

On the ‘grand narrative’ of media and mass communication theory and research: a review

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Abstract

This paper offers a genealogy of the field of mass media and communication theory and research, with the purpose of distilling a *grand narrative* of media studies and communication science. Such a ‘story of stories’ is articulated with recurring concerns over the categories and taxonomies of the communication process, the rapid development and penetration of new information and communication technologies, and attempts by scholars around the world to respond to our increasingly complex and convergent media environment. In conclusion, an argument is developed for a *vital, creative, and public* way forward for the field.

Keywords

Communication; Mass media; Media environment; Theory; Research; Communication process; New information and communication technologies; ICT.

1. Introduction

Throughout the history of (mass) media studies and mass communication research, claims have been made that ‘mass’ media and communication are concepts that do not fit the contemporary media environment (anymore). Such observations about ‘cracks’ in the foundations of the field (**Chaffe; Metzger**, 2001, p. 369) and subsequent calls for ‘paradigm shifts’ (**Reardon; Rogers**, 1988, p. 297) are generally inspired by technological advances. More fundamentally, the field has been lamented for its “diversity and creative chaos” (**Calhoun**, 2011, p. 1482) or “extraordinary pluralism” (**Fuchs; Qiu**, 2018, p. 220), leading **Waisbord** (2019a) to label it as a ‘post-discipline’ as it not only lacks ontological unity (or unifying Big Theory) but cannot even agree on the subject it purports to study: Is it media? Mass media? Communication, or just mass communication? And what are media? Is not everything communication? When is a large group of people a mass? In short, the scholarly investigation and teaching of (mass) media and communication seem to be a mess, and for the longest time have been.

Instead of defending or abandoning a broad range of continuously bifurcating definitions, theories, and methods, the purpose of this paper is to return to a fundamental ‘grand narrative’ of the discipline: a meta-narrative offering a connection between an enormous variety of ideas and ideals, approaches and frameworks, disci-

“The scholarly investigation and teaching of (mass) media and communication seem to be a mess, and for the longest time have been”

plinary legacies, and conceptual innovations, all in what **Bauman** (2005, p. 33) calls the ‘permanently impermanent’ context of contemporary society and technology relationships. Please note that I am most certainly not advocating a disciplining move to ‘reign in’ the ongoing differentiation of media studies and communication science. My aim is to take up **Waisbord’s** (2019a; 2019b) challenge to articulate the field with a common interest and understanding in addressing contemporary challenges related to the media and all forms of mediated communication, historically grounded and empirically supported. In doing so, I am inspired by **Livingstone** (2011) to highlight the ways in which the various parts that make up our field are connected, in the process identifying where the expertise and specific knowledges and arguments of the discipline lie. In doing so, I hope to tell the story of the field – a story about stories, really: the stories that students and scholars in the field of media and mass communication tell themselves and each other about *what* they are doing, *how* they are doing it, and *why* this matters.

Using as a basis the work, pursued over a ten-year period, on updating a new edition of the late Denis McQuail’s (1935-2017) seminal handbook of the field (**McQuail; Deuze**, 2020), this story does not only intend to explain what the field understands the societal role of media and mass communication to be, but also to underpin the work being done by media and mass communication scholars, regardless of disciplinary background, theoretical lineage, and methodological preference. It is, in a way, an attempt to ‘tie the room together’ (paraphrasing the character Jeffrey Lebowski in the 1998 movie *The Big Lebowski*).

What makes McQuail’s *Media and Mass Communication Theory* stand out from most other impressive and comprehensive textbooks, are three things:

First, Denis McQuail was among the very first academics to consider and later define mass communications as a bounded scholarly field of study.

In 1969, just two years after completing his PhD at *Leeds University*, he published *Towards a Sociology of Mass Communications*, still articulating the study of (mass) media and communication with sociological themes and issues. In 1983, he followed this work up with the first edition of his seminal textbook: *Mass Communication Theory: An Introduction*. Initially, this textbook and its first editions considered the field strictly from a social–scientific perspective. However, this changed after the *University of Amsterdam*, where he was a full professor from 1977 until his retirement of 1997, merged into one department colleagues studying (mass) communication, political communication, and media psychology as well as cultural studies and (feminist) media studies. This mixing of faculty and perspectives rubbed off on Denis, as did the growing complexity of the literature in the field, and subsequent editions of the textbook included insights from humanities and social sciences approaches to the study of mass communication.

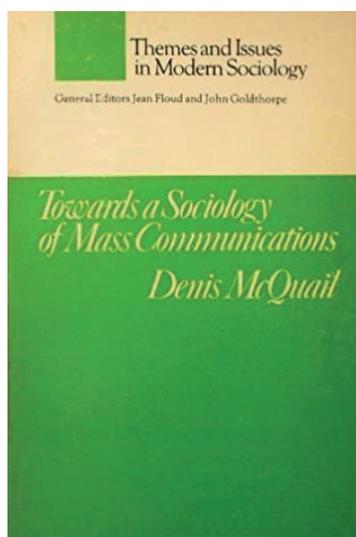
Second, instead of merely listing the various paradigms, theories, and methods in the field, most of his book consists of an attempt to weave the story of the field across the particularities of any single approach or study. The first read of his book is always a bit overwhelming; I distinctly remember a colleague describing it as stumbling across a fallen over set of full bookcases, which always makes me laugh. Indeed, Denis was magisterial in bringing so many authors into conversation with each other.

