

Twenty Years of Media and Communications Research: from Media Studies to Media Ecology



LSE's Department of Media and Communications celebrates its 20th anniversary this year, and is marking the occasion with the upcoming [Media Futures Conference](#) on 15-16 June. Here [Nick Couldry](#), Professor of Media, Communications and Social Theory at the LSE, reflects on how the study of media and communications has evolved in the 20 years since the Department was founded.

Look back to conference programs of 2003, the year in which LSE's Media and Communications department was founded, and the sense of discontinuity is strong. So many topics have since faded (telecentres, digital divide, reality TV). Priorities have changed, and the huge interdisciplinarity of perspectives that we now take for granted was largely absent.

Yet important things have endured. Contrary to breathless predictions, television did not die, even if prime time has shrunk and is now distributed across multiple streaming channels. Nor did radio die (quite the contrary) or newspapers (yet). Habits are, after all, more enduring than hype or futurology.

Nor have battles for the status of the media and communications field been entirely resolved. Although few people in rich societies believe that media in the extended sense (to include everything we do with our smartphone and other computing devices) are without implications for the feel and structure of daily life, that has not stopped established disciplines from continuing to operate as if media do not matter: from economics to political theory, from international relations to social theory, media and

communications tend at best to be an afterthought, with notable exceptions such as the work of Manuel Castells and Judith Butler. Worse, there is still work (I won't give examples) that presumes to talk about media as something in common experience without any attention to the extensive literatures in media and communications research.

Inside the field, some battles also lie unresolved. I remember the urgency with which arguments for the importance of religion in the field were in 2003 being then proposed at the [International Communication Association](#), but twenty years later, there is still no ICA division or interest group focussed on religion, such is the field's default secularism.

But those enduring patterns mask more fundamental change.

When the LSE Department was founded in September 2003, the shock of the World Trade Tower attacks two years earlier still reverberated. The need for *some way* of opening up ethical debate about the role of media as weapon, and the potential of media as a space for recognising others who are silenced in global media agendas, were high on our list of concerns. Roger Silverstone's book [Media and Morality](#) was the fruit of that, as later has been Lilie Chouliaraki's work at LSE ([The Ironic Spectator](#)) and in another way my own.

But that early recognition of the need for a media ethics that went beyond a discussion of journalistic codes in the years that followed grew into a veritable paradigm shift with ever more books over the past decade or so foregrounding ethics as their core question, controversially or otherwise. Think of such different books as Sherry Turkle's [Alone Together](#), Robin Mansell's [Imagining the Internet](#), or Mark Deuze's [Media Life](#) (a rare positive take). Indeed one could argue that this expanding sense that something is ethically troubling about the media landscape was what began to connect communications research on media and the internet to previously distant work in legal theory, such as Julie Cohen's synoptic book [Configuring the Networked Self](#). The sense of a *common cross-disciplinary* topic about the nature of our media and information environment had emerged by the early years of the 2010s.

If one way of describing this shift, seen from the perspective of media studies' older agendas, was 'ethics', a newer way of formulating it was in terms of ecology. While the topic of media ecology (and even sound ecology) had a longer history in North America, it absolutely was *not* a familiar way of framing what there was to talk about in media

studies two decades back. But Roger Silverstone's statement in the preface to [Media and Morality](#) that 'global societies' are facing an 'environmental' 'crisis in the world of communication' (2007: vi) sensed the direction of travel, even if for a media landscape that looked very different from today's.

Just a few years after Silverstone, Julie Cohen's call for a 'cultural environmentalism' that can help us see more clearly the problems with our growing dependence on computing infrastructures and platforms that continuously surveil us seemed both original and absolutely inevitable. By the start of the last decade, our sense of the scale and nature of what there was to be discussed about media had changed profoundly.

For one thing, it no longer made any sense to talk about media without also talking about the internet and the whole matrix of information and communication technologies in which legacy media like television, radio and the press are now embedded.

For another, old battles between political economy and cultural approaches to formulating the key questions about media now seemed quaint, because it was a profoundly changed political economy that, in full view, has driven the changes in how media culture feels.

The core thing that had changed was, of course, the rise of social media platforms and indeed the rise of platform-focussed capitalism generally: not as one phenomenon among others, but as a total transformation of the economic, social and technological *space* in which media survive or die, grow or wane. Our smart phones *are* portable ecologies of media inputs, but, more than that, they give access to, indeed demand our attention to, a transformed ecology of social communication.

Ten years from the beginning of this ecological (and ethical) turn in media communications *and* information research, it is versions of ecological thinking that are opening up new avenues for exploration in our field. To give some diverse examples: Amanda Lagerkvist's work on [Existential Media](#), Thomas Poell, David Nieborg and Brooke Duffy's work on [Platforms and Cultural Production](#), Shakuntala Banaji and Ramnath Bhat's work on [Social Media and Hate](#), the work by Deen Freelon and other political communications researchers on Disinformation, and Sarah Banet-Weiser's work on [popular misogyny](#).

Those are just a few examples among many of exciting new directions of research. But

they show that, at this state in our field's history, the starting-point has become thoroughly ecological, in a way that it was only subliminally twenty years ago. Our field has come a long way and yet, in a sense, it has taken just a small step towards addressing the growing challenges posed by capitalist communication platforms for our chances of living well together in the future.

This post represents the views of the author and not the position of the Media@LSE blog nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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