

The Identity of Communication Research

Despite its roots in ancient rhetoric communication as an academic field and discipline has a relatively young history. Starting in the first half of the 20th century it has seen an enormous growth over the last 10-30 years. However, the field has still not fully found its identity and borders. There are many reasons for this, among them are: an object that is almost without boundaries, an ongoing diversification and specialization of the field, the characterization of communications as an “integrative” or “synoptical-discipline” which uses theories and methods from other disciplines, epistemological and methodological debates, and 4 the loss of normative orientation which helps to identify relevant research or “research in the public interest”. The article discusses these problems along several theses and antitheses about the state of the field and suggests a clear normative orientation.

Keywords: Communication, Communication Research, Social Science, Epistemology, Methodology, Interdiscipline, Communication Norms.

Search Tags: Communication – Communication -- Research – Communication -- Identification – Philosophy of Communication – Information Theory – Communication Process.

Submission Date: August 12th, 2011.

Acceptance Date: September 16th, 2011.

La identidad de la investigación en comunicación

A pesar de sus orígenes en la antigua comunicación retórica como campo académico, ésta tiene una historia relativamente joven iniciada en la primera mitad del siglo XX y ha experimentado un crecimiento enorme en los últimos 10 – 30 años. Sin embargo, el campo aún no ha encontrado la totalidad de su identidad y de sus límites. Hay muchas razones para ello, entre las que se consideran: un objeto que casi no tiene límites, una diversificación en desarrollo y la especialización del campo, la caracterización del campo, la caracterización de la comunicación como una disciplina “integradora” o “sinóptica” que utiliza teorías y métodos de otras disciplinas, debates epistemológicos y metodológicos, y la pérdida de la orientación normativa que permite identificar la investigación relevante o la “investigación de interés público”. El artículo habla de estos problemas, en conjunto con varias tesis y antítesis acerca de la situación del campo, y sugiere una orientación normativa clara.

Palabras clave: Comunicación, Investigación en Comunicación, Ciencias Sociales, Epistemología, Metodología, Interdisciplina, Normas de la Comunicación.

Descriptor: Comunicación – comunicación -- investigaciones – comunicación -- identificación – filosofía de la comunicación – teoría de la información – proceso de comunicación.

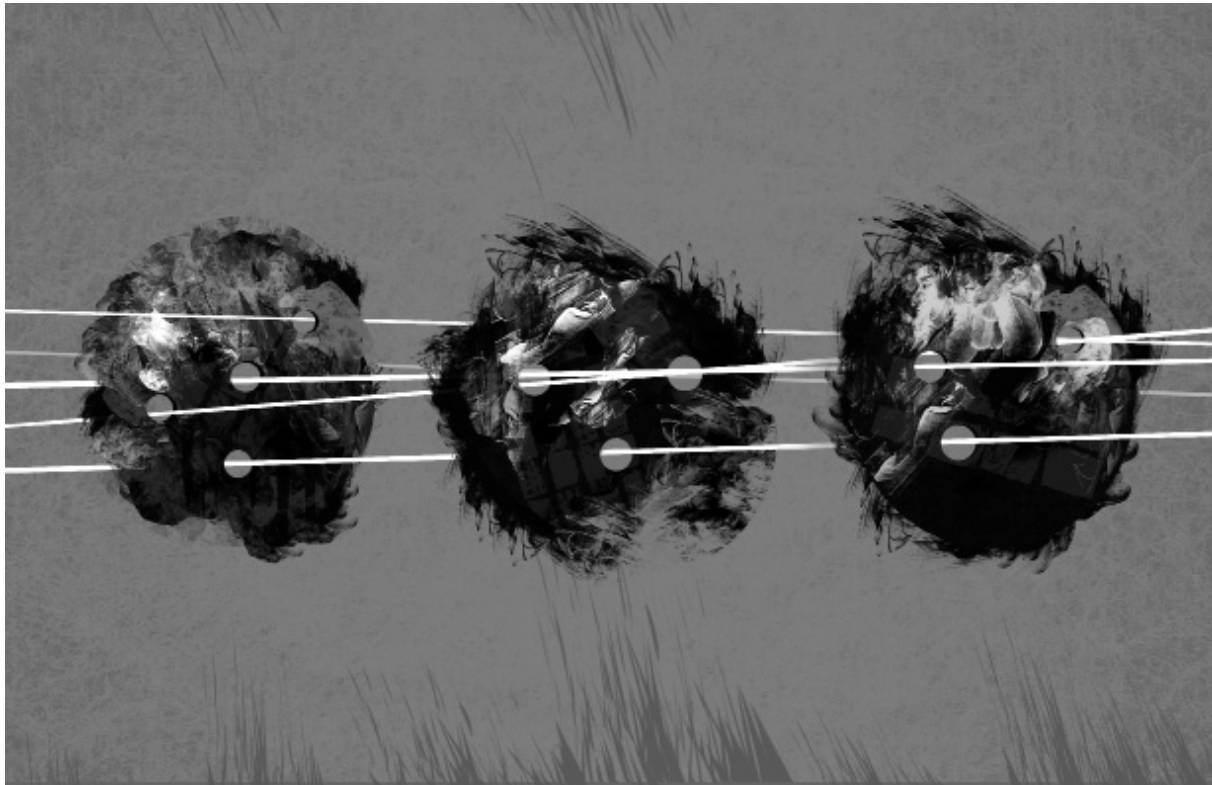
Recibido: Agosto 12 de 2011.

