

Editorial

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Reclaiming the past, rethinking the future: Marking 50 years in media and communication scholarship

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With this issue, *Communications: The European Journal of Communication Research* proudly commemorates its fiftieth anniversary. Founded in 1975 by the communication sociologist Alphons Silbermann, the journal has served as a vital platform for advancing European perspectives on media and communication research. This jubilee issue is both a tribute to the journal’s rich intellectual legacy and an invitation to re-engage with foundational texts through the lens of contemporary scholarship.

This special issue adopts an experimental format designed to bridge past and present. We invited today’s leading scholars to revisit landmark articles published in *Communications* over the past five decades that once helped define the contours of the field and that continue to provoke, inspire, or challenge. Contributors were tasked not only with re-reading these texts, but with re-assessing them in light of current theories, methods, and societal transformations. Their reflections concern questions about what we can still learn from these earlier contributions, and what we must now reconsider in an era marked by digital media, datafication, algorithmic governance, and new forms of civic engagement and populism.

Rather than presenting these articles in chronological order, we have opted for a thematic arrangement that highlights enduring areas of scholarly concern: from surveillance to media ethnography, from audience research to stereotyping, from organisational communication to the Uses and Gratifications tradition. Our goal is not merely to look back, but to consider how these themes have evolved and how they continue to shape the European research agenda.

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We open with Göran Bolin's reflection on Thomas S. McCoy's 1991 article "Surveillance, Privacy and Power." In his contribution "Grappling with Surveillance Before Datafication" Bolin revisits McCoy's Foucauldian insights on privacy, underscoring their prescience in the context of today's pervasive surveillance capitalism.

Koen Leurs and Laura Candidatu return to Kirsten Drotner's 1994 "Media Ethnography – Another Story." Their essay "Reclaiming the Radical" explores the feminist epistemologies underlying Drotner's work and tracks the evolution of media ethnography in the digital age.

In a 2001 contribution by Karsten Renckstorf and Fred Wester, the Uses and Gratifications approach was creatively linked to Max Weber's theory of social action and Alfred Schütz's concept of the lifeworld. Uwe Hasebrink and Ingrid Paus-Hasebrink revisit this interdisciplinary synthesis to assess its resonance in today's mobile and platform-driven media environment.

Jesper Strömbäck, in turn, engages with Veikko Pietilä's 1976 piece "People's Conception of the Mass Media." In "From Norms to Templates?" he critically examines the methodological and stylistic norms of early communication research while affirming the enduring relevance of Pietilä's observations on media coexistence and continuity.

Bernie Hogan offers a timely reappraisal of Rolf Wigand's 1977 essay on organisational communication, drawing connections between Wigand's systemic approach and contemporary debates on network analysis and formalisation.

Maria Kyriakidou revisits the 1983 article "Media Stereotyping: Images of the Foreigner" by Gary Grumpert and Robert Cathcart. Her contribution reflects on shifting media narratives surrounding migration and nationalism, situating their work within ongoing conversations about media, identity, and right-wing populism.

We also honour the intellectual legacy of Dennis McQuail and Keith Roe, a former editor of the journal. Roe revisits his longstanding dialogue with McQuail, reflecting on continuities and changes in communication research over the decades. His essay "Making Progress in a Trackless, Weightless and Intangible Space" is a call for renewed interdisciplinary and mixed-methods engagement in the study of media use.

The issue's book review section also joins past and present. Our editorial team, Olivier Driessens, Stijn Joye, and Rebecca Venema, selected seminal volumes once reviewed in the journal and invited contemporary scholars to revisit them. Giovanna Mascheroni re-engages with Sherry Turkle's *Life on the Screen* (1995); César Jiménez-Martínez revisits John B. Thompson's *The Media and Modernity* (1995); Bart Cammaerts reflects on Chris Atton's *Alternative Media* (2002); and Martine van Selm offers a renewed perspective on Klaus Bruhn Jensen's *Handbook of Media and Communication Research* (2012) in its third edition. In each case, the original reviews are acknowledged, creating a dialogue across generations of scholarship.

The idea for this special issue was first shaped during a meeting of the journal's editors and associate editors in Leuven in June 2023. There, we identified a set of landmark texts and carefully paired them with scholars well positioned to reflect critically on their significance. Each contributor was asked to assess an article's relevance across six dimensions: its research question and field of inquiry, theoretical contributions, conceptual innovations, methodological approaches, adaptability in light of media change, and enduring strengths and limitations. Their responses are, we believe, both intellectually rigorous and deeply thoughtful.

In parallel, Stefanie Averbeck-Lietz revisits the journal's founding and its early years in her contribution "Alphons Silbermann (1909–2000) and the Founding of *Communications*." She reflects on Silbermann's efforts to internationalise the field in the face of his isolation within German Publizistikwissenschaft, and she reassesses his essays and reviews that are mostly published in German in terms of their scholarly value and limitations.

As editors, we are especially grateful for the authors' generous engagement with this project and for their willingness to treat these earlier works not as static artefacts but as living documents. For this special issue, we waived the standard blind peer review process in favour of close editorial dialogue, an exception made in honour of the journal's anniversary and the collaborative spirit of the endeavour.

Several contributors to this issue will also participate as keynote speakers at our 50th anniversary conference, European Communication Research: What, Whence, and Whither?, hosted on 29–30 September 2025 at the University of Leipzig, fittingly, in the city where *Communications* has long been anchored.

On behalf of the entire editorial team, including Denisa Hejlová (Czech Republic), Philippe Maarek (France), Hillel Nossek (Israel), Christian Pentzold (Germany), Christina Ponte (Portugal), and, newly appointed in 2025, Christian Ruggiero (Italy) and Brigitte Sebbah (France), we invite you to read these contributions as both a retrospective and a provocation: a chance to reflect critically on where the field has been and where it might go next.

We hope you will find inspiration in these dialogues across time.

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