

Communication Research

Is There Such a Thing?

ULLAMAIIJA KIVIKURU

Communication Research. Is there such a thing? And if there is, is it worth keeping up and developing further? Does it have anything to contribute? The grand old men asked questions like these thirty and forty years ago, but today hardly anyone bothers. Bernard Berelson gave us *'the end of the road'* / *'dead end'* / *'cul de sac'* metaphor, and Wilbur Schramm the *'intersection'* / *'crossroads'*.

Berelson administered last rites to the field as far back as 1959. Its time had passed, he said, the corpse was still, and it was only to commend it to the saints. His graveside obsequies pointed out four different orientations: Lasswell's political bent, Lazarsfeld's survey research, Lewin's studies of small groups, and Hovland's experiments. In Berelson's estimation, Lazarsfeld was the only one of the four who could be called a communication researcher, but even his line of inquiry had come to *'the end of the road'* fifteen to twenty years earlier. No, 'communication research' was no more, Berelson pronounced, and with that, he himself moved on to demography.

To Schramm's way of thinking, the communication researcher was situated at a *crossroads*, where different avenues lead out in different directions: from the social sciences to the humanities, from engineering to law, and so forth. Some scholars linger in the crossroads, most move on and follow one or another of the avenues. Those who remain at the intersection are the true communication researchers. But communication research has many forms, the opportunities are boundless.

Thus, Berelson was a pessimist, Schramm an optimist, who saw in pluralism fertile soil for new and creative thinking.

Even if the title of my speech may lean toward Berelson, I do think that Schramm's idea is the ideal – in general terms. Still, it feels strange to characterize the field of communication research in the Nordic countries today.

In all fairness, I should stress that my comments are primarily based on the Finnish research community. *Nota bene*.

Communication research was controversial back in the 'seventies. But hardly today. When did you last hear two communication scholars quarrel, vocally or in writing? Our field of study has been called 'broad', 'rich' – and that is true, if we consider all the various themes we look into. Still, I find contemporary communication research more conformist and minimalist than pluralist. Yes, there are lots of different areas of study in the field. But the basic ideology is quite the same in virtually all of them.

How is it that we have developed such a conformist mentality?

For one thing, we have come to adopt a comfortable role as spectators. We are not actors, heaven forbid, we simply observe. We are dispassionate, nonchalant; we are scholars. Still, we have a certain desire to study what we consider important – science must be free, unfettered. We tend to use our academic freedom to study television viewing habits.

But isn't it the proper role of research to analyze significant phenomena in society and culture? To analyze, evaluate and systematize such phenomena? We can hardly pretend that we do. For the most part, we have become nay-sayers. We spurn applied research. We say "no, thanks" to quantitative measurement, no to policy orientation, no to opinion surveys. We reserve our right to decide for ourselves. And so we declare we shall study 'everyday life'. But the 'life' we study is an artificial construction, tailored to our needs.

The strange thing about that 'life' is that it revolves to such an extent around communication! Who says real life is like that? Of course, we do know that people spend a good part of their days in the company of mass media, but that hardly means the media are focal, that they are the object of people's passions. The fact is, we don't know what people are passionate about, because we have chosen to concentrate on media 'froth' and some stray observations, which we like to call 'media ethnology'. We joke about the forests of percentage-signs in quantitative research and the 'emptiness' of statistics, but – I ask you – how much more do we know about the lives of our contemporaries, when it comes right down to it?

At this moment, an important task for communication research might be to try to dispel the mystique and temper the euphoria which surrounds communication today. But instead of taking on such basic tasks, we choose instead to busy ourselves with modern, sophisticated questions – like TV viewing. Once it was an act of audacity to study entertainment instead of the news; today we are all 'audacious' and hardly anyone cares about the news or current affairs any more. At the same time, we are anxious to emphasize the special nature of our discipline. We have something others don't, albeit it may not be so easy to put one's finger on what it is exactly. So, instead of dispelling the mystique, we tend to increase it. It confers status.

We can argue that Berelson was wrong and marshal the bibliographic statistics to prove it – the number of titles published has grown steadily year after year. It is harder, however, to make as light of Schramm's incitement to diversity and originality. Schramm may have been an overly optimistic, naive empiricist, but still he can give us pangs of conscience. Can we really claim that we have exploited all the possibilities open to us in our communication-oriented societies?