Third, although the first instance of the textbook came out of a European research project Denis was involved in, it gradually evolved to become a global ‘book of books’ in media and communication theory. Although there is still much more work to be done in future editions of the book to make it truly inclusive and representative of the global nature of our field, I do not know of any other textbook that has made such an effort to open up a worldwide dialogue on theory that encompasses all aspects of the mass communication process. I feel it is therefore warranted to use the work on the current, seventh, edition of the book as grounding the argument as outlined in this paper.

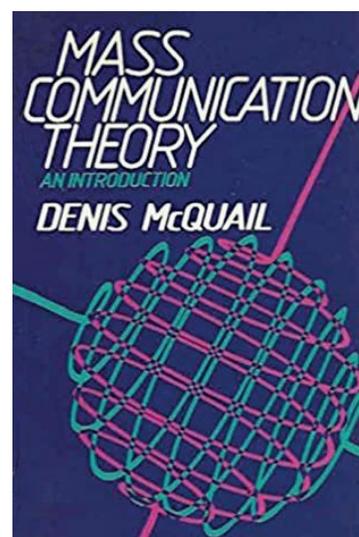


Denis McQuail during a conference in 2015

<https://cutt.ly/cjmRMsc>



Towards a Sociology of Mass Communications (1969)
ISBN: 978 0 029748008



First edition of *Mass communication theory* (1983)
ISBN: 978 0 803997714

This paper first proposes a *genealogy* (rather than a more or less linear history) of mass media and communication research, identifying common concepts, themes and assumptions in terms of lessons learned from over a century of scholarly work.

The argument then articulates this history with recurring claims toward *rethinking*, renewing or altogether abandoning mass media and communication theories and processes in the context of contemporary developments – particularly regarding technological advances and subsequently changing communication processes on a global scale.

Thirdly, it offers an assessment of the current *convergence* of the three core mediated communication categories – mass communication, interpersonal communication, and mass self-communication – as well as a *collapse* of the traditional taxonomy of the communication process – production, content, and reception. One could question whether these categories still hold in our digitally networked, always-on, and permanently connected world. The very act of questioning the categories destabilizes much twentieth-century theorizing about the role and impact of media on society, which in turn necessitates a careful reassessment of what we know.

In conclusion, an attempt is made to recapture the normative and hopeful essence of the field – as our work tends to be implicitly or explicitly informed by an expectation that our results and findings will improve people's lives and the functioning of institutions in society in some way. In all our work as media and communication scholars, we inevitably expect media to be a force for good (and are concerned when they do not).

In doing so, I hope to bridge real or perceived gaps between social scientific and humanities-based traditions as much as Denis McQuail has done, and to advocate a *vital, creative, and public* way forward for the field.

2. On the origins and evolution of mass media and communication

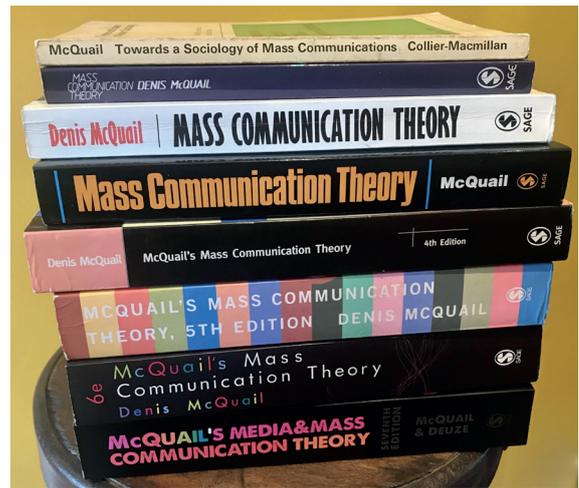
The foundational assumptions of the disciplinary and disciplined study of mass media and communication are grounded in a set of basic definitions. Mass communication, first and foremost, refers to messages transmitted to a large audience via one or more media. Media are the (technological and formally organized) means of transmission of such messages. Media theory considers how these messages mean different things to different people as determined by the (affordances of) different channels used to communicate them. Media and (mass) communication matter, as they are paramount to

“the production and reproduction of sociality, social relations, social structures, social systems, and society” (Fuchs, 2020, p. 377).

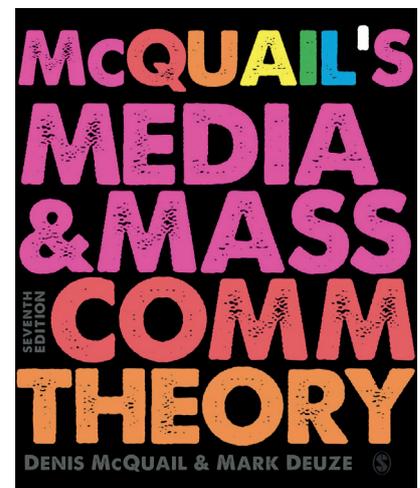
It is this 'productivity' of media and mass communication that is key to our field of study, as it raises awareness about how (almost) nothing in society and everyday life can be comprehensively understood without considering the role media and communication play in it.

