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### How International, National, and Local Research Strategies Shaped ASCoR's History in Its First 25 Years

Neijens, P.; Zwier, S.; de Vreese, C.H.; Peter, J.; Vliegenthart, R.; Araujo, T.

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# Part I.

## ASCoR's History



# 1. How International, National, and Local Research Strategies Shaped ASCoR's History in Its First 25 Years

*Peter Neijens, Sandra Zwier, Claes H. de Vreese, Jochen Peter, Rens Vliegenthart, and Theo Araujo'*

## Abstract

This chapter gives an overview of the institutional development of the Amsterdam School of Communication Research (ASCoR) in the 25 years since its foundation in 1997, paying attention to both objectives of ASCoR: organising and supporting research, and training of PhD students. The chapter also discusses various factors that shaped this trajectory, including ASCoR's orientation on media technological and societal changes, its international, funding, output, and research methods' orientation, and individual factors. The chapter concludes with ASCoR's new policy being deployed to address some concerns about the current research climate at universities in the Netherlands.

**Keywords:** institutional development, communication research history, research institute, research policy

## Introduction

In only 25 years, the Amsterdam School of Communication Research (ASCoR), the research institute in communication science at the University of Amsterdam (UvA), has firmly established itself as one of the top

<sup>1</sup> Peter Neijens, Claes H. de Vreese, Jochen Peter, Rens Vliegenthart, and Theo Araujo served successively as ASCoR's scientific directors. Sandra Zwier was ASCoR's first research manager. ASCoR's founding director, Jan van Cuilenburg, passed away in 2016.

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communication research institutes worldwide. This is evidenced by consistently high ratings by international review committees and the number 1 position in the QS World Ranking by Subject for the sixth consecutive year in 2023. ASCoR has become home to a large, impactful, and highly visible community of researchers, being “cutting edge in the topics it addresses, the methods it uses, and the theories it develops” (Research Review, 2020, p. 11).

In this chapter we provide a brief overview of the institute’s history and show its developments over the years, paying attention to both objectives of ASCoR: organising and supporting research, and training of PhD students. We have taken great advantage of ASCoR’s annual and self-assessment reports since 1997, prepared by ASCoR’s directors and research managers. We used the data from these reports for our overview and adopted some verbatim descriptions of the research programme and mission.

## **The start of communication science at the University of Amsterdam**

Communication science was established in the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences, which was founded after the Second World War. Kurt Baschwitz was the first professor of the discipline with an appointment for the field of “Press, Public Opinion and Propaganda.” The great interest in these subjects was motivated by the developments in Nazi Germany in the preceding period (Hemels, 2017; van Ginneken, 2018; Wieten, 2005). After Baschwitz’s promotion to full professor in 1952, he held the chair in “Press Science and Mass Psychology,” which reflected a combination of the then dominant medium (the press) and mass psychology.

After an intensive effort for academic recognition of the field, the programmes for the degree in communication science were started, first at Radboud University in Nijmegen (in 1982) and then at the University of Amsterdam (in 1985) (Hemels, 2017). Until the launch of the study programme, subjects such as press studies, broadcasting studies, film studies, sociology of mass communication, public relations, and mass psychology were taught as electives in social sciences degree programmes (Hemels, 2017).

The new Communication Science study programme at the UvA was based on the two pillars that had already been part of Baschwitz’s chair: Mass Communication (including press and television, chaired by Denis McQuail), and Mass Psychology (chaired by Marten Brouwer). Shortly after the start, a third pillar was added to the programme: the appointment of Jan van Cuilenburg in 1988 broadened the Communication Science programme with

courses on media policy, media economics, information science, advertising, and public communication. Appendix 1.1 shows the chairs in communication science until the launch of ASCoR.

This history and position of communication science at UvA explains ASCoR's social scientific approach to the discipline. This approach is different from media and communication programmes that tend to emphasise language and cultural aspects and can often be found within faculties of humanities.

## The foundation of ASCoR

The foundation of ASCoR was inspired by an increase in publications in international journals, research presentations at international conferences, active involvement and success in acquiring science foundation grants, and the founding of a PhD programme in communication research in the second half of the 1990s. The immediate reason for the founding of ASCoR were the conclusions of an external review committee (1990–1994), which rated the quality of communication research as “good to excellent” and unequivocally concluded that a research school in communication science should be implemented as soon as possible. Department Chair Jan van Cuilenburg then took the initiative to set up the new communication science research institute.