A slightly malicious outsider might be more blunt: Nordic communication research – internationally respected as it may be – may be ample,

methodologically elegant and well-informed, but it is anemic and tediously repetitive. We are all participants in a process which is twisting communication research in a direction that brings us to prefer irrelevance and triviality. Of course, there are exceptions. But our eagerness to be politically correct has grown so strong that it threatens to paralyze our thinking, stunting both our erudition and our methodological repertoire.

A second motive for conformism is our preoccupation with method at the expense of thinking or theory.

It has been said that communication research has shifted from its former social science orientation to a humanities approach? Has it, really? Communication researchers have indeed exchanged quantitative methods and phrases for qualitative ones – the rhetoric has changed, but if what we are doing truly belongs to the humanities tradition, I'm not so sure. Eclectic, surely. As the parvenus we are, we are confident that we can pluck a couple of fascinating concepts out of the humanities tradition and use them as we like, without paying deference to the long history during which they evolved.

Once again, we have made ourselves an artificial construction which we call a 'humanities approach' – despite the fact that it consists of but a few delectable fruits we have gathered during a casual stroll through the gardens of literary criticism and linguistics. We are hardly familiar with the garden as such: the rich tradition of the humanities is terra incognita to most of us. It is quite possible that never before has Nordic communication research shown such methodological diversity. Still, we are all caught up in an era of cultural studies and text analysis. Some *crossroads* do exist, but the dissidents are kept far from the junction.

If we talk about theory and methods, we have to include the world – the object of our research. I say 'world', for it is best we avoid words like 'reality', lest we once again rekindle the Great Objectivity Debate, which ended in a sort of 'ceasefire agreement' some ten years ago. The point of the debate, the bone of contention, was important and interesting, but the debate was a miserable affair. Perhaps we Nordics simply aren't playful enough. Might that be the reason why so many academic debates degenerate into mean-minded quarrels over legitimacy?

To tell the truth, I am much more concerned about our relation to our object, the world around us, than I am about whether we manage to develop some measure of harmony between our theories and our methods. It is the world and its myriad phe-

nomena which should be the starting point for research; the theories are there, or may be developed, to help us understand those phenomena. Methods are means by which to gather and analyze material. In good research – whether qualitative or quantitative – theory and method are integrated. We have examples of such integration. But ideally, all three are consonant and tend to merge: the object of research, the theory we apply, and the method. We do not have so many examples of this latter case, and the ones we have are very small-scale. It is, of course, perfectly legitimate to study “small” themes and areas, but the prevailing tendency in communication research seems to be to operate in cameo format. Yet ‘the world’ and its phenomena haven’t changed format, have they?

A third source of conformity is the fact that we generally read the same books. And despite all the praise of ‘the Net’, we are still essentially conservative about the sources we use.

We communication researchers are time-conscious in the extreme. I venture to say that we are more careful to follow the trends than researchers in general. Our work habits are highly routinized. First, we draw on our own expertise, tried and true, secondly, a couple of so-called ‘classics’ and, finally, a dozen or so ‘modern’, politically correct (usually foreign) references. We construct our theoretical frames of reference of these familiar ingredients. The world of knowledge is hypertextualized and globalized; there are any number of networks to get involved in, there are interesting latent actors behind all the jumble of contents Internet serves us. That is to say, even if most research libraries have less money than ever before, professional researchers have access to a greater variety of literature than ever before. But to be frank: either we are conservative or we are naive in our approach to literature, and via it, to theory. For the most part we use basically the same references as everybody else and the same ones we have used before. We talk a lot about the Net, but we use it sparingly.

There is one interesting thing about today’s Finnish – and perhaps Nordic – research. We have become so conformistic and rigid with respect to our ‘foreign policy’. Habermas and Luhmann are modern again, for their work has been translated into English and is discussed in Anglo-America these days. We of somewhat older vintage recall discussions of Habermas in the 1970s. But then we used to read his texts in German or Swedish. Now and then someone besides Tarmo Malmberg even struggled with books in French, too, when word reached us of something exciting on that horizon.

Nowadays, English alone is the seal of legitimacy for foreign literature. Of course, it is good that we are reading our Habermas, Foucault and, say, Martín-Barbero. But it is a bit sad that we are doing it in English. Texts lose so much in translation – as anyone who uses foreign languages regularly is painfully aware.