Whether it is one's love life and romantic relationships, the ties and networks that make work and the functioning of companies and corporations possible, or the intricacies of politics and the political system – in all of these areas media and communication play a formative (and sometimes determining) role. This fundamental realization originally gave rise to much hand-wringing about the potentially problematic impact media and mass communication would have on people and institutions, which inspired the first studies on the effects of media, now just over a hundred years ago.

The concept of mass communication was first coined during the 1920s to apply to the new possibilities for public communication arising from the emerging mass press, radio, and film. These media enlarged the potential audience beyond a literate minority. The industrial style and scale of the organization of production and dissemination were also essentially new. Large populations of nation states could be reached more or less simultaneously with much the same content, often content that carried the stamp of



Denis McQuail books sorted by their edition number (author's collection)



McQuail's 7th edition of *Media (& Mass) Communication Theory*, coauthored with Mark Deuze (2020)
ISBN: 978 1 473902510

“ In all our work as media and communication scholars, we inevitably expect media to be a force for good ”

approval of those with political and social power. The then new mass media of press, film and radio, along with recorded music, also gave rise to a new variant of ‘popular culture’, in which political and social ideologies were often embedded. **Blumer** (1939) was among the first to provide an explicit framework in which the audience could be exemplified as a new form of collectivity made possible by the conditions of modern societies. He called this phenomenon a ‘mass’ and differentiated it from older social forms –especially the group, the crowd and the public–.

“(Almost) nothing in society and everyday life can be comprehensively understood without considering the role media and communication play in it”

The mass audience was large, heterogeneous, and widely dispersed, and its members did not and could not know each other. This view of the mass audience is less a description of reality than an accentuation of features typical of conditions of mass production and distribution of news and entertainment reflecting industrial logics and methodological constructs rather than reality and lived experience. In the digital age, the concept has been reconceptualized in terms of ‘networks’ (**Van-Dijk**, 1992; 2020) and the ‘multitude’ (**Hardt; Negri**, 2005) to articulate the mass with the Internet and the generally dispersed, fragmented, and disjointed nature of group formation online.

The context for developments in mass media and communication since the start of the twentieth century has been one of rapid and constant change in the world of newly industrialized and centralized nation states. It has been a time of growth and concentration of population in large cities, of the mechanization and bureaucratization of all aspects of life, and imperialist expansion (as well as disintegration) by the great powers of the time. It was also a period of profound political change, of large social movements, unrest within states, and catastrophic warfare between states. Populations were mobilized towards national achievement or survival and the new mass media played their part in these events as well as providing the masses with the means of relaxation and entertainment. Against this background the concepts of mass media and mass communication were forged and rose to a dominant status as objects of public concern – for example about the purported effects of listening to the radio, going to the cinema, or falling for the manipulations of populist politicians and wartime propaganda.

The early meaning of ‘mass communication,’ and one that still lingers, derived much more from the notion of people as a ‘mass’ and from the perceived characteristics of the mass media than from any idea of communication. The ‘mass’ was perceived primarily in terms of its size, anonymity, general ignorance, lack of stability and rationality, and as a result was vulnerable to persuasion or suggestion. It was seen to be in need of control and guidance by the superior classes and leaders, and the mass media provided the means for achieving this. Although research conducted especially in the second half of the twentieth century consistently provided much careful nuance to any such claims and expectations of the power of the media or the role of the masses, it is a common theme in contemporary debates – especially in a time of a ‘infodemic’ as well as a pandemic – to assume that mass media and communication has powerful effects on not just cognition and attitude, but even behavior of people.

As a ‘communication science’ developed, a more formal definition of the concept of mass communication emerged that was not based on untested impressions, the claims of publicists or social theorists, but on objective characteristics of media that could be specified and put to the test. In the course of the twentieth century, an abstract model of mass communication was developed with the following typical features:

- A centralized production of content by a few large channels, with a center-peripheral network of dissemination that was typically hierarchical and one-directional.
An organization of production and distribution operating according to the logic of the market or as a state-run institution of public communication.
- Message content in standardized forms open to all but also subject to normative and political supervision or control.
- A mass public of receivers made up of many dispersed, anonymous, and disconnected individuals.
- The attribution of great power to persuade and inform, arising from the prestige or popularity of sources, the monopolistic control of channels, the near instantaneity of reception, the skill of practitioners and the supposedly high impact and appeal of the means employed.

From one perspective, the general hypothesis of mass communication has played a fruitful role by the very fact of being comprehensively disputed and disproved. The research it generated led to a much firmer understanding of key principles underlying mass mediated communication. In this respect, a series of fundamental insights that hold up today as much as they have done throughout history, can be summarized with the benefit of hindsight:

- Interpersonal communication is often a much more compelling or even competing form and source of influence on people’s attitudes and behaviors, especially as this category coincides (and to some extent converges) with those of mass communication and mass self-communication in the context of online social networks.
- The professional production of media follows an industrial logic, with a highly structured and routinized production pipeline and process, while at the same time undergoing constant change to accommodate fickle audiences that are increasingly less likely to congregate as a ‘mass’ around content.
- Media content typically has multiple (or no identifiable) purposes for its makers and transmitters, and no fixed meaning for its receivers, and thus is largely without predictable effects attached.

