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Alphons Silbermann (1909–2000) and the founding of Communications: The European Journal of Communication Research

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Abstract: This article contributes to the Jubilee issue of *Communications* on the occasion of the journal's 50th birthday. Based on archive material and the publications of Alphons Silbermann in the journal (his editorials, book reviews, essays and articles) the role of the founding editor in establishing a European field of communication research is reflected. This role cannot be underestimated – at least not regarding the German context of the founding of the journal confronting Silbermann with a lot of hostility from within the field – he answered in both terms, scientifically but also with his typical sarcasm visible in his book reviews.

Keywords: Alphons Silbermann, History of Mass Communication Research in Europe, European Communication Journals

He [Silbermann] survived the Nazi terror in Australian exile and later returned to Cologne where he reconstructed an open, integrative and democratic communication science that was evidently necessary in Germany. (Krotz, 2012, p. 323)

1 The context and the sources of this article

On the occasion of the 50th birthday of *Communications: The European Journal of Communication Research* in 2025 we want to honor its founder Alphons Silbermann (1909–2000), heading for a long time also the DGKF (*Deutsche Gesellschaft für Kommunikationsforschung/German Society of Communication Research*), this today small academic society holding the title rights of the journal since its beginnings.¹ Silbermann's name is also highlighting the so called Cologne approach of

¹ The author of this article is a co-editor (together with Leen d'Haenens) of *Communications* since

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Mass Communication Sociology which he developed up from the 1970s. Together with René König (1906–1992) he co-edited the *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* (KZfSS) between 1972 and 1980.

Before diving deeper into Silbermann's work, life and especially his editorship of *Communications*, let me start with a personal note: Even as a researcher of the Nazi past of German communication research (Averbek, 2001), I was not at all aware that the roots of *Communications* and its early milieu of protagonists were so much burdened with the past of Nazi newspaper studies. Silbermann (1999, p. 154) called himself the “only Jew among German communication scientists [translated from German].”² In many of his writings he confronted colleagues with their Nazi past. He had a difficult re-start in Germany after World War II. Nevertheless, Silbermann succeeded with achieving his aim of the Europeanization of German communication research (Krüger, 2015). This article is an attempt to understand Silbermann's ambivalent journey regarding his editorship and also his authorship for the journal *Communications*.

The following article predominantly refers to the published editorials, articles, essays and reviews by Silbermann in the journal itself, his auto-biographical writings and some secondary literature.

The history of the journal has to be analyzed in more detail in future research in the context of the history of other leading journals in the field (Vroons, 2005; Averbek-Lietz et al., 2024). Regarding *Communications: The European Journal of Communication Research*, such a research project should be based on archive materials from the Cologne archives of Silbermann's professorship, archive material of the editorial office of the journal and the legacies of Alphons Silbermann at Potsdam.³

Silbermann founded *Communications* in 1975. From 1990 onwards he edited the journal together with Walter Nutz (1924–2000) who passed away the same year as him. Josef Kurt Meinel was a co-editor at least between 1976 and 1978.⁴ The publishing houses shifted from Richartz at St. Augustin (1976–1984) to Frankfurt/M. *Peter Lang* until 1988, then to Munich *KG Saur* until 1994, Berlin *Quintessenz* till 2001,

2016 and heading the DGKF (together with Christian Pentzold) since 2023.

² All translations from original German quotes by Mirko Wittwar. I have to thank Christian Pentzold, Friedrich Krotz, Keith Roe and Leen d'Haenens for their critical comments. As a student assistant Helena Kater cross-checked the bibliography.

³ See <https://www.mmz-potsdam.de/bibliothek/sammlungen-und-nachlaesse/alphons-silbermann-nachlass> (August, 16, 2024).

⁴ Josef Kurt Meinel was a member of *Internationale Vereinigung für Kommunikationsforschung* (IVK), for further information on this society see below.

and then to *de Gruyter-Mouton*.⁵ With the shift to *Quintessenz* Walter Nutz, Karsten Renckstorf (1944–2013), Silbermann and Ralph T. Wigand (1934–2020) signed as an editorial team and from then on the journal published *English only* to reach a “wider audience” (Nutz et al., 1996; also Krotz, 2012, p. 323, 2013). After 1996 it was Renckstorf who headed the editorial team (Krotz, 2013). With the beginning of the year 1997 Silbermann left the team. From then he was indicated as the founder of the journal on its title page and still today on the journal’s website (<https://www.degruyter.com/journal/key/comm/html>). The modernization of the journal was pushed by Karsten Renckstorf and Keith Roe (until 2008). Friedrich Krotz (editor 2008–2016) achieved the implementation of the journal as a high impact one with its admission to the *Social Science Citation Index* (SSCI) in 2011.

