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Making progress in a trackless, weightless and intangible space

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Abstract: In 2001 Denis McQuail published an article in *Communications* in which he reflected on conceptual problems in media “gratifications” research and proposed some ways in which “media use” research could go forward. Two years later (McQuail, 2003), in a response to a debate article by me (Roe, 2003), he wrote an article bearing the same title as the one above in which he broadened the discussion to the overall identity and state of the discipline of communication science at that time. The purpose of this article is to do the same with respect to the current state of the discipline and suggest some possible future directions.

Keywords: uses and gratifications, media research, communication research: recent developments, strengths and weaknesses, future directions

At first sight such a “reflection on reflections” could be seen as academically incestuous. However, I believe that periodically taking stock of “where we have been, where we are now, and where we are going” is a fruitful and necessary exercise which may help us not only to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past but, more generally, also prevent us from continually “reinventing the wheel” in the future.

In the earlier article McQuail (2001) began his reflections by looking back on Uses and Gratifications research by noting,

As time passes, my qualifications for looking back on this tradition of research increase, on the ground that I can look back over an even longer time period ... even though my claim to contemporary expertise diminishes. I was invited to write this paper because on a previous

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occasion (McQuail, 1984) I tried to strike a balance on the failings and future of the Uses and Gratifications field of research.

My own qualifications echo those of McQuail. I suspect I was invited to write this paper because, having written my first research report in 1982, and first appearing in *Communications* ten years later (von Feilitzen and Roe, 1992), I can also look back on a very long association with the Uses and Gratifications approach. Moreover, in a long personal association with Denis we spent many enjoyable evenings at many conferences and symposia discussing a wide range of ideas.

In comparing the changes that had occurred between 1984 and 2001 McQuail stated:

Not least amongst the features of today's environment compared to that of twenty years ago is the rapid acceleration of alternative media forms and of actual media outlets (multiplicity of channels). Accompanying this are increased fluidity about what actually counts as "media use," given the variety of forms, behaviours and means of delivery. (McQuail, 2001)

Writing in 2024 it is obvious that this must be the starting point of any discussion of what are and are not appropriate concepts, theories, and methodologies in contemporary media research. The acceleration and proliferation of media forms and outlets which McQuail noted then has greatly increased with the result that the context of media use today appears almost unrecognisable to that at the turn of the century. However, we should not allow ourselves to be so dazzled by all these developments as to conclude that this is the end of the story. In research it is always tempting to focus on changes, especially fashionable ones (as in everything there are fashions in academia). They are more manifest and, not least, newsworthy. By contrast continuities are more latent and research into them appears not only rather mundane but less likely to be funded or published (both of which, as we all know, are things of vital concern to researchers!). Moreover, even if the results of such studies are published, they are less likely to stimulate interest within the academic community. While the slogan "publish or perish" is known to everyone, there is a less remarked upon but equally fatal academic outcome, namely "perish by silence." However, by ignoring continuities we can only obtain partial and misleading conclusions regarding the phenomena we study. This important lesson was summed up by Denis McQuail in his typically succinct style:

The changes that have occurred in the audience branch of communications research have involved extensions into new issues, adopting new frameworks, for conceptualizing problems, rather than changes of a fundamental theoretical or methodological kind. (McQuail, 2001)

The article continued by reviewing the successes and failures of the media gratification approach, noting that, up to that point, its successes had been patchy and uneven. On the positive side, it had been useful in terms of describing audience tastes and expectations, identifying types and patterns of selection behaviours and characterizing audience perceptions of different genres, forms and content types. Such descriptive benefits, he noted, are very extensive and significant, not least in facilitating classification of audience segments.

The failures relate to some of the most important aspirations of the approach, namely predicting audience demand, finding causal explanations of actual choices and use patterns, and connecting these to effects research. However, as McQuail noted, some of these failures are not unique to gratifications theory and research but reflect more general and fundamental difficulties facing communication research as a whole. This caveat is as important and valid today as it was then. For rhetorical reasons researchers tend to position their own work in relation to the shortcomings and failures of existing theoretical approaches and methodologies while neglecting to note that some of these problems are, indeed, inherent to the communications paradigm in general and, not infrequently, in their own work in particular. However, this (in a sense natural) zeal to legitimate our own approaches can lead to a deficiency in self-reflexivity—a tendency which I increasingly detect in reviewing manuscripts for journal publication.

McQuail ended his reflections with suggestions for progress in the field, noting that researchers were faced with a number of interrelated, but separate, tasks of problem formulation and analysis. To meet this situation he recommended subdividing the terrain in to “manageable plots,” and suggested an initial, pragmatic subdivision in terms of the main *moments* of media selection, attention, and response. These *moments*, he continued, constitute more or less autonomous topics and fields of inquiry, requiring different kinds of methods and goals. However, he acknowledged, one consequence of this approach is that

it is almost inconceivable that one could really enquire deeply into all these matters and interrelate the findings ... into any single model or even in a single extensive research project. It is probably inadvisable to try. One of the failings of earlier research was the attempt to do too much; too many variables; too many levels of analysis, too much data collected. Essentially it is a matter of choosing priorities about what questions to answer and constructing ... appropriate designs. (McQuail, 2001)

In his conclusions, he returned to this point, arguing there is now “no escape from viewing the whole territory of media gratifications research as beyond the reach of any one theoretical perspective.”

I would certainly agree that it has long been impossible to encompass the whole field of communication within the parameters of a single empirical model or

theoretical perspective. Moreover, in research it is always to some degree necessary to subdivide the phenomena to be investigated into “manageable plots.” However, this does not imply that researchers should abandon any attempt to integrate their findings into any broader perspectives whatsoever. To do so can only result in increasingly narrow specialisation and theoretical incoherence producing not only “abstracted empiricism” but also “abstracted inductivism”. I shall return to this point below.

