

Doing the Right Thing

Movin' on Up – at a Price

Juha Koivisto

In our book *Mapping Communication and Media Research: Conjunctures, Institutions, Challenges* (Tampere 2010), Peter Thomas and I monitor developments in several countries and present some general conclusions. In this presentation I will focus on some of these conclusions.

As Craig and Carlone have maintained, this field has witnessed an “explosive growth” that is almost unrivalled by any other field in modern universities (1998, 67). In our book we present some impressive figures, statistics and graphics depicting this growth, with curves pointing higher and higher.

However, the expansion of the field has led to what some scholars in Germany have described as the ‘Unübersichtlichkeit’ of the field, perhaps best translated into English as a ‘lack of clarity’, or the inability to gain a comprehensive overview of the entire field, with its internal unity and contradictions. Similar voices are increasingly heard in other countries as well. In the US, Craig and Carlone felt the need to confess that “we no longer understand the field very well ourselves” (Craig and Carlone 1998, 67). They concluded that the field has “amorphous”, perhaps even menacing “contours” (Craig and Carlone 1998, 68). Pfau (2008, 598) cited Craig’s (2003) statement that field’s core and intellectual focus remains “radically heterogeneous and largely derivative”; “Nonetheless”, commented Pfau, “the communication discipline’s growth continues unabated” and is “accompanied by fragmentation and increasing specialization”. In the UK, Boyd-Barrett has argued that any overview of contemporary communication and media research has “to accept at the outset that the ‘field’ of communication media research is somewhat nebulous” (Boyd-Barrett 2006, 235).

Japan provides perhaps the most extreme example of the difficulty of establishing even a sense of a ‘field’ of communication and media studies. There, media and communication research has been and still is dispersed in different universities and into different disciplines, rarely having a department or faculty of its own. Consequently, in Japan the ‘field’ is in reality constituted only at the level of academic and scholarly associations that create a space for dialogue for researchers who can now be understood – in retrospect, precisely on the basis of their participation in these associations – as working in the same ‘field’.

French communication and media research presents an even more heterogeneous picture, despite its firmer institutional bases. The combination of information, docu-

mentation, and library sciences with communication and media studies, including all of its various approaches, can make the field seem like a patchwork when viewed from an international perspective. Should the French scholars of Infocom move into the international Anglo-American world, they would probably be dispersed among such disciplines as information science, media studies, communication science, cultural studies, sociology, political science, literature studies and semiotics (cf. Jeanneret 2001, 5).

Indeed, there has been an ongoing protracted debate regarding the precise status of communication and media research. Is it a 'discipline' in a strict and traditional academic sense, or a more loosely defined 'field', an amalgamation or maybe only *modus vivendi* or variety of disciplinary approaches? This is an old debate – perhaps the foundational debate – of academic communication and media research. As Donsbach notes,

This identity crisis has been with us for as long as we have existed in academia. When claims were made to establish communication (then called 'press research' or 'Zeitungsforschung') alongside sociology in the German academic system, the president of the German Sociological Association, Ferdinand Toennies, said at the association's 1930 annual conference, 'Why would we need press research within sociology? We don't need a chicken or duck science within biology'. His point really hit communication researchers hard and still does today (Donsbach 2006, 439).

Neither a 'discipline' nor even a clearly demarcated 'field', communication and media research seems to be followed by a permanent question mark.

The fundamental 'vehicles' for creating coherence in the field – which have been used historically, particularly in the USA but also in many of the other countries, to a greater or lesser extent – have been the concepts of 'communication' and more recently 'media' and 'mediatization'. Indeed, they are the terms most commonly used as 'umbrella categories' to group together different strands of the field.

However, there are various problems with notions of both 'communication' and 'media'.