Aceptado: Septiembre 16 de 2011.

Origen del artículo

Este artículo se publicó originalmente en la revista *Journal of Communication*, del Instituto de Medios y Comunicación de la Universidad Técnica de Dresden, en el número 56 (año 2006), de la página 437 a la 448. El texto se reproduce en este número de *Signo y Pensamiento* con la autorización de sus editores, John Wiley & Sons Inc.

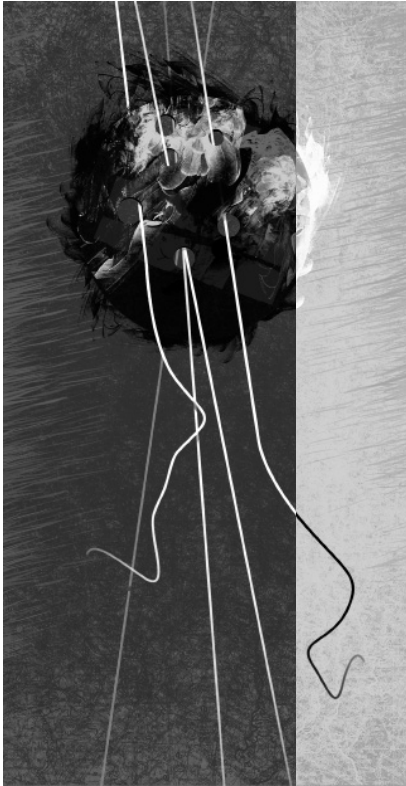
The Identity of Communication Research



Let me warn you first: Any account of a state of a discipline is limited in scope and is biased. It is limited because the field grows faster than the capacity of the average scholar to process and digest new information and thus keep an overview. And it is—by default biased because people differ in what they think is good and what they think

.....

* **Wolfgang Donsbach.** Alemán. Estudió comunicación, ciencia política y cultura antropológica en la Universidad de Maguncia, Alemania, donde se doctoró en comunicación (1981). Profesor y director del Departamento de Comunicación de la Technischen Universität de Dresden. Inició su actividad académica en las universidades de Dortmund, Maguncia y Berlín. Presidente de la Asociación Mundial para la Investigación sobre Opinión Pública (1995-1996). Presidente de la sección de Psicología y Opinión Pública de la Asociación Internacional para la Investigación sobre Medios y Comunicación. Editor del *Journal of Public Opinion Research*. Profesor visitante de las universidades de Navarra, Harvard, Libre de Berlín y Syracuse. **Correo electrónico:** wolfgang.donsbach@tu-dresden.de



is relevant research, thus disagreeing on what is the “right way to scientific knowledge.” I believe there is a right way but not everyone in this room will share it.

Thus, as scholars, we still help to confirm one of the earliest hypotheses in communication research: that predispositions shape the perception of reality. Why should we be different from our subjects in experiments? Therefore, take cognitive dissonance theory as my major excuse for the following. I have organized my talk in theses and countertheses because this reflects best the ambivalent state of our field.

Thesis 1

Communication as a research field has seen the greatest growth of probably all academic fields over the last 30 years.

There are only a few other fields with the same dynamics in the last 10–30 years: maybe biotechnology or computer sciences. When I started as a student in the late ‘60s/early ‘70s, our professors were

generalists, that is, they were overlooking the whole field and the whole communication process, at least in public communication. One day they would do research on journalists, the next on emotional effects of pictures, and then, for instance, on media law and politics. Today, there are only a few such generalists left; names like Denis McQuail, Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, or Elihu Katz come to mind.