Lately, we are sceptical of North American literature, too – whenever we can afford to be. British sources are to be preferred these last 10-15 years. The British do produce interesting work – but they are not alone.

We in the Nordic countries have been admired – especially by our American colleagues – for the breadth of our intellectual horizons, for being ‘well read’. Nowadays we hardly even know what’s going on in the other Nordic countries.

Americans sometimes (half-)joke that they don’t have an opinion because they haven’t had time to read the latest issue of *Time*. Aren’t we showing similar symptoms? Haven’t we become awfully Anglo-Americanized, even if the process was indirect? Are we any better than Wilbur Schramm, who truly believed that all the world’s societies and cultures would, sooner or later, become ‘Westernized’? We up here in the northern periphery ought to be sensitive to all forms of dominance, but instead we have chosen conformism and an Anglo-American interpretation of life and society.

Our monoglot state is more than linguistic; it also affects our ideas about legitimacy. Putting it bluntly, this might be taken for mental lethargy or perhaps exaggerated cautiousness. In order to ‘qualify’, to be accorded legitimacy, a writer has to be familiar, and the publisher, as well. As far as our reading habits are concerned, we aren’t much for safaris. That is probably why so few of us are familiar with Martín-Barbero’s fascinating book.

There are reasons, of course, and one reason may be that researchers these days are totally immersed in specialized projects and work under the pressure of tight deadlines. If you are forever in a hurry and have extremely specific criteria to fulfil, it is easy to lose your spirit of adventure and the pleasure of serendipitous experiences. And that is a shame. So many interesting and exciting impulses are ignored, whilst we at the same time become inured to repetition.

When did you last read a book by a non-European, non-North American author?

Yet another source of our conformism is our determination to avoid social issues and issues of morality whenever possible – and even when it isn’t.

The world and the people living in it are at once globalized, localized and glocalized – they use mobile telephones, Internet and transnational television, yet live in a specific place, spend time with their friends, eat potatoes and buy clothes, just like they always have. Arjun Appadurai speaks of five different ‘landscapes’ which constitute the mental environment of mankind today: *mediascape*, *ideoscape*, *ethnoscape*, *financescape* and *technoscape*. Such a complicated organism seems a walking goldmine for a researcher. But what do we do? We study TV habits. Again, a quick comparison with the journalist: We often complain that journalists splinter the phenomena they report about. But are we not guilty of the same – in the name of academic freedom?

I will never forget the day a couple of years ago, when a journalist rang me up and asked what research we in communication research had done on unemployment. I checked our bibliographies and was forced to say that I found only two titles: an undergraduate thesis in Political Science and a research proposal from Tampere – in a country with more than 500,000 jobless [of a total population of 5.1 million, tr. note]. ”You’re ashamed, I hope,” was his dry response. And he wrote a very sarcastic article – luckily in Swedish [spoken by a few hundred thousand in Finland, tr. note]. We communication researchers are often heard to complain that journalists have no patience, that they don’t seem to understand that scholarly study takes time. When we finally get around to publishing the results of major projects, journalists aren’t interested any more. Of course, our complaint is justified, but to be honest, journalists’ news values aren’t always that bad. Journalists sometimes lose sight of the big picture, but so do we.

To be sure, the Academy of Finland or the various research councils and what-all they are called in our respective countries, tend to keep a tight hold on their pursestrings when it comes to projects in the field of communication research. We have to choose ‘selling’ subjects and do the research we can get funding for. But that is only part of the explanation, isn’t it. I think our reticence has more to do with the fact that it simply isn’t *à la mode* these days to tackle large-scale social issues – except for the European Union. Identity formation is about as ‘social’ as most of us are willing to go. Political and normative issues are beyond the pale; they have no place on our agenda. Maybe this is simply some kind of ‘righting the balance’ after the 1970s, but it is interesting to hear colleagues outside the Nordic countries speak of the ”strong Nordic tradi-

tion in communication policy and media ethics”. Is that tradition still alive?

A last source of conformism is that we do what we can to avoid discussion and debate. Consequently, we are forever starting from scratch and (re)discovering the wheel – the hard way.