Silbermann early on favored a *trans-European* view on communication studies. He read German, French and English texts in the original and maybe some languages more. From an article of our editorial board member, Jan Servaes, we learn that some DGKF-members following on Silbermann, namely Walter Nutz heading the DGKF from 1990 until 2000, and Ekkehard Mochmann were involved into some initiatives in the founding history of the *European Communication Research and Education Association*, ECREA (Servaes, 2015; Mochmann, 2000).

With the journal’s founding, its subtitle became program: To bring together and to discuss European communication research. This was not a matter of course. And it was not by hazard that this initiative came from Silbermann, an international scholar and public intellectual with a sense for Europe. Not least as a re-migrated Jewish German citizen a critical observer of early German democracy as well as of German communication studies, at that time *Publizistikwissenschaft*, which he believed to be too national and narrow-minded (Silbermann, 1991 [1989], p. 529; Koenen and Sanko, 2016, pp. 3–4; Rudiger, 2019). Moreover, it was a scientific discipline which more or less willingly forgot its Nazi past (Silbermann, 1972, p. 118; see also Duchkowitsch et al., 2004; Pöttker, 2007).

2 Silbermann: The person and the scholar

Silberman was a scholar and a public intellectual. Much has been written about him all over the globe (recently Rudiger, 2019 introducing Silbermann’s communication sociology to a Brazilian public; see also Daros, 2019), including biographical books by himself (Silbermann, 1989, 1999). His lifelong journey was an international one,

⁵ See the online catalogue of the German National Library (https://www.dnb.de/DE/Home/home_node.html). It is unclear where the No. 1, 1975 had been published.

and this was not at all his free choice. In 1934, after his doctorate at the University of Cologne, he fled from National Socialism, first to the Netherlands, then to France (where he worked as a waiter), later on to Australia where he opened a fast-food restaurant (Scheuch, 2000).⁶

After 1945 he became a prominent music sociologist and communication scholar, first in France, then in Germany, while being fully aware that these two countries and their traditions in media and communication studies were more than difficult to bring together (Silbermann, 1990a, p. 326; see also Auerbeck-Lietz and Cordonnier, 2022). He even tried to bridge the two Germanies while giving Eastern German scholars like Lothar Bisky (after 1990 a famous figure of the leftist PDS party), Peter Etzekorn and Hans-Jörg Stiehler the possibility to publish on Eastern German topics in Communications (Bisky, 1978, 1979; Etzekorn and Stiehler, 1998). Silbermann (1978) – a declared anti-Marxist – reviewed two books by Bisky and his team from the Central Institute of Youth Research (Zentralinstitut für Jugendforschung) at Leipzig positively assessing the theoretical and empirical aspects of their work for its validity, beyond questions of the political systems.

Later, Silbermann edited a leading German Handbook for communication research (Silbermann, 1982a) and became a highly visible intellectual figure, a public intellectual during the 1990s not least on TV and for decades observing ongoing anti-Semitism in Germany (Schoeps, 2015). Silbermann understood himself as a “cosmopolitan” (Albrecht, 2015; Scheuch, 2000), open, curious and obviously with a high ambiguity tolerance regarding his manifold contacts to German scholars, including one prominent figure with a former career in NS-newspaper studies, Wilmont Haacke (1911–2008, on his involvement in Nazi newspaper studies, see Blaum, 2004; Scharf, 2005; Wiedemann and Birkner, 2023).⁷ Silbermann contributed an article (a reprint) to a jubilee publication on the occasion of Haacke’s *Emeritierung* from the University of Göttingen in 1973 (Scharf, 2005, pp. 124–125), and vice

⁶ See also the detailed overview of Silbermann’s life with a focus on his work in the sociology of music in Pasdzierny, 2015, additionally the biographical notes on Silbermann by Käsler, 2010, Knoll, 2015, Huber, 2017.

