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## Essay

### **Communication Studies beyond the National: Connections and Disconnections between Research Communities and How to Study Them**

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**Abstract:** This essay is dealing with a self-reflection in communication studies on existing blind spots between national communication research communities and milieus. The author presents recent debates on communication studies under international comparison, including their focus on historical developments and disciplinary boundaries of the field. She discusses the lack of knowledge about *transnational* influences between scientific communities in the field of communication research as well as central categories to grasp the social as well as the body of knowledge in Science (like “generation” a term which understands scientific milieus as experience communities in the sense of Karl Mannheim). The underlying argument is, that only a meta-science perspective from an historical viewpoint allows the understanding of our actual theory building and methodological settings which is confronted with future problems, especially the transnationalization of communication flows as well as of scientific knowledge.

**Keywords:** History of Communication Studies, Sociology of Science, Sociology of Knowledge, Methodology of the Sociology of Science, History of Ideas

*“Where did communication [studies] come from? What does the worldwide landscape of this fast growing academic enterprise look like today?” (Meyen 2012: 1451).*

Michael Meyen asks this crucial question in the introduction to his interviews with 57 former fellows of the International Communication Association, the ICA. Since he focuses on US-academia, in particular on members of the ICA – probably the most powerful global player in our field – his work does not sketch the whole landscape of communication research and the problems of communication and media studies in an increasingly complex and connected world.

Are we operating in connected academic worlds or rather disconnected ones? *Are we informed about what we are doing in communication studies in each part of the world?* Are we aware of topics, theories or methodologies which communication scholars around the world are engaged with? – Surely not. On the occasion of a conference with researchers and scholars from ten countries including those from Northern, Southern, and Western Europe, from Latin-America, Japan and the US, we recently discussed questions about the commonalities, differences and transgressions between our research cultures.<sup>1</sup> One year ago, in 2011, a conference of the section “Intercultural and International Communication” of the German Communication Research Association (DGPK) aimed to de-westernize communication research.<sup>2</sup> And at the recent IAMCR-conference in Durban, a quite similar discussion has been held in a special panel on “Latin-American and European cross-fertilizations in communication and media studies”.<sup>3</sup>

During these occasions, differences and commonalities have not only been discussed in terms of theoretical and methodological backgrounds, but also with regard to the social organization of different research communities and the political impact on science. In addition, the worldwide peer-evaluation-systems and citation indexes are not very much in favor of societies that are not natively English-speaking (see the publications in the context of the IAMCR-Panel in Durban: Vega-Montiel 2012, Voltmer 2012).

Moreover, in recent years, book publications (very early Blumler/McLeod/Rosengren 1992, recently Thussu 2009, Kovisto/Thomas 2010) as well as monographs (Averbeck-Lietz 2010, Löblich 2010, Schäfer 2012) and articles (Massmann 2004, Barbero 2006, Averbeck-Lietz 2008, Hepp 2012) are analyzing inter- and transnational developments in communication studies and show that there are enrichments between national and/or world-regional communities of communication research.

Several conclusions can be drawn from such publications and discussions:

- 1) Currently, there is a great interest in international exchange and transnational knowledge in Germany and beyond.
- 2) In particular young researchers are pressured to publish in international journals in order to fulfill academic recruitment criteria.

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<sup>1</sup>For details see: <http://www.zemki.uni-bremen.de/de/forschung/tagungen-geplant/comparing-communication-research-transnational-perspectives.html>. This conference was organized by the author. My thanks to all the colleagues who joined the event. There will be a forthcoming book at the end of 2013 (Springer VS).

<sup>2</sup>For details see: <http://www.uni-erfurt.de/kommunikationswissenschaft/conference/conference/>. The conference with the title *Beyond "Center" and "Periphery": (De-)Westernization in International and Intercultural Communication* has been organized by Carola Richter, Anne Grüne und Dirk-Claas Ulrich.