When I started as a student, there were only a very few journals. It was easy to keep up with the stream of research. When you read *Journal of Communication*, *Journalism Quarterly*, *Gazette in Europe*, or the *Publizistik* in Germany, you were pretty much up to date with research. Today, a rough count brings you easily to 40 or 50 journals—or more. Thus, for a scholar, every day is a day of bad conscience because of what one has NOT been able to read!

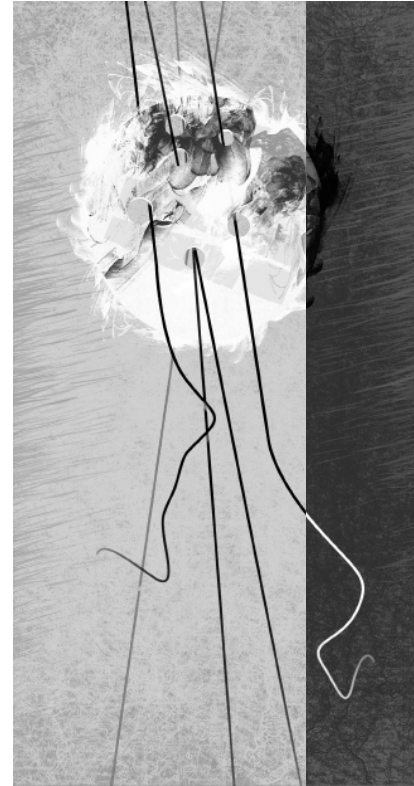
Or take the institutions of communication research: The first chair for communication in Europe, at the University of Leipzig, was founded in 1916 and 10 years later, there were five such chairs. When I started as a student half a century later, not much had happened: five departments in Germany offered communication as a major. Today, Germany has some 40 departments; there are hundreds in the U.S. And it is still growing. Other well established disciplines in the humanities (like literature or history) and the social sciences try to jump on the bandwagon of our growing discipline.

There are several indicators that this growth will continue. What British sociologist Daniel Bell called the “information societies” have not yet reached their end.

1. First, access to and availability of information becomes more and more important for personal and economic success.
2. The same is true for the management of one’s social and public appearance through communication. Communication skills become more important than most of a person or an organization’s other skills. Just ask why PR belongs to the fastest growing areas in our field.

3. Time spent with the media increases year by year. Our societies are leisure-time societies and the majority of this time is spent with some form of media consumption—mounting up (in my country) to more than 7 hours per day.
4. As a consequence, the significance of media as a source of reality perception increases every day. One example, three out of four Germans mention one of the news media—particularly television—as the most important help when making up their minds whom to vote for; only a minority mentions talks with family and friends.
5. The interdependence between the media system and other social systems increases, particularly with the political system. We talk of “media societies” or “media democracies.” This change is twofold: The media have become the most important tool to gain political power and the media have become an active player in politics themselves.
6. Finally, we can gauge the increasing importance of our field when looking at public discussions about the quality of public and private communication. We seem to be far away, and sliding ever further, from a “Habermas-like ideal world” of public discourse. Whether this ever existed in the past, or is a realistic model for complex societies in the first place, is another story. But for sure, there are many reasons to complain about the quality of personal and public communication and the performance of the public media.

Thus, there is an increasing demand for research and expertise. We want to understand what is going on and how we can react to it. Will we become more and more susceptible to personality management without our own awareness? Will the increasing iconization of our worldview through television and the Internet transform our perceptual apparatus and finally our worldview? Do people become more aggressive, more numb, or more gullible through intense media exposure?



The need to answer all these questions leads me to my expectation that communication will stay a booming discipline. The salience of its object is increasing and, therefore, there is an increasing demand for explanatory knowledge about this object and for people to operate in this field.

Counterthesis 1

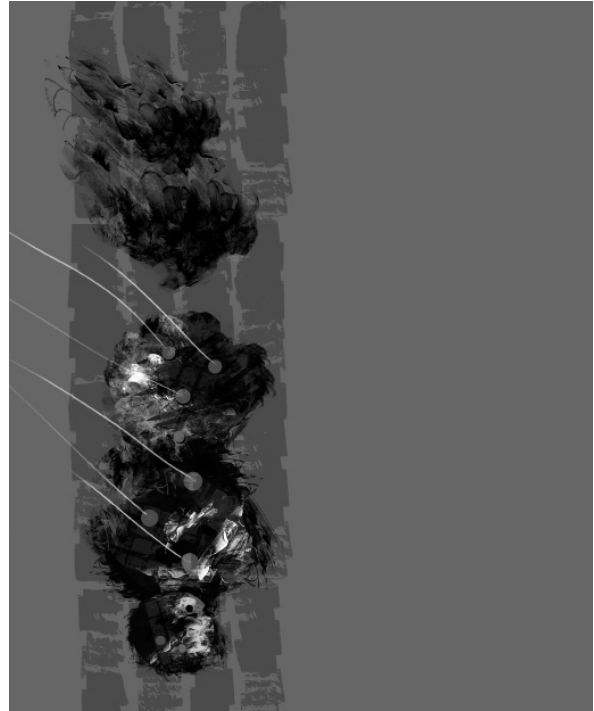
Communications still lacks, and even loses, identity.

