

Communication research has expanded phenomenally since the 1950s, but where has it taken us?¹

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In 1959 Bernard Berelson announced that communication research was “withering away.”² His obituary of the field turned out to be so fundamentally mistaken that it stands out as a monument in the historical landscape of communication research.

Expansion of the field

Over the past 50 years, the associated fields of communication and media studies³ have expanded perhaps more than any other academic field apart from computer science and biomedicine. Evidence of this growth is supported by the data presented in the attached figure (in 4 PP slides) on publications in the fields of mass communication, biotechnology, sociology and psychology in the years 1965-2009.⁴

Although the validity of the database and its categories may be debatable, the overall picture they provide is unequivocal: communication and media studies have grown over the past half a century, moving from the margins into a distinguished class alongside other modes of inquiry, including psychology and surpassing sociology. By the end of the twentieth century the status of communication and media studies had gained a firm footing next to older, more established fields.

While expanding, the field of communication and media studies became more and more diversified. The ascent of different media (print, electronic, online) and different aspects of communication (journalism, visual communication, media economy, etc.) emerged and developed into more or less independent branches. This process of proliferation was in no way halted by the convergence brought about by the digitalization of media production and distribution. Taken together, then, the expansion and diversity of the field made it over-abundant. Placed in a broader perspective of the history of science, such proliferation is not only normal but problematic. Communication and media studies are today so abundant that the field runs the risk of both losing sight of its scholarly roots and embracing only the surface of the realities it investigates.

The problematic that arises here has been debated before. I addressed it in my response to Brenda Dervin’s 2004 question “How do you account for the field’s many approaches, foci, methodologies, methods? Is this diversity strength or weakness?”⁵ In 2004, I argued that it was both. Nowadays, as then, I am concerned with its weaknesses. I am particularly concerned with the possibility of diversity turning into surfing. The rapidly expanded field has become more and more differentiated, buttressed by convergence, with new media, including internet, extending grounds for highly specialized – and often unconnected – focal points of interest in communication and media studies. With such a development, the field is both losing its healthy roots to the more basic disciplines which have retained a definitive core – such as sociology, political science, linguistics and literature – and is becoming more and more dependent on the empirical and practical dimensions of reality. This means that applied research is increasingly being used to service existing institutions in the field, and we are back in the old division between administrative and critical research.

Thus, we may be fooling ourselves by celebrating the popularity of communication and media studies at the expense of a legitimate concern for the ill-focused development of the discipline, or, worse yet, the development of several unconnected disciplines. I thereby call for serious soul-searching and a critical examination of the identity of the field. It is time again to return to the crossroads suggested so many years ago.

I refer here to the crossroads question highlighted in 1959 by Wilbur Schramm in his response to Berelson: Is mass communication research really a discipline or just a field?⁶ Mobilizing, years later, an exercise in clarifying the “ferment in the field,” in the *Journal of Communication* in the early 1980s, the uncertainty over communication being either a discipline or a field gave way to a widespread review of the field’s major research paradigms and their challenges – not least the challenges posed by leftist-critical thinking. The resulting special issue⁷ served as a timely reminder of the need to periodically stand back and view what we are doing. A second look at the ferment in the field was taken up by the same journal ten years later,⁸ but that turned out to be just another overview “between fragmentation and cohesion” (the issue title). More of such ferment was since exposed by other histories of the field, which looked at the international landscape,⁹ focused on particular regions,¹⁰ or targeted specific areas of scholarship¹¹ as well as provided content for anthologies of the classics.¹²

A crucial ingredient of the ferment started during the 1980s was the fact that the mainstream scholarly tradition, dominated by logical positivism and quantitative methods, was challenged by critical schools of thought both from Marxist/materialist and humanistic quarters. One point often forgotten is the tremendous tension which had built up across generations along with the field’s expansion in the 1970s. It was not always an easy and natural development that growth was accompanied by diversity; in reality the diversity often times had to break its way through by bitter struggles – both intellectual and political – opening wounds which took decades to heal. The histories of national and international research associations may tell exciting stories of this.

