

# Making progress in a trackless, weightless and intangible space: A response to Keith Roe

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## *Abstract*

*In this debate article in response to Keith Roe (Communication, 28, 2003, 53–59) the author offers a less problematized characterization of the identity and current state of the discipline of communication science. It has many achievements and its limitations stem primarily from the nature of its subject matter. We need to maintain it as a unified but diverse enterprise for it to be capable of handling interrelated questions that arise from the working of various communication institutions in contemporary society. The field has to be concerned both with communication and with media and a plea is also entered on behalf of communication, appropriately delimited, as an object of research and theory in its own right.*

## **Posing the problem**

The field of study of communication, however named and defined, has never been free from doubters, both within and without and is unlikely ever to escape this condition. Keith Roe puts his finger on the main points of critique, which can certainly not be dismissed as chimerical or trivial, even if in the end I do not share his conclusions. He writes of a lack of cohesion, identity and a common discourse which stem in part from the rapid expansion, proliferation and diversification of the field in the last ten to twenty years. Even more seriously, these deficiencies are claimed to have resulted in a loss of explanatory power and of quality control that threaten the scientific credentials of the field and there is certainly evidence of a lack of wider collegial respect for the new 'discipline', sometimes fuelled by journalists, popular pundits and politicians.

A certain amount depends, in formulating the problem in this way, on whether a progressively downward spiral is being asserted or whether it is simply recognizing certain more or less inevitable and constant fea-

tures of a field that has multi-disciplinary origins, disparate concerns and deals with a very public subject matter. The key issue is whether there is a loss of certain key qualities over time (or a failure to attain them) or simply a relative shortage of some of the desirable attributes (such as cohesion and self-identity as well as certainty of knowledge) for a scientific enterprise. There is much more to it of course, but a first step is to question whether the allegations of repetitiveness, triviality, lack of cohesive theory, failure to explain or predict or to innovate or accumulate knowledge, etc., can sustain an indictment sufficiently to justify potentially radical steps towards dis-aggregation as contemplated in Keith Roe's article.

My own career has to some extent overlapped with that of Keith's in time, disciplinary origins, topics of research and experience of institutionalization of the field. However it differs sufficiently to have left me with an alternative perspective on the field and a different assessment of its strengths and weaknesses. Most relevant here is my own view that there is a viable core of problem formulations, research approaches and theory that specifically relates to the communication processes that are entailed when 'media' are at work. Communication has primacy and cannot be dispensed with, however difficult it has proved to deliver an adequate theoretical framework and methodology for establishing any discipline of 'communication' as such. Adopting this position does not resolve the problems facing the field, but it involves a different understanding of the origins of the branch of study, an alternative evaluation of its history and a different view of future prospects.

### **Identifying the field**

My own mapping of the current field of 'communication science' or 'media and communication' (which I identify in much the same way as does Keith Roe) views it at as already a subdivision of the large and amorphous 'space' that the term communication (or 'human communication') on its own refers to. The subfield of 'media and communication' (our branch of study) is strongly marked by a primary reference to: the 'mass media' institution; public communication processes with a collective character; and often by attention to other related social institutions (politics, education, law, family, etc.). The (very extensive) remaining space of 'communication' can be notionally divided in many ways, but most consistently for the present purposes by reference to other communication institutions identified according to a similar logic (such as religion, work organizations, education, family and friendship, art and culture, etc.). From this point of view, the origins of the present field are disparate but also shared with other branches of inquiry, especially in

the social sciences. These remarks leave out of account the other ways in which communication can be conceptualized and identified for inquiry in terms of neuro-physiology, electronics, mechanics, transportation, etc. We cannot escape from the fact that our own version of the field of communication is one insubstantial construction depending on circumstances and temporary agreements.

The general notion of a scientific field or discipline needs to be spelled out for the sake of clarity of argument. The main components are held to be as follows:

1. There is a territory mapped out in terms of various proper objects of study and issues to be addressed that have an interrelated character and some internal logic or coherence.
2. A field has its own institutional identity and apparatus, including many practitioners, programmes of study, a more or less shared conceptual discourse, professional associations, conferences, journals, differentiated according to issues and approach.
3. Education for a discipline is carried out according to some shared understanding of what is useful for students amongst the large amount of relevant knowledge in various fields and also according to a certain range of diversity and appropriate division of labor.
4. There exists a corpus of findings of research, descriptive data about the objects of inquiry, plus a body of theory that accounts for observations and evidence.
5. A set of appropriate methodologies and methods for investigating the issues of the field is available.
6. Where relevant, a body of prescriptive theory is available that deals with the perceived rights and wrongs of the activities under study, according to different value perspectives.

