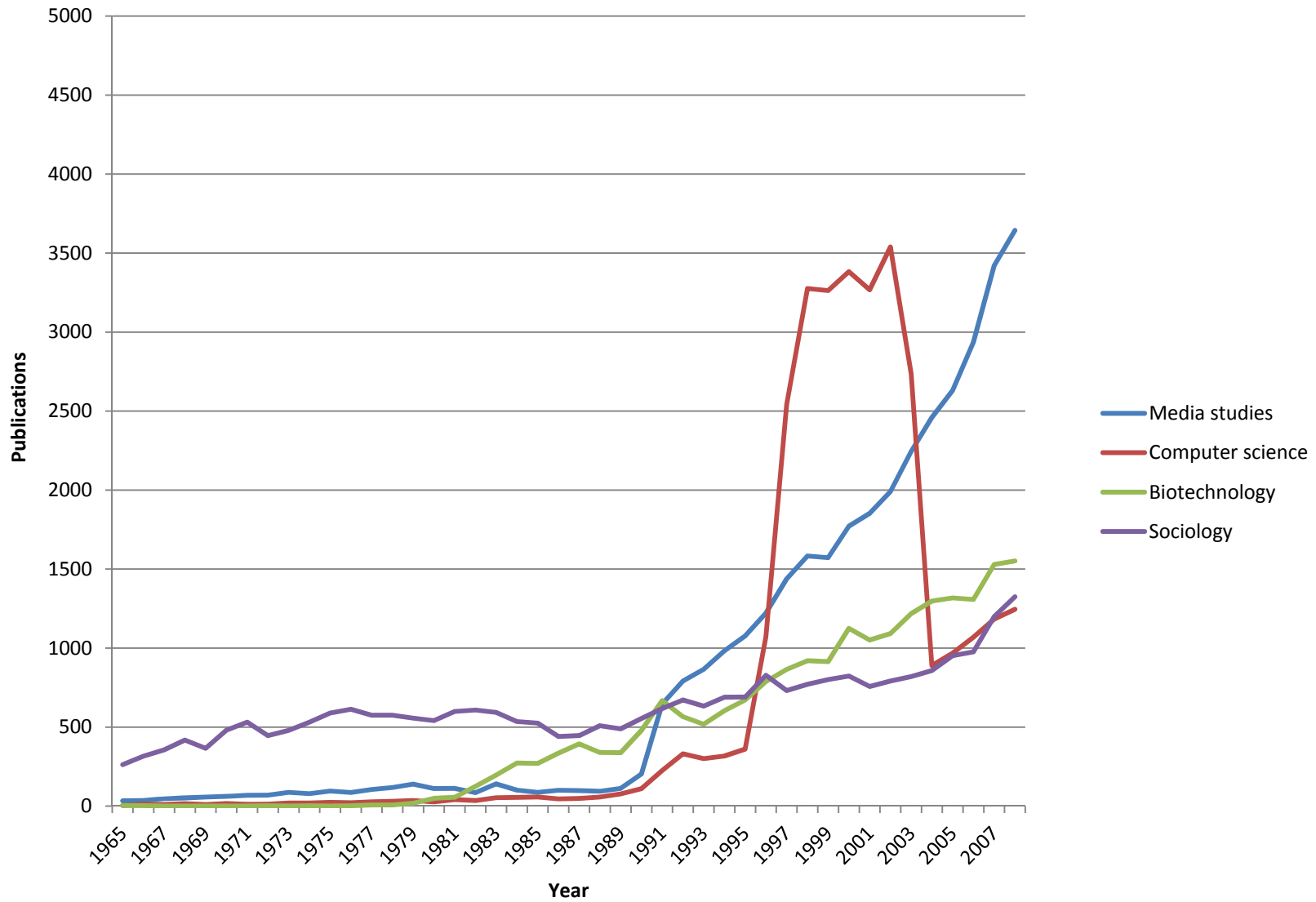
Source: Web of Science  
Maria Forsman, May 2009

