

**Communication****As A Discipline**

## **Paradigm Shift and the Centrality of Communication Discipline**

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Unlike most disciplines, communication studies have since their heyday been kidnapped by the development of media technologies. To discuss the centrality of communication discipline in this era of dazzling technological change is therefore more like attempting to sketch a train as it shoots by. While we are still unsettled with the scale, scope, and significance of the digital revolution, talks about the end of newspapers, even television, are already thick in the air (Katz, 2009; McChesney & Pickard, 2011; Myer, 2009). This seems to be a time when we can no longer be sure what media communication is to be like in the next three years, how to prepare students for their future careers, or even how to name our department and school.<sup>1</sup>

In contrast to the anxiety about the decline of journalism and television studies brought by the fall of mass media, we seem to be faced with a certain degree of “stability” in the way communication problems are approached. After a comprehensive review of research on Internet news consumption, Mitchelstein and Boczkowski (2010) noted that “continuity,” rather than change, has characterized the dominant modes of inquiry, with a reliance on “traditional conceptual and methodological preferences.” This “stability”—or more closely “inertia”—is especially noteworthy, as it underscores a lack of sensitivity to the very features that have differentiated digital communication from mass communication. The three systematic limitations that the two authors cited have made typical examples of such lack of sensitivity: a division between print, broadcast and online media when convergence is the trend; a separation of media features from social practices when users are part of the media; and a focus on either the ordinary or the extraordinary when a full picture of mediated communication takes both. We are, therefore, faced with a paradox in the study of communication: While media technologies are undergoing revolutionary changes, approaches to investigate these changes tend to remain in a state of inertia.

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<sup>1</sup> In 2010, for example, the Advisory Board of the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Colorado at Boulder recommended closure of the school, and in its place, opening a new interdisciplinary School or College of Information, Communication, Media and Technology.

Dominant paradigms rise and fall in all areas of studies, according to Kuhn (1962). They offer a sense of direction for the conduct of inquiry and provide a framework for analyses. Yet as flashlights and camera lenses, their guidance led us to focus on certain issues rather than others, and from a certain angle rather than others. Once accustomed to a paradigm, we are no longer aware of its existence. To grasp the essence of rapid changes, we are often encouraged to “think outside the box” but the question is, are we aware of the existence of “the box” and what it looks like?

While discussing the development of journalism vis-à-vis that of communication studies, Zelizer (2011) warned us against what she described as a “subdisciplinary nearsightedness.” Journalism, for example, has survived in communication studies “primarily in ways that match the contemporary interests of the subfield invoking it” (Zelizer, 2011, p. 10). Is this nearsightedness a sign of the growing inadequacies of the existing dominant paradigm in guiding communication studies? Katz (2009) has found thousands of television studies to be “unsuited” to the task of identifying larger or more enduring effects. While more systematic undertakings may produce more desirable outcomes, can it also be that “effect” is an elusive concept to begin with and that the dominant paradigm has led to an overemphasis of its importance in our understanding of the workings of media? A more serious question perhaps is: Do such limitations explain the reason why the discipline seems to be rather ill-prepared for the changes that began taking place over two decades ago? Is this the time for competing paradigms to emerge?

Technological changes are not the only type of change the discipline is experiencing at the moment. A second, perhaps less visible yet equally important change is brought by the internationalization of the field of study. The International Communication Association (ICA), one of the largest associations in communication, now claims membership from over 80 countries. E-journals in media and communication number over 60, with about half published in a language other than English. In China alone, the number of communication faculty reached over 10,000 in 2008. A study by So (2010) found that even SSCI journals are publishing a greater number of Asia-related articles.

With this trend of globalization, it is increasingly difficult for us to overlook the changes that are taking place in the other parts of the world, especially when regional differences are becoming too obvious to ignore. Reports from the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (2010), for example, showed that newspaper circulation recorded phenomenal growth in Africa, Asia, and Latin America (Table 1) in 2009, in contrast to a significant decline in North America and Europe. Rather than showing signs of “final days,” on a global scale the newspaper industry fared well from 2004 to 2009, with as many as 68% of the world nations reporting either stable or increased circulation. When free newspapers are added to the total, circulation rose 1.7% globally from 2008 to 2009, and 7.7% during the five-year period. Are we then truly looking at the end of newspaper?