For a long time, we debated whether communication is a discipline at all. Usually an academic and research discipline is defined by a certain degree of coherence in its objects, plus a certain degree of coherence in its theories. Take physics as a prototype: Its object is nature, its theories are built upon each other, and there is not much of a debate as to which theories belong to the discipline. Einstein’s relativity theory was built on Newton’s mechanics. No one questions that both theories, and many others, are theories of physics as a discipline.

Now, let's look at communication! Some say we are a "field" rather than a discipline, defined by a common object—namely, communication. But I doubt that we have even a well-defined object! "Communication" as the object is much too broad; almost everything in life involves communication. Moreover, not everything that deals with aspects of media communication is, in my view, communication research. For instance, research on psychological deformations as an effect of violent media content is still psychology and research on the causes of media concentration is still economics... not communication.

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 "*Zeitungsforchung*") 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 it still does today.

Our counterarguments have always been that communication is either an "integrative science," a "synoptical science," or, as Littlejohn (1982) put it, an "interdiscipline." All three terms have a slightly different connotation: As an integrative science, we would use the *theories and methods* of any discipline that has something to offer in order to describe our object of communication. As a synoptical science, we use the *knowledge* of any discipline. As an interdiscipline, we would do both. But whatever term we use, it does not save us from the problem that we have no clear identity. Our departments have many different names even within one country. And we do many different things. Sure, we all deal with some communication phenomena, but under very different circumstances. Thus, there is no common object; when you see a communication department on the map of any university worldwide you have to take a closer look and see what they are really dealing with.



Disciplines usually also have a common body of theories. Ours doesn't, even among those who work on the same objects. We have always profited from the input of other disciplines. This is, at first sight, an advantage, because theoretically we can integrate the best theories and methods to describe our object. In the very beginning, these came from economists or historians. The next wave of input (and probably the most important one) came from psychologists like Paul Lazarsfeld, Harold Lasswell, and Carl Iver Hovland. Then, sociological approaches came into fashion—partly as neomarxist movements, partly as an increasing interest in the concept of "culture." Names like Habermas, Bourdieu, and Gitlin stand for this movement.

Nowadays, this is changing. Most communication scholars, at least as far as the membership of ICA or the German Communication Association, are concerned, have studied communication themselves. In a survey of ICA members conducted in the spring of 2005, almost two out of three members said that they have received their degree in communication (Figure 1). The self-recruitment of the discipline is also increasing: Among the younger members, fully three quarters have stu-

died the field in which they teach today (Figure 2). This might eventually give the discipline more coherence; however, because communication is itself so weakly defined and so different, it does not yet have that coherence. In his award-winning article “Communication Theory as a Field,” past-president Robert Craig (1999) distinguished seven traditions of communication theory, which all theorize communication differently: rhetorical, semiotic, phenomenological, cybernetic, sociopsychological, sociocultural, and critical. The natural sciences have one such theoretical tradition, psychology two (behaviorism and psychoanalysis); we have seven or even more.

This sounds impressively pluralistic, and it is, but it does not necessarily help to come up with a coherent description and explanation of the communication processes and even less so of the discipline as an academic institution. Instead, the discipline is split up into many microcosms that do not talk very much to each other. In the survey of ICA members, we asked the following question: “There are very different approaches to conducting research in the field of communication.

Figure 1
Most ICA members received degree in communication.

“What is the field or discipline in which you have received your final degree?” (n = 1117).