A landmark in this regard was the ICA annual convention in 1985 in Honolulu, where then President-Elect Brenda Dervin staged “paradigm dialogues” with Stuart Hall and Anthony Giddens, both of whom spoke for the anti-hegemonic traditions. After the event, Dervin received poison pen letters from major figures in the field for inviting these “Marxists” to destabilize the field’s normality and to “fracture ICA’s center.”¹³ Accordingly, diversity represented a challenge to the paradigmatic status quo and political conservatism, advocating change and instigating polarization. But history shows that this ferment was an indispensable stage of development. It led to the development of more qualitative approaches in the field, embodied in the establishment of new institutional divisions of ICA, such as those representing philosophy of communication and feminist scholarship. The two volumes of *Rethinking Communication* that resulted from this convention initiative, coedited by Grossberg, O’Keefe and Wartella,¹⁴ stand as a milestone next to the *Journal of Communication*’s earlier “Ferment in the Field.”

More recently, a useful overview of the present global landscape of communication and media studies – and its disciplinary tensions -- was provided by Wolfgang Donsbach in his presidential address to the 2005 ICA conference in New York.¹⁵ His first thesis was that communication as a research field had seen the greatest growth of probably all academic fields over the previous 30 years. His counter-thesis,

however, was less celebratory, problematizing that same growth: “Communication still lacks, and even loses, identity,” he noted, based on a survey of ICA members, arguing that “the field increasingly suffers from epistemological erosion.” Donsbach’s third thesis went even further: “We have precise and sound knowledge in many areas – but (counterthesis) we tend to lose normative orientation in empirical research.” I fully agree with all of these points, and I argued for the last one already in my Gazette article in 1968 (see note 6)

The big picture over the past 50 years, then, is that communication and media studies have indeed undergone an impressive expansion and consolidation. Instead of withering away, we have witnessed a phenomenal growth, which has brought them to the centre of contemporary paradigms of socio-economic development, embodied most explicitly in notions of the Information Society.¹⁶ As expressed in the editor’s epilogue to the ferment issue of 1983, “if Marx were alive today, his principal work would be entitled *Communications* rather than *Capital*.”¹⁷ At the same time, however, this growth has brought its own problems, which raise questions about the very core of the field that growth was supposed to strengthen.

I have mixed feelings about this success story. I perceive that the field, with all its abundance, runs the risk of becoming professionally self-centred and scientifically shallow. What I call the “paradox of communication and media studies” suggests that our task in communication and media studies should be to deconstruct the naïve view that communication is the core of society, and that thus we need to specialise in undoing media hubris. If we do not, I worry that we are just continuing to feed an already combustible bubble. Journalism has a special tendency to mystify its profession within a fortress sheltered by the constitutional freedom of information. Accordingly, there are good grounds to search for the identity of the field. Moreover, in addition to these reasons for soul-searching, which stem from the field itself, Europe faces an additional challenge, seen in the reform of its whole higher education system, the so-called Bologna Process.¹⁸

Nature of the field

As suggested in my response to Brenda Dervin’s survey above, a lack of scientific depth follows all too easily from an eclectic and multidisciplinary approach to inquiry. Both are important for the healthy evolution of a discipline, but when rapidly developed, they may become excessively dominant and offset the foundations of the body of knowledge. Such a “surfing syndrome” is particularly risky in studies of fashionable topics such as information technology. In point of fact, information technology tends to lead not only to excessive eclecticism but also to the neglect of other phenomena. I have introduced the term “Nokia syndrome” to refer to these risks of being dominated by technology.¹⁹

As typically understood in the field, communication and media studies is taken as the constituting factor of a large rubric of related studies and disciplines, whereby various aspects of human communication – speech, organizational communication, journalism and mass communication as well as the new “social media” – are driven by their own specialized knowledge. However, it is by no means self-evident that communication should be taken as the core of these related disciplines. True, communication may be understood as the essence of social relations and society may be understood not only as something held together by the “glue” of communication but as something that is itself made up of communication. On the other hand, however, communication can be seen as a

mere camouflage, which diverts attention from the more fundamental structures related to economics or socio-political power. This latter perspective does not support the idea of communication and media studies as an independent discipline united by the foundational concept of communication. Rather, it takes communication as a complementary aspect of more fundamental circumstances.

