

Communication as a Discipline

Views from Europe

Evolving Paradigms of Communication Research

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The MIT historian of science Thomas S. Kuhn famously introduced the notions of paradigm, paradigm shift, and revolutionary science in his *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1970/1962), focusing primarily on the early histories of chemistry and astronomy. Those ideas and the parallel notion of puzzle-solving normal science have become frequently and influentially used in both the social sciences and humanistic scholarship, including the interdisciplinary field of communication research (Bennett & Iyengar, 2010; Dervin et al., 1989; Katz, 1992; Gitlin, 1978; Rosengren, 1985; Wang, 2011). What follows is a continuation and extension of a special section of *The International Journal of Communication* on the topic, "Communication Research as a Discipline." Reflecting on the future of the field, the present special section joins contributions from a collection of key European scholars around a focus on three interrelated questions:

1. Is it useful and appropriate to characterize the diverse practices of communication research as reflecting an underlying paradigm or paradigms which represent the common concerns of a community of scholars?
2. To the extent that the notion of paradigms is a legacy of past communication research, is this legacy subject to pressures to change as a result of the significant transformations in the media technologies of the digital age?
3. Similarly, are past paradigms subject to pressures to change as a result of new historical conditions, public practices of communication, and normative concerns?

Our tentative responses to all three questions are in the positive. But, as persevering readers will discover, the views of our contributors assent in different ways, for different reasons, and with different reservations and enthusiasms. In fact, a common theme of several contributions is that the very idea of a paradigm has been changing throughout the history of the field. Following a capsule characterization of the idea of a paradigm, we first address the second and third questions—regarding the technological and

historical forces affecting the field—before returning to the overarching issue of paradigms at the end of this introductory article.

Although definitions of “paradigm” vary in the literature (Lakatos & Musgrave, 1970) and among the contributors here, we can draw on Kuhn’s central definition of a paradigm as a set of “model problems and solutions for a community of researchers” (Kuhn, 1970/1962, p. viii) or, in more informal language, a set of puzzles and a corresponding set of agreed upon methodologies for trying to solve these puzzles. The central puzzle for communication scholarship has been to understand how complex, multi-institutional, and increasingly global media systems work in modern societies. Under what conditions do they facilitate democracy and empower citizens for public participation, as opposed to reinforcing inequalities and sustaining elite hegemony? Polarization or pluralism? A vibrant, open, and competitive marketplace of ideas, versus a closed and monolithic cultural orthodoxy? Research on this puzzle takes place simultaneously at the social/institutional/cultural level, and at the level of individual attentional and perceptual psychology. In order for research to be cumulative and theory to be moving forward as the community of researchers gradually comes to a rough agreement on intermediate findings, there has to be some consensus on what the main puzzles and the appropriate analytical methods are: How do we arrive at a common agenda of relevant questions and types of answers? Although such a consensus is far from unanimous, the move toward methodological convergence and commensurability, we believe, has been gaining momentum in recent decades (Jensen, 2012). So, if a paradigm in Kuhn’s classic sense is not yet fully in evidence, paradigmatic aspirations certainly have been.

Most histories of mass communication scholarship trace its origins to the period during and following the Second World War, when concern about the powerful effects of propaganda, especially by means of the evolving media of radio and television, inspired analysis of media use and attitude change among what were seen as the atomized publics of the mass society (Delia, 1987; Neuman & Guggenheim, 2011; Park & Pooley, 2008; Rogers, 1994). The driving normative concerns of that era are probably captured with some fidelity by the Orwellian imagery of Big Brother on the telescreen and an easily manipulated audience coming to accept an authoritarian orthodoxy (Neuman, 1991). It is useful to step back from the seminal work of Lasswell, Lazarsfeld, Hovland, Berelson, and their colleagues during this era, and also to acknowledge the historical limitations of their outlook and premises: the rather mechanistic one-way transmission model, the singular voice of the propagandist, the passive and atomistic audience, and the taken-for-granted context of the nation-state. All of these elements seem a bit awkwardly quaint in an age of digital globalization and many-to-many communication through social media, and against the background of political and cultural controversies frequently transcending national borders. Despite much theoretical and methodological refinement over the decades, it is not uncommon to encounter one or more of the original premises in contemporary publications, as also noted by some of our contributors. A case in point is the general failure of the field so far to bridge the great divide between one-to-one or interpersonal communication and one-to-many or mass communication—what Rogers (1999), in documenting the divide, referred to as “two subdisciplines,” and which may be understood as separate paradigms in the practice of research. Given the ongoing reconfiguration of these two basic communication formats in the digital media environment (Jensen, 2010), our first conclusion—regarding the technological challenge to research—is that there are, indeed, significant pressures on the field to

redevelop our theories and our methods. Doing so may equip us to offer interpretations and explanations of the transformations associated with the media technologies of the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