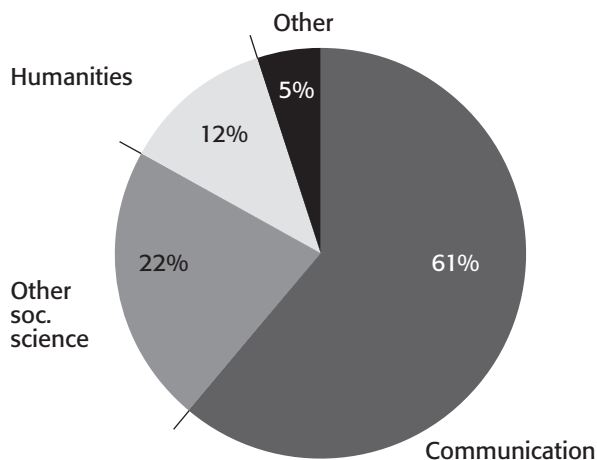
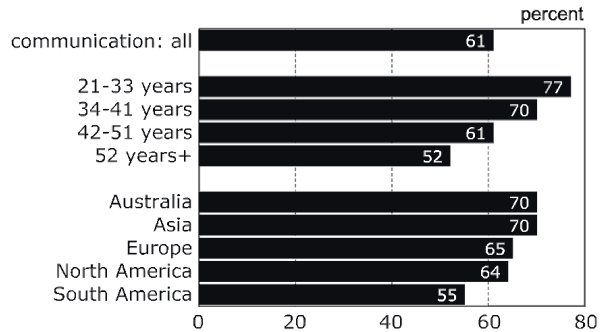


Figure 2
Academic degrees by age groups and geographic areas.

“What is the field or discipline in which you have received your final degree?” (n = 701–704).



How strongly do the items listed below apply to the way you conduct research?” The questionnaire listed six options, which, of course, are rather crude representations of our vast field: humanities, social science, qualitative empirical, quantitative empirical, theoretical, and practical.

As Figure 3 shows, there is no unanimous scientific approach to which all ICA members adhere. Only “social science,” a very vague and inclusive description of the field, is accepted by a majority of the members (64%), while the others clearly subscribe to “camps” with little overlap. These camps materialize in the different divisions of ICA, most of which do not represent the plurality of the different epistemologies internally but focus on a specific academic access to the field. Figure 4 shows the results of a cluster analysis grouping the divisions and interest groups by their members’ preference for either a social science or a “humanities” approach (Figure 4). The dispersion of the ICA units on this map is probably one of the reasons why two out of three members usually attend the conference sessions of no more than three divisions.

Figure 3
Epistemologies in ICA.

“There are very different approaches to conducting research in the field of communication. How strongly do the items listed below apply to the way you conduct research?” (n = 1128–1149).

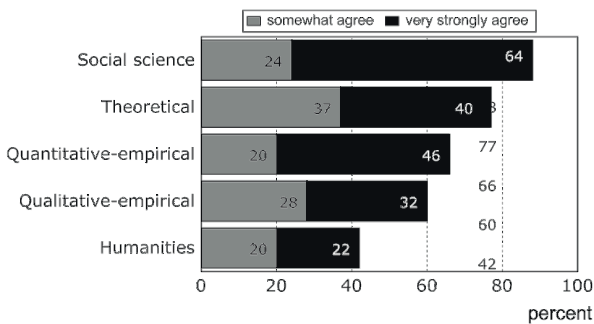
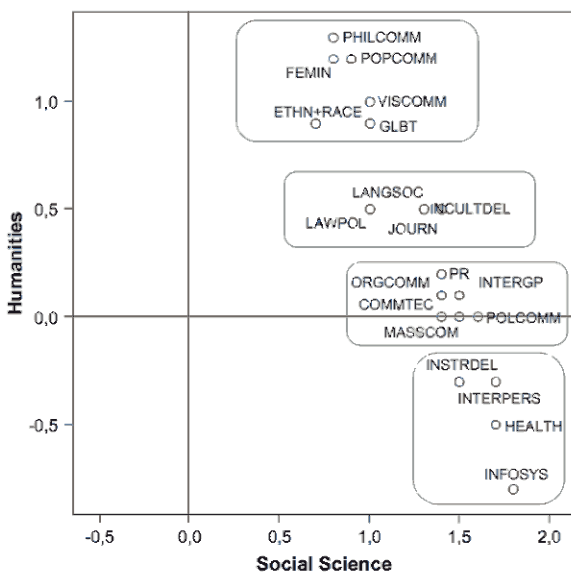


Figure 4
Epistemological camps in ICA divisions (cluster analysis).



There have been several attempts at integration, one of them James Beniger’s (1993) suggestion in the second “Ferment in the Field” issue of the *Journal of Communication*. Beniger defined the discipline by the four Cs: cognition, culture,

control, and communication. This was an intellectually bold attempt, but it still leaves us with blurring boundaries, embraces almost any kind of research on and with humans, and does not serve as a source of distinct identity for one discipline.