There are further questions about whether or not communication and media studies can be seen as a discipline. By discipline we typically refer to a relatively independent and discrete area of creating knowledge with its own research object, concepts and methods as well as its own experts, publishing channels and institutional homes. The Institute for Scientific Information (ISI)²⁰ lists about 300 disciplines with some 9,000 subfields. These can be grouped in different ways to larger categories of sciences such as these four: formal (from automation to statistics), natural (from acoustics to zoology), social (from anthropology to women's studies) and humanistic sciences (from arts to theatre).

How does the field of communication and media studies fit into this picture? A concise roadmap of the landscape of the field is provided by Robert Craig in his contribution to *The International Encyclopedia on Communication*:

Formation of the communication field has resulted from a partial convergence of various disciplines and lines of research that intersect in complex ways, all somehow related to the phenomenon of "communication," but have never been tightly integrated as a coherent body of thought. [...] As it was established, the field constructed an eclectic theoretical core by collecting ideas relevant to communication from across the social sciences, humanities, and even engineering and the natural sciences. [...] This body of knowledge has no universally accepted overall structure. Sub-fields and topics can be grouped and organized in various more or less systematic ways for different purposes. [...] With the development of modern research universities since the nineteenth century, the notion of a discipline has evolved in relation to specific institutional and professional structures (university faculties, scholarly societies, peer reviewed journals, funding agencies, etc.) that interact in complex ways with conceptually defined categories of knowledge.²¹

Craig concluded that not even scholars in communication and media studies today universally regard it as a discipline. Hence the state of the art is itself ambiguous regarding the question of its shared scientific status. Yet it is worth recalling that already in the early 1960s, Schramm called an anthology of the rising field *The Science of Human Communication*²² and that in the late 1980s Charles Berger and Steven Chaffee edited a *Handbook of Communication Science*, with an introduction entitled "The study of Communication as a Science."²³ This "communication science model" of communication did not endure through the ferment discussions of the 1980s, and its diminishment eventually lead to "intellectual poverty."²⁴

A contemporary summary of the status of the field is offered by Craig in the concluding paragraph of his above-quoted article:

No matter how intellectually or institutionally well established the discipline of communication may become, many areas of the field continue to be highly *interdisciplinary*. Contextually focused areas like

health communication and political communication inherently straddle disciplinary boundaries. Study of the media as social institutions is unavoidably a multidisciplinary endeavor involving psychology, sociology, economics, legal and policy studies, technology studies, etc. The question is not whether communication will continue to be an interdisciplinary field, as it certainly will. The open question is whether communication may also have a theoretical core that enables communication scholars to approach interdisciplinary topics from a distinct disciplinary viewpoint that adds real value to the interdisciplinary enterprise.²⁵

Craig's observations are made more relevant when one considers the different degrees of interdisciplinarity that exist. These range from *multidisciplinary* research, where a common topic is studied by parallel disciplines, to *transdisciplinary* research with a shared frame of reference and a common research problem.²⁶ An examination of thousands of scholarly journals shows that 56 percent of articles published in engineering and biomedicine journals belong to more than one discipline, whereas only 11 percent of articles in the humanities journals are interdisciplinary and social sciences not far from that.²⁷ At the same time, the natural growth of science points to the establishment of more and more disciplines and their subfields, meaning a fragmentation of the overall science landscape. This in turn leads to the integration of the disparate specialities with interdisciplinarity as a way to achieve it.²⁸

Additionally, beyond integration and interdisciplinarity there are also older disciplines which should not be underestimated. As Thomas Kuhn pointed out, especially in natural sciences a scholar must first fully and uncritically master the theories and practices of a single discipline; in these "mature sciences" one cannot achieve new results without thorough knowledge of earlier achievements.²⁹ It is necessary to be deeply rooted in normal science, and crossing disciplinary borders succeeds only when one knows where they are. This tension between tradition and innovation suggests that an ideal scholar should be both a conservator of tradition and an iconoclast.