**Table 1. World Newspaper Circulation**

Region	2008–2009 Growth Rate	2004–2009 Growth Rate
North America	-3.4	-10.6
Europe	-5.6	-7.9
Africa	4.3	+30
South America	-4.6	+5
Asia	1.0	+13
Australia and Oceania	-1.5	-5.6
World total	-0.8	+5.7

Source. World Association of Newspapers ([www.wan-press.org/article18612.html](http://www.wan-press.org/article18612.html)).

Some had suspected the lack of widespread computer usage to be the cause of newspaper growth in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, yet the newspaper is clearly not the only communication medium that has embarked on a rather different path of development. So have digital media. Statistics show that while these regions may still lag in fixed broadband subscription, mobile cellular has not only reached a significant level of penetration (Table 2), but has been growing at an unprecedented rate. By the end of 2010, the developing world had increased its share of mobile subscriptions to 73 percent of the world total, from merely 53 percent at the end of 2005 (International Telecommunication Union, 2011). China alone added most of the 2010 growth in the Asia Pacific Region, which saw mobile subscriptions grow by 490 million to reach 2.6 billion (The Wire Report, 2011).

**Table 2. Key Global Telecom Indicators for the World.  
Telecommunication Service Sector in 2010 (estimates)**

	Global	Africa	Arab States	Asia & Pacific	CIS	Europe	Americas
Mobile Cellular/ 100 people	76.2%	41.4%	79.4%	67.8%	131.5%	120.0%	94.1%
Mobile Broadband /100 people	13.6%	3.6%	9.7%	7.1%	25.9%	46.3%	24.2%
Fixed Broadband /100 people	8.0%	0.2%	2.3%	5.7%	8.7%	23.9%	15.5%

Source. International Telecommunication Union ([www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/material/FactsFigures2010.pdf](http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/material/FactsFigures2010.pdf)).

As both media and communication studies were born in the West and introduced to the rest of the world, leadership of the West in both was seldom questioned. Yet what can we make of the above changes in media growth? Is the West still leading, and will other regions sooner or later be faced with the decline of the newspaper, or are the “rest” developing a different model of media industry—one characterized by the partnership of print and mobile?

Interesting differences are also seen in the myriad of new ways in using digital media. A notable example is “human flesh search,” or Chinese Internet manhunt<sup>2</sup>—a collective endeavor of Chinese netizens in exposing personal information on the Internet, often about individuals who have behaved in a morally unacceptable fashion. In 2009, the Zhao Da-gen case brought attention to media audiences and Internet users on both sides of the Taiwan Strait. A tourist from China, Zhao was found to have inscribed his name, country, and city of residence onto a piece of rock in a popular geological park in northern Taiwan. While he was neither the first nor the only one to commit such a misdemeanor, the fact that he intentionally made known to people that he was from China struck a highly sensitive chord in Taiwan-China relations. To offset the negative impact of his behavior, Zhao was tracked down within five days from among China’s 1.3 billion people and apologized under public pressure for what he had done.

The Zhao Da-gen case was by no means an isolated incident in China. In 2009 alone, online communication provided one-third of the disclosures for 77 high-profile social events in China (Cheong & Gong, 2010, p. 473). Surprisingly, despite its tremendous social impact since its emergence in 2001, human flesh search has received little attention from the academic community, either locally or internationally,<sup>3</sup> and this is not the only example.

The problems of academic dependency and the lack of theorizing in research works from outside the Western world are nothing novel to Asian communication researchers (Alatas, 2006; Chen, 2006; Dissanayake, 1988; Goonasekera & Kuo, 2000; Wang, 2011b). Over the past few decades, globalization of the field has basically stopped at the data level, seldom reaching into the realms of methodology, theory, or paradigm. In examining changes in mediatic processes in Eastern European nations, Downing (1996) noted that there was a tendency to extrapolate theoretically from “relatively unrepresentative nations” such as Britain and the United States (Downing, 1996, p. xi; Thussu, 2009, p. 17). His observations remind us of what Zelizer described as “geographic nearsightedness,” when “the discipline’s geographic spread constitutes only part of the environments from which scholars tackle communications” (Zelizer, 2011, p. 11).

Some may disagree with the notion that media theories basically represent “an intellectual monologue within the mainstream West with itself (Downing, 1996, p. xi),” yet there is little doubt that

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<sup>2</sup> Sources of information on human flesh search include news reports, essays, and comments from the Internet.