We have good psychology-based communication research—for instance, when explaining media exposure with mood management or processes of persuasion with ELM or priming. We also have good sociology-based communication research—for instance, when describing the patterns of personal interaction or the social gratifications of media use. But it is still hard to claim that all this could not have been achieved outside of our own discipline.

The identity or coherence of a field is important for extrinsic and intrinsic reasons: Extrinsically, it is important to justify the existence and growth of our field to deans and provosts when we negotiate resources. Communication constantly struggles within universities everywhere to claim an independent administrative status. Our departments often compete with sociology, political science, or linguistics departments to maintain a distinct identity and to sustain a unit that provides a disciplinary home for scholars trained in communication.

Intrinsically, coherence and identity is important for the function of science, which is the accumulation of accepted knowledge. This accumulation can only be achieved through communication within any given discipline: communication about the results and negotiation (and finally decision) about the acceptance of hypotheses and theories. This needs one platform, commonly accepted and read journals, associations and conferences.

The current situation is that this communication is diffuse and there is almost no communication between the different camps and the disciplinary traditions. Each have their own journals, reside in different departments, and belong to different associations or their different divisions. This would already be a problem: no clear object, no coherent system of theories. But our identity problem is even threefold: We have



different camps, even battlefields, in the epistemological sense. And this leads me to my second thesis and counterthesis:

Thesis 2

We have accumulated a lot of good empirical evidence on the communication process.

Empirical means, in my view, mainly the following traits: (a) aiming at intersubjective knowledge, (b) aiming at “laws” describing and explaining human behaviors, (c) using some kind of systematic methods, and (d) letting reality decide about the fate of hypotheses. This is based on two assumptions: that the production of intersubjective, valid knowledge is the most decisive factor in separating the sciences from other social systems, for example, journalism, politics, or literature; and that humans, although they are different from other “objects” of the sciences, can still be described by the same methodology, based on the same epistemology as, say the objects in physics or chemistry.

These assumptions were, by the way, part of the enlightenment process and it comes as no surprise that the social sciences were facing strong opposition from the traditional disciplines and theology when pursuing these goals. Opponents to empirical research misunderstood the term law and thought that assessing laws in human behavior would limit the freedom of the individual to behave as he or she wants, thus running contrary to the interest of man.

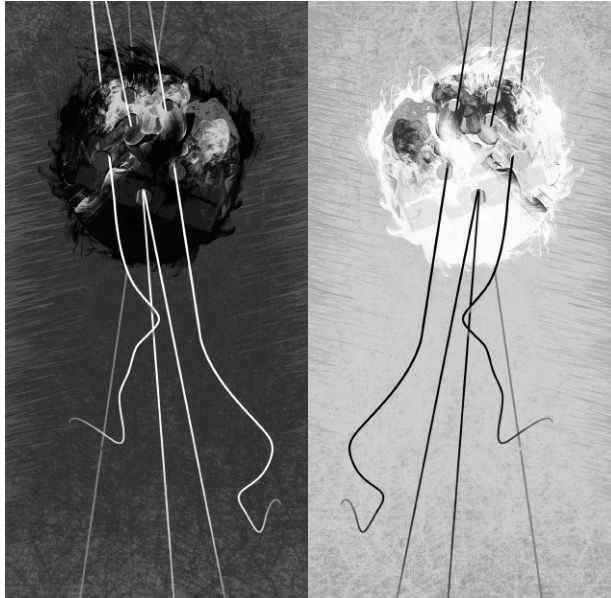
This fundamental battle continued, though, and regained strength when the social sciences developed: first experimental psychology and later sociology. The so-called positivism debate—led by Karl Raimund Popper on the side of the Critical Rationalism and by Adorno and Habermas

on the side of Critical Theory—was its epistemological highlight.

Today a majority—or at least close to a majority—of communication research is working with empirical methods. I claim that this epistemological basis is the reason for a vast body of knowledge that we have developed over the last 50 years. It is true, we are often accused of wishy-washy hypotheses and accounts. But this is not so much due to shortcomings in research as it is the complexity of the behavior with which we deal. Humans often perceive the same information or pictures very differently, and even if they perceive this information in the same way, they can react very differently due to the discrete combination of the many other factors that make up their individuality. This involves necessarily that our hypotheses remain highly probabilistic ones with a big portion of unexplained variance, to phrase it statistically.

One of the biggest paradigm shifts in the social sciences has been to put the unconscious factors of our behavior in the focus of research. In our field, this applies mainly to media exposure and to a lesser extent to news decisions. Today, we know that factors that are under the surface of the individual’s consciousness (and therefore cannot be reported to the researcher) explain a great deal of the variance in communication behavior. Mood management research is a case in point, as are studies on the attribution of news values to certain stories. This makes it a tougher job to assess these factors through appropriate research designs.