- The concept of a media audience consisting of isolated individuals who are living inside their own personal information spaces (or equally evocative concepts such as 'filter bubbles', 'telecocoon', and 'echo chambers') tends to be largely an illusion, just as much as the opposite view of the audience as a more or less amorphous and amoral mass haplessly consuming content is a fallacy.
- The conditions of media influence and effect (however conceptualized) depend on structural, social, and individual contexts as well as media properties and technological affordances, and on variable features of reception, rather than simply on the fact of transmission.

These and other lessons have been learned well enough and both challenge and confirm the mass media and communication thesis. The mass communication idea was a compelling one that has proved very resilient because it is based on much that seems observable and plausible. It has a broad appeal to those who seek to benefit from it as senders, as well as to audiences. It is a convenient formulation for those who study it and, for those who are highly critical, it provides a useful summary of what is essentially wrong with the phenomenon. It is not easy to redefine or replace, even when many of the conditions of its origin have changed and many of its inbuilt assumptions have been disputed. For much of the twentieth century, the concept in this form has exerted an excessive influence on both popular and expert ideas about the influence of mass media. It has also shaped the direction of media research, despite recurrent evidence that has undermined the foundations on which it was based and cast doubt on the hypothesized effects.

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We can now see quite clearly that the era of mass communication is best viewed as a transitional phase of industrial mass public communication – while throughout the developments in the media there has been a continuity of mass communication as a society-wide process. This continuity today is established in new forms that are made up of a much finer and tightly woven network of lines and connections (both online and offline) that has an organic character rather than being constructed and controlled by a few for their own ends. Although the structures that underpin the media and mass communication process are liquid, it is still possible to observe these various instances of production, content, and reception, and to make generalizable statements about them. There is continuity in all this discontinuity. Much of this constancy, however dispersed, hybridized, networked, or automated, is observed in our field based on a relatively uniform set of fundamental assumptions, as outlined by **Lang** (2013):

- First, media and mass communication are pervasive and ubiquitous.
- Secondly, media and mass communication act upon (and are acted upon by) people and their social environments.
- Thirdly, media and mass communication change both the environment and the person.
- Fourthly, the primary goals and questions of media and mass communication researchers are to demonstrate the various elements, roles, influences and effects of media and mass communication, and, if possible, explain how they come about.

These assumptions hold for both the humanities-inspired practice of media studies and the social-science-oriented domain of communication research, despite their sometimes different theoretical and methodological alignments. A sidenote here must be that we tend to make too much of the purported differences between the two domains, especially in a contemporary context of interdisciplinarity, mixed methods and integrative research.

3. The end of mass media and communication

Throughout the history of the field, there have been numerous analyses pointedly arguing for the reconsideration, dismantling, or altogether 'end' of the mass media and communication thesis, theory, and paradigm. Especially following rapid developments in new information and communication technologies, scholars postulated as far back as the 1980s that

“technological change may facilitate a long-needed paradigm shift in communication science” (**Reardon; Rogers**, 1988, p. 297).

The introduction of Global System for Mobile communications (GSM) phones and the World Wide Web as the graphic user interface of the Internet – both in the early 1990s – amplified predictions about the end of mass media and communication, as

“the [portable and decentralized] characteristics of the new media are cracking the foundations of our conception of mass communication” (**Chaffee; Metzger**, 2001, p. 369).

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However, after studying ‘old’ and ‘new’ media as well as offline and online communication practices over several decades, and considering the various ways in which media devices, institutions and (networks of) people adapt to this constantly changing context, one has to conclude that mass communication has remained (or returned as) a significant way to make sense of our media environment. Similarly, the former mass media organizations

(such as publishers, broadcast and cable television firms) are in many ways bigger and more influential than ever before, increasingly operating on an interconnected, interdependent, and altogether global scale. There is also no doubt that something like a predictable process of effect does occur in some circumstances. Similarly, it is safe to argue that the theory in general outline is still dear to the heart of advertisers and propagandists, as much as populist politicians. Much critical theory directed at mass media and communication still depends on the essential validity of the original mass communication thesis, and the contemporary context at the time of writing – the worldwide coronavirus crisis – coincides with an equally global return to the notion of mass media and communication as having powerful effects on people, given widespread concerns about an infodemic developing alongside the Covid-19 pandemic.

Given these historical lessons learned from the study of mass media and communication, we can now turn to the current context. At the heart of the contemporary study of (mass) media and communication in society lies the realization that there is nothing ‘outside’ media anymore. In some way, all the experiences in everyday life are connected to media. Some of this refers to professionally produced media (as artefacts and practices): from the smartphone to the television, from newspapers and books to motion pictures, digital games and recorded music. Yet much of the media that play such a profound role in people’s daily lives consist of data, content and experiences that are produced by us – via logins and uploads to social media and platforms, voluntary (and involuntary) participation in all kinds of digital surveillance mechanisms, and by making our own media. Although ‘mass’ audiences for the most part may be a thing of the past, the potentials of ‘mass’ media and ‘mass’ communication are still part of almost all our engagements with media.

Livingstone (2011, p. 1472) considers that the continued significance of mass media and communication theory lies in the fact that

“everything is mediated –from childhood to war, politics to sex, science to religion– and more so than ever before [...] Nothing remains unmediated.”