There are many variations of the 'technical' model of communication, conceived a 'transmission' by a 'sender' of a 'message' that then encounters a 'receiver', but they all share the feature of abstracting from the ensemble of social practices and contested social production and circulation of meanings they entail. A similar reduction – though in a somewhat 'milder' or 'softer' form – occurs also in more humanistic or hermeneutic approaches to communication that focus solely on shared 'language', 'codes' 'discourses' or 'culture', etc. Yet meaning as such – the act of signification and its social diffusion and acceptance – pervades all social relations. In both cases, the very attempt to specify the concept of communication, in order to define a discrete field of academic inquiry, results in making it more – not less – amorphous and incapable of providing a distinct object of academic study.

The concept of media functions as a 'meta-concept' for a means of communication and the communicative relations that structure it. It thus allows 'communication' to return to its previous wider meaning, while it isolates and valorizes the particular instrumentalist sense that had been ascribed to communication in the sense of a regulated system of transmission. In fact, there can be no communication without corresponding

'media' that constitute its 'material or social form', just as there can be no society or culture without communication. Thus, when investigated rigorously and coherently, 'media' turns out to be a concept just as wide as that of communication, potentially capable of including a range of practices and institutions that are not limited to the transmission of 'information', 'meanings' or 'codes', but which also includes such generalities as language (conceived as a medium for the creation of human community) or even money (conceived as the concrete medium for establishing a relationship of exchange of values). As in the case of an 'instrumentalist' or 'technical' – or 'hermeneutic' – concept of communication, the more widespread 'common sense' notions of 'media' (or 'mediatization') usually end up obscuring precisely that which they should have clarified, namely, the social reality that underlies the various institutional forms assumed in concrete historical conjunctures. Its usefulness in establishing a rigorous and critical field of social scientific research, beyond temporary and ultimately inessential questions of institutional concurrence, should therefore be treated with some caution, if not scepticism.

Every attempt to establish a theoretical foundation for the field, in terms of basic concepts, soon runs up against its own limits and contradictions; indeed, even the notion of a 'field' itself, insofar as it presupposes a basic conceptuality, is revealed to be much more problematic than it appeared at first sight. Indeed, we argue that the 'field' is defined on a social and institutional level, not at the level of 'basic concepts' or disciplinarily, and not even in terms of a supposed common object of study. After examining different possible conceptual tools ('discourse', 'institution', Bourdieu's 'field theory'), we propose Antonio Gramsci's notion of a 'hegemonic apparatus' as a particularly efficacious concept that has the potential to include conceptually all the elements we believe are necessary to comprehend the articulations of contemporary communication and media research in different countries, in their national particularity and international interactions. The materials gathered in our study show clearly that the short-term pressures and temptations to compromise in instrumentalist versions of scholarly inquiry are many and that they have been growing in the neo-liberal regime. Equally, however, a closer analysis of the different constellations in which communications and media studies is conducted has indicated that they are not written in stone: they are the historical products of identifiable political and social processes. The critique of these processes, including the proposition of alternative forms of institutional organization and paradigms of intellectual investigation, is a legitimate and necessary element of the overall field of forces that go to make up communication and media studies and research in its present form.

Literature

- Boyd-Barrett, Oliver (2006) 'Publishing, Research and the Communications Curriculum Under Globalization', in Kenneth W.Y. Leung, James Kenny, Paul S.N. Lee (eds) *Global Trends in Communication Education and Research*. Hampton Press; Cresskill, New Jersey, 235-259.
- Craig, Robert T., Carlone, David A. (1998) 'Growth and Transformation of Communication Studies in U.S. Higher Education: Towards Reinterpretation', *Communication Education*, 47, 67-81.
- Donsbach, Wolfgang (2006) The Identity of Communication Research. *Journal of Communication* 56: 437-448.
- Jeanneret, Yves (2001) *Les Sciences de l'information et de la communication: Une discipline méconnue en charge d'enjeux cruciaux. Rapport sur la situation des recherches après le 12ème congrès de la société française des sciences de l'information et de la communication*, Paris, Unesco. SFSIC.

Koivisto, Juha, Thomas, Peter (2010) *Mapping Communication and Media Research: Conjunctions, Institutions, Challenges*. Tampere; Tampere University Press.

Pfau, Michael (2008) 'Epistemological and Disciplinary Intersections', *Journal of Communication* 58(4), 597-602.