

From Fermentation to Maturity?
Reflections on Media and Communication Studies:
An Interview with Todd Gitlin, Jostein Gripsrud & Michael Schudson

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Twenty-six years after the *Journal of Communication* published a special issue entitled "Ferment in the Field," Professors Todd Gitlin, Jostein Gripsrud and Michael Schudson reflect on the state of the field of media and communications research. They discuss the conflict between critical and administrative research, the role of the intellectual in today's society, and the quality of current research on new media.

In 1983, the leading academic journal of media and communication studies took stock: *Journal of Communication* published a special issue entitled "Ferment in the Field." Media and communications as a research field at this stage consisted of a number of different disciplinary approaches. As communications research established departments of their own, there were disagreements as to how to further proceed. Discrepancies in methodology were particularly debated — an issue we find prominent also in today's debate about media and communications research.

As noted by the 1993 follow-up special issue of *Journal of Communication*, entitled "The Future of the Field – Between Fragmentation and Cohesion," communication scholarship continues to find itself at a crossroads. As old controversies are resolved, new dilemmas appear. At the same time, lasting cleavages remain, for instance, between critical and administrative research traditions. Ultimately, the question of the field's lack of disciplinary status still remains. In this interview, three leading scholars — each having entered the field at different times and with different backgrounds — consider the impact of the 1983 special issue, the relevance today of the debates it stirred, and the state of the field now, 26 years later.

The discussion took place at Columbia University in New York on Dec. 3, 2007, as part of a research trip undertaken by the authors and Professor Jostein Gripsrud to institutions collaborating in Gripsrud's DigiCult project on democracy and the digitization of audiovisual culture¹.

Todd Gitlin is an American sociologist, political writer, novelist, and cultural commentator. He holds degrees from Harvard University (mathematics), the University of Michigan (political science), and the University of California, Berkeley (sociology). For 16 years, he was Professor of Sociology and Director of the mass communications program at the University of California, Berkeley, and for seven years, Professor of Culture, Journalism and Sociology at New York University. Currently, he is Professor of Journalism and Sociology and Chair of the PhD program in Communications at Columbia University.

Jostein Gripsrud is a Norwegian media scholar and cultural commentator. With a background in the study of Nordic languages and literatures, he entered the field of media and communication as one of the founders of Norway's first university department for media studies in Bergen in 1986. Since then, he has published widely on the social history of the arts; media and popular culture; cultural sociology and the public sphere; textual analysis and semiotics; and rhetorical and aesthetic theory. He now holds a professorship at the Department of Information Science and Media Studies, University of Bergen.

Michael Schudson holds a doctorate in sociology from Harvard University. In 1980, he joined the faculty of the University of California, San Diego where he now is Professor of Communication and Adjunct Professor of Sociology. He is also Professor of Journalism at The Journalism School at Columbia University. Schudson's work has concentrated on the history and sociology of the American news media, advertising, popular culture, Watergate, and cultural memory.



Sjøvaag & Moe: It's been 26 years since the Journal of Communication special issue "Ferment in the Field." What do you think was the significance of that issue at that point in time? What kind of impact did it have?

Gitlin: I saw it, at the time, as an attempt to get the collective mind around what, in fact, had been a ferment which was also a breakdown of a field that into the late 1970s had been compactly understood as a given — as a field on its way to becoming a discipline. The chief practitioners going into the 1970s felt that they had consolidated a dominant paradigm, a set of research programs, a cast of characters, a standard repertory of methodologies, and a territory of journals — in general, the apparatus of the discipline. They knew what the predominant questions were; they knew what the predominant unfinished business was. And then something erupted. Thus, a way of describing what had happened was this ferment. This was an attempt to reconsolidate and to catalogue. I did not really think of it as a successful effort at ordering a new field. I thought of it as an inventory. As for its impact, I am not aware that it had any impact. I never did hear that anybody was affected by it.