It is not difficult to credit the field of 'media and communication' with disciplinary status according to these criteria. There is a field of application that deals with all aspects of media publication and dissemination, including the origins and organization of production, the assessment of technologies used, the analysis of what is published, the uses to which content is put and the consequences, intended or not, of publication. At this level of generality, disputes about which particular media 'count' or how we proceed (and where we stop) in the assessment of effects are relatively minor and internal. We can hardly question the institutional identity of the field as an established fact, according to the criteria mentioned, even if we find it part of the problem. The 'corpus' of evidence and theory is not much in doubt as a reality. Perhaps most important is the fact that there is now a generation of younger scholars

educated over the last two decades and for longer in some places that are not particularly self-conscious or troubled about the status of their own discipline and their identity and have no reason to be so, according to the normal reigning standards across the board of education and research.

Even if no one of us can easily perceive its overall coherence and integrity and we may harbor doubts about the contribution to civilization or rational inquiry of some of our colleagues, it is no longer enough to dismiss the field as a whole on such grounds. There is too much of it and over too wide a range, often with good credentials and meeting various tests of validity for any sweeping negative judgement to be supported. The methods and methodologies of media/communication studies are largely borrowed from other social sciences and the humanities and have been adapted to the tasks of the field, along with a good deal of innovation and ingenuity. Such eclecticism may seem a sign of weakness or and be a source of dispute but it is certainly no vice. There are many questions in the field that lack adequate answers, but the fault does not lie in methodological inadequacy or lack of intelligence. It lies rather with the question and the topics of inquiry.

Beyond the question of formal criteria for recognition as a discipline there are certain strengths and weaknesses (sometimes both at the same time) that are in some respects especially characteristic of the field. These include the intrinsic appeal of many of the topics of investigation because of their novelty, immediacy, fashionability or links to popularity and celebrity. There is also a strong contemporary link between public communication and the exercise of power, which keeps the issue of media effects permanently alive, as does the link asserted between media and many kinds of social and personal harm. Moreover, the field has numerous links to the application of communication in advertising, journalism, public information, show business, public relations and in many of the new emerging information industries. The field is often perceived, rightly or wrongly, as having a particular allure that attracts students and researchers as well as sustaining activities that may not appeal to academic colleagues. It also has been and remains inescapably normative in its general tendency, whether the normative impulse comes from social critics or from the moral guardians of society.

As indicated, such features also entail risks and limitations. They put novelty and immediate yield of results ahead of fundamental research, generalization and theory-building. Fascination with the question often distorts judgements about what is likely to have any scientific yield. The features mentioned tend to reward topicality, speculation and short-term utility more than critical thinking and the steady accumulation of a body of knowledge. The strong overall tendency to 'media-centeredness' leads

to a neglect of underlying causal factors. It has resulted in an undue focus on the latest medium to be added to the spectrum and a rerunning of old debates and inquiry into essentially the same issues. The mass media themselves and public opinion still exert a strong and often distorting influence of the agenda of enquiry. The undeniable failure of the field to find adequate confirmation of the most widely circulated notions about mass media effects has been obscured by the constant changes in the object of study and the social context in which communication occurs. The normative tendency of the field is linked to its appeal and its critical role in society, but it also opens the way for polemical and tendentious uses of media research and theory than undermine rather than support an effective critical role. In addition, we have so far failed to produce an adequate body of normative theory of our own about the working of media that is robust enough to provide much guidance to ourselves or to society.

A weakness that seems peculiarly our own is the persistent lack of any agreed definition of 'communication' as a field. Many have commented on the number of different and not always consistent definitions of the communication concept and there is no profit in revisiting those debates. Although this is a source of discontent it is not such a unique problem, when we look at other 'disciplines' that can only offer extremely simplistic descriptive definitions of their field (such as 'history' or 'economics') and/or have similar difficulties in setting boundaries to their domains (as with sociology or philosophy). Other unproblematized disciplines are not less the result the result of provisional convention and social construction, in other words outcomes of human communication.