Her analysis echoes earlier sentiments, such as expressed by **Hardt** and **Negri** (2000, p. 291), arguing that an understanding of the contemporary human condition cannot be separated from the context of a media environment that is both ubiquitous and pervasive. As Livingstone suggests, mass communication has always been constitutive of society, fundamental to all human action. What is perhaps particular about the last few decades is how a whole range of rapidly expanding media technologies have amplified and accelerated human communication on an unprecedented scale. In the process of this ‘mediation of everything’ (**Livingstone**, 2009), media have permeated not only the world but also, and perhaps more importantly, the ways in which we (as humans) have access to, act in, and make sense of that world.

Mass media and communication theory is crucial to consider, given the fundamental challenges of our time regarding big data, the role of algorithms, and the dissolution of individuals into endless databanks, samples, targets, and markets, the Internet of Things, and a renewed scholarly as well as public interest in the political economy of digital culture, and the many efforts in the field to rethink and retheorize the profound role media play in everyday life, in politics, and the construction of reality (**Couldry; Hepp**, 2016). The (continued and growing) significance of mass media and communication theory and research in part follows from its status as a ‘practical discipline’ (**Craig**, 2018), in that the field primarily concerns itself with what people and social institutions actually *do* with media – and is generally committed to answering societal communication problems with research of real-world relevance.

Notions of ‘mass’ media and ‘mass’ communication exist side by side with (inter)personal communication and mass self-communication in today’s digital, online and interconnected media environment, and these

“three forms of communication coexist, interact, and complement each other rather than substituting for one another” (**Castells**, 2009, p. 55).

This map of conceivable communication patterns is a reminder of the possibly subsidiary status of ‘mass communication’ functions in the total spectrum of mediated communication. It is also a reminder that patterns of communication do not coincide very closely with particular media or even their dominant forms. Older types of mass media (even television) have developed consultation and conversational possibilities and newer online media are increasingly being used for different types of ‘egocasting’ (**Rosen**, 2004), ‘narrowcasting’ and ‘broadcasting’. The telephone, once predominantly

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a medium of conversation, has joined in this expansion of usage potential and technological affordance, as the contemporary smartphone is many things above and beyond a mere telephone: a game console, a television, a fitness and health device, a personal organizer, a video-recorder, etc. These processes are part of the larger process of convergence made possible (and to some extent determined) by digitalization.

These and other circumstances reflect not the end of mass media or of mass communication, but rather a significant and ongoing shift in the ways that purposes of public communication can be achieved. The original means of mass communication consisted primarily of reaching an entire national public with a relatively uniform restricted range of content. Transmission would be direct, rapid, and very cost-effective. This 'industrial' vision of both ends and means has given way to a different version of mass communication: more personal and private, more targeted and interactive, more diffuse, and perhaps even more powerful than before in some instances.

The overall goal of public communication is still to be able to know and give shape to the mediated experience of a target population, although not by the monopoly imposition of a suitable limited range of ideas, information, motives, and stimuli. Now the chosen means is to provide a highly differentiated range of content targeted towards innumerable subgroups and segments in the public, taking account of the interests, tastes, and circumstances of the receivers. The fragmented nature of the contemporary media audience is therefore as much the product of market differentiation by a global industry as it is the result of individualization and the rise of networked individualism (Wellman, 2002).

The purposes of mass media and communication are more varied and more opaque than they ever were in the past. The whole process is held together not by a rigid and uniform structure of provision and a stable pattern of mass reception, but by the voluntary engagement of the public in its own immersion in a rich and varied world of mediated experience, to which it contributes both voluntarily (through mass self-communication) and involuntarily (through sharing detailed personal data with providers and platforms online). The personal networks and ties that were said to provide a barrier to the influence of older mass media are now playing a positive role in reinforcing demand and consumption on an endlessly changing and kaleidoscopic journey.

The evolution of a condition or state of mass communication (as redefined), which can now scarcely be distinguished from other social processes, is primarily due to its high degree of functionality for key driving forces in society and its intimate connection with human aspirations. Many of the actors who benefit from the capacity to communicate to all in a measured and calculated way are visible and their motivations are transparent. They include big advertisers and global media firms (both bigger and more concentrated than ever before), the world financial system, rulers and national governments, states with imperial ambitions and concern for their image, and the list goes on. It is inconceivable that these and others could dispense with the results of even 'smarter' and more effective communication to any chosen public constituency. The emerging, revived, and reinforced form of mass communication is highly consistent with underlying trends towards convergence and the globalization and mediatization of everything.

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“ The fragmented nature of the contemporary media audience is therefore as much the product of market differentiation by a global industry as it is the result of individualization and the rise of networked individualism. ”

4. Towards a grand narrative for media and mass communication research

The general trend (and recommendation) in the literature throughout media studies and communication science in recent years points towards increasing integration and cross-fertilization of models, methods, and paradigms in theory and research. However, this is easier said than done. Academic units tend to be organized along either social scientific or humanistic disciplinary boundaries, scholarly journals are equally singular in their preferred approaches, and combining perspectives can be time-consuming and costly (for example, when it comes to multiple method research designs). However, such observations can be made of almost any academic area and are not necessarily problematic for the coherence of a field. A scholarly discipline does not have unity because of consensual models or methods, but through articulating a more or less coherent narrative that weaves across all the different ways in which it approaches its object of study. I would argue that what binds research across the field are less than a handful of core approaches and assumptions about the nature of the communication process, and the materiality of the media involved.