¹ Digidult: Democracy and the Digitization of Audiovisual Culture, <http://digidult.uib.no/>

Schudson: It is an odd issue, most of it. All of the papers in it are brief. It became a kind of a milestone, a marking point, a point of reference of some kind, but I do not think there is a single piece in here that has gotten much mileage itself, as something to look back to or to cite. These are very occasional pieces — a few thoughts for the moment. But it did mark a moment in what had been a reasonably unified and very insulated field that was opening up.

Gripsrud: To me, it was interesting because it came out just as the humanities in Norway started to get interested in mass communication and media studies. Many of the features of this ferment were about a turn toward critical theory, toward qualitative methodology — an acknowledgement of the virtues that these methodologies held for analysis. It was an opening up of a field which took place at a time when people like myself were discussing with people, that in the USA were called number crunchers. It signaled, in a sense, a turn in the international landscape that was important for the work that we were doing — starting the field from scratch in Norway.

What I otherwise thought of, it was a very delayed marking of the struggle over positivism in German sociology from the late 1960s and early 1970s. To me, it also signified that this field was delayed in these debates over methodology, theory, and politicization. This had taken a long time to come to the surface. It is also a characterization of a field that could do with some ferment.

Gitlin: The field had not been self-aware. And one reason I think was that it proved to be brittle. It had actually been rather pleased with itself for some time. There was a sense among the old-timers who were still going strong that they knew what the field was. They had a well demarcated body of questions, they had methods, and they had access. They had institutional sources of money and they had a certain esprit and a sense of themselves as a maturing profession, and that they were taxiing down a runway that had long since been built. So it was kind of shocking to them to feel under siege.

Sjøvaag & Moe: *The critics of media and communication studies have claimed that the lack of homegrown theories is a problem for the field. Would you agree on that?*

Gitlin: Communications was always, for the most part, a field and not a discipline. That is to say, it did not have a method or even a definite array of alternative methods. I am not sure the others deserve to claim the methods they claim, including here specifically, sociology. But in any event, our field was an application of a series of methods to a topic, to a subject, and the subject was a means of communication. If there was anything like theoretical thinking in communications, it was the line that came out of McLuhan — which was problematic when rigour was under consideration. But at least it was an approach to questioning the place of media in history — it was theorizing on a grand scale. I think it actually deserves some place in the field, and has earned it. But there is not very much about *that* in the "Ferment in the Field" special issue.

Sjøvaag & Moe: *If the field of communication studies was shaken up in the early 1980s, how is it defined in the United States today? Is this still a field within the social sciences for the study of mass communication?*

Gitlin: There is a field of communication studies. I am sure it is still a growth area in terms of the number of students who major in it and the size of the departments. Communication studies, which is largely, although not exclusively, "mass communications" in American universities, is a growth area. But here, it is limited in part by its history in basically disconnected "positivist" research. It is limited also by the fact that it is a preparatory major for students who want to go into media practice. This has been true for many years. Communication majors are huge. So this suggests that communications is compendious, or to put it less kindly, loose and baggy, and rather devoid of an intellectually serious agenda.

Communications programs, which are heavily undergraduate, for the most part, feel that they need to include something theoretical. There needs to be a foundation, just like the way sociology feels it needs to at least point at Marx, Weber, Durkheim, and throw in a couple of other of the luminaries. But the equivalent in communications departments is a quick once-over gesture at two-step flow, or very narrow and un-ambitious theory will suffice.

Gripsrud: What characterizes some of the theoretical contributions to media studies, such as McLuhan's, is that it is intellectual work of broader interest. It has been a goal, at least in our department, that media studies is to breed intellectuals — broadly educated, with an interest in history, sociology and so on, but looking specifically at media and cultural phenomena.

We could use the term "intellectual" to raise the question of the relations between political or other activities in the public sphere and the academic work as a scholar. You, Todd, have indicated that what you do as a scholar has nothing to do with your politics. What I'm asking is actually whether the idea of the scholar's position in the public sphere has changed since the late 1970s. The notion of an intellectual: What is an intellectual today? Is this a role that scholars can fill or should fill? Can they be public intellectuals, if such a thing exists? I should think you are pretty close to that.