The time may soon be ripe to recognize that there are controversial phases, worthy of discussion, in the history of Nordic communication research. We live in the present and have a childish tendency to turn a blind eye to phenomena that don’t fit into the current scheme of things. That is why the trends in communication research have been so sharply demarcated. We are forever starting afresh – without the benefit of our own or others’ past experience. That is also why our relation to theory and methodology remains superficial – which, I feel, it is.

In the field of literary criticism in a number of countries just now there is a debate – even conflicts in some countries – concerning how cultural studies relates to older traditions in the field. I am quite confident that no such strife will break out in communication research; when the time comes, we will simply discard cultural studies and latch onto some new trend.

The coteries in our field used to be smaller and easier to grasp. We often quarreled: theorists vs. practitioners, academic scholars vs. teachers, who perhaps did a little applied research on the side. Practitioners didn’t know much about theories of communication – at least not the theories the academics revered; they, for their part, had media production on their side. We couldn’t totally ignore them or brush them aside, but neither have we taken advantage of the link to media and journalistic praxis.

The obvious link to praxis is what makes us unique in relation to fields like Sociology or Political Science. It is tragic that we are so intimately related with the apparatus of public communication, yet we have only barely tolerated it, let alone seen it as a stimulating challenge. We have happily accepted the research opportunities the media have offered, but the link to praxis has always – particularly this past decade – embarrassed us. Thus, theory and practice have proceeded more or less parallel; seldom have they met.

Today, the practical side looms tall on our horizon. Practitioners have become specialists, and we laymen. We are in even less of a position to ignore them. The situation is complicated by the fact that some specialists in communications technology have shown an interest in social theory and com-

munication theory – but their interest doesn't coincide with ours now, either, because we are all busy analyzing texts. We have developed a sophisticated rhetoric concerning the so-called information society, but no one knows for sure what it means. We eagerly accept scholarships and research positions whenever they are offered, but, when it comes right down to it, what can a single communication researcher accomplish in a team with ten engineers? *We have the answers, but what about ethics?* I am sure that the wheel will be discovered several times again in these projects.

* * *

Now, what part do Schramm and Berelson play in this story?

Actually, they are essentially only metaphors – but not entirely. I don't agree with most of what they say, not at all. They wrote badly and superficially; they had peculiar political views. But they had something we don't have: they had the gumption to ask big questions. We, on the other hand, are careful to avoid such questions – often in the name of professionalism. I mean, after all, professional, specialized scholars can hardly be expected to know everything, or can they?

The 'big questions' vary over time. In Berelson's and Schramm's day, it was important to ask whether communication research existed and if so, what was it. For, communication research was something new, and the gentlemen saw the need to try to define it. Today, we would have to put the questions differently, but again it is time for major questions about existence, relevance, society and culture. If we don't ask them, we run the risk of trivializing ourselves into oblivion.

Well, now, is there such a thing as communication research? Do we have something others don't? The first question is easy: of course, there is. The second question is highly complex, and much more

difficult than Schramm imagined. We still haven't found the essence of the field. The centre of the intersection is empty, but there are crowds lining the curbs. We used to discuss the problematics of how and why. The question is important – even though, to my way of thinking, 'how' and 'why' are interconnected; you can't discuss the one without considering the other. But the sad thing is that we generally set out to document how, but believe (or claim) that we have specified why, as well. We're not honest with ourselves. Is it because we can't be, or do we simply lack the courage?

What am I asking for? Some kind of Renaissance Scholar? A Leonardo da Vinci? No, not at all. I find Schramm's *crossroads* metaphor is useful, but I respect Berelson's passion. He must have had great hopes for communication research to hate it as much as he later did. That passion is missing from the communication research community of today.

What I am looking for are reasonable research institutions, a bit of daring, honesty, a broad orientation, common sense, and time for major projects. 'Projects'? Aren't 'projects, what we do most of the time nowadays? More and more, inasmuch as it is increasingly difficult to find funding for individual studies. But, what are our 'projects' more precisely, if not collections of individual studies which we clump together – more or less haphazardly – under a common heading? In the kind of projects I have in mind, the members of the team would collaborate in depth and dialectically – theorists, empiricists and practitioners together – toward a common goal. Such a team might in time achieve something that none of the members could have achieved alone. Goodbye, individualism!

But maybe I am just a starry-eyed idealist. We are, after all, individualists in our marrow. Each of us follows our own course – despite the fact that we happen to be sitting in the same canoe, paddling with the same professional phraseology and the same references.

