Looking Back Together to Become 'Contemporaries in Discipline'

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Why should our history matter? How can we produce it without being historians ourselves? And for whom shall this history be written? I propose to revisit these basic questions by relying on the French case, and by putting this case into dialogue with others in order to find collective ways of answering them.

Why Should Our History Matter?

During the second half of the 1990s, twenty years after the institutional recognition of the discipline in 1975,[1] the French *sciences de l'information et de la communication* (SIC) were put under historical scrutiny. Among other initiatives, the most consistent work came from a structured study group that was itself created in 1997 after "agitated, even heated debates," according to its leader Robert Boure.[2] Hosted by the French Society of Information and Communication Sciences, this group was called "scientific theories and practices" and was dedicated to the history of the French field. In 2002 it gave rise to a "first production, original in our field, [which] calls for others, more ambitious in terms of both questions and methodologies."[3] This book was developed through seminars, discussions around texts produced by the participants, and the collective definition of three axes articulating the topics they dealt with: addressing the public of the SIC "practitioners," focusing on the institutional dimensions first and on their articulation with the production of ideas, and clarifying and contextualizing the origins of the discipline.[4] And yet, after this "first production," and with the exception of a series of

[1] About the history of SIC, see Stefanie Averbeck-Lietz et al., "Communication Studies in France: Looking for a 'Terre du milieu'?" *Publizistik* 64 (2019).

[2] Robert Boure, ed., *Les origines des Sciences de l'information et de la communication, Regards croisés* (Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses du Septentrion, 2002): 9. All translations from the French are mine.

[3] Boure, *Les origines*, 14.

[4] Boure, *Les origines*, 10–11.

follow-up articles published mainly by the same authors,[5] the history of the French discipline has been almost totally abandoned after this ten-year period (1997–2007).

Many local reasons could explain this waning of interest: the resolution of internal conflicts, the acceptance of the heterogeneity of the discipline, a lack of time due to new orientations in national academic policies, etc. "Normal" disciplinary life paradoxically runs counter to a concern for disciplinary development as such. "Discipline" becomes for most communication scholars a convenient and therefore invisible device. This story is not isolated. Outside of France one also finds numerous cases where interest in the history of sciences dedicated to communication has vanished after a period of greater historical study that was based on personal acquaintance and shared concerns for the (fragile) institutional premises of the discipline.[6] In these enterprises, which both require and constitute a collective, history depends on extra-cognitive incentives and interests more than on mere academic research. History was then necessary because it was both a political issue and a political tool to make room, socially and academically, for something that did not yet exist.

Our contemporary international contexts are characterized by a massive increase in the number of researchers; by the professionalization, standardization, and anonymity of academic practices; and by the development of areas of specialization. Skillful and engaged historical work seems to be out of reach almost everywhere now. Wolfgang Donsbach prefaced his own remarks about the state of the discipline by saying:

> Let me warn you first: Any account of a state of a discipline is limited in scope and is biased. It is limited because the field grows faster than the capacity of the average scholar to process and digest new information and thus keep an overview. And it is – by default – biased because people differ in what they think is good and what they think is relevant research, thus disagreeing on what is the "right way to scientific knowledge." [7]

The fragmentation and progressive specialization of any growing discipline, and especially ours, has important consequences in an international environment. Previous political stakes have vanished along with the sense that the participants know "all and everyone" in the field. At the same time, scientific requirements are more stringent, decontextualized, and depersonalized. In this situation, meaningful history implies not only theoretical reading and methodological compliance, but also clarification of irritating differences that turn out to be more "cultural" than "scientific," as pertains to the authors under consideration, the method of developing an argument, the writing style, the respective weight of the theory and the empirical

[5] In *Questions de communication* 10 (2006), 11, and 12 (2007), https://journals.openedition.org/questionsdecommunication/.

[6] For the US context, see Jefferson Pooley, "The Declining Significance of Disciplinary Memory," in *Handbuch kommunikationswissenschaftliche Erinnerungsforschung*, ed. Netzwerk Kommunikationswissenschaftliche Erinnerungsforschung (Berlin: de Gruyter, forthcoming 2021).

[7] Wolfgang Donsbach, "The Identity of Communication Research," *Journal of Communication* 56, no. 3 (2006): 437.

material, the interest in remote domains or areas, and the acceptance that there is more than one, in the words of Donsbach, "right way to scientific knowledge." In sum, meaningful history relies upon the resolute creation of an international "milieu," where the delicate balance between methodological demand and political significance can be shaped afresh.

Looking Back: How to Produce History without Being a Historian?

Pioneering and engaged research about the history of the field of communication was not always so attentive to the requirements of science, or of good history. Indeed, the mediocrity of much of this work has attracted significant critical attention.[8] Still, we must confront these methodological issues, as historians almost completely neglect the history of our field, which is thus only produced by its members.

If the prospect of extra-disciplinary study raises questions about the (non)involvement of researchers and their (lack of) specialized or insider knowledge, these same questions apply to researchers taking their own discipline as an object. Ethically speaking, can we adopt a historical, sociological, or epistemological approach without being a historian, sociologist, or epistemologist? Don't we risk producing a history that is biased, hagiographic, inaccurate—or all three at the same time?