Gitlin: Intellectuals feature in the public sphere today almost exclusively as experts. They are, in that sense, administrative, regardless of their political position. If you were comparing this moment in the public sphere to the moment 30 years ago, you might think that this was actually a time of improved standing for public intellectuals — so-called, because there is now a regular institution within journalism that is hospitable to public intellectuals, and that is the op-ed page, which is a relatively late development. On the other hand, it will be an interesting exercise if you look at the op-ed pages of our major newspapers — the topics that are there.

They are not topics of general intellectuals, except scientists. Social thinkers and philosophers are conspicuous by their scarcity. The op-ed pages are, in general, not places for engagement in ideas unless we count the tendentious, heavy-breathing efforts of the *Wall Street Journal*. The last example I can think of when *The New York Times* published a broad-gauged piece of public intellectual work on its op-ed pages

was the famous Fukuyama piece about the end of history, which was published in 1989.² But that kind of thing is extremely unusual in the U.S., as opposed to France and Germany, for example. So my answer to your question, the place of public intellectuals in our discourse — it's underwhelming.

Gripsrud: Jean Paul Sartre's distinction from 1965 between knowledge technicians on the one hand — which would be your experts — and intellectuals, seems outdated to me, since Sartre defined the intellectual as someone who is speaking about something that he in principle does not know anything about. That would be the poet discussing military matters, or the teacher of mass communication discussing measures taken in the field of ecology. Both are possible and perhaps desirable, resulting from a general *engagement*. But both would simply be speaking as citizens. You cannot now speak with particular authority simply out of your position as a writer, artist or professor. It is easier to make a difference in the public sphere if you speak about something that you really know about. Your ethos as a speaker will be more convincing.

When writers and actors now get together and write a manifest about some war going on somewhere, it is rarely convincing. That kind of political action seems to me slightly outdated. You would be more convincing talking about media and communication than talking about agricultural policy or the fisheries off the coast of Alaska. I think maybe this is because the general level of education has risen. Something happened to the old-fashioned forms of intellectual initiative that I associate with the 1960s — say the anti-Vietnam War movement in Norway — it was about getting together some well-known names and having them express opinions, exploiting their authority in some very different field.

Gitlin: That sort of interplay still goes on all the time, but with limited significance. On the other hand, I would still stand for the model of the general intellectual who can bring to specific questions some angle which opens them up, which conveys something about their implications. When Habermas wrote on Bosnia or Kosovo, he was not simply popping off. Whatever you think of his line of argument, he was catapulting from the particular to the general. He had a claim about what the significance of NATO intervention would be with respect to constitutional democracy. And that is valuable, whether you agree with him or not. It is valuable to lift the particular out of the particular.

Sjøvaag & Moe: *The field of media and communication has been characterized as one that is full of specializations, with too much detailed administrative research and too little critical overview. Would you agree on this?*

Schudson: No, I probably would not agree. This is an interesting and somewhat different instance, but there are some, usually second-tier journals in communication that are nothing but overview. You know: prolegomenon to an introduction to a preface to a study of communication. Why did you not actually go out and do some *work*? I increasingly like empirical research — someone went out and looked at something. If they actually went out and talked to someone or interviewed some people, or brought back

² Fukuyama, F. (1989). "How the West Is Winning." *The New York Times*. Week in Review. Aug. 27, p. 5.

to this domain of research a little news. Maybe it is because I am in a journalism school now half the time, but recording looks like a very good activity to me.

Gitlin: The term “critical” is a euphemism. And most of the time it was a euphemism for Marxism. What I find a bit of a cheat, from both the “critical Marxists” — let the record show that I made air quotes — and some administrative research also, is that it does not actually undertake research — it actually always knows the answer to the question beforehand. This is not critical research. This is an exposition that contains, and is meant to contribute to, a rhetorical spree of criticism. And left-wing criticism in particular. There is good critical research and there is bad critical research. There is good administrative research and there is bad administrative research. I am extremely tired of this polarity between the critical and the administrative.