⁷ Wilfried Scharf (2005, p. 117, 123, 126, 138) shows Haacke’s ambiguity as a person and a scholar: Haacke’s dissertation thesis on the newspaper *Deutsche Rundschau* was denounced as being pro-Jewish by high NS-officials in 1937. But after 1940, as a Prof. of Newspaper Studies in Vienna, Haacke was involved in the machinations of NS propaganda, including anti-Semitic propaganda. In 1946 he went through the Denazification measures of the French Administration in occupied Germany and was classified as a “fellow traveler (*Mitläufer*)”. At the age of 90 Haacke wrote to Scharf that he had failed to oppose the Nazi regime and had then, not least as an academic teacher and a public person (he was an editor of the journal *Publizistik*) again failed after the war by being silent about his own past. On Haacke’s biography see additionally Wiedemann and Birkner (2023).

versa Haacke did so for an anniversary publication on the occasion of Silbermann's 80th birthday (Nutz, 1989).

Wilmont Haacke (1976, 1977, 1978a, and more) contributed book reviews to *Communications* in the fields of journalism, advertisement and strategic communication. Haacke (1978b, pp. 124–126) even reviewed the memories of journalist Fritz Sängner (1901–1984), an opponent of the Nazi-Regime. With this book review Haacke wanted to warn against “terror” (ibid., p. 127). In the early 1980s Silbermann (1983a) reviewed a book by Haacke and Günter Pötter about the history of political magazines. Compared to other reviews in the journal, this was a positive one without Silbermann's otherwise typical ironical undertone. Silbermann (1983b, p. 145) wrote a description of Haacke and Pötter's book without any hint at Haacke's National Socialistic past – instead in the same review he mentioned Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann (1916–2010) as an author of *Das Reich*. In his memoir he called Noelle-Neumann and also Franz Ronneberger (1913–1999) “Nazi-Mitläufer (fellow travelers)” (Silbermann, 1999, p. 154).⁸ In Silbermann's eyes, a study on anti-Semitism in Western Germany conducted by Noelle-Neumann's Institute at Allensbach (edited by Renate Köcher, 1988) was an affront (by Noelle-Neumann, he did not mention Köcher) (Silbermann, 1999, pp. 124–125).

Silbermann and Haacke shared a kind of intellectual friendship, not without epistemological discrepancies (Silbermann, 1972, p. 122), but seemingly not deeply influenced by Haacke's past. During the late 1990s Silbermann denied to Arnulf Kutsch and Horst Pöttker a contribution by himself to their book project based on interviews with elder German communication scholars. One reason was that Ronneberger and Noelle-Neumann were authors in the same book (Silbermann 1999, p. 154). Haacke also refused to take part in this book project (Kutsch and Pöttker, 1997, p. 18).

The relationship between Silbermann and Haacke developed much earlier, during the 1960s, the founding area of academic societies for communication in Germany (see below).

⁸ On Ronneberger's Nazi past, who was a member of the SA and the SS and served with the NS-South Eastern European research and intelligence, see Heinelt, 2004; Klingemann, 2005; Höpken, 2020 and recently a distancing comment from his former Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt, https://www.ku.de/fileadmin/Personenbilder_oeffentlich/SLF/Journalistik/StellungnahmeRonneberger.pdf (August, 23, 2024).

3 Silbermann in Cologne: Reviewing and renewing the field of Media and Communication Research

The polarity of Silbermann's thought found expression on the one hand by his harsh rejection of misanthropic, utopian and morally motivated positions towards the effects of the mass media, and on the other hand by his closeness to practical work and his future-oriented attitude towards technological inventions [translated from German]. (Krüger, 2015, p. 42).