All of this reminds us that the question about the nature of communication and the related problem of discipline vs. field is far from resolved and therefore it should be actively discussed and not pushed under the carpet, either by neglect or by addressing it with clichés. This leads us to the philosophy of science, asking how scientific knowledge is constructed and organized and what are the principles which designate sciences and disciplines.

We are faced with the well-known distinction between basic and applied research.³⁰ Whereas basic sciences are supposed to describe, explain and help to understand, applied sciences are supposed first and foremost to predict; the basic sciences tell us what *is* and predictive applied sciences tell us what *will be*. In addition, there is a particular form of applied sciences which tells us what *ought to be* so that we can attain a given goal. These "design sciences" are not supposed to produce true or false knowledge nor to correctly predict what will happen, but to enhance human skills and generate instrumental knowledge for the production and manipulation of both natural and artificial systems – something that is highly relevant in communication and media studies.³¹

Consequently, I make a strong claim for the science studies in order to deal with the concept of communication and its relation to the system of sciences. At the same time

I call for a continuous study of the history of ideas in the field. However young the field, and however burning the issues of the day, it is vital to realise how communication and media studies has evolved and how it relates to other fields of research. Accordingly, all master's level degree programs in communication and media studies should have a module on the history of the field and on the nature of the discipline. Likewise, all established institutions of communication and media studies should pursue some research on research, not only by mapping out the development of their research agenda, both in terms of topics and underlining paradigms, but also by examining the very nature of the field.³²

My own base in Finland, the University of Tampere and its journalism program dating back to 1925 – the oldest in Scandinavia and one of the first in Europe³³ – has a notable record in this respect. We were among the first in Europe in the 1970s to reflect upon the history of the field with such contributions as Veikko Pietilä's report *On the Scientific Status and Position of Communication Research*³⁴. This report became one of the central sources of inspiration for Hanno Hardt and his students in Iowa to search for the roots of the field in general and to look for the constituents of critical thinking in particular. Unfortunately our interest in Tampere and elsewhere in Finland in the history of the field has since those years of the 1970s remained pretty marginal, with only few scholars, notably Tarmo Malmberg, focusing on it.³⁵ We like so many others have been overwhelmed by the expansion of the field and the institutional reconfigurations which have constantly surrounded us. Too much of us has indeed been lost in abundance and too many of us have suffered from the surfing syndrome as well as from the Nokia syndrome.

Achievements of the field

In brief, the field has

- contributed to modernization, to post-industrial & postmodern society as well as to globalization
- constructed in public consciousness a notion of the Information Society – largely a hubris
- strengthened among media professionals a feeling of self-confidence and independence – largely an illusion
- integrated social sciences and humanities, while delinking their roots
- created interdisciplinary specialities, highlighting new phenomena
- canonized such specialities to gain the status of another discipline in the academic nomenclature

Notes

¹ This text is recycling my chapter “Lost in Abundance: Reflections on Disciplinarity,” in *Making the University Matter*, ed. Barbie Zelizer (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 194-205. It draws on my three earlier articles on related topics:

“Ferment in the Field: Notes on the Evolution of Communication Studies and Their Disciplinary Nature,” *Javnost – The Public* 10, no. 3 (2004): 5-18 (special issue “New Perspectives on Critical Communication Studies”, based on papers presented in Colloquium “What is Left in Communication Research,” in Piran, Slovenia, September 2003).

“Field or Discipline? Soul-Searching in Communication Research,” *Nordicom Review Jubilee Issue* (2007): 211-222.

“Media Studies as an Academic Discipline,” in *Internationalizing Media Studies*, ed. Daya Thussu (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 254-266.

² Bernard Berelson, “The State of Communication Research,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 23, no.1 (1959): 1-6.