<sup>3</sup>For details see: <http://www.ecrea.eu/news/article/id/184>. The panel has been organized by the European Communication and Research Association (ECREA) together with the Asociación Latinoamericana de Investigadores de la Comunicación (ALAIC).

Their work is (more and more) valued through the Social Science Citation Index – whereas a lot of national scientific journals in communication studies are not measurable by the SSCI.<sup>4</sup>

3) Beyond all differences in epistemology and methodology: Research communities are overlapping; they are not at all national ‘containers’ of knowledge. People as well as ideas travel beyond national research communities.

To refer to some historical examples: in fact, most of the US-American social psychologists had visited Wilhelm Wundt's laboratory in the German city of Leipzig during the first decade of the 20th century – and Wundt himself had travelled to visit US-academia. Or let us take Robert Ezra Park, the founding father of the Chicago School, who has written his dissertation thesis on “The Crowd and the Public” (*Masse und Publikum. Eine soziologische Untersuchung*) in 1903 at the University of Heidelberg supervised by Wilhelm Windelband. The run on German universities was a phenomenon of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and very early 20<sup>th</sup> century (see for Japan and the overlaps in Japanese and German newspaper studies at that time Schäfer 2005, 2012). A different type of transnational traveling of communication studies is marked by the exodus from German universities in the 1930s. The forced emigration of European intellectuals and scholars before and during the Holocaust and its impact on social sciences is a phenomenon that has been well described (see Heilbutt 1983, for the emigration from German newspaper science to the US and elsewhere see Kutsch 1988, Averbek 2001). But there are other political contexts of scientific emigration/immigration, for example, the escape of scholars from Latin-American regimes to France. In our field of study this concerns well-known names such as Armand Mattelart (who came from Chile) and Eliséo Véron (who came from Argentina to Paris) (see Averbek-Lietz 2010).

Beyond the (sometimes) forced exchange and expatriation of people, the transgressions between scientific milieus and cultures are brought about by international citation circles, their research questions, their exports and imports of ideas and theories from one tradition to another. There are several examples worth mentioning such as the traveling of British Cultural Studies in Europe and abroad (Hepp 2004, Massmann 2004, Barbero 2006), the traveling of social constructivism and symbolic interactionism between the US and Europe (see Averbek-Lietz 2009, 2010), or the traveling of US-American functionalism to German *Publizistikwissenschaft* (see Löblich 2010).

Up to now all studies focusing on the history of ideas, the socio-political history and the sociology of knowledge in communication studies show that *the adoption*

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<sup>4</sup> For example in Germany it is only *Communications. The European Journal of Communication Research* ed. by Friedrich Krotz, which is listed in the SSCI; the traditional publications in German language *Publizistik* and *Medien & Kommunikationswissenschaft* are not.

*of whatever theory to another cultural horizon is not linear*, but – as Edward Said (1983) showed for *Orientalism* – is driven by context-bound transformations. This becomes quite clear when we take a closer look at communication studies. They were prone to different cultural contextualizations depending on the respective country and its media system. Moreover, they are rooted in different academic horizons. In France, for example, communication studies are rooted in the language departments and still have a strong tradition in semiotics in the *Sciences de l'information et de la communication* (see Boure 2002, Averbek-Lietz 2008, 2010). The German newspaper science (*Zeitungswissenschaft*), in turn, originated after 1916 in close relation to its so called mother disciplines history and economics (*Nationalökonomie*) as well as to its sister discipline sociology. This is certainly remarkable in today's communication studies in Germany (see Roegele/vom Bruch 1986, Averbek 1999).