Coming back to Europe meant coming back to Germany *and* to France: Silbermann's journey between the two countries during the 1950s and 1960s started in the Sociology of Music and Radio in Paris and then took off with mass communication research in Bordeaux, Cologne and Lausanne (Huber, 2017; Scheuch, 2000). In 1970 he became a Professor for Mass Communication and the Sociology of Music at the University of Cologne and in this function also the director of the *Mass Communication Institute* affiliated to René König's Institute for Sociology (Knoll, 2015, p. 7). In fact, Silbermann had been teaching there since 1964, on media and communication (Krüger, 2015, p. 43). Based on his former studies of law, sociology and musicology at the Universities of Cologne, Freiburg and Grenoble, Silbermann placed communication research into the broader context of social theory and did not separate Mass Communication from Cultural Analysis, from interpersonal communication and from aesthetical analysis. Originally, he was a media *and* a communication scholar (Rudiger, 2019, pp. 129–144). The integration of interpersonal communication, cultural communication and aesthetics was not at all typical for German *Publizistikwissenschaft*. His relation to Critical Theory, also not taking part in the milieu of *Publizistikwissenschaft* (Scheu, 2012), especially to the protagonists Theodor W. Adorno (1903–1969) and Max Horkheimer (1895–1973), those two prominent re-migrants to Germany, remained weak: The “Cologne School” of Communication Sociology became an antipode of the “Frankfurt School” (Scheuch, 2000; Krüger, 2015, p. 41; Rudiger, 2019, pp. 129–144).

Silbermann (1976) fostered empirical media and communication research in the context of popular culture and everyday life, far away from cultural pessimism. Again, and again – often explicitly against Adorno – he argued against simple models of causality in communication processes (Silbermann, 1983a, p. 266). Early on he favored the institutionalization of private broadcasting in the German media market (Silbermann, 1968, 1980a, p. 120; see also Krüger, 2015, pp. 58–60). In the context of empiricism, it was not only the Frankfurt School but also the Paris School at the Centre d'Etudes de Communication de Masse (CECMAS) with Georges Friedmann (1902–1977), Edgar Morin (born 1921) and Roland Barthes (1915–1980) whom he denounced of “hostility to science, hatred of technology and defamation of large numbers [translated from German]” (Silbermann, 1972, p. 126). It was

Paul F. Lazarsfeld (1901–1976), the “founder of empirical-sociological” communication research, who impressed him (Silbermann, 1990a, p. 325). Erwin K. Scheuch sees common lines between Silbermann’s reception sociology and Uses and Gratification Research; with Elihu Katz (1926–2021) Silbermann was in close contact (Scheuch, 2000).

Contrary to Uses and Gratifications Research, Silbermann went beyond individualistic schemes and catalogues of motives and demands: He also looked at the cultural production from the meso-level of organizational sociology and from a normative standpoint of how to implement self-regulation on private media markets and “mediating institutions” in the cultural and journalistic sector (Silbermann, 1977a, p. 17). Nearly fifty years ago Silbermann questioned if intermediary institutions like private media with their economic interests are able to take responsibilities for the content mediated to broader publics (Silbermann, 1977a, p. 18). The question is still virulent regarding the online platform regulation of today. For Silbermann, self-regulation needed co-regulation, namely “public advisory boards [“öffentliche Beiräte” without vote [translated from German], meaning expert boards without economic interests supervising the private industry (Silbermann, 1977a, pp. 18–19). Silbermann’s argument was empirically based on a document analysis of international media codices (ibid., pp. 19–21).

4 Silbermann’s attempts to bridge German Communication and Media Studies: The failure of a cooperation

In Germany, Communication Studies and Media Studies were institutionalized as two different disciplines and they are until today (Wagner, 2023). One reason is that “Medienwissenschaft”, *Media studies*, developed in the field of text sciences after 1970, analyzing film as text etc. Another reason is more hidden: From archive papers it becomes obvious that early on Silbermann – supported by Haacke – tried to bridge the gap and to cooperate with newspaper and communication scholars. German communication scholars labeled themselves as *Publizistikwissenschaftler* with a focus on public and political communication and were organized by the DGpuZ (*Deutsche Gesellschaft für Publizistik- und Zeitungswissenschaft*) (Klein, 2006; Löblich, 2010). The DGpuZ, the association of “*Publizistik*” and Newspaper Research, considered the *media and culture* or *media as culture*-approach represented by Silbermann as being too wide and too fluid. The so called Silbermann Society, the DGKF (*Deutsche Gesellschaft für Kommunikationsforschung*, <https://www.dgkf.de>).