Research in media and mass communication can be mapped along several key areas of investigation, each with its own prevailing perspectives about the nature of our relationship with (our) media. Generally speaking, a fundamental organizing principle of work in the field would be a distinction between considering mediated communication as something that happens to people – where messages are sent and received in relatively straightforward manner, and be studied as such – or as something that occurs in the context of a complex variety of sense-making and meaning-giving practices, all contributing to the influence and impact of whatever is mediated. This distinction follows roughly from Carey's (1975)

original contrast between a *transmission* and a *ritual* view of communication. Following Carey, a transmission view considers communication as a process of transmitting a fixed quantity of information –the message as determined by the sender or source–. This represents the linear sequence of

sender > message > receiver

which is largely built into standard definitions of the nature of predominant forms of mass communication. Although there are many ways in which this representation of the mass communication process can be challenged, it lives on because it usefully distinguishes the selecting role of specific mass communicators, it involves an appreciation that this selection is undertaken according to an assessment of what the audience will find interesting; and the third is that communication is not considered purposive beyond publication and seeking attention for its message. These assumptions about the process enable precise research questions and targeted theorizing about media effects, influence, and audience reception. Content analyses from a transmission point of view tend to treat different media in isolation, focusing completely on the ‘text’ of a medium – such as a news story, a motion picture, a television series, a digital game franchise, or a particular app. Completing the taxonomy, transmission-based work in production studies would be focused on the media making pipeline and across the entire product cycle of a media industry (Deuze; Prenger, 2019). More often than not, scholars in this area of research are inspired by a political economy approach to the media, which ‘follows the money’ in terms of its assumptions where media influence comes from, and what it intends to affect.

A transmission view of (mass) communication is incomplete and possibly misleading as a representation of most media activities and of the diversity of communication processes that are at work. One reason for its weakness is the limitation of communication to the matter of ‘transmission’. Carey pointed to an alternative view of communication as ‘ritual’, according to which:

“communication is linked to terms such as ‘sharing,’ ‘participation,’ ‘association,’ ‘fellowship,’ and ‘the possession of a common faith.’”

This definition exploits the ancient identity and common roots of the terms

“‘commonness,’ ‘communion,’ ‘community,’ and ‘communication.’ A ritual view of communication is directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs” (1975 [1989], p. 18).

Seen as such, communication becomes an exchange – a participatory act where meanings depend on shared practices, understandings, and emotions, and where medium, message as much as the sending and receiving of messages are hard to separate empirically. Research adopting a ritual view of communication tends to be less interested in questions of influence, asking more specific questions about the pervasive and ubiquitous role media play in the ways society’s institutions function, as well as in the way people structure and give meaning to their everyday lives. The influence of media tends to be taken for granted in this type of research, with more attention paid to patterns of appropriation and integration of media into for example the political process, how media are ‘domesticated’ at home, or how people organize themselves into (new) social movements using (new) media. The content of the media, when considered from a ritual point of view, is seen in context, often based on the assumption that all mediated content is polysemic. In other words: media production, circulation, representation, identity, consumption, and regulation are all interdependent, and all highlight the power – or lack thereof – of various stakeholders in the mass communication process.

Media production, circulation, representation, identity, consumption, and regulation are all interdependent, and all highlight the power – or lack thereof – of various stakeholders in the mass communication process

Although this organizing principle in media and mass communication scholarship sounds deceptively straightforward, the contemporary reality belies such easy classification. A particular observation needs to be made about the nature of our current digital environment, where the mass media of old (newspapers, television, radio) not just exist side-by-side with personal (and portable) media, such as smartphones, tablets, and laptop computers, but generally have converged with them. This means that the mass communication process cuts across the materiality of both mass and personal media, and that interpersonal communication likewise benefits from multiple ways of circulation. The digital media environment has contributed to a collapsing of categories, inspiring much creativity and innovation across this field of research – and contributing to a worldwide soul-searching of what the story of our field is.

5. What media and mass communication theory and research tells us

At the heart of the (contemporary) story and teaching of media and mass communication – in terms of the traditional production/content/reception taxonomy – are notions of convergence, integration, and hybridity. Media industries are converging, stretching their operations across multiple channels and platforms. The content of mass mediated messages gets similarly remixed, transforming formats and genre conventions. Audiences large and small congregate and dissipate in an instant and are not always acting like audiences anymore – as media consumption can go hand in hand with me-

dia production. Underneath it all run vast social, economic, and political transformations, not determined but most certainly amplified and accelerated by rapid developments in new technologies and media and a deeply emotional sense of urgency.

What seems to be the meta-narrative of media and mass communication is embodied in the big shift from more or less stable to fluid and flexible structures across both our field and its objects of study.