### **On human communication**

Without engaging in this word game there is some point in recognizing some key features of what we often refer to, however non-consensually, as the field of communication. The process of communication occurs in space and time. It involves the making of linkages or connections between entities in space so as to create routes and networks of routes that may have a material form but may also be invisible. The same applies to traffic along routes. The recurrent imagery thus identifies a 'landscape' that is crisscrossed by pathways and replete with nodal points, junctions, gates through which communication 'flows' and is exchanged. The space is also occupied by notional 'structures' sustained by communication activities or by 'frameworks' of relationships, of rules or guidelines, sometimes 'frameworks of meaning'.

Alongside the flow of 'information', variously definable, along the pathways or channels of communication, there is also the matter of the

creation of information or 'meaning', which also implies the existence and then multiplication of identities. The frameworks of meaning referred to are numerous, overlapping and competing, with various manifestations (public opinion, ideology, belief systems, cultural identity, etc.). Characteristic of this universe of communication phenomena is its mutability, ephemerality, insubstantiality and immense volume and speed of mutation. It is these features that I refer to in my title.

This very roughly sketched version of what communication refers to in the name given to the discipline is quite obviously very problematical for direct scientific enquiry, but far from unimaginable, beyond conceptualization or lacking in many concrete manifestations, especially if we locate 'our' corner of the total field as primarily concerned with aspects of public communication and especially the media institution.

### **Strengths of the field**

In what is in effect a defence of the field as it has been constituted, even if somewhat circumstantially in our time, it is necessary to be more specific about its achievements. In my own view there are areas where 'communication science' has been relatively successful, and even where inadequate, is distinctly ahead of any competing disciplinary effort or, more to the point, of many undisciplined and amateur efforts. There are a number of issue areas within the overall scope of the field of inquiry on which our discipline is the most reliable guide in responding to significant issues posed in society (even if this has not yet been widely acknowledged). There is no space to do more than name areas of strength, which I will do so in a personal and provisional way, and in no order of precedence or claim to completeness. My lists runs as follows:

- The assessment of media effects of all kinds;
- The independent and critical understanding of news and journalism;
- The reliable description and also interpretation of many forms of 'media content' as sent and received, using varied approaches.
- The analysis of characteristics of different media and of what is involved in the (mass) 'mediation' of information and culture.
- The description and critical evaluation of the media institution in relation to political and economic forces.
- The analysis of political communication strategies, outcomes and wider consequences for the democratic political system.
- The 'measurement' and understanding of media audience behavior, experience and perception.
- The exploration of construction of meaning, reality and identity.

- The conversion of ideas about the social purposes of public communication into concepts and methods for recognizing purpose and assessing performance of media.
- Providing approaches to describing and critically assessing processes of cultural and informational globalization.
- Providing an initial framework for assessing the communicative impact of new media technologies on society.
- Providing descriptive and analytic frameworks for the study of media institutions, systems and policies.

This is a personal agenda of significant areas of communication research and theory. Others in the field would have different priorities and judgments and or would use a different terminology. I believe that these ‘areas of disciplinary strength’ are interconnected and are in some degree all interdependent, even if pursued by different methods and for diverse and unrelated reasons. I am also convinced that in these areas, what is conventionally recognized as ‘our’ field is better equipped overall to handle questions arising than relevant sub-branches of other disciplines, let alone the many amateurs and even charlatans that engage with the same issues (as is their right). The perspectives and insights of ‘outsiders’ to the field are often valuable in themselves, but need the validation, sustenance and consistency which only a discipline can provide. For all its failings, ours is the leading discipline on the matters indicated and if it did not exist or if it were dispersed and fragmented it would have to be laboriously re-invented. It is hard to see how it would turn out very differently.

The claim made here is not especially extravagant and may not amount to much more than asserting that what we have as a discipline is the least worst of all the existing contenders for guidance in a zone of great uncertainty. But it is a firm claim nevertheless, based on a conviction that the collective, loosely interrelated efforts of students of media and communication have made progress that is not simply an illusion created by a more or less successful institutionalization within higher education, albeit grudgingly bestowed. A listing of strengths implicitly acknowledges that there are areas of weakness. Again personal judgments based on detailed knowledge as well as value preferences come into such assessments and it is not necessary to balance the above list with a negative entries on the balance sheet.

### **Weaknesses**

Even so, it is necessary to acknowledge some persistent weaknesses that stem from the nature of the field of communication beyond what has

already been mentioned. Three matters in particular come to mind. One concerns the essential invisibility of many communication phenomena, as already indicated. We cannot observe communication flows, except in fragmentary and perhaps trivial instances and by indirect means. Our understanding of how information is processed, understandings arrived at, meanings learnt or transmitted is all hypothetical or made by inference with insecure formulations. Many of the phenomena that are central to the discourse of the field in respect of key questions are insubstantial as well as immensely complex, for instance in respect of culture, identity, public opinion, influence, frames of meaning and much else.