dgkf-communications.de/)⁹ with Erich Feldmann (1893–1978), Walter Hagemann (1900–1964) and Silbermann at the top of the Society, aimed at bringing forward film studies and mass communication research.¹⁰ Silbermann headed the DGKF between 1970 and 1990. As early as in 1964 he and Feldmann became members of the DGPuZ, too – on recommendation of DGPuZ-member Wilmont Haacke (Feldmann, 1964a; Silbermann, 1964). During a period of several years, the archive files of the German *Bundesarchiv* at Koblenz reveal a kind of formal and predominantly informal quarrel documented by dozens of letters by people who often *were members of both societies*, showing the futile attempts of the DGKF and the DGPuZ to cooperate (Haacke, 1963, Prakke, 1963, Feldmann, 1964b).¹¹ In 1964 Haacke supported Silbermann's approach to mass communication studies in an article in the journal *Publizistik* which was co-edited by Haacke himself (Haacke, 1964; Krüger, 2015, p. 38).

Silbermann may have not known that some DGPuZ-members voted *against* his membership. At the end of an intense and controversial discussion Haacke succeeded with promoting his candidate and Silbermann was accepted as a member of the DGPuZ. Haacke himself did not know who opted against Silbermann (Haacke, 1963; Prakke, 1963b).

Attempts to mediate the fuzzy field and its protagonists were supported by Henk Prakke (1900–1992), communication sociologist from the Netherlands and professor at the University of Münster, like Silbermann having been persecuted by the NS-regime and like him trained in general sociology (Klein, 2006; Wiesel, 2018). In several letters in his role as the head of the DGPuZ he tried his best to mediate between those controversially involved:

It should not matter under which name publishing studies issues are dealt with at university: if publication studies or newspaper science, communication research, media-studies work in the field of the press, film, radio or television, if issues of advertisement or of public relations work are what people focus on [translated from German]. (Prakke, 1965)

Even Silbermann's offer to Franz Ronneberger, the then responsible head of the DGPuZ¹², to host the 1967 conference of the DGPuZ at his Cologne institute – not least caused by the fact that both societies, DGPuZ and DGKE, shared some of their

⁹ Retrieved on August, 23, 2024; website under reconstruction.

¹⁰ Also Emil Dovifat was a member.

¹¹ See Bundesarchiv Koblenz, Signature 107 Minutes "Treffen der Fachvertreter der Zeitungs- und Publizistikwissenschaft" (October, 10, 1963).

¹² See the list of persons heading the DGPuZ/DGPuK since 1963: https://www.dgpuk.de/sites/default/files/DGPuK-Vorstaende1963-2022_3.pdf (August, 23, 2024).

members – was denied: The DGpuZ held the conference in the rooms of *Westdeutscher Rundfunk* (WDR), the public service broadcasting station in Cologne (Ronneberger, 1967; Silbermann, 1967). Ruth Münster (1967), a member of both societies, demanded in a letter to Ronneberger to avoid time collusions of the meetings of both societies and to find another date for the DGpuZ meeting – in vain. Later, at the annual meeting of the DGpuZ in 1972, the archive files notify “Cooperation with Deutsche Gesellschaft für Kommunikationsforschung – due to Mr. Silbermann’s absence, this issue was not discussed [translated from German]”.

In 1966 a meeting between members of both societies, Ronneberger for the DGpuZ and Karl Gustav Specht (1916–1980) (for the DGKF), brought the following result: “One had agreed to coordinate the work of the societies in such a way that there is no reason to fear any overlapping of research projects [translated from German]”. The DGKF rather went into the direction of media studies in the broad sense, including film studies (Kübler, 2020), the DGpuZ/DGpuK rather in the direction of political communication and journalism research (Löblich, 2010).

The concurrency and personal overlap between societies (DGKF and DGpuZ) and/or actor’s constellations (gathered around Film and Media studies or around *Publizistik*) gave birth to the two very different research milieus in German communication research. Paradoxically, both *Publizistikwissenschaft* and the research milieu around Silbermann in Cologne went methodologically into the same direction: empirical social science research. Franciso Rudiger (2019) sees Silbermann and Noelle-Neumann as two minds of very different approaches to empirical social research in the field of communication studies. On the other hand, film studies and media studies are still today methodologically rather qualitative oriented (Wagner, 2023).

