

## Academic traditions in communication: Expanding the field and redrawing the boundaries. ECREA 2018 special panel report

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### Note

Invited report for the Thematic Section on ECREA 2018 devoted to the 7<sup>th</sup> European Communication Conference of the European Communication and Research Association (ECREA), held in Lugano from October 31<sup>st</sup> to November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2018.

### 1 Rationale

The main conference topic for the ECREA conference in Lugano addressed the many ways in which centers, cores and peripheries, and also mainstreams and alternatives are dealt with in academic media and communication research. The premise of this panel was to apply this general outline of the conference for academic introspection and to recount the many shifting centers and peripheries of communication research over time and discuss the redrawing of the contours of our expanding field.

Less than two decades back, the question what the main subjects of media and communication inquiry were would have highlighted the centrality of (already slowly declining) mass media as the main pillars alongside journalism and public communication. Since then, the very notion of mediated communication has become less clear and has expanded to nearly all areas of the human experience and encompasses a variety of technologies, tools, platforms and intermediaries for communication.

Unlike other disciplines, media and communication does not have stable boundaries but experiences rapid and constant change and reconfiguration. Issues of media and communication research and the shifting boundaries of the field together with the (changing) relationships of communication research with other and

neighboring disciplines are hence recurrent topics. “Soul Searching in communication research” (Nordenstreng, 2007) has even itself become a characteristic tradition in the field. Over the decades, media and communication researchers have repeatedly put in question the boundaries of their very area of research and its position in the fan of disciplines (Zelizer, 2016).

Media environments and communication practices evolve over time and in relation to overall processes of social change, making media and communication ‘moving targets’ for research. The ‘thought collective’ and ‘thought style’ (Fleck, 2008) formed by media and communication researchers has repeatedly been adapted to new field external conditions and shapes of the phenomena as well as to field internal changes in the modes of inquiry. This resulted in fundamental shifts in terms of scopes, forms of communication covered by the field, theoretical lenses applied, methodological tools used, and relationships with old and new academic disciplines closely or distantly associated with media. Over time, this culminated in a strong fragmentation and diversification of the field generating a multitude of cores and peripheries.

Regarding this fragmentation of the field, John Corner (2013) argued that due to the emergence of a vast number of autonomous subfields, which would willfully ignore each other, it would no longer be



possible to speak meaningfully of a coherent field with a central core. According to Craig Calhoun (2011) “communication researchers study lots of different intellectual problems and empirical topics, at lots of different scales and in lots of different places.” This challenge was taken up in the panel, which thus asked whether there was something specific that we, as a field, have to offer and that we do better than other fields or disciplines engaging with media and communication? What is the key difference that distinguishes our field from others and is there (still) a stable core or identity of communication studies? In a historical perspective the panel also asked for previous cores and strongholds of communication research and whether they were becoming more peripheral and less relevant due to recent developments. Participants were further invited to speculate about future developments of what will become centers of the field in terms of power and relevance (socially and academically) and what new maps of cores and peripheries of our field might look like in the near future.

## 2 Participants

This special panel assembled a group of well-established scholars from across Europe covering a variety of perspectives and representing different relations beyond the boundaries and in potentially peripheral areas. The panel was organized by Gabriele Balbi (Lugano), Katharina Lobinger (also Lugano), and Christian Schwarzenegger (Augsburg). Balbi and Schwarzenegger are both members of the management team of the communication history section of ECREA and also engaged with the history of the field in their research. Katharina Lobinger is active in the field of visual communication and co-chair of the ECREA conference. In terms of their career paths but also regarding their academic work all three of them have an individual history of crossing boundaries, both nationally and disciplinary. Balbi is Italian, working in Switzerland, Lobinger Austrian, also now working in Switzer-

land but with a past in both Austria and Germany while Schwarzenegger is an Austrian in Germany, having worked in the very west and currently the far south of the country. All three have worked interdisciplinary, reaching beyond the boundaries of the established field and building bridges to bring historical or visual communication expertise into the “mainstream” of communication studies. The invited panelists were experienced in crossing boundaries as well. Stefanie Averbeck-Lietz has worked extensively on the history of the field of communication studies and especially on the formation of the field in diverse national context across the globe. Furthermore, her interest in the transnational exchange and movement of ideas, especially regarding the example of French scholarship and early German sociology’s resonance in the field of communication qualified her as an expert to discuss the structural, institutional and intellectual centers and peripheries of the field. Emiliano Treré, from Italy, with past affiliations in Spain, Mexico and currently in Cardiff/Wales, engages with the Global South in his research. He also made the experience that some knowledge is deemed peripheral and other issues are considered more central due to their provenance and publishability; referring to experiences made with research in Mexico he questioned prevalent concepts of central or peripheral, as often events in a European country seem to be more central to research than events in densely populated countries of the Global South. Furthermore, Treré reported about his experiences in ten years of activism research and social movement studies. Describing his own academic path, defined by a continuous fluctuation between media and communication schools and sociology and political science departments, he epitomized how the construction of bridges between fields is starkly opposed by career paths within the academic system that draws neat and unrealistic boundaries between disciplines, resulting in ‘knowledge silos’ that unnecessarily limit the understanding of the complexities of the social world. Ranjana Das described her role as “a fox in the