To the extent that any singular puzzle has dominated, though hardly united, the field to date, it is that of "media effects": What do media do to people (Katz, 1959)? The voluminous social-scientific scholarship on media effects during the latter half of the 20th century can be read as the story of a curious battle between frequent empirical findings of relatively modest effects and the enduring belief within the research community (along with many commentators and much of the general public) that media effects are actually not so minimal after all. One disciplinary hope has been that increasingly more sophisticated theory and refined measures and research designs would reveal this to be the case (McQuail, 2010). From the 1970s on, this scholarly trajectory was paralleled by a humanistically grounded stream of cultural studies relying on textual research methods and contextual evidence to identify strong media effects: the articulation of a political and cultural hegemony that would reinforce and legitimate the social status quo (Grossberg, Nelson, & Treichler, 1992; Hall, Hobson, Lowe, & Willis, 1980). On the one hand, these two positions have commonly been taken to represent separate paradigms, originating from the social sciences and the humanities, respectively, articulating different visions of the intellectual brief of research and recalling Lazarsfeld's (1941) prototypical distinction between administrative and critical research. On the other hand, the two forms of scholarship can be seen to intersect in a common set of normative concerns: how to document and, if necessary, counteract whatever media do to people.

Both camps recognize, in distinctive terminologies, the overriding importance of a vibrant and accessible "public sphere" or an open "marketplace of ideas." For both sides, Habermas' widely referenced "ideal speech situation" (1984–1987/1981) has served to capture the idea that each citizen should feel free to speak his or her mind about public issues without fear of retribution or ostracism, and thus, to participate in society-wide deliberations defining the common good. The hope for such an ideal condition of communication has been rekindled by the rapid diffusion of a near universal and (mostly) unfiltered Internet. In principle, online citizens are as free to speak as to listen, and to continue their conversation regardless of physical space and time. Habermas himself has been unimpressed by this scenario (2006a, 2006b). But the issue has been a powerful magnet, appropriately so, for further attention and research (Castells, 2009; Hindman, 2009; Neuman, Bimber, & Hindman, 2011; Price, 2009; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009). There is already evidence of one more standoff between a hopeful position of comparative cultural optimism (Benkler, 2006; Jenkins, 2006) and a concern that researchers may be entirely "misunderstanding the Internet" (Curran, Fenton, & Freedman, 2012), its potential, and its implications. And yet, the two positions would seem to agree that the point of reference for hopes and concerns has shifted from the image of the isolated and easily persuaded urban television viewer of the 1950s, to the always-connected—and perhaps always-distracted—Internet user of the new millennium. Our second conclusion, then—regarding the historical challenge to research—is that there are also significant pressures on the field to change in response to new communicative practices and various associated normative issues.

Returning to the idea of a paradigm, we note that paradigmatic analysis is pervasive in the field of communication research. The term has been widely used to identify both tensions and transitions—tensions within the field of study, transitions in the object of study, and sometimes both of these

dynamics. As such, the term bears witness to the historically embedded and socially interested nature of the enterprise of research. We study communication in a context and for a purpose. Different contexts may motivate different purposes. Regarding the current relevance of paradigms, we conclude that transitions in the object of study have moved to the top of the research agenda—despite the continued presence, as noted, of more ideologically motivated paradigmatic tensions which, in turn, help to explain different assessments of ongoing transitions. These transitions—technological, as well as historical—challenge the field to reconsider past positions on a scale traditionally associated with the terminology of paradigms.

The following eight contributions take up this challenge, organized under three broad headings focusing on the current state of paradigms in communication research, the historical backgrounds and normative foundations of research, and the global contexts that may encourage future studies to take a comparative approach, both to its objects of study, and to its own paradigms.

I. Communication Research Paradigms

Denis McQuail's contribution, "Reflections on Paradigm Change in Communication Theory and Research," sets the stage for us by asking if, indeed, a new paradigm is, in his words, "struggling to emerge." His overview suggests as much—that the contemporary digital environment and its forms of media use and experience represent a disjuncture from the received "linear mechanical" model of communication and its attendant assumptions that any effects would be largely equivalent to content as sent, would rise in proportion to the amount of "exposure," and would typically be one-directional. Importantly, he notes, some intermediate conceptions of the audience have led classic "audience research" to give way, at least in part, to the study of "reception." Nevertheless, McQuail finds, "the traditional notion of 'effect' is not going to be abandoned lightly," concluding that "[i]t may be that what really stands in the way of a genuinely new paradigm of communication is the lack of sufficient motive to discover one." The materials for a revised, much broader, and more complex concept of the communication process, he also suggests, are almost certainly at hand in the many intervening developments of communication theory and research.