The look into the journal’s archives contextualizes this ambivalent story: Silbermann was not only a DGpuZ-member, he extensively read literature from the discipline of *Publizistikwissenschaft* and contributed to this research field by way of many book reviews (e.g., Silbermann, 1976a–d, 1980b). Often these reviews present devastating criticism. But this was not too specific for Silbermann’s book reviews in the German scientific field. French, Belgian and other European colleagues earned the same rigorous criticism (Silbermann, 1980a–d, 1991a). Not least authors in the Marxist and critical tradition of cultural industry were addressed with open sarcasm, denouncing them for pursuing ideology instead of epistemology (Silbermann, 1977b, p. 136 against F. Dröge, O. Negt, H. Holzer, A. Kluge, see also Silbermann, 1980b). At the same time Silbermann denounced Western German scholars for ignoring the “other” Germany behind the Iron Curtain (Silbermann, 1976d, p. 128).

Seldom Silbermann showed open sympathy or respect for an author and his/her work. In his nearly 60 book reviews for *Communications* the few positive

recensions are difficult to find: Anne-Marie Laulan's *Sociology of the Cinema* of 1979, Louis Bosshart's work on the Swiss TV culture of that same year, Gerhard Maletzke's introduction to communication studies as an empirical social science of 1980, Jürgen Wilke's work on news media and media reality of 1984, Christian Doelker's book on the cultural technique of TV of 1989, Jean Cazeneuve's work on the sociology of television of 1992, Walther von LaRoche' book series on practical journalism, Karsten Renckstorf's approach to media uses, both of the 1980s, and Akiba Cohen and Hanna Adoni's study on Social Conflict and the Television News of 1991 were the few exceptions as positive reviews (Silbermann, 1981a–c, 1982a–c, 1986, 1987, 1991b–c, 1993).

Time passed, the situation in Germany stayed ambivalent: Silbermann (1991a, p. 263) ironized the then DGPuK (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Publizistik- und Kommunikationswissenschaft, the successor society of the DGPuZ) in a book review of the DGPuK's publication of its annual conference as being over-active but not relevant, neither in an academic context nor in a practical one. Parallel to the so called Silbermann-controversy in the German weekly *Die Zeit*, when Silbermann once again denounced German communication research for its provinciality (Silbermann, 1999, pp. 150–151; Krüger, pp. 64–65; Koenen and Sanko, 2016), young German communication scholars (Klaus Merten in 1996, Hans-Jürgen Weiß and Michael Schenk and Patrick Rössler in 1997; Friedrich Krotz and Uwe Hasebrink in 1998) began to publish in *Communications*. Some scholars of the then younger generation, such as Merten, wrote book reviews for the journal since the late 1970s (Merten, 1978), Michael Kunczik (1979) started one year later with book reviews for *Communications*.

5 Silbermann as a visionary editor, author and a confrontational book reviewer of the Journal

Communications: The European Journal of Communication Research was a passion project which Silbermann managed in an extremely time-consuming way and confronted with a constant lack of money to print the journal, which was supported financially by the DGKF (Silbermann, 1991 [1989], p. 529).

Between 1975 and the 1990s *Communications: The European Journal of Communication Research* published in several languages: German, French, and English, including abstracts and reviews of books in Spanish and Portuguese. Founding fathers of the field, like Abraham Moles (1920–1992), reviewed for the journal. Silbermann's own books were reviewed and often with great enthusiasm for his original approach. The two editors Nutz and Silbermann even reviewed their publications mutually (Nutz, 1993), surely a no go today.

While diving in the numbers of the journal down to the year of 1975 it becomes obvious that it was a “milieu journal” – stemming from a milieu of certain communication scholars with a an inter-/transdisciplinary broadness and international aims, acknowledging Silbermann as an exceptional figure. It was an editor’s journal. Blind peer review was (like in other journals such as the German *Publizistik* at that time) not even an idea, it was unknown.