That is not to say there was nothing in the distinction, and if you go back to the old Lazarsfeld-Adorno debate about this, the Lazarsfeld claim was that Adorno made lots of unsubstantiated and unsubstantiable claims about media effects. And the Adorno claim, in turn, was that the Lazarsfeld style of research took too much for granted about institutional structure, to which, at least on one occasion as I remember, Lazarsfeld replied, “I also want to see research on for example how institutions function.” —which seemed to me fine. It is just that here I would sound like the vulgar Marxist. I would say the reason he never undertook that research was that you could not get any money to do it.

Gripsrud: But don’t you think this critical-administrative aspect could be applied today to some of the research that goes on? I am thinking specifically of some of the research on new media. There is a lot of research which is about exploring or just celebrating the magic of new devices and the fact that kids can do several things at once. I just saw this reference to Henry Jenkins today, regarding how a young person can switch between e-mailing and chatting and talking on the mobile and writing a paper and watching a movie or the news or a TV-show all more or less at one time, and “this is fantastic,” “it is unbelievably fantastic.” It is almost like a research and development department for the industry. Maybe I am wrong, but at least there seems to be not as much research that puts this in a greater perspective. Link these new media phenomena with the longer history of media technologies. There is this link between the old critical-administrative dichotomy and the present situation in new media research.

Gitlin: That I agree with. In fact, we were just reading Jenkins in my seminar last week. Plainly, the questions he is asking in this book, *Convergence Culture*³, have answers which are useful to those who are in the business of promoting their gadgetry. But that is not what is wrong with the research. It is, actually, to anybody who is seriously interested in promoting the use of certain gadgetry, not awfully useful, I would think. And the reason it is not awfully useful, is that the kinds of questions it asks are so superficial. If I were an executive at Google, I do not know that I would learn a lot from the sort of research that is evident in that book.

³ Jenkins, H. (2006) *Convergence Culture. Where Old and New Media Collide*, New York & London: New York University Press

I would be more interested to know “what is the consciousness like of somebody who lives a life substantially devoted to multi-tasking and electronic dependency?” I want to look into this rigorously, drawing on psychological, neurological, historical, and sociological angles. I do not think the merits of my line of argument about the consciousness of multi-tasking depend on my politics. It depends on something else. It depends on its fidelity to evidence and logic. I do not want to make it sound too grand, but I could be a fascist and still have some interesting ideas about what is happening to consciousness in an era of media saturation.

So is my interest critical or administrative? It might be administrative. It might be some people with an administrative state of mind who also display some farsighted interest in the nature of consciousness and whether anything is actually changing in it — that might actually speak to their commercial interest, but not only. If you look at physical sciences, research undertaken by the Pentagon for its own purposes including DARPA’s underwriting of initial work on the Internet.⁴ It turned out to have all kinds of other significance, even though that is not what the bureaucrats who achieved the funding thought they were buying. It was, in fact, basic research.

Gripsrud: It is important that universities — the research that goes on there — do some of the things that research and development departments of big mobile phone operators are doing. But there should be some difference in the sense that we are free to ask other questions. What new media researchers are asking is all the time questions of what young people use their mobile phones for, and then detail how many text messages they send per day, or that they are constructing their gender when they are sending images of themselves around among friends. Specifically, they do not ask the larger questions of what this means — for not only consciousness but the culture and society at large, human relations if you like, the relations within and between social groups.

Gitlin: To me, the crucial distinction is not between critical and administrative, it is between deep and shallow — comprehensive and parochial.

Schudson: However you want to define it, this is a good question. I would love to know what we can say are the consequences of media multi-tasking on the minds of particularly younger people who have adopted this as an everyday practice. Has anyone said anything intriguing about it? Jenkins said something like, “It’s great, it’s wonderful, people can absorb so much more information this way and connect to and link to whatever they want to link to.” And others say, “Nobody reads anymore, people are much shallower than they once were.” There is technological optimism, and there are technological pessimists. That has more to do with characterological meanings and the interpreter, than it does with evidence out there.

