

Reflections on the International Association for Media and Communication Research

reviewed by Michael Meyen 

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Jörg Becker and Robin Mansell, eds., *Reflections on the International Association for Media and Communication Research: Many Voices, One Forum*. 558 pp., figs., index. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan 2023. \$38 (paper)

Reflections on the International Association for Media and Communication Research, reviewed by Michael Meyen *History of Media Studies* 3 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.32376/d895aoea.16a75512>.



WHEN THIS BOOK arrived in my mailbox, I first celebrated. More than 500 pages of the discipline's history. 500 pages of IAMCR history. A brick. A milestone. One of the most important academic associations in the field takes five years to delve into its own past and hold up a mirror to media and communication research. The table of contents is full of big names and good acquaintances. For someone like me, this is both a celebration and a promise.

I have to say that I started studying journalism in the communist GDR and then wanted to understand in the larger Germany why a completely different academic approach was practiced there under the same name. Why did the Leipzig professors before 1989 concentrate on journalistic skills and on optimizing training for editorial departments instead of asking about media content and media effects like their colleagues in the West? Why do psychological theories, data analysis, and statistics dominate in Mainz or Munich? Why is the U.S. considered the ultimate here and not France or Italy?

I quickly realized that the field's history is worthwhile beyond my own personal curiosity because there is little competition. Communication is too far removed from the power pole of the academic field to be relevant to historians. The only people interested in the subject are members of the communication community itself. This professional community, in turn, is too small to afford specialists in

its own past. In Germany, for example, most institutes do not even have relevant courses.

This means that the history of the communication field is written by a few professionals (for example: Dave Park, Jeff Pooley, Pete Simonson, Christopher Simpson) and by amateurs who are actually at home in other subdisciplines and who, as a rule, pursue a self-interest when they become part-time historians. Hanno Hardt (1934–2011), for example, a professor at the University of Iowa and later in Ljubljana, produced two books at once to advance what he saw as an overdue paradigm shift in U.S. mass communication research.¹ Others write history to secure a place for themselves there. Diversity of sources, self-reflection, and perhaps even a theoretical perspective that allows scholarly work to be placed in a context that includes geopolitics and national interests as well as university structures, relationships with neighboring disciplines,² or biographical imprints almost inevitably fall by the wayside in such works.

In my own studies, being an outsider as an immigrant from East Germany helped as much as the media history research I used to advance my academic career. I had the tools and did not have to promote the subject as a whole or a particular school of thought, nor mentors, teachers, or even myself.

Probably this explains why the editors of the brick did not ask me to contribute. This book is an account that is supposed to put the IAMCR in a favorable light. The subtitle already testifies to this goal: “Many Voices, One Forum” sounds more like a TV commercial than an academic endeavor. The way it comes about is also reminiscent of the collaboration between companies and advertising agencies. IAMCR’s Executive Board appointed a commission at the 2018 annual meeting in Portland, Oregon, which then sought out topics and authors, repeatedly consulting with IAMCR leadership. The result is a book that tells how IAMCR would like to see itself today. This includes the pride in the MacBride Report and everything that belongs to the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) and the Non-Aligned Movement (five contributions), as well as the extensive fading out of the competing organization International Communication Association (ICA) and thus of the U.S. hegemony in media research.

In their introduction, the two editors concede “gaps and imbalances” (xi), but they mean above all “gender balance” and the representation of authors from the Global South (xi). No doubt: Despite all efforts to be objective and scientifically true, historical research also depends on social position and personal experience, but historical scholarship has developed criteria in dealing with sources that allow the reader to classify and evaluate the results. To put it another

¹ Hanno Hardt, *Critical Communication Studies: Communication, History and Theory in America* (London: Routledge, 1992); Hardt, *Social Theories of the Press: Constituents of Communication Research, 1840s to 1920s* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001).

² Maria Löblich and Andreas Scheu, “Writing the History of Communication Studies: A Sociology of Science Approach,” *Communication Theory* 21, no. 1 (2011).

way: Actually, it should not matter whether the history of IAMCR or the communication field is written by a man from the U.S. or by a woman from Uganda.

How far the transfiguration can go when media researchers become historians of their own lives can already be studied in this introduction. Jörg Becker claims that members of the IAMCR who are based in larger countries “have tended to have intrinsic, rather than career, motivations” (viii). Further in the text, “It is also precisely the reason that there have been so many unconditional internationalists in IAMCR” (viii). Anyone who has ever been to an ICA annual meeting will probably shake their head. In my interviews with ICA Fellows, I learned that careers tend to be a waste product of intrinsic motivation.³ The IAMCR has been accused in many conversations, at least between the lines, of lax quality standards and the politicization of research.

³ Michael Meyen, “57 Interviews with ICA Fellows,” *International Journal of Communication* 6 (2012).

If you think this is exaggerated, read the article “IAMCR and Russia,” written by Kaarle Nordenstreng, born in 1941, longstanding professor in Tampere, Finland, from 1972 to 1988 Vice-President of IAMCR and, from 1976 to 1990, President of the International Organization of Journalists, an association dominated by the Eastern Bloc. There is no doubt that Nordenstreng is an excellent expert on Russia. He has also been present at almost every meeting in Moscow or St. Petersburg that I have attended. Nevertheless, why did the History Commission of the IAMCR not ask a Russian? Nordenstreng’s text provides the answer. He seriously claims that it was only personal interests that led Soviet researchers to the IAMCR (297), thus defending himself against the accusation of having been a Trojan horse of the East for almost two decades.

Why is it worthwhile to work on a professional history that goes beyond justifying one’s own decisions and thus legitimizing oneself, and that is also more than a photo album in which one leafs through on quiet evenings to remember the good old days? I myself have always learned the most for my own work when I have asked about dependencies, and here especially about the instrumentalization of science by politics and business. This is very well documented for the history of the emergence of media research in the United States.⁴ When one knows the interest that the military, corporations, and intelligence agencies have in our work, by no means only in major wars, and how this interest has corrupted even some of those at the top of the annals of the professional community, then one is more likely to be immune to overt and covert attempts at influence.

Many of the authors found by the History Commission of the IAMCR are either unaware of the state of the art in the field’s historiography or deliberately ignore it. This certainly has to do with

⁴ Christopher Simpson, *Science of Coercion: Communication Research and Psychological Warfare, 1945–1960* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Jeff Pooley, “The New History of Mass Communication Research,” in *The History of Media and Communication Research*, ed. David W. Park and Jeff Pooley (New York: Peter Lang, 2008).

the fact that most of them rarely work on the history of science, and probably also with the desire to promote their own school, their own country, their own idols. For a specialist like me, this is most evident in the topics where I myself have analyzed archives, testimonies, publications. I could therefore spend hours here on the two contributions about Germany, but I prefer to point out that there is a contribution about Pakistan, but none about South Africa or Australia.

This already brings me to the credit side. An account of 500 pages is a treasure trove for the few people who are specialized on the field's history, even if the critical distance to the subject matter is missing. There are the photos, from which every book about the past lives. And there is plenty of material that will be indispensable as a source for future trials—from reports on theoretical traditions, countries, and regions to documentation of institutional changes in the IAMCR to biographical sketches (George Gerbner, Dallas W. Smythe, Herbert I. Schiller, Stuart Hall, James Halloran). My personal highlight was the very personal story by Slavko Splichal, who outlines his own intellectual journey, providing something every historian needs. That's why I was able to celebrate once again after reading it.

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