The power position held by Silbermann as a person is today split and functionally shared. He himself initiated the first steps when the editorial team with Walter Nutz, Karsten Renckstorf and Rolf Wiegand was installed in 1996. But: Silbermann’s early powerful position may have been crucial for implementing such a journal not least in Germany. Maybe one day, when the archives and legacies of Silbermann and of the journal are more researched, we may know more about the internal and external organizational communication of the journal. For now, this chapter reveals Silbermann’s role and position in the journal via the published archives of the journal¹³ between 1976 and 1996, the year when he left the editor’s position. We count seven full articles, one obituary, two debate articles, 60 book reviews, each of them in fact on two to four pages reviewing several books, one dozen editorials, partly together with Walter Nutz. Apart from some editorials and debate pieces in English, Silbermann wrote in the German language on books predominantly coming from German, US, French and Swiss communication studies literature with an obvious preference for general (mass) communication theory, reception analysis, the sociology of film and music, but also the history and the – in his eyes – doubtful progress of communication and media studies. Especially concerning effect analysis, media psychology and media-pedagogics Silbermann was critical and often sceptic: Effects are still discussed in terms of stimulus-response, media psychology is helpful but not self-sufficient with regard to communication studies as a whole, media pedagogy is (with exceptions like C. Doelker’s work) too normative. In his own articles his writing style is essayistic (see particularly Silbermann, 1992a on public opinion, scandals and myths).

The editorial team around Silbermann (it remains unclear which publication initiatives were initiated by himself) early on set new topics like satellite communication in the late 1970s, culminating in some conferences like the one on “Satellite Broadcasting“, co-organized by the Swiss Association of Communication Scholars (SGKM) in Geneva in 1980 (Saxer, 1980; Steinmann, 1980). The results were published in *Communications*. Silbermann (1980c) contributed a proposal for a Delphi Survey to learn more about the presumed social and cultural implications of satellite broadcasting. His discussion of an “on demand technology” was far ahead

13 See <https://www.degruyter.com/journal/key/comm/html#issues> (August 24, 2024).

regarding a new “visual culture”, maybe replacing or at least troubling the culture of the written word (Silbermann, 1978, p. 84). In his words, the new broadcasting technology would establish messages whose time and content will be controlled by the audience:

We thus face a transition, from mass communication to communication on demand, which of course will have reached its full extent when videography is equipped with a sufficient number of cable channels at certain times of the day and for affordable costs per hour [translated from German]. (Silbermann, 1978, pp. 80–81)

Some years later he denounced the MacBride Report on “Many Voices, One World” for overlooking the constantly growing multitude of media and their impact on human lives (Silbermann, 1983a, p. 270).

During the 1980s and 1990s, beyond topics like local communication, cable TV, the popular reading culture (Silbermann and Cazeneuve et al., 1982; Silbermann and Nutz, 1991)¹⁴, videography and satellite communication, the readers of *Communications* learned that communication studies should be decolonized (Silbermann, 1992b).¹⁵ Also, that modernization theory and the idea of the pure implementation of media technology could be no solution if the people of the so-called “Third World” were not included into decision making about *how to modernize* (Silbermann, 1982b, p. 160).

At the dawn of the new century the idea grew to implement health communication as a research field (Mochmann, 2000, p. 226).¹⁶ The DGKF organized some conferences about this new topic, which today is an established field of European communication research.

6 Prospects

What can we learn from Silbermann’s journey? A journal like *Communications: The European Journal of Communication Research* has a history and makes a difference, here a difference to develop the field of communication research from a transeuropean perspective. Scientific journals can be described as the “nerves of

¹⁴ Against any cultural pessimism like Neil Postman’s “amusement to death” (Silbermann and Nutz, 1991, p. 129).

¹⁵ Silbermann did not explain what he understood by decolonialisation.

¹⁶ See the special issue in the German language resuming the conference on the same topic in Düsseldorf on April 20–22, 1995 “Gesundheit und Kommunikation”, *Communications: The European Journal of Communication Research*, 1995 (20)1, 2.

a discipline” (Donsbach et al., 2005, p. 46). Journals are part of the history of communication studies and they are – beyond bibliometric studies – a still under-researched object to write this history. Other articles of this jubilee issue refer to this point. This history is contextualized by many actors, institutions (like the discipline’s societies), interdisciplinary connections and not least the social-political horizon after World War II (also Vroons, 2005), culminating in Silbermann’s experience as a Jewish refugee from Germany who came back and was confronted with a silencing society and with scientific milieus actively taking part in this silencing (Duchkowitsch et al., 2004). Nevertheless, as a person and as a scholar Silbermann was optimistic, future-oriented and integrating people from different horizons and milieus. He guided the journal to a European future with a multinational editor’s team following him and a multinational editorial board right from the beginnings.

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