<sup>3</sup> A search of literature on human flesh search shows that studies on the topic are mostly theses or conference papers by graduate students.

the same paradigm dominating communication research in the West is currently dictating it at the global level. It is important to note here that a paradigm generally reflects more closely the needs, values, aspirations, and world views of the historic, social, and cultural context that has nurtured it. When a paradigm guides our attention and provides frameworks for analyses across time and cultural boundaries, its limitations become greater. But when phenomena do not square with frameworks, they are frequently selectively understood and analyzed, or dismissed as “deviants” or isolated incidents that do not warrant investigation in their own right. Under the name of science, we readily accept the universality of methods, theories, and paradigms, unaware of the problems that an imported paradigm may bring to research—an important issue that the concept of Eurocentrism addresses.

The limitations of applying paradigms across time and cultural boundaries are illuminated with an examination of the few studies that have attempted to tackle the issue of human flesh search (for example, see Chen, 2009; Lee, 2010; Wang, et al., 2011). They have shown difficulties in analyzing the findings and discussing their theoretical implications. Although human flesh search has touched on a range of concepts and theories, the fact that it borders on sets of dichotomies, e.g., empowerment but also mob behavior, public interest but also individual privacy, social justice but also cyber-bullying, has made it difficult for a researcher to “fit it into” any given theoretical framework.

Similar examples are not hard to find. A quick survey of digital policies in the non-Western world<sup>4</sup> reveals a dominant model that is quite different from that in the West. Rather than having industries as the driving force of growth and government as the regulator to ensure fair competition, in Asia, Africa, and Latin America more frequently the government bears the major responsibility in building the infrastructure, paving the way to attract investment, and introducing the technologies and know-how necessary for the system to function (Wang, 2003). Yet an industry/government partnership contradicts the very way media are conceptualized—social institutions standing clearly apart from political powers, if not a major balancing force against the state. Likewise a study report on censorship and social harmony may find itself in conflict with values underlying media studies. Researchers are trained to take up challenges and advance knowledge, yet not many would care to risk their limited time and effort on topics that stand a greater chance of disapproval from editors and reviewers.

Other speakers on this panel have remarked on the diversity currently found in communication research. The concern here is about the level of such diversity. The above examples revealed the influence of a single paradigm dominating most theories and approaches in media and communication studies. Its tendency to endorse liberal democratic values, primary concern over matters of effect, and approach to issues in a dualistic, either-or fashion have led us to a second paradox in communication research today: a lack of heterogeneity in theory discourse, despite a high level of data globalization.

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<sup>4</sup> While the concepts of “Western” and “non-Western” are inherently confusing (Wang, 2011), the terms “West” or “Western world” in this essay are used to specify geographical areas such as North America, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand, whereas “non-Western world” refers to mainly Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

There can be no shortcut to globalization of the field at all levels. After rounds of debate, it was becoming clear that de-Westernizing communication research was not the cure for Eurocentrism. As all cultures are now infused with a certain extent of “foreign” elements over the process of modernization (Murdock, 2011), the very idea of dichotomizing “West” and “non-West” culturally and academically is problematic. It is, however, important to provincialize and relocalize Europe and North America (Morley, 2011), and for researchers to be more sensitive about using a single set of standards or criteria in classifying, comparing, and ranking societies (Hall, 1992).

There is not merely a need to interpret, anthropologize, and contextualize media and communication research (Chung, 2011; Kraidy, 2011; Lee, 2011). To establish dialogue with the rest of the global academic community and contribute to theoretical discourse, researchers in Asia, Africa, and Latin America need to recognize the value and relevance of their cultural heritage to communication research and the potential of their “unique” media and communication matters in developing new methods, theories, and paradigms (Dissanayake, 2011; Wang, 2011c). Universality and particularity are not dichotomies (Miike, 2006), but symbiotic (Wang, 2011a; Wang & Kuo, 2010).

To establish the centrality of a discipline, we need a dominant paradigm that can effectively guide and frame research. Yet the inadequacies of the existing paradigm in responding to the major changes in media and communication studies are increasingly visible. New theoretical frameworks are called for, but before it can happen, we need to face paradigmatic issues. This is the time to consider a paradigm shift.

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