³ “Communication” here refers to the field in its widest sense beginning with rhetoric of Plato and Socrates, see Robert T. Craig & Heidi L. Muller, eds., *Theorizing Communication: Readings Across Traditions* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2007). In practice, my focus is on the media and journalism related parts of the field, which is why also the term “media studies” is used.

⁴ The figure is based on Web of Science Databases (see http://images.isiknowledge.com/WOK46P9/help/WOS/h_database.html) and was constructed for me by Maria Forsman, Director of Social Science Library at the University of Helsinki. See Maria Forsman, *Development of Research Networks: The Case of Social Capital* (Åbo, Finland: Åbo Akademi University Press, 2005), 67-69.

⁵ Brenda Dervin provided an insightful addition to historical reflections about the field in a survey for the 2004 ICA conference in New Orleans on “navigating methodological divides in the communication field,” see Brenda Dervin & M. Song, eds., *Communication as a Field – Historical Origins, Diversity as Strength/Weakness, Orientation toward Research in the Public Interest: 54 Brief Ruminations from Field Grandparents, Parents, and a Few Feisty Grandchildren*. Background paper for the “Strength of Our Methodological Divides: Five Navigators, Their Struggles and Successes” plenary and post-plenary dialogue, International Communication Association annual meeting, May 27-31, 2004, New Orleans, LA. Available online <http://communication.sbs.ohio-state.edu/sense-making/artdirect/artdervinsong04ica.html>

⁶ Wilbur Schramm, “Comments on Berelson’s Article,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 23, no. 1 (1959): 6-9. Few years after this exchange I made an excursion into the topic on the basis of my experiences in the USA in 1966-67, including personal interviews with Schramm, Berelson and Lasswell; see Kaarle Nordenstreng, “Communication Research in the United States: A Critical Perspective,” *Gazette* 14, no. 3 (1968): 207-216.

Available online <http://www.uta.fi/jour/laitos/Gazette1968.pdf> accompanied by original interviews as mp3 files [Interview with Bernard Berelson](#) [Interview with Harold Lasswell](#)

⁷ *Journal of Communication* 33, no. 3 (1983).

⁸ *Journal of Communication* 43, nos. 3-4 (1993).

⁹ Veikko Pietilä, *On the Highway of Mass Communication Studies* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2004).

¹⁰ *European Journal of Communication* 5, nos. 2-3 (1990).

¹¹ Kenneth W.Y. Leung & James Kenny & Paul S.N. Lee, eds., *Global Trends in Communication Education and Research* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2006); John Durham Peters & Peter Simonson, eds., *Mass Communication and Social Thought: Key Texts 1919-1968* (Lanham, MA: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004). See also Elihu Katz & Jefferson Pooley, "Further Notes on Why Sociology Abandoned Mass Communication Research," *Journal of Communication* 58, no. 4 (2008): 767-786.

¹² Elihu Katz & John Durham Peters & Tamar Liebes & Avril Orloff, eds., *Canonic Texts in Media Research: Are There Any? Should There Be? How About These?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003).

¹³ Brenda Dervin, personal communication 18 January 2010.

¹⁴ Brenda Dervin & Lawrence Grossberg & Barbara J. O'Keefe & Ellen Wartella, eds., *Rethinking Communication*, Vol. 1-2 (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1989).

¹⁵ Wolfgang Donsbach, "The Identity of Communication Research," *Journal of Communication* 56, no. 3 (2006): 437-448.

¹⁶ Frank Webster, *Theories of the Information Society*. 3rd edn. (London: Routledge, 2006); Frank Webster & al., eds., *Information Society Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004).

¹⁷ George Gerbner, "The Importance of Being Critical – In One's Own Fashion," *Journal of Communication* 33, no.3 (1983): 358.

¹⁸ This is summarized in my article of 2004, see note 1.