Robert Boure and the other "historians" of the SIC carefully develop and make explicit their reflexive position as amateur historians involved in their object of study, constantly paying attention to the pitfalls they can encounter as such. Their stated intention is

> to produce a non-hagiographic and non-retrospective history; and consequently, a non-official history which is not the magnified account of the emergence and then the success of current scientific and/or institutional "truths" which one readily imagines to be stable—but which, on the contrary, endeavors to take into account the elementary requirements of the historical method… while remaining meaningful (because it is open to contemporary questioning).[9]

The solution they found consists in mingling scientific concern and relevance, while addressing "time" with the tools of our own discipline. On top of a "historical" approach, Boure suggests more specifically a genealogical method, a method that "abandons the logic of linearity, of temporal evolutionary continuity (and thus of the search for origins or precursors) to highlight instead the various temporalities."[10] Boure also observes that the non-historian researchers cannot

[8] A detailed list of authors who "sharply criticized the traditional historiography of the field" is given in Maria Löblich and Andreas M. Scheu, "Writing the History of Communication Studies," *Communication Theory* 21 (2011): 1. See also, among others: Hanno Hardt, "Foreword," in *The History of Media and Communication Research: Contested Memories*, ed. David Park and Jefferson Pooley (New York, Peter Lang, 2008): xi.

[9] Boure, *Les origines*, 10.

[10] Boure, *Les origines*, 39. See also Hardt, "Foreword," esp. xv and xvi.

> have the luxury of rejecting, if not presentism, at least any allusion to the present. If only for two reasons: on the one hand, they will probably only be read by researchers in their own field, and on the other hand, they will have to answer to the latter. Therefore, it is difficult to see how they can leave aside the questions which, *hic et nunc*, interest their "contemporaries in discipline."[11]

[11] Boure, *Les origines*, 38.

Highlighting various temporalities and, in an international perspective, highlighting various *spatialities* as well, could help us chart a path to resolving the contradictions of a history without historians, with the help of other disciplines and the strengths of our own.

Whom Are the Histories of "Others" Addressed to?

Building upon the two preceding questions, we see that the production of a meaningful history in and of our field requires both a purpose and the elucidation of a point of view, both within and outside the discipline, the academic environment, and the immediate national context. Neglecting these, as it is too often the case in international editorial projects, will result in "bad" histories. And yet, these two criteria are still not enough.

I mentioned earlier how French researchers, like those of other countries, largely turned away from the history of their own national discipline. In a context where academic internationalization is mostly promoted as a seductive notion, but without further indications about what it implies regarding the "traveling theories"[12] and the ways to deal with them, a crucial question must be posed: Why should we be interested in reading about far-away situations and histories? In a way, this question squares the first two ranges of problems and, if not addressed, international publications can do more harm than good: By definition, the information they give about national context is truncated, simplified, decontextualized, and often hard for a foreigner to understand. Researchers from one country are better able to situate their disciplinary history within a national history, and yet these same researchers are also, by dint of their immersion in that national context, more likely to function within that context in a manner that reflects their own various and not always avowable interests. The inverse of this situation applies to researchers from other countries. Moreover, through their "neutral" editorial postures, scholarship like this can give a false impression of comparability, or even homogeneity, of some of the issues in the national and international fields:

[12] Edward Said, "Traveling Theory," in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983).

> "World tours" as illustrated by English-language volumes that bring together dozens of country cases and conference panels featuring

> multi-country experts should not be seen as synonymous with "de-westernization." … Making international research available does not change prevalent parochialism; in fact, it can exist separately in a crowded and fragmented field of research.[13]

That is how the "international" literature can conceal certain crucial differences between and within countries, to the detriment of the most dominated: nationally, "the forgotten, the unknown, the unrecognized or the 'exotic,' "[14] "the 'losers' and 'outsiders' of the discipline, … those who have not succeeded in making a career in it, those who have left it, those within it who have refused to conform to its standards,"[15] and internationally, by creating "black holes":

> Eastern Europe was for a long time in modern history a veritable "black hole" about which little was known in Western academia, except to a minority of specialists. While this has started to change with the advent of the third wave of democratization in 1989/90, when much academic interest became focused on it, in the field of communication and media studies Eastern Europe is still very much perceived as the undifferentiated "other," somewhat like the "global south."[16]

The vigilance about these processes must remain constant, as they cannot be solved once and for all.[17] How can we be interested in "others" without making them exotic? How can we (re)discover forgotten theories, to share our disparate ways of producing knowledge? How can we become "contemporaries in discipline" in spite of all the differences? Finding ways, space, and time to confront these questions together could be a beautiful challenge for an authentically and ethically international journal.

[13] Silvio Waisbord and Claudia Mellado, "De-Westernizing Communication Studies: A Reassessment," *Communication Theory* 24, no. 4 (2014): 365.

[14] Robert Boure, "Les sciences de l'information et de la communication au risque de l'expertise? Sur et sous des pratiques scientifiques," *Réseaux* 82–83 (1997): 246.

[15] Stéphane Olivesi, "À propos de l'institutionnalisation des SIC. Pour une histoire localisée," *Questions de communication* 12 (2007): 223.

[16] Zrinjka Peruško and Dina Vozab, "The Field of Communication in Croatia: toward a Comparative History of Communication Studies in Central and Eastern Europe," in the *International History of Communication Study*, ed. Peter Simonson and David Park (New York & London: Routledge, 2016), 213.

[17] Stefanie Averbeck-Lietz gives us precious insights about the path(s) to follow and its pitfalls: Stefanie Averbeck-Lietz, ed., *Kommunikationswissenschaft im internationalen Vergleich. Transnationale Perspektiven* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2017).

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