Patti Valkenburg and Jochen Peter's essay, "Five Challenges for the Future of Media-Effects Research," picks up where McQuail's leaves off and provides the beginning of an answer to the question of "sufficient motive," reemphasizing the need in every discipline or field for self-reflection. Their guiding thematic is the near obsession over "effect size" within our field, despite the fact that modest effect-size parameters are quite common throughout the social sciences. A key outcome of their analysis of the effects literature is the call for a shift from simply demonstrating "big effects" to an elaborated model of the conditions under which effect sizes vary, especially in the context of the digital media environment.

Reversing the perspective from singular effects to constant exposure, Peter Vorderer and Matthias Kohring focus on an extremely important characteristic of the current media environment. Their title is "Permanently Online: A Challenge for Media and Communication Research." As in the case of McQuail's contribution, the challenge for them derives from the linear transmission model of a speaker/propagandist and a passive, but attentive, audience member—a model which cannot capture the

activity and experience of being online. "Audience members" may not even need to deal explicitly with messages; they are just "there." Vorderer and Kohring call for renewed analysis of the changing media environment and changing media experiences on two different, interrelated levels, the individual and the social. They conclude, citing the work of Joseph Cappella, that progress might follow not just from disciplinary, but from transdisciplinary work, as "people from very different points of view cannot themselves answer the important problems that we face alone from their limited disciplinary perspectives."

II. Historical and Normative Foundations of Communication Research

Jay G. Blumler and Stephen Coleman, in "Paradigms of Civic Communication," highlight the point that, "rather than thinking of paradigmatic change as emanating from ideological antagonism," the field needs to ask more broadly "how changing historical conditions generate grounds for intellectual reassessment." Traditional political communication research, they assert, has been based on a tripartite model of political elites (typically politicians and parties), media institutions, and the audience as citizens. They ponder the possible benefits of a shift from that tripartite model to a more differentiated analysis of the meaning of citizenship in the digital media environment. Citizenship, they argue, is a deeply normative concept, and the manifest but vulnerable potential of digital media to enhance the interactive, dialogical, and inclusive features of democratic citizenship is in danger of being squandered. As key questions on an evolving agenda of political communication research, Blumler and Coleman ask the following: What are the implications of communication abundance? What are the terms and boundaries of "the political"? How should traditions of national and international media regulation respond to the current media environment? And, finally and importantly, how might communication abundance contribute to more diverse media content about "politically significant matters"? Whither consonance?

Graham Murdock, under the heading "Communication in Common," takes the long view. He bases his rich historical analysis on the normative distinction between the realms of the public and the private, and he develops his argument with reference to the tradition of the public "commons" and the varied movements toward enclosure of this shared resource—in the case of land, culture, and most recently, digital media. Murdock's analysis suggests that current events in the "media marketplace" represent, in effect, the most recent enclosure movement. The social responsibilities of citizenship, he argues, have been comprehensively trumped by the promise of expanded opportunities to consume.

Daniel Dayan's essay, entitled "Conquering Visibility, Conferring Visibility: Visibility Seekers and Media Performance," tells two distinct, yet intersecting stories from different vantage points, tracing not one, but two paradigm shifts. The first story takes us from a paradigm conceiving of the spectator's condition in terms of victimization by or resistance to media, to a paradigm conceiving that condition in terms of either deprivation or conquest. Spectators themselves may want, above all, to become visible *within* media. The second story takes us from a classic understanding, especially of news media, in terms of more or less "objective" representations of reality, to a performative paradigm recognizing that media necessarily perform and pass on particular versions of reality, making certain aspects visible and others invisible. Far from succumbing to postmodern relativism, Dayan suggests, such a performative and

pragmatic paradigm may help the field to evaluate the quality and relevance of actual media performances.

III. Globalization and Communication Research

Paolo Mancini explores "What Scholars Can Learn from the Crisis of Journalism." The crisis is not just structural or economic, he notes, as news media migrate from print and broadcasting to the Internet. At issue is also the nature of professional journalism and its place in political democracy. The fragmentation of the structural frameworks of news entails a profound transformation of journalism, both as a profession, and as a social and cultural institution. If niche audiences replace the mass audience, reporters and editors may be more inclined to address their perceived audiences with reference to already familiar and shared points of view. In a global perspective, the crisis of journalism, as debated not least in the Western hemisphere, calls for more (and more comparative) studies in order to avoid, in Mancini's words, "generalization from a tiny handful of countries."

Frank Esser concludes our special section with his essay, "The Emerging Paradigm of Comparative Communication Enquiry: Advancing Cross-National Research in Times of Globalization." It is noteworthy that there are many more communication scholars working comparatively in Europe than there are in the United States—the opportunity structures and context conditions do not seem to be equally favorable in both places. Comparative research, Esser reminds us, guides our attention to the explanatory relevance of the contextual environment for communication outcomes. However, this environment has become one of growing globalization and supranational integration. Under such conditions, it is increasingly difficult to treat societies and cultures as isolated units. He makes six practical suggestions as to how scholars should respond to this situation, and he is optimistic that the comparative approach has a bright future, in Europe and beyond.

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