¹⁹ Nokia is a perfect label to be used by one coming from Tampere: the Finnish company started in the 19th century in Nokia, a little township next to Tampere. The company, which adopted the name of its place of origin, began in wood processing, moving soon to rubber boots and later to car tyres and electric cables followed by mobile phones as late as in the 1980s. By now none of Nokia Corporation's business is located in the town of Nokia, whereas a good share of its R & D activity has landed in Tampere next to the academic community.

²⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Institute_for_Scientific_Information

²¹ Robert T. Craig, "Communication as a Field and Discipline," in *The International Encyclopedia on Communication*, ed. Wolfgang Donsbach (New York: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 675-688.

²² Wilbur Schramm, ed., *The Science of Human Communication: New Directions and New Findings in Communication Research* (New York: Basic Books, 1963).

²³ Charles R. Berger & Steven H. Chaffee, eds., *Handbook of Communication Science* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1987).

²⁴ John Durham Peters, "Institutional Sources of Intellectual Poverty in Communication Research," *Communication Research* 13, no. 4 (1986): 527-559.

²⁵ Craig, *ibid.*, 687. Craig has continued his analysis in an insightful article "Communication in the Conversation of Disciplines," *Russian Journal of Communication* 1, no. 1 (2008): 7-23.

²⁶ A five-stage classification of interdisciplinarity was developed in the French Centre d'Études et de Recherches Internationales (CERI), based on an earlier work on the system of sciences done by Jean Piaget for Unesco and a Seminar on Interdisciplinarity in Universities organized by CERI in collaboration with the French Ministry of Education at the University of Nice in 1970; see Léo Apostel & Guy Berger & Asa Briggs & Guy Michod, *Interdisciplinarity: Problems of Teaching and Research in Universities* (Paris: Centre for Education Research and Innovation; OECD, 1972). See also Joe Moran, *Interdisciplinarity* (London: Routledge, 2002).

²⁷ Fernanda Morrillo & Maria Bordons & Isabel Gomez, "Interdisciplinarity in Science: A Tentative Typology of Disciplines and Research Areas," *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 54, no. 13 (2003): 1237-1249.

²⁸ See Andrew Abbott, *Chaos of Disciplines* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001); Bent Flyvbjerg, *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How It Can Succeed Again* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). For a Finnish project on trends and tensions in intellectual integration, see <http://www.helsinki.fi/filosofia/tint/>

²⁹ Thomas Kuhn, *The Essential Tension: Selected Studies in Scientific Tradition and Change* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977).

³⁰ See Matti Sintonen, "Basic and Applied Research: Can the Distinction Still be Drawn?" *Science Studies* 3, no. 2 (1990): 23-31.

³¹ Ilkka Niiniluoto, "Applied Science – A Philosophical View," in *Yearbook 1986-1987* (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1987), 137-142.

³² An exemplary project in this respect has been carried out in Denmark at the University of Aarhus, Department of Information and Media Studies: “Theories of Media and Communication – Histories and Relevance” sought to highlight the theory of the field – meta theory – as a special area of study, see <http://www.mediateori.dk/english/> In Norway a book series of presenting a long list of disciplines included Espen Ytreberg, *Hva er medievitenskap?* [in Norwegian, What is media science?] (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2009), followed by a symposium among media scholars (in Norwegian) in *Nordicom Information* 31, no. 4 (2009): 5-20. Another Nordic contribution in the same line is by Lars Nyre, “Normative Media Research. Moving from Ivory Tower to the Control Tower,” *Nordicom Review* 30, no. 2 (2009): 3-17.

³³ See http://www.uta.fi/cmt/en/introduction/journalism/hist_jrnl_edu.html

³⁴ University of Tampere, Institute of Journalism and Mass Communication, Reports N:o 35/1977. Later my colleague Veikko Pietilä published a book-size history of communication research, first in Finnish in 1997 and as English translation in 2004, see note 9 above.

³⁵ See e.g. Veikko Pietilä & Tarmo Malmberg & Kaarle Nordenstreng, “Theoretical Convergences and Contrasts: A View from Finland,” *European Journal of Communication* 5, no. 2 (1990): 165-185.