The problem increases when we look at the newest development in neurological research: that the concept of “free will” is nothing but a fiction, a post hoc attribution made by the individual only after a decision has been taken. On the other side, this determined behavior is not predictable because some of the factors determining the decision exert only in the process itself. This means hard times



for research that aims at general laws and predictions. Nevertheless, given the problems of our highly volatile object, that is, human beings, our achievements in terms of more or less undebated knowledge are not really bad.

We know exactly how much input from the media it takes to put a new political topic on the public agenda, even to the point of how many articles and TV reports raise the public awareness by how many percentage points (according to Russel Neuman's research: 10 articles in the *New York Times* or a news magazine raise it by 0.3%–0.9%). We also know the strength of pictures on the perception of people or on emotional arousal, as compared to written text (according to research by Dolf Zillmann and others, pictures can turn around the perception of issues and of people regardless of the text accompanying them). We know how much of the variance in journalists' news decisions is explained by quasi-objective news factors or by their subjective beliefs; it is about one third each. And we know how much our predispositions, for instance, attitudes toward parties or politicians, predict selective exposure to media content. It is—contrary to a paradigm that has shaped our field for almost half a century—very little, at least when it comes to important and negative news.

These are only a few examples (from my field) that show how we have developed a solid body of knowledge—with new research building on existing studies—that enhances our insight into the processes of communication.

Counterthesis 2

The field increasingly suffers from epistemological erosion.

I fear that the further development of this body of knowledge is jeopardized by developments from within and without the discipline. From within it is a revival of approaches that refrain from putting their hypotheses to a test. From outside it is an increasing competition of all scholars in the field with laypeople of all kinds. Let me start with the latter.

Communication has a very simple problem: The closeness of its object to everybody's reality and experience makes everybody a self-proclaimed "expert." People say, "Because I watch a lot of television (be it as a politician, a spokesperson, spin-doctor, or just a parent), I have at least as much to say as a researcher in this field." This problem does not apply to a physicist or a neurologist. But it happens to us, and it sometimes makes it hard to defend research against common wisdom or claims from interested parties.

The epistemological erosion from inside, however, is even more severe because it has more long-term and fundamental consequences. Epistemological debates about the true way to scientific knowledge have been with the field from its beginning. Adorno was the first to criticize the empiricist Paul Lazarsfeld for his so-called administrative research and confronted this (as he said) "establishment-oriented and repressive research" with "critical research." Lazarsfeld responded a few years later with his "Remarks on Administrative and Critical Communications Research," in which he showed that empirical research can of course be critical, maybe even more critical, than nonempirical research if it supplies valid and convincing data (Lazarsfeld, 1972). But



Paul Lazarsfeld's main point was that there is no alternative to intersubjectivity.

German sociologist Niklas Luhmann saw it as the social function of science to define the criteria with which to separate scientific assertions from assertions made in other contexts and for other purposes. Therefore, diversity per se is no value in science. The sciences (and the social sciences) exist because society expects from us decisions on which theories are acceptable and which are unacceptable. This sounds pretty straightforward—and for the natural sciences and most of psychology, it is—but not so for most of the social sciences, including communications.

The latest hype has been and still is the so-called constructivism debate—most of which I think is superfluous. Everyone knows that constructivists are probably right in stating that every perception is subjective. But so what? Should that keep us from doing research? Or does it give us any guidance in how to do research? No—and this is why Devitt, in *Realism and Truth* (1991), said about constructivism that “it attacks the immune system that saves us from silliness” (Devitt, 1991, p. IX). Not only that but it is also a free ticket for an “anything-goes” approach to research. If everything is subjective and biased and if there is no way to compare the

validity of scientific assertions, why bother with how to proceed?

Although the constructivism debate steals from us some of the time we would need to do real research for epistemological discussions, it is still relatively harmless because most of those participating in this debate do not do research themselves. I am worried about some developments (of which the constructivist paradigm is only one), however, because they try to shift the borders of research beyond the norms of intersubjectivity and testability. There is a whole new culture of communication research, mainly influenced from the sociological tradition, which rather successfully pursues a rollback strategy against empiricism.