### **From single country studies to systematic transnational research**

But how to work systematically on the question about our past and future beyond national examples? There have been efforts to differentiate „types“ of communication research communities (see Pietilä/Malmberg/Nordenstreng 1990, McQuail 2008, Cabedoche 2009, Averbek-Lietz 2008, 2010), such as:

**The German Type:** „Publizistik“ – political communication

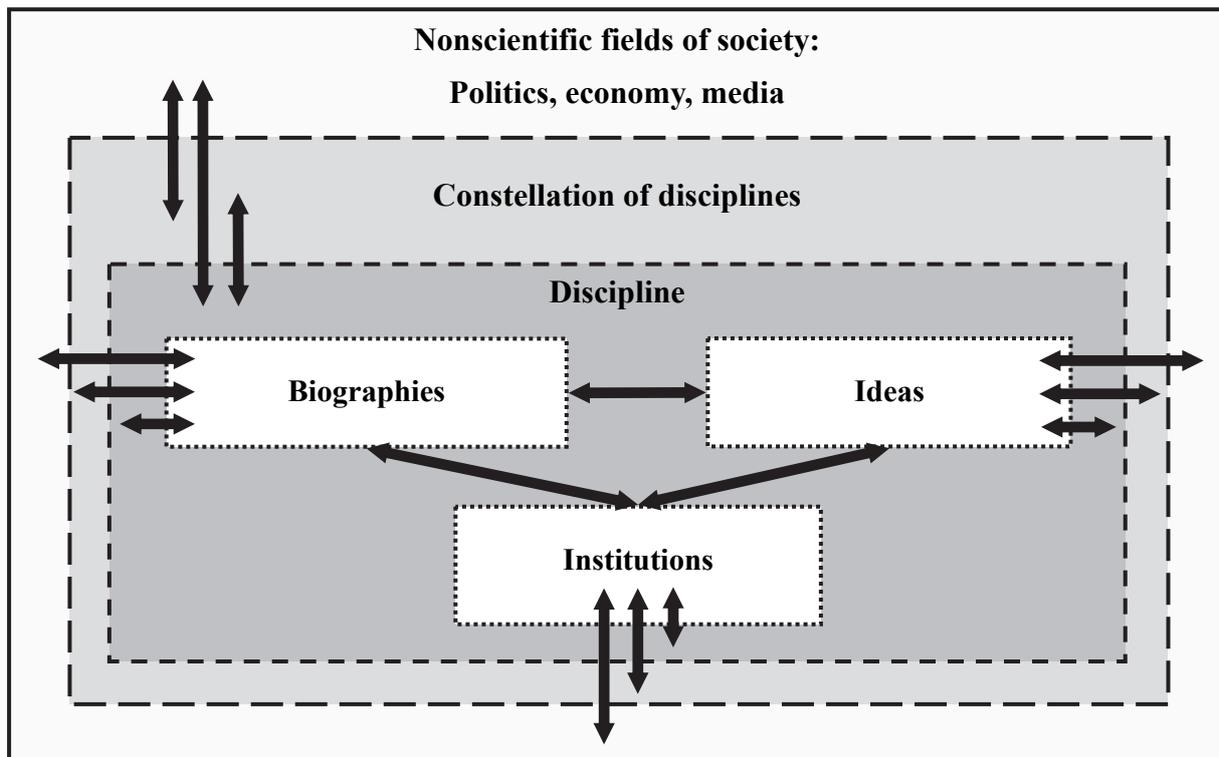
**The French Type:** „Sémio-Pragmatique/Socio-Sémiotique“ – semiotics and pragmatics of culture and media

**The British Type:** Cultural Studies – media and popular culture, media at home (domestication)

**The Euro-American-Type:** social sciences – integrative fields of research, dominance of quantitative methodology

Pietilä, Nordenstreng and Malmberg (1990) constructed the Euro-American type as a mixed type which developed during and after World War II. This hints at the fact that stable categories are not necessarily to be proven empirically. In fact, according to Max Weber we have to remember that “typification” is only an abstraction from reality: Therefore, these types provide an idea on mainstream communication research in different countries, *but not so much on developments over time and on overlaps between those types*. To underline this argument, let me focus on a scheme recently developed by Maria Löblich and Andreas Scheu, which is dealing with the dynamics and fluidity of science – even when paradigms seem to be stable.