Secondly, the corpus of theory and research that the discipline controls is pervaded by numerous value judgements that are often inconsistent, unrecognized and sometimes uncontrollable. Values play an essential part in inquiry in any branch of the 'human sciences' and in this case they are often inescapably bound up with the object of inquiry. My earlier sketch of the of field emphasized the degree to which it is linked to the working of particular institutions that are in turn strongly shaped by local and national cultures, with different historical experiences and contemporary outlooks. The knowledge we produce cannot be culture-free. Even so, we have not really been very successful at coping with this circumstance, a general matter of under-development of theory in the field.

An aspect of the same topic is the undeniable 'ethnocentricity' or western bias of the field, in its institutional forms, preoccupations and assumptions. The field was at one time typified as an American invention of the post war years (see Jeremy Tunstall, *The media are American*) despite the existence of several different national 'schools', especially in Europe. It has become more truly international as a disciplinary enterprise and a community of scholars, but it retains many traces of its origins. In some degree, the strong links with the activities of particular communication institutions (press, broadcasting, etc.) require some measure of ethnocentricity, given the considerable cultural differences that survive the globalizing trends. At the very least, one can identify a need both for comparative research, but also for theory, both 'normative' and 'fundamental' that crosses national boundaries.

A third area of uncertainty of evaluation of the field relates to the way current changes in communication technology and systems are being coped with. On the face of it, there is much evidence, going back at least two decades, of strenuous and extensive efforts to adapt the discipline to such change and to fit findings about the application and use of new technologies within existing paradigms developed for mass communication. Research activity has often gone rather ahead of real world developments, reflecting both commercial and political pressure to have



useful intelligence on communications trends and the appeal of novelty to which the field has always been susceptible.

So far, however, there is little coherent engagement with the notion of an 'information' or 'knowledge' society, either theoretically or empirically. The 'control' of the field of communication (in disciplinary terms) identified according to current, albeit speculative visions, of the emerging type of society has not been achieved and may not fall to what we recognize as our discipline. There are competitors for this prize (if it is one) coming from other older or newer formations of disciplinary activity. Quite possibly this imagery of a contest for a prize is illusory and diversionary and the 'information society' concept itself will prove to lack viability and coherence. The territory on which media and communication operates will simply be enlarged and changed by new types of public communication and institutional arrangements.

### **In conclusion**

My response has been based on quite a strong claim that we need to maintain the link between communication and media as closely related objects of inquiry, rather than choose one or the other. This will be fruitful provided we also identify the context and conditions in which the two come together, especially by attending to public communication (and what lies behind and beyond it) and to the media institution in the larger sense. There is also a potential for our field to make more use of its somewhat neglected stock of basic communication ideas and tools in this task, for instance exploring the ongoing re-arrangement of the relations between private and public communication roles. My claim in this respect may be more based on pious hope than realistic assessment or certainty about how to develop the core of a communication discipline. There are risks of sterility and irrelevance in pursuing the search for a pure 'science of communication', which seems to have made little progress.

My rather positive overall assessment of the field as it is now will certainly not convince everyone, but it is intended to support a case against the need or desirability of fragmentation or subdivision into separate clubs where surveillance and control of logics and standards of inquiry is easier and problems of identity do not arise. Leaving institutional self-interest to one side, if we maintain our collective identity and current forms of organization we are better placed, I believe, to address the 'big questions' of communication and society. The extent and diversity of the network of scholars now working in the field has many advantages. We are more likely to be able to resist ethnocentricity, narrow specialization and routinization of topics and methods of research. We

are in a better position to speak with some authority on difficult and complex questions of media and society and less likely to be permanently on the defensive, even if we can never claim a monopoly of insight or expertise. The problematic character of relations within the field can itself be stimulating and lead to innovation as well as a permanent state of self-reflection.

In some respects the constitution of our field reflects some essential conditions of our object of study, as characterized earlier. Communication also lacks boundaries, material substance, fixed states or predictability. Perhaps on its way to institutional respectability the field will end up by disqualifying itself from its primary task and some components will re-form with other elements to provide a better means of coping with the uncertainty of the information world.

### **Reference**

Tunstall, J. (1977). *The media are American*. London: Constable.