# Growth of publications 1965-2008



Source: Web of Science  
Maria Forsman, May 2009

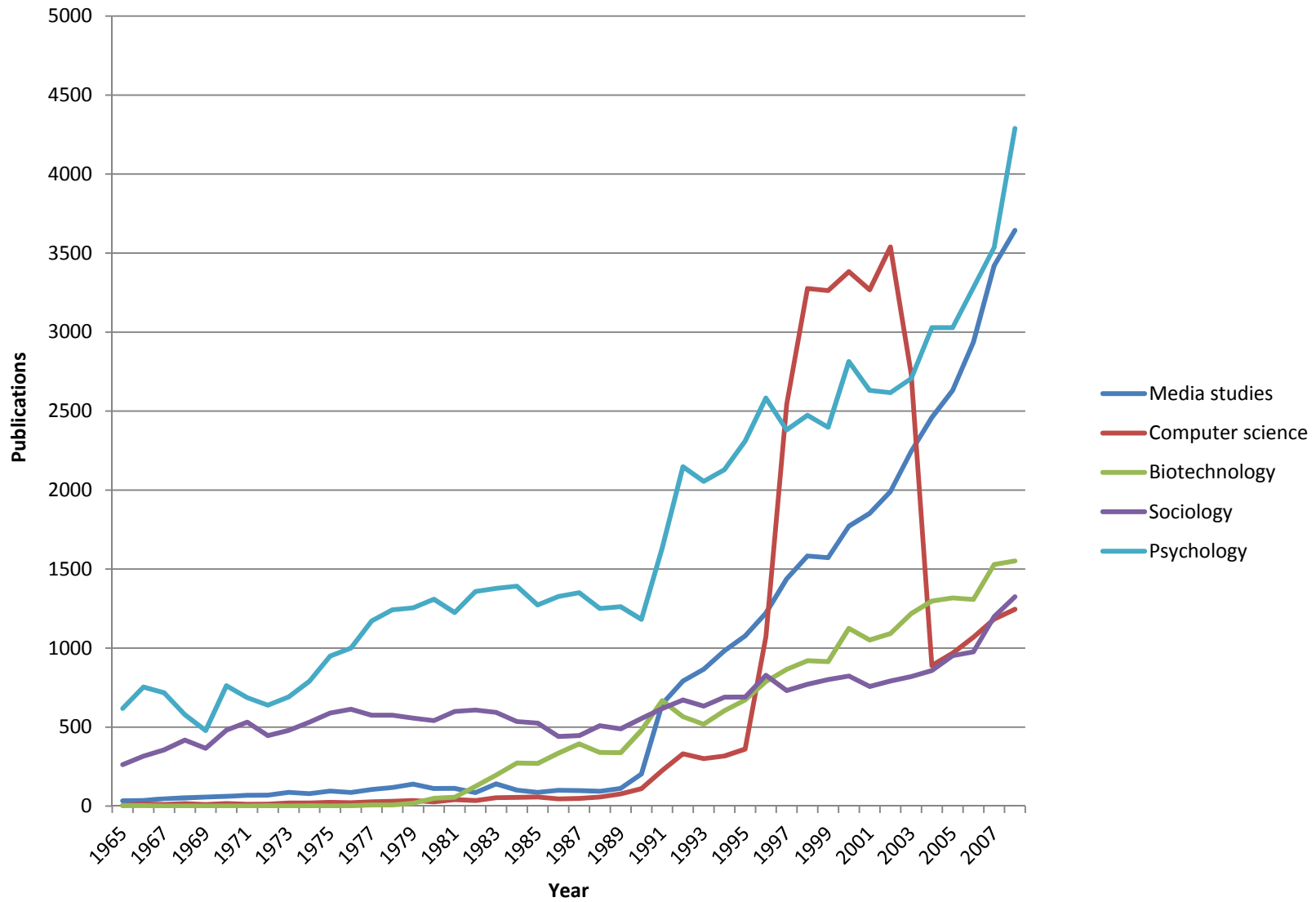
# Growth of publications 1965-2008



Source: Web of Science  
Maria Forsman, May 2009



# Growth of publications 1965-2008



Source: Web of Science  
Maria Forsman, May 2009

# Diversity

Different media (print, electronic, online) and different aspects of communication (journalism, visual, culture, economy, etc) have emerged as separate branches.

Brenda Dervin asked (2004): “How do you account for the field’s many approaches... Is this diversity strength or weakness?”

My answer was “Both”:

“But today I mostly warn about diversity turning into surfing. The rapidly expanded field has become more and more differentiated and new media, internet, etc have given further grounds for specialized approaches, often gaining the status of another major subject and discipline in academic nomenclature. With such a trend the field is both losing its healthy roots to basic disciplines (sociology, political science, linguistics, literature, etc) and it is also turning more and more dependent on empirical and practical aspects of reality.

“This means typically applied research serving existing institutions, i.e. administrative instead of critical research. It is an unhealthy illusion to celebrate the popularity of media studies with the distinction of an independent discipline or several disciplines. I would call for serious soul-searching and critical examination of the identity of the field. It is time again to return to the crossroads of Schramm, Bereslosn & al.”

# The State of Communication Research

BY BERNARD BERELSON

From time to time the Public Opinion Quarterly reviews the progress that has been made in one of the fields of research within its ken and surveys the current status of work in that field. Without waiting to publish a special issue, it presents in the following article and discussion a review of communication research which is of modest dimensions but unusual significance.