**Figure 1: Heuristic model on the history of communication studies (Löblich/Scheu 2011)**



This general scheme of the dynamics of science understands research and research communities not as separated from society but as interwoven with it. For example, the dimension “biographies” is closely intertwined with other dimensions: By analyzing collective scientific biographies, one sees that “Generation” – as an *experience community* in the sense of Karl Mannheim – is a very useful factor to consider. Some examples concerning the generation of 20-30 agers during World War II underline this argument: The emigrants from Weimar Germany newspaper science to the US during the Nazi period were young people who had just finished their dissertations in the early 1930s, mostly on the sociology of the press, public opinion etc. They were students or successors of Ferdinand Tönnies, Max Weber, also of Karl Mannheim himself (for details Averbeck 1999, 2001) and did brilliant work in academia but also in linking European and American research traditions which is often forgotten today. Mostly, they could not proceed their academic careers in the US and elsewhere, because they were lacking academic reputation in their new home country. One exception was the young Ernest Manheim, a cousin of Karl Mannheim, who found open doors in US-academia after informal mentoring by Karl Mannheim and a lot of other elder European scholars (see Welzig 1997, Baron/Smith/Reitz 2005).

Obviously, having good connections and an academic “lobby” was necessary to have success in the new world *besides* the outstanding work Ernest Manheim did at the Institute of Sociology of Leipzig (which he as a Jew had to leave in April

1934),<sup>5</sup> at the London School of Economics and later at the sociology departments of Chicago and Kansas City.

A second example can be given for the period after the Second World War: The French founding fathers of *Science de l'information et de la communication* show strong milieu factors as well as generational ones *beyond science*: As a generation they shared the experience of the German occupation of France and a lot of them became politically active. It is not by accident, that most of the French founding fathers of communication studies (like Georges Friedmann, Robert Escarpit or Edgar Morin) had been communists, active in the *résistance* against the Nazi invasion in France. Later, most of them left the French Communist Party when the crimes of Stalin became known in the 1950s (see Averbek-Lietz 2010). With respect to theory building, this shared political orientation had an impact: Marxist thinking and the influence of the Frankfurt School had been very strong in France in the 1960s. In Germany, on the other hand, the Frankfurt School was largely neglected in communication studies during the shift from “Publizistikwissenschaft” to “Kommunikationswissenschaft” as a social science. Instead, neo-positivism came up in the same decade (see Löblich 2010, Scheu 2012) which was plausible, when one takes into account that there might have been more or less subconscious processes under way: In order to forget its own ideological past during the Nazi era, German communication research preferred to set up an allegedly ideal type of objectivity and distanced itself from normative positions, as Hanno Hardt (2002) has shown.<sup>6</sup>

These historical examples illustrate that it is worth to model scientific biographies by generation or collectively and not only as singular, outstanding biographies (see also Meyen 2007, Koenen 2009, Averbek-Lietz 2010).

With the help of all those empirical studies focusing on the history of communication studies in *single countries*, which have been done up to now, as well as by regarding *different generations* of communication researchers, we have to consider the differences between national research cultures as being *more diffuse than “clear-cut-types”* (as has been already shown with the Euro-American-Type for the decades after 1945 by Pietilä/Malmberg/Nordenstreng 1990):

- Communication studies are embedded in different ‘mother- and sister-disciplines’ (sociology, semiotics, economics, history, psychology...) → *these imply different approaches*
- Differences between romanophone and anglophone (-oriented) communities of communication researchers concerning theories and methodologies → *beyond national borders*

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<sup>5</sup> In 2000, at the age of 100, Ernest Manheim (1900-2002) received a honorary doctorate of the University of Leipzig. See: <http://www-classic.uni-graz.at/sozwww/agsoe/manheim/dt/index.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> Concerning the Nazi past of German newspaper studies see Kutsch 1987, Averbek 1999, Duchkowitsch/Hausjell/Semrad 2004.