Examples of the seemingly stable media and mass communication structures informing much research and theorizing in our field are:

- Media production taking place in newsrooms, the film and television studio system, within large holding firms and multinational corporations
- Media content based on more or less consensual, strategically routinized and altogether formulaic industry formats and genre conventions
- Media audiences massively aggregated and programmed around schedules and more or less predictable media events

These three key elements of the mass communication process are increasingly fluid or 'liquid' today, in that their constituent elements change faster than it takes new structures to sediment (paraphrasing **Bauman**, 2000):

- A trend toward multiplatform and multichannel industry structures and value chains, with production increasingly organized through 'atypical' working arrangements
- Rapid development of a wide variety of multimedia, crossmedia and transmedia storytelling forms throughout contemporary media productions
- Concurrent media exposure, co-creation, and emblematic media use as standard types of contemporary ways of being a media consumer and belonging to an audience

Across all these developments, the three fundamental types of communication that form the object of study in most media and communication research – mass communication, interpersonal communication, and mass self-communication – converge in a hybrid media environment that necessitates equally hybrid forms of scholarship. What all of this suggests is the need, now more than ever, to consider the overall story of the various theories and theoretical traditions in the field. To indeed consider them as connections within a 'grand narrative' that enables us to tackle the complexities of our media environment.

Most scholars in the field today would acknowledge that it has become less than useful to study media in isolation and out of context, suggesting that our relationship to media has become too intimate – both in a technological sense, as our devices feel and 'live' quite close to us, and in an affective sense, as we clearly love (and sometimes hate) our media. Although such an approach to media as an ensemble of devices and activities collectively constituting how people understand and co-ordinate their everyday life has been advocated in the literature for many decades (**Bausinger**, 1984), only quite recently is such work becoming more common, often informed by considerations of 'media life' (**Deuze**, 2012), 'polymedia' (**Madianou; Miller**, 2013), media 'territories' (**Tosoni; Tarantino**, 2013), media 'repertoires' (**Haddon**, 2016), 'communicative figurations' (**Hepp; Breiter; Hasebrink**, 2018), and media as an all-encompassing 'digital environment' (**Boczkowski; Mitchelstein**, 2021). Beyond such holistic theorizing, rigorous empirical work today addresses the interaction and conjunction of multiple devices, channels, and platforms when considering how people access, use, and make sense of their media – rather than studying any medium or use thereof in isolation.

To talk about media influence and 'effects' in this environmental context seems impossibly difficult, yet sophisticated theoretical frameworks are being developed across the humanities and social sciences that show great promise in tackling this discussion – including, but not limited to, work on (deep) mediatization and understanding media use as communicative figurations (**Hepp; Breiter; Hasebrink**, 2018), and emerging models and approaches to investigate complex reciprocal media effects (**Valkenburg; Peter; Walther**, 2016).

In a new media context, the distinctions between one or more senders and a 'mass' of receivers *versus* the perceived intimacy of personal communication, between the formal and informal organization of communication, and between different (yet converging) technologies seem to be difficult to maintain. In a contemporary context, it can certainly be argued that interactive communication technologies simply multiply opportunities for all forms of conversation, and

"[w]hat has evolved is mass communication, and as a result, the joint effects of mass and interpersonal communication differ from those which they formerly rendered" (**Walther; Valkenburg**, 2017, p. 421).

What seems to be the meta-narrative of media and mass communication is embodied in the big shift from more or less stable to fluid and flexible structures across both our field and its objects of study

Rigorous empirical work today addresses the interaction and conjunction of multiple devices, channels, and platforms when considering how people access, use, and make sense of their media – rather than studying any medium or use thereof in isolation.

Collapsing mass communication and interpersonal communication along dimensions of personalization into a model of ‘mass personal’ communication (**O’Sullivan; Carr**, 2018) in fact reaffirms their age-old separation. In today’s digital, online, and interconnected media environment, different forms of communication coexist, often simultaneously, highlighting the need for nuanced appraisal. The study of mass media and communication is still at the heart of our field – in part, because the contemporary ‘media manifold’ (**Couldry**, 2016) reinvigorates concerns about the role and influence of mass media and mass communication practices, and in part due to the nature of mass communication as underlying all forms of communication, in turn amplified by processes particular to mass media. All of this gets exemplified by a preponderance of research topics covered in contemporary scholarship signaling a prevalence of ‘mass’ concepts (often mixed or integrated with other levels of communication) including, but not limited to:

- Big data as a primary driver of the digital economy, and as an increasingly powerful tool in political communication (for example, regarding the micro-targeting of individuals on a massive scale with customized messages as a staple of contemporary election campaigns).
- The Internet of things as the rise of a ‘non-human’ mass communication network (linking things such as home appliances, health monitoring systems and all kinds of sensors to the Internet), affecting our lives in numerous ways. A political economy of digital capitalism, inspired by the enormous global (market) power of telecommunications, information, and media corporations, such as *Microsoft, Apple, Amazon, Alphabet* (including *Google*), *Facebook, Tencent*, and the *Alibaba Group*.
- The recurring public concern with ‘balkanization’ (**Sunstein**, 2001), ‘telecocoon’ (**Habuchi**, 2005), ‘echo chambers’ (**Jamieson; Cappella**, 2008), ‘filter bubbles’ (**Pariser**, 2012), and other forms of highly personalized information spaces within which people spend significant time when using media, suggesting an ongoing conflation of ‘mass’ communication and interpersonal (and even intrapersonal) communication (**Walther; Valkenburg**, 2017). Interestingly, the empirical work on these issues tends to ‘burst’ the filter bubble myth, finding instead that people’s media habits are a much more complex mix between self-selected and pre-selected personalization that generally does not lead to polarization, and that there are many factors mitigating the role of fake news, filter bubbles and echo chambers (**Borgesius et al.**, 2016; **Fletcher; Kleis-Nielsen**, 2017; **Dutton; Fernández**, 2019).
- The rise of all kinds of (more or less) new social movements and forms of collective action primarily facilitated and organized through online and mobile communication networks, which are playing a key role in influencing sentiments around matters of public interest.
- A growing recognition by teachers, scholars, policymakers, and politicians regarding the need to invest in digital literacy and making citizens ‘mediawise,’ while at the same time developing new policies to effectively govern the Internet (and curtail people’s Internet use) with regard to areas such as privacy, online harm, and copyrights.
- A renewed interest in the influence and impact of media, featuring multivariate, mixed-method, and multi-step flow communication research designs to accommodate the ‘double bind’ of media effects: on the one hand, scholars in the field do not assume – as was common in much of the twentieth century – that media are all-powerful and have direct effects on people, instead acknowledging how the impact of media is indirect, conditional, and transactional (**Valkenburg; Peter; Walther**, 2016). On the other hand, it is beyond any doubt that we live in a time of ‘deep mediatization’ (**Couldry; Hepp**, 2016), where media can be considered to be at the center of today’s institutions and activities, fueling social and political transformations through an interplay of people’s use and consumption practices and the media’s own internal logic.