field”. Das, besides having an impressive track record in orchestrating international cooperation in research projects and also having gained experiences in transnational academic mobility, is currently working as a communication researcher and a trained media scholar in a sociology department, and thus per definition outside the boundaries of the field. In her contribution to the panel she reflected about this role and how it helped her and shaped her understanding of what communication research is and about the freedoms that comes with crossing academic boundaries. Julia Velkova made similar experiences. She has moved into the academy after prior experiences in the free software movement and working for Internet Society Bulgaria. Currently, her research in Helsinki aims at connecting studies on the production of media technologies, materialities and infrastructures, one topic that has remained largely neglected by media and communication scholarship. Her contribution particularly made visible that there are tensions not only between established areas of studying media and communications and new upcoming fields. But also within existing and traditional subfields of media and communication studies the struggle of how a subfield should adapt to new affordances can be observed. New perspectives and interests within subfields can challenge established questions and ways of interrogation as well as power relations in a respective subfield.

### 3 Key issues discussed in the panel

The panel foregrounded some of the dynamic tensions between expanding the borders of media and communication studies, on the one hand, and the need to define and maintain borders for disciplinary coherence, the institutionalization of concepts and the manifestation of knowledge, on the other. The risk of a too-narrow focus and the peril of creating enclaves of media research is opposed by fear of losing a coherent identity and being awash in interdisciplinary no-mans-land. In this regard, depending on the view-

point, the boundaries of communication research are currently both, drawn too tight, and too loosely.

Panelists and audience widely agreed that a main concern and drawback of crossing disciplinary boundaries in research is the lack of academic gratification for such efforts. While the call for interdisciplinarity or transdisciplinarity is quite strong, the actual reality of doing such research, e.g., finding the necessary resources and environments and the challenges of making the outcome of said research visible is problematic. Hence individual career paths are still strongly made (and evaluated) within the confinements of academic traditions and distinct disciplines. As long as interdisciplinarity does not pay off in terms of securing positions and allowing a continued career path, researchers engaging in endeavors of border crossing might put themselves at risk. This holds especially true for early career scholars without permanent positions.

The panel further demonstrated that the field expands in different directions. It is characterized by diversification within, and shifting proximities to fields outside of communication studies. These changes are also temporal, i.e. the subfields that are considered relevant change over time and often reflect tensions between the established or “old” or “traditional” ways of doing research and “new” approaches. For communication researchers what was at the core some years back, may be found to become peripheral, whereas new liaisons with other fields become important, and we reach out to new allies and find new competition regarding funding, institutional power, capital and prestige. Under this respect, three metaphors were used during the discussion. The field is “shrinking” because more and more academic subjects move in, reach out across the previously cohesive boundaries of the field and intervene in our area of expertise, ultimately posing a thread of colonialization by new powerful actors and interests. Second, the metaphor of media and communication research “stretching” out refers to communication scholars moving out and bringing attention to

underdeveloped fields of research as theories, approaches and methods from other academic fields and disciplines come into view. Finally, the field is “liquefying”. This can be interpreted both as a threat or an opportunity or success factor. It is a threat if the core identity, peculiarity and stability is dissolving. On the other hand, liquefying communication research might be an opportunity if it makes the discipline more flexible and thus suitable for addressing new challenges of the communication environment and thus able to cope with the challenges and entanglements of highly mediatised societies.

What also became apparent is that still Western countries and the Global North are in the focus, mostly normalized as the “natural” habitat of communication inquiry, as if the developments in a certain geographical and cultural context were globally generalizable. A real De-Westernization of research or truly global perspectives are still rather rare. To a certain degree, communication research can thus be seen as reproducing cores and peripheries in our understanding of the digital landscape and mediatised worlds through the way we conduct research.

Finally, it was important to reflect on how the boundaries of communication scholarship are not just disappearing or removed but are in fact redrawn, resulting in new inclusions and exclusions new chances and new hindrances every time and everywhere they come up. A takeaway from the panel was that while debates about the state of the field will continue, it is and will remain important to show cultural, contextual and temporal sensitivity for what media and communication studies is, what it has been, and what it is about to become in the near future.

#### 4 Panel overview

##### Panel title

Academic traditions in communication: Expanding the field and redrawing the boundaries

##### Panel organizer

Christian Schwarzenegger (University of Augsburg), Gabriele Balbi, Katharina Lobbinger (USI – Università della Svizzera italiana)

##### Date and location

Friday, 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2018, 18:00–19:30  
Villa Ciani, Room 015

*Why to look upon Communication Studies' history? The reflexivity of the discipline and its phenomenological, analytical and normative levels.*

Averbeck-Lietz, S. (University of Bremen, ZeMKI, Bremen, Germany)

*The fox in the field: On doing communication studies in a sociology department, and what it teaches me about my field.*

Das, R. (University of Surrey, Department of Sociology, Surrey, England)

*Production studies of media technologies, materialities and infrastructures: Creating bridges between old and new strands of media and communication research.*

Velkova, J. (University of Helsinki, Consumer Society Research Centre, Helsinki, Finland)

*Bridges vs boundaries: Ten years of medial movement research.*

Treré, E. (Cardiff University, JOMEC School of Journalism, Media and Culture, Cardiff, Wales)

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- Corner, J. (2013). Is there a “field” of media research? – The “fragmentation” issue revisited. *Media, Culture & Society*, 35(8), 1011–1018. doi:10.1177/0163443713508702
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