- Theory building and normative orientations go hand in hand → *and differ between nations and world regions*

*Beyond national borders* means for example: different research communities may look at US-communication research, but from different perspectives, e.g. French research has widely adopted the Palo Alto School, whereas the Germans have not (Averbeck-Lietz 2010). Instead they followed Paul Lazarsfeld's functionalism (Löblich 2010). *Beyond national borders* also means perpetuations in other parts of the world: the schism between the French and English-speaking scientific cultures are also to be found in former colonies, e.g. in the French-influenced Maghreb area there is a preference for concepts, methodologies and theories coming from French *Sciences de l'information et de la communication* (see Hammami 2008). They are spread by Maghrebian scholars, who often graduated from the University of Paris. Surely, they not simply reproduce knowledge, they rather familiarize it into their home backgrounds, thus hybridizing scientific culture.

### **Categories for further and more dynamic analysis**

In a project with students over the last two years (at the Universities of Münster and Leipzig) we asked if *very 'young' concepts* like “globalized communication” or “transnational communication” are comparably used in different research communities worldwide – or not. We worked with a scheme, which we applied to qualitative comparative content analyses of international journals in communication studies by looking at the following categories<sup>7</sup>:

- *research objects* (which media? which type of communication processes?)
- *denominations and concepts* (here: in the field of international/transnational/global communication)
- *basic theories* (e.g. systems theory, social constructivism, semiotics...)
- *middle range theories* (e.g. media event theory, agenda setting, uses and gratifications...)
- *normative orientations* (participation, inclusion, exclusion...)
- *methodology/methods* (qualitative, quantitative? long-term/short-term settings?)

It was very interesting to see that there are common concepts to model globalized (or transnational/transcultural) communication like “connectivity” and/or “mediatization” – but a closer look revealed that there are in fact a lot of

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<sup>7</sup> I presented some of the findings at the conference “Beyond Center and Periphery” in Erfurt. See: Stefanie Averbeck-Lietz, Germany: “Globalization” and Related Key Concepts in Western and Nonwestern Communication Studies <http://www.uni-erfurt.de/kommunikationswissenschaft/conference/program-abstracts/>. The findings will be published extensively in the forthcoming book of the ECREA-summer school in 2012, where I organized a workshop on the same topic.

differences: The German community, for example, applied the question of transnational/transcultural communication nearly 15 years after the French community did. In addition there is a different understanding of concepts: “Connectivity”, for example, means not the same to everybody: In the context of cultural studies the term rather refers to the micro level of connected life-worlds of ordinary people, in the context of systems theory it refers to the macro level of connected (or disconnected) media systems and/or power elites.

Moreover, at least in European scientific cultures *traditional* concepts like “public sphere” may also be linked to different denominations, different normative orientations, different research questions in different communities of communication researchers – and some of them travel and are transformed again like the famous concept of a discursive public sphere by Habermas.<sup>8</sup>

“Communication” is a process, but also an idea or an analytical concept, and if it is both, then it is only legitimate to ask how, why, where and when the notion of communication is used, in ordinary life as well as in science. We will not understand anything about communication processes if we do not understand *how to conceptualize* them (differently). And this is not a question of measurement, but of understanding communication as a symbolic process, *which is reflexive*—in life as well as in science. Science is a part of the social construction and understanding of social reality. Therefore, we must talk about connections/disconnections and the benefits of diversity between research milieus. We are a part of the (future) construction of our problems and concepts as researchers and the problems we are facing – like globalization and mediatization – go beyond national borders.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> This is one aim of our international project “Communication Studies in International Comparison” hosted at the University of Bremen to analyze the traveling of ideas on the public sphere, namely in Finland (which will be analyzed by Tarmo Malmberg), in the US (which will be analyzed by Jefferson Pooley/Christian Schwarzenegger) and Japan (which will be analyzed by Kitada Akihiro/Fabian Schäfer).

<sup>9</sup> To bring different research communities together to face problems of future research, Friedrich Krotz initiated a conference on “Media and Cultural Change outside of Europe”, see <http://www.zemki.uni-bremen.de/de/forschung/tagungen-geplant/media-and-cultural-change-outside-of-europe.html>.

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