6. Discussion and conclusion

Across the literature there is an emerging consensus around the need for cross-disciplinary theorizing, mixed-methods designs, and other approaches that combine and remix the various strands and traditions of media and mass communication scholarship. As **Valkenburg** (2017, p. 11) remarks about the prospect of combining research on mass, interpersonal and computer-mediated communication,

“[i]ntegrative research that crosses different communication subdisciplines is even more sorely needed than a few decades ago.”

Likewise, **Hartley** (2012), in his assessment of the digital futures for media studies, passionately advocates research to go between disciplines, to translate across differences, and therefore to embrace a *vitality* in theory and research.

A rich vocabulary to talk about the implications of the developments of communication that are taking place is emerging – one that questions simplistic models and modes of doing research, one that takes technologies as much as affect into theoretical consideration, one that does justice to the multimedia nature of all aspects of the mass communication process. What is also remarkable is that media and mass communication scholarship is finding all kinds of more or less new ways to communicate about itself, increasingly embracing creative and public forms of scholarship.

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Scholars take to social media, blogs and vlogs, and other forms of public expression – including pushing for completely open-access publications, as well as embracing the arts (for example, dance, poetry, and music) – to engage as researchers, practitioners, experts, advocates, activists, and critics (Archetti, 2017b; Witschge; Deuze; Willemsen, 2019), truly in the spirit of what Waisbord (2019b) advocates as a renewed sense of 'public' scholarship.

Elsewhere (see Deuze, 2021), I have outlined what I consider as the fundamental challenges for media studies and communication science as it moves deep into the twenty-first century – a comprehensively mediated century, indeed. In sequence, I first considered how the field needs to recognize and acknowledge where it is coming from – as I have tried to outline in this paper. Secondly, I advocate – as do so many of my colleagues around the world – a truly 'post-disciplinary' approach to research, bridging or bypassing disciplinary boundaries and methodological silos. Thirdly, I would like to echo and celebrate the emergence of engaged and public scholarship in our field, as more media and mass communication scholars become confident in expressing not just what we *find out about*, but also what we *can do with* media and mass communication teaching and research.

The grand narrative of our field is, in conclusion, twofold – and perhaps somewhat counterintuitive. On the one hand, it is clear that mass media and communication are of profound importance for the functioning of society as well as our attitude and behavior toward the world we live in. The two main scholarly traditions in our field align in their perspective that media and mass communication are (or can be) powerful agents of change in society, where communication research seeks to find evidence (and explanations) for such effects, and media studies tends to take this powerful role for granted, opting to explore avenues for critique of the way media operate in society (Lang, 2013).

On the other hand, the end result of all this agreement and alignment must be that we have to conclude that, overall, media are not all that powerful. A century of scholarship leaves little doubt that media do have many effects and they probably do account for some general trends. However, media effects are inconsistent and often cancel each other out, and complex societies can be characterized by different lines of development and subsequent roles for media at the same time. As is the conclusion of much of the research in our field: media have some effects on some people in some circumstances some of the time.

This seemingly paradoxical narrative – media are everything, and they are nothing – is haunting our field. As the world is stuck behind a screen at home, public and political debates rage on cyberbullying and online harassment, the role of powerful algorithms and artificial intelligence, rising privacy and security concerns, problematic media use and media addiction, fake news and disinformation campaigns, conspiracy theories and declining trust in institutions. Our answer to all of this is consistently and necessarily ambiguous:

- yes, these are all important issues that clearly warrant our concern;
- no, none of these issues is likely to change much how most people live their lives, make their decisions, nor in how society and its institutions generally function.

However, in everything that people do, and in every single act of an institution in society, media and mass communication play a formative role. Regrettably, that role is complex. Yet aspirationally, our increasingly sophisticated research, theorizing, and teaching across the humanities and social sciences (and elsewhere) contributes to understanding this role and how it can be used for (the common) good. It is my hope that this mapping essay sheds some light on how we know what we know, where we came from, and where we may be headed. It is an exciting time to be a media and communication scholar.

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