I think that nobody reads enough anymore. I also observed in the cream of the crop of young people, that they are amazing. There is a kind of remarkable ambition that I think that technology has done something

⁴ DARPA, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency develops technology for the U.S. Department of Defense. DARPA’s research has developed Internet technologies such as computer networking, hypertext and the graphic user interface (<http://www.darpa.mil/>).

to help unleash. But there does seem to be an absence of an organizing principle to grapple with what looks like a quite fundamental transformation in communication systems.

Gitlin: I would like to make a statement that is going to sound self-serving — and will be, but maybe not *only* self-serving. It bears on this question that we have just been discussing. It also bears on the earlier question about the state of theory or the state of general ideas. I have been interested for quite some time in the question of the nature of new media and some of its general features, in particular, its saturating quality and its speed. And I wrote a book on this subject. The title is *Media Unlimited*.⁵ It is certainly *my* major statement on this question. There are many flaws in it, but it aspires to raise large overarching questions about the place of the new media environment in relation to our general place.

My publisher has never sent me a review of this book in a communications journal. I am not aware of one. And I say this not because I feel sorry for myself, but because I do feel sorry for the field. I am not an unknown figure in the field. And yet, evidently, the book did not match the field's collective focus — an idea of what is worth thinking about now in the field of mass communications. And I think this is a mark of intellectual bankruptcy. And it is not that I think I have the last word. I am not saying I wanted universal applause, but I do think I have some ideas, and I do think I have earned the right to articulate them, and I find it kind of pathetic that my challenge was not taken up. So I think very poorly of the field. Most of what it is doing does not interest me.

Gripsrud: You had a situation in the 1980s and 1990s where the study of popular culture became a *celebration* of popular culture. An uncritical celebration of it, not just a defense. It turned into a celebratory discourse particularly through the American version of cultural studies. And it seems to me that the same people that were representative of this celebratory discourse, including others of course, have now moved into the new media field, and they produce much of the same celebratory discourse.

Gitlin: I agree. There is a particular political element to this. It is great and it is fun and therefore — so we claim — we have not been crushed by capitalism.

Sjøvaag & Moe: *Talking about some of the main strengths and weaknesses we can see in the field today: What is your impression of the status of our field within academia — is it just Mickey Mouse studies?*

Gripsrud: I think there is a significant element of Mickey Mouse studies in some of what goes on in some countries — if they just do this celebratory thing. But it is unfair to call the field as a whole or any whole department a field or department of Mickey Mouse studies. They do that at times, especially in England in parts of the press — because of the success of media studies in getting students. The main thing about these accusations about Mickey Mouse studies — the suggested simplicity, superficiality — is mainly wrong.

⁵ Gitlin, T. (2002) *Media Unlimited. How the Torrent of Images and Sounds Overwhelm our Lives*. New York: Owl Books.

Schudson: There is a lot less Mickey Mouse studies now than when I started. I was trained as a sociologist, started in the communications department in 1980, essentially at the time of "Ferment in the Field." I was in probably the only communication department in the country that I would have found tolerable at that point, at San Diego. Now, I could think of 6-8-10 communications departments where there is some really interesting work going on. So either my standards have lowered or the field has gotten better.

Partly because there was ferment in the field, and the window was open, fresh air was blowing in from other domains. The activities of the last 10 years around digitization has brought in another array of work that will eventually be another source of cross-fertilization, particularly science and technology studies. This is my instinct. There is interesting work, and a greater sophistication than there used to be about McLuhanesque notions about the relationship of technology to society and social change.

There is better thinking there than there used to be. It is still amorphous. It is still too insulated from a broader intellectual discussion that you would be closer to in sociology or history. I do not know what all the factors are that would affect that but I think communication is a better field than it was. And it does have the advantage — there are a lot of students, so there is money flowing in rather than out of this domain, so it has a chance of growing and becoming more sophisticated.

Gitlin: I certainly agree. I am pro amorphousness in a kind of open source spirit. That is, better to be sending out lots of pseudo-pods than single-celled animals. Better to be enfolding and ecumenical than to be too nicely defined. The ferment that exists now, or ought to exist, is on a much broader canvas.

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