It is also part of a wider movement that I observe in attitudes towards the sciences in general, or the medical professions; something one could call a new, postmodern spirituality—but this is a much bigger story. Stephen Littlejohn, in his article “An overview of contributions to human communication theory from other disciplines” (1982), has identified 10 issues of epistemological debate, of which the 4 most important, in my view, are:

1. To what extent is reality universal? One world-view holds that reality is absolute and can be discovered. Another holds that it results from human interpretation.
2. Is the locus of reality outside the person or in personal experience?
3. Can humans be observed by the same scientific operations as other objects?
4. Does scientific knowledge arise from sensory experience, discovered by controlled observation of well-defined objects? Or is it a construction of the person, resulting from a transaction between knower and known?

I think I have made no secret of my own position. And although I believe that plurality and diversity is in general a great value, it should not lead to an anything-goes culture in the sciences. Of course, there must be com-

petition between methodologies. But at some point we must admit reality checks. This, in all disciplines, is the potential of our hypotheses for repeated evidence on the one side and for predictions on the other. Communication research, like any research in any discipline, profits from standards and norms, which are the basis for knowledge that can be accepted independent of the predisposition of the researcher. The law of gravitation has been accepted by all physicists, independent of their geographical origin, political attitudes, religious beliefs, gender, and so on—until it gets replaced by a better theory. Why should this be different when it comes to factors influencing media exposure, the effects of political coverage on voting behavior, or of the Internet on class structures? These are all empirical questions and as such they can be put to a test by intersubjective research.

Thesis 3

We have precise and sound knowledge in many areas—but (counterthesis): we tend to loose normative orientation in empirical research.

Another issue in epistemological discussions has always been the general aims and functions of science: Should it be value-free descriptions and explanations or should it normatively pursue specific goals about how people should live and interact together? The equivalent to the famous norm in journalism that *News is sacred— comments are free* in the sciences is the distinction made in the 1930s by philosopher Hans Reichenbach. He

distinguished between the context of discovery and the con- text of justification by indicating that social or political values are illegitimate as content of scientific assertions, but can still motivate a researcher to choose his or her topics or hypotheses on the basis of such values.

I have already talked about our achievements in empirical research. Let me therefore talk right away about my counterthesis. While decades ago, we had too much politics and too little empirical research, today, *within the paradigm of empirical research*, we are shifting into a direction with too much petty number crunching and too little really important research questions, that is, research with state-of-the- art methodology and with validity but with little relevance and significance.

I see two reasons for this: first, the institutional growth of our field. With more personnel striving for professional distinction, the research questions become smaller and more remote all the time because everybody is going for (a) the ruling paradigms and (b) niches within these paradigms that have never before been subject to research. The second reason is that many scholars lack the knowledge of and/or interest in societal values that could guide research. This is a problem of socialization.

My point here is that empirical research without normative goals can easily become arbitrary, random, and irrelevant. Of course, norms and values cannot be submitted to empirical tests, but they are easily available in statements of human rights and the constitutions of liberal social systems. A common denominator of all



endeavors in communication research could be to strive for research that has the potential to serve such general human and democratic values and norms, that is, “research in the public interest” (the theme of the 2004 ICA conference).

It will by no means be easy to achieve agreement on what this public interest is. Researchers with different backgrounds—be it national, cultural, or social—will stress different values based on their views of social reality and, more so, on the ideals that they use as the benchmark for this reality. But consensus is worth a try.

Now is not the time to develop these norms. But I believe that, for instance, in all societies, *choices* or *options* can be an overarching norm from which others can be derived. Choices have to do with the freedom of the individual to perceive his or her environment and to act in this environment. Thus, it relates to access to information and communication, to knowledge and education and therefore communication competence, to plurality in media content, to the quality of media content, and to many other aspects of the communication process. Choices are a basic humanistic value because they are the prerequisite for the individual’s autonomy.

Communication research has the potential and the duty to focus on research agendas that can help societies and people to “communicate better,” that is, to make up their minds on any issue on a sound basis of evidence and as little influenced by other people or institutions as possible—be it “great persuaders” in personal communication, the news media, or political or economic powers, in either a national or global context.

References

- Beniger, J. R. (1993), “Communication—Embrace the subject, not the field”, *Journal of Communication*, 43(3), 18–25.
- Craig, R. T. (1999), “Communication theory as a field”, *Communication Theory*, 2, 119–161.
- Devitt, M. (1991), *Realism and truth*, Cambridge, U.K.; Blackwell.
- Lazarsfeld, P. F. (ed.) (1972), *Administrative and critical communications research. In Qualitative analysis. Historical and critical essays* (pp. 155–167). Boston, Allyn and Bacon.
- Littlejohn, S. W. (1982), “An overview of contributions to human communication theory from other disciplines”, in F. E. Dance (ed.), *Human communication theory: Comparative essays*, (pp. 243–286), New York, Harper & Row.