As noted above, McQuail’s 2003 article broadened this discussion from the specifics of Uses and Gratifications research to the whole discipline of communication science. In it he began by noting that the study of communication, however named and defined, has never been free from doubters and is unlikely ever to escape this condition, continuing:

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. (McQuail, 2003, p. 275)

The key issue in the discussion remains essentially as McQuail (2003, p. 276) formulated it, namely

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 ... for a scientific enterprise and whether the allegations of repetitiveness, triviality, lack of cohesive theory, failure to explain predict ... innovate or accumulate knowledge etc. ... justify potentially radical steps.

First, it should be noted that the status of communication as an object of academic focus has changed immensely in the past 20 years. At the start of the new millennium it was still largely regarded, in both the wider scientific community and in social science, as something of a Cinderella discipline dealing with what was generally regarded as trivial subject matter, and most of us who were active at that time still remember the scepticism and patronizing “put-downs” which we frequently had to endure. This change is undoubtedly the result of the growth and spread of proliferating forms of digital media and their occupation of most aspects of public and private space. This ubiquity and manifest social importance have resulted in an enormous growth in the number of courses on offer and student numbers, not only within departments of communication and other branches of social science, but also in faculties ranging from Arts to Medicine. Moreover, not least, it, has also

led to an exponential growth in the amount of research funding (and research output) available. Today, not even the greatest sceptics of 20 years ago can deny the significance of communication in virtually aspect of human life. In other words, the discipline has not only “arrived” but is now part of the academic establishment.

However, this development has been accompanied by an inevitable increase in the breadth of the parameters and degree of fragmentation of what is regarded as “communication.” Moreover, the equally understandable focus on digital technologies has led to a comparative neglect of other essential forms of human communication, not least perhaps in its non-verbal forms. Furthermore, there is no necessary correlation between growth and visibility on the one hand, and scientific quality on the other. The question marks regarding the latter are at least as much in evidence now as they were 20 years ago.

McQuail continued his article by identifying the current field of “communication science” or “media and communication” and outlining the general features of what constitutes a scientific field or discipline, concluding that according to these criteria, “it is not difficult to credit the field of ‘media and communication’ with disciplinary status”—a conclusion which few would dispute today. However, he cautioned, these features can also lead researchers “to put novelty, topicality and immediate yield of results ahead of underlying structural factors, generalization and theory building resulting in an undue focus on the latest medium to be added to the spectrum and a re-running of old debates and investigation of essentially the same issues (McQuail, 2003, p. 279). It would not be difficult to put together several voluminous anthologies of recent research articles displaying exactly these characteristics.

Arguably, in the past twenty years communications (and more generally social science) research has continued to become increasingly fragmented into micro-perspectives and research designs, leading to a focus on the minutiae of individual and small group patterns of media use. While this, too, is necessary to the scientific enterprise as a whole and produces some excellent scholarship, these mini discourses can quickly become trivial and separated from each other with the result that researchers increasingly inhabit isolated academic cocoons. In addition, contact with other conceptual levels is lost, thereby widening the gulf between macro- and micro-perspectives, resulting in fewer linkages to broader questions pertaining to culture and society.

As I have noted elsewhere (Roe, 2020), These differences of perspective can to some extent be traced to classic dichotomies like subject vs. object, inductive vs. deductive, and quantitative vs. qualitative methodology, but the often dogmatic and hostile debates surrounding them can quickly become sterile and unhelpful in research; often having more to do with attempts by researchers to legitimate their own preferences and competences than analytical rigour. In fact, there is no inherent conflict between them as individual agency, group dynamics, and objec-

tive social structures are all manifestly important in shaping human actions and outcomes. It is possible to combine “objectivist” and “subjectivist” perspectives by working simultaneously on different conceptual and analytical levels and combining them in research designs. Similarly, “inductive” and “deductive” and “quantitative” and “qualitative” methodologies can fruitfully be combined into multi-method techniques which can greatly broaden the range of phenomena that can be studied within a single project.

A corollary to such an approach is the added value that can be obtained by employing interdisciplinary approaches. However, here an important distinction should be made between “interdisciplinarity” and “multidisciplinarity.” This is no mere semantic difference: The latter brings together researchers from different academic backgrounds in a common project but, not infrequently, each remains largely within the parameters of their own discipline. Conversely, the former brings such researchers together within an overall, coherent theoretical and methodological framework designed to genuinely integrate their work. However, since researchers from different backgrounds tend to have different perspectives on the concepts, theories, methods, and types of analysis to be employed, this is frequently not an easy task. For a working synthesis to emerge it requires an open and flexible attitude on the part of all those involved and, not least, time. If and when such a synthesis does emerge, it can produce rich insight and linkages which can only improve the output of the project.

I realise that all of this can be seen as a manifesto for some “ideal type” which is unrealisable in the highly constrained world of everyday research. Nevertheless, within these constraints, or perhaps precisely because of them, I believe that it is very important not to lose sight of the goal of building a corpus of knowledge that can be seen as representing both communication as a whole and its subfields. To facilitate this, the metaphor of research as mapping might be useful. Maps can be made on a wide range of scales varying from very large—i.e., outlining the major contours of a selected area—to very small—i.e., zooming in on fine details within an area. The choice depends on the goal(s) of the research: To use another metaphor, do we want an overview of the forest and its position relative to other large structural features in the landscape, or more detailed knowledge of specific segments or even groups of individual trees? It follows that, just as a geographical atlas can contain representations stretching across the whole continuum, so can a social atlas.

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