Bernard Berelson is Director-Designate of the Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia University. He is now Professor of the Behavioral Sciences at the University of Chicago and Director of the Study of Graduate Education. His article is based on a paper he presented at the 1958 Conference of the American Association for Public Opinion Research. It is discussed by Wilbur Schramm, Director of the Institute for Communication Research at Stanford University, David Riesman, Professor of Sociology at Harvard University, and Raymond A. Bauer, Ford Foundation Visiting Professor at the Graduate School of Business Administration, Harvard University.

**M**Y THEME is that, as for communication research, the state is withering away.

The modern version of communication research began about twenty-five years ago with the development of both academic and commercial interest—the former largely coordinated, if not stimulated, by the Rockefeller Foundation seminar of the late 1930's and the latter developed in response to radio's need to prove its audience. Since then there has been a great deal of research activity on both fronts, so much so that for a time the field exhibited many of the characteristics of a scientific fad. What has it all come to and where do we now stand?

## THE PAST

In the past twenty-five years or so, there have been four major approaches to communication research, and perhaps six minor ones. The four major approaches are so well characterized by their leading proponents that it is convenient and revealing here to identify them by name, as in the chart below. In my view, the major lines of inquiry have been the political approach, represented by Lasswell; the sample survey approach, represented by Lazarsfeld; the small-groups approach, represented by Lewin; and the experimental approach, represented by Hovland. (Whether Lewin really should be counted as a student of "communication research" is a matter of definition with which I am not particularly concerned here.) Lasswell, with his interest in broad socio-political considerations, represents a macrocosmic line; Lazarsfeld and

out direct and immediate regard to the detailed, empirical underpinning. David Riesman and others have made important contributions along this line already, as a counterbalance to the minute and atomistic inquiry, and I look forward to more such studies in the future.

5. Popular culture. Some interests that earlier would have been called communication are now being followed up under this heading. With aesthetic aspects emphasized, the field has a chance to get some help from humanistic studies, and the cooperation ought to be stimulating. Communication problems have been reflected on a great deal in the past—by very good minds—and such reflection should have a good deal to say to the modern empirical researcher.

6. *Mass* communication. Such “new generation” sociologists as James Coleman and William McPhee tell me that the first word needs more emphasis relative to the second. Their position is that the field is better seen as one of a variety of *mass* activities and that headway will be made by stressing the similarities of such mass phenomena rather than the particularities attaching to a mass communication system. That is, the oblique attack may yield more than the frontal.

7. Practical affairs. One way an intellectual field can advance is by dealing directly with the theoretical problems of the discipline itself. Another is by dealing with practical problems to which the discipline can contribute answers. The former is the academic approach and the latter the professional. Of our four major figures, Lasswell, Lewin, and Hovland were primarily concerned with academic matters, and only Lazarsfeld was sometimes concerned with professional problems. A practical, or more professional, turn may now be indicated.

In sum, then, it seems to me that “the great ideas” that gave the field of communication research so much vitality ten and twenty years ago have to a substantial extent worn out. No new ideas of comparable magnitude have appeared to take their place. We are on a plateau of research development, and have been for some time. There are two ways to look at this phenomenon, assuming that it is correctly gauged. One is to regret that no new “breakthrough” has developed in recent years; the other is to be grateful that the field has a period of time to assimilate, incorporate, and exploit the imaginative innovations of the major figures. The reader reads the journals; he can take his choice.

#### COMMENTS BY WILBUR SCHRAMM

WHEN ONE has been pronounced dead, it is ungracious to rise and make comments. Indeed, it shows a certain lack of faith in the attending physician. Nothing is farther from my wishes than to show any lack of faith in my friend Bernard Berelson, and therefore if he pronounces us dead I am content to believe him.

But it is a somewhat livelier condition than I had anticipated. I have just come from the doctoral examination of a young man who demonstrated depth in psychology, sociology, mathematics, and research method, as well

	<b>Reference group</b>	<b>Basic objective</b>	<b>Publications</b>
<b>Academic market</b>	Scientific community	Contribution to one's field	Top-ranked journals (and monographs)
<b>Corporate market</b>	Companies	Commercial benefit	Unpublished reports, patents
<b>Policy market</b>	Public administration bodies	Policy-relevance	Reports
<b>Professional market</b>	Profession	Professional development	Reports, guidelines, textbooks
<b>Public market</b>	Ordinary people	Empowerment	Popular publications

# Research markets by disciplinary groups

- Academic market: all disciplinary groups
- Corporate market: technology (social sciences, natural sciences, medicine)
- Policy market: social sciences
- Professional market: medicine, social sciences
- Public market: humanities, medicine



- All disciplinary groups are on the market of 'academic capitalism'
- Disciplinary differences in market location, also within disciplinary groups
- Several markets with distinct aims, modes of action and resources
- Tensions among different markets
- University–society relationship includes a variety of forms, from economic input to public 'empowerment'