Van Cuilenburg became the director of the school “in formation.” Together with two of the school's board members, Holli Semetko and Peter Neijens, and its research manager, Sandra Zwier, he spent 1997 developing the mission and profile of the institute that would be named The Amsterdam School of Communications Research *ASCoR*. Its mission statement is shown in Table 1.1.<sup>2</sup> ASCoR was officially launched with an opening conference on September 18 and 19, 1997,<sup>3</sup> at the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW), with contributions from the minister of education of the Netherlands and international colleagues, including Robin Mansell (University of Sussex, UK), Peter Dahlgren (University of Lund, Sweden), John Keane (University of Westminster, UK), Thomas Petterson (Harvard University, USA), Rohan Samarajiva (Ohio State University, USA), Jean-Claude Burgelman (Free University Brussels, Belgium), Tamar Liebes (Hebrew University, Israel), and Jane Fulk (USC Annenberg School for Communication,

2 In 2009 “Communications” was replaced with “Communication.”

3 See Appendix 1.2 for an overview of ASCoR's management and staff from 1997.

USA) (van Cuilenburg & Zwier, 1998). Members of parliament, government officials, publishers, and representatives of communication agencies and market research companies also attended the conference. On the second day, a valedictory ceremony in honour of Denis McQuail was held. His valedictory lecture “Theory as Compass: Competing Lodestones for Communication Research” was the concluding contribution to the conference.

**Table 1.1. ASCoR's Foundational Mission Statement in 1997**

The Amsterdam School of Communications Research (ASCoR) conducts research at an advanced academic level into the political, social, psychological, cultural, and economic aspects of communications infrastructure, contents, and effects. Research addresses the role of media and (tele)communications, nationally and internationally, from the perspective of democracy and processes of opinion and identity formation. As an institute for academic research and training in the field of communications, ASCoR is also a meeting place for scholars, students, and policymakers.

ASCoR aims at high-quality research into the fundamental aspects of communications, its social potential and effects. ASCoR's research is rooted in the empirical tradition and characterised by methodological pluralism. Research is aimed at theory development and testing based on data. ASCoR also addresses applied research questions in the field of communications as part of the school's societal task next to taking the opportunity to learn from real-life situations.

Research in ASCoR also has an eye for normative and ethical issues. ASCoR takes the perspective of “communication toward open societies.” This perspective refers to the situation where senders and receivers of communication may freely exchange messages. Openness in opinion formation is indicated by the processing of diverse information, opinions, and views which may contribute to tolerance of different cultures, views, and groups of people in society.

ASCoR aims to be a truly international research organisation with respect to research topics, publication outlets, PhD students, exchange programmes, and personnel. At the same time, it is a strong wish of ASCoR to collaborate with all Dutch universities in the area of communication research.

## ASCoR's mission and lines of research

Table 1.1 shows that it has been ASCoR's aim from the beginning to contribute knowledge on the production, uses, and consequences of information and communication in informing, persuading, and entertaining citizens, at the individual, group, institutional, and societal levels. Much of this remains in place today. Likewise, ASCoR is still guided by the conviction that research should provide answers to both fundamental scientific, and socially relevant questions, with its focus on an interdisciplinary, empirical approach.

The main lines of research by ASCoR scholars have since 2008 crystallised in the four themes shown in Table 1.2: corporate communication,

persuasive communication, political communication and journalism, and youth and media entertainment. Popular culture was a line of research which, although very successful, unfortunately could not be continued due to the departure of the programme director, Liesbet van Zoonen, who left ASCoR for Loughborough University, UK. Appendix 1.3 lists ASCoR's research programmes and programme directors from 1997.

**Table 1.2. ASCoR's Lines of Research**

|  |
|--|
| <p><i>Corporate Communication</i> focuses on the development, execution, and especially the effects of communication strategies towards internal and external stakeholders of organisations. In this context, this group focuses on mediatisation processes, artificial intelligence and technology use, legitimacy and visibility, and sustainability and diversity.</p> <p><i>Persuasive Communication</i> focuses on marketing and health communication messages, and investigate how companies, consumers, health providers, and clients communicate, and how these interactions influence their attitudes, cognition, and behaviour, with a strong focus on new media technologies.</p> <p><i>Political Communication &amp; Journalism</i> focuses on understanding the role of media and communication in politics and democratic societies. The research is focused on how political news and information is produced, what the features of the contents are, and what the dissemination patterns, uses, and effects are.</p> <p><i>Youth &amp; Media Entertainment</i> focuses on the role of entertainment media in the lives of young people. At its core, research in this group relies on a media psychology paradigm to answer questions about how different users are affected by different media content in different ways.</p> |
|--|

**Cross-fertilisation and acceleration of research via research priority areas (RPAs)**

Cross-fertilisation between ASCoR's lines of research has been stimulated by the university's policy of (competitive) multidisciplinary research priority areas (RPAs) since 2010. At the level of the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences (FMG), as well as the level of the university. In 2010, the FMG decided to fund the RPA Entertainization of Society programme with Patti M. Valkenburg as principal investigator. The programme focused on the intended and unintended effects of entertainisation, which refers to the inclusion of entertainment-related elements, such as emotions, dramatic conflict, and sensational content, in information, education, commercials, and health-education messages. This interdisciplinary RPA included several



ASCoR researchers and colleagues from political science, informatics, psychology, and the medical sciences. One year later, the RPA refocused its programme under the title “Communication” and, now directed by Claes H. de Vreese and Patti M. Valkenburg, investigated the contents, uses, and consequences of media and communication more broadly, pioneering in a renewal of media effects theories.

The RPA Communication was renewed in 2018 by FMG after a positive evaluation of the first years. In this new stage, the RPA launched the Digital Communication Methods Lab (digicomlab), directed by Claes H. de Vreese, Theo Araujo, and Judith Möller. Between 2018 and 2022, the RPA focused on digital communication methods, ranging from mobile communication to artificial intelligence, both as methods and as objects of study. The RPA was successfully completed in 2022 and a plan was approved by ASCoR and the FMG to continue with the Digital Communication Methods Lab as part of ASCoR until at least 2027.

ASCoR researchers continued having a central role in the leadership of other FMG RPAs. The RPA Youth Digitality, launched in 2022, is co-directed by ASCoR's Jessica Taylor Piotrowski and Eline Smit. This RPA focuses on how young people are shaped by the digital world and how they navigate the intricate connections between the offline and online world, digital platforms, and their interactions with society and others in the digital context. Bert Bakker and Christin Scholz have been involved with the launch and coordination of the RPA Polarisation (also launched in 2022), which fosters interdisciplinary examination of causes, consequences, mechanisms, and potential interventions targeting (de)polarisation at the cognitive/individual, social/group, and societal levels. In 2023, the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences launched three new RPAs: Artificial Intelligence & Politics (with ASCoR's Theo Araujo, Hilde Voorveld, and Claes H. de Vreese), Conflict & Society (with ASCoR's Alessandro Nai), and Bridges, bridging social and behavioural science disciplines to galvanizes sustainability (with ASCoR's Marijn Meijers and Anke Wonneberger). In addition, several ASCoR members have participated as members of the FMG RPAs during this period.

The success of the RPA format and the interdisciplinary nature of ASCoR's research went beyond the level of the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences. As of 2015, the University of Amsterdam provided funding for the project Personalized Communication, a collaboration between ASCoR's RPA and the university's Institute for Information Law (IViR). Directed by Claes H. de Vreese and Natali Helberger, this programme focused on empirical and normative research on the uses, effects, and implications of

personalised communication in the areas of politics, health, and commerce. The Personalized Communication project was broadened after a successful evaluation in 2019, and it was renamed Information, Communication, and the Data Society. The focus became the way artificial intelligence (AI) and algorithms affect the role, impact, and regulation of information and communication in our data society.

ASCoR researchers also have been active members and held leadership roles in other interfaculty RPAs. For example, the RPA Urban Mental Health, a collaboration between FMG researchers and the Faculty of Medicine (A-UMC) and the Faculty of Science (FNWI), is co-directed by ASCoR's Julia van Weert. This RPA focuses on the understanding of the dynamics of mental health problems in an urban environment with special attention to common mental health problems: depression, anxiety, and addiction. The RPA Human(e) AI, a collaboration between FMG, Amsterdam Law School, FNWI, and the Faculty of Humanities (FGw), stimulates new research at UvA on the societal consequences of the rapid development of AI and automated decision-making (ADM) in a wide variety of societal areas, being co-directed by Claes H. de Vreese. The RPA Trust in the Digital Society, a collaboration of FMG, Amsterdam Law School, the Faculty of Economics and Business (FEB), and FGw, focuses on the emerging distrust within our societies and on interventions that re-establish trust and trustworthiness at an interpersonal and institutional level, is co-directed by Theo Araujo. The wide involvement of ASCoR members in all RPAs demonstrates the deep embedding and contributions of ASCoR within the University of Amsterdam.

These multidisciplinary RPA programmes had a major effect on the collaboration of researchers within ASCoR and on collaboration between ASCoR researchers and the wider UvA community. The increase in collaboration within ASCoR can be seen in the growth of the average number of ASCoR authors per publication, increasing from approximately 1.2 in the early 2000s to almost 2 per publication in the early 2020s. An even more notable rise is the collaboration of ASCoR researchers with the wider community—within and outside of UvA—as evidenced by the average number of authors per publication of which an ASCoR member was part, growing from less than 2 in the early 2000s to almost 4 authors in the early 2020s.

## Societal impact

To have a societal impact has always been one of ASCoR's aims, reflected both in its mission-oriented research agenda linked to crucial societal

developments, and in its connection with societal partners, with whom ASCoR members often conduct research and deploy interventions in practice. These partners include the government, policy bodies, NGOs, healthcare organisations, interest groups, media organisations, and companies, among many others. ASCoR researchers often engage in societally relevant discussions by issuing policy advice and public reports, by presentations and publications for societal partners, in their media appearances, and in their active contributions as members of several advisory boards of (public) institutions.

ASCoR's societal engagement history is too long and varied for an exhaustive list. Some notable examples in the past five years include the activities of its members during the COVID-19 pandemic, issuing advice and reports for policymakers and public health professionals,<sup>4</sup> or the institute's partnership with a leading national newspaper and polling agency to research the Dutch 2021 parliamentary elections.<sup>5</sup> They also include a variety of public reports on key societal challenges, such as public perceptions about artificial intelligence<sup>6</sup> or social media usage, and the well-being of adolescents.<sup>7</sup> They also encompass interventions with public institutions or societal partners, such as an initiative to measure and improve the digital competence of Dutch citizens<sup>8</sup> in collaboration with the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations. Moreover, ASCoR members also provided research-based (policy) advice on multiple topics, such as on the disclosure of online sponsored content for minors in collaboration with the Dutch Media Authority, to the Trimbos Institute on drugs and addiction, to the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport on the development of health interventions, or to policymakers on micro-targeting. ASCoR members are also members of several (advisory) boards of key societal or public organisations, including of the European Digital Media Observatory and its Dutch–Flemish counterpart,<sup>9</sup> a collective of fact-checking organisations, media literacy experts, and academic researchers focusing on disinformation, the Complaints Council for the Netherlands Institute for the Classification of Audiovisual Material (NICAM), or of the Netherlands Gambling Authority, among many others.

Important vehicles for ASCoR's societal impact objectives are its affiliated research centres that collaborate with societal actors and disseminate

4 [https://www.healthcommunication.nl/blog/category/covid\\_19](https://www.healthcommunication.nl/blog/category/covid_19).

5 <https://www.ioresearch.nl/actueel/digitale-campagne-politieke-partijen-onder-de-loep/>.

6 [https://www.digicomlab.eu/reports/2018\\_adm\\_by\\_ai](https://www.digicomlab.eu/reports/2018_adm_by_ai).

7 <https://www.awesomescience.nl/publieksrapport>.

8 <https://www.dedigiq.nl>.

9 <https://edmo.eu/> and <https://benedmo.eu/>, respectively.

scientific knowledge. They include SWOCC (Foundation for Scientific Research on Commercial Communication, founded by the highly respected advertising practitioner and professor Giep Franzen),<sup>10</sup> CPC (Center for Politics and Communication),<sup>11</sup> CcaM (Center for Research on Children, Adolescents, and the Media),<sup>12</sup> and ACHC (Amsterdam Center for Health Communication).<sup>13</sup> In addition, ASCoR has endowed chairs that provide a bridge to society. These include the Chair in Strategic Communication, established by Logeion, the platform for communication professionals, the Chair in Customer Media, established by the Customer Media Chair Foundation, and the Chair in Information Society, established by the Royal National Library of the Netherlands.

### ASCoR's PhD programme

Today ASCoR's PhD programme follows the department's PhD programme that started in 1993 with the first generation of PhD students. The pre-ASCoR generation of students were supervised by Denis McQuail and Peter Neijens and included Simone Bergman, Lilian van der Bolt, Patrick Hendriks, Bart van den Hooff, Andra Leurdijk, John Nouwens, Edith Smit, Marit Vochteloo, and Mir Wermuth.

The main aim of ASCoR's PhD programme is to promote the training of young academics in the study of fundamental scientific research issues in the field of communication science. Students are trained to extend, deepen, and actively apply their knowledge of theories and methodologies in order to become fully qualified, independent researchers. The programme prepares students for careers in academia or to take up research, consulting, or management positions in market and opinion research organisations.

To achieve these goals, students are offered a combination of research, coursework, and teaching tasks. Research, including data collection, is conducted throughout the project. The project proposal is usually written by senior ASCoR faculty and fits into the ASCoR research programme. A PhD project consists of three or more studies, typically leading to peer-reviewed articles. PhD students are usually required to teach in the bachelor's programme so that they can develop into full-fledged scholars. The final

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.swocc.nl>.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.polcomm.org>.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.ccam-ascor.nl>.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.healthcommunication.nl>.

project months are devoted to finishing the thesis, based on the articles written throughout the project. After approval of the thesis by a committee of experts, there is a public defence.

ASCoR was fortunate to have a very talented group of PhD students in its first cohort, including PhD students who later became full professors, including Moniek Buijzen, Mark Deuze, Jochen Peter, and Claes H. de Vreese (Table 1.3 shows the alumni who have become full professors). The programme has grown strongly over the years, and it currently has 35 students from countries including Germany, the UK, India, China, Sudan, and the Netherlands. In total, ASCoR's PhD programme has led to around 200 doctorate degrees. Alumni of the programme continued their careers in academia, in research institutes, and outside the university.

**Table 1.3. ASCoR's PhD Alumni who Became Full Professors  
(Graduation Year in Brackets)**

|  |
|--|
| Marjolein Antheunis (2009)—Tilburg University                                  |
| Theo Araujo (2015)—ASCoR, University of Amsterdam                              |
| Hajo Boomgaarden (2007)—University of Vienna                                   |
| Moniek Buijzen (2003)—Radboud University and then Erasmus University Rotterdam |
| Yael de Haan (2012)—University of Groningen                                    |
| Claes H. de Vreese (2003)—ASCoR, University of Amsterdam                       |
| Mark Deuze (2002)—Faculty of Humanities, University of Amsterdam               |
| Bart van den Hooff (1997)—Free University Amsterdam                            |
| Martin Kroh (2003)—Bielefeld University  |
| Sanne Kruijkemeier (2014)—Wageningen University                                |
| Sophie Lecheler (2010)—University of Vienna                                    |
| Judith Moller (2013)—University of Hamburg                                     |
| Jochen Peter (2003)—ASCoR, University of Amsterdam                             |
| Stijn Reijnders (2006)—Erasmus University Rotterdam                            |
| Esther Rozendaal (2011)—Erasmus University Rotterdam                           |
| Edith Smit (1999)—ASCoR, University of Amsterdam                               |
| Roderick Swaab (2005)—INSEAD, Paris  |
| Damian Trilling (2013)—Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam                            |
| Caroline Wagner (2004)—Ohio State University                                   |
| Tamara Witschge (2007)—University of Groningen                                 |

## What contributed to ASCoR's trajectory?

In this section, we reflect on the factors that may have contributed to ASCoR's trajectory. Subsequently, we discuss ASCoR's orientation on media technological and societal changes, including its international, funding, output, and research methods orientation, as well as individual factors.

## Media technological and societal changes

The many exciting developments in the media and communication landscape and their challenges and opportunities for individuals, organisations, and society gave rise to fundamental research questions that became part of ASCoR's agenda. These developments ranged from the liberalisation of the telecom markets and the arrival of commercial broadcasters in ASCoR's early years, via the rise of digital, online, social, and mobile media, to the widespread application of big data and AI in media and communication. Media and communication became omnipresent, affecting all aspects of life, including politics, economics, health, and well-being. This continues to make ASCoR's research extremely relevant for policymaking, organisations, and individuals (Neijens & Valkenburg, 2024, this volume).

## International orientation

From the outset, communication science in the Netherlands was internationally oriented. The founder of the discipline in the Netherlands, Kurt Baschwitz, became a driving force behind various international initiatives, including the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR), currently one of the biggest international communication associations worldwide. He also founded the English-language journal *Gazette* (currently *International Communication Gazette*) in 1955 (van Ginneken, 2018; Wieten, 2005).

The international orientation of communication science at the University of Amsterdam was significantly strengthened further with the appointment of Denis McQuail as full professor of communication science in 1977. McQuail had relocated from the University of Leeds in the UK, where his earlier research about the influence of television on election outcomes had already drawn broad attention from colleagues in Europe and the United States. As a result of McQuail's tenure in Amsterdam, the department extended collaborations with colleagues across Europe and North America during this period. McQuail is well-known for his book *Mass Communication Theory*, which has sold over 150,000 copies worldwide and has been translated in 22 languages so far. ASCoR alumnus Mark Deuze now carries the legacy of McQuail, updating and publishing new editions of the textbook.

ASCoR had an international and specifically Anglo-Saxon focus since its creation. The aim of ASCoR has always been to present its research at international conferences organised by IAMCR, the World Association for Public Opinion Research (WAPOR), and the International Communication

Association (ICA), the largest communication association worldwide), as well as to publish in the leading English-language academic journals in the field. The international orientation of ASCoR was also reflected in the appointments of professors Holli Semetko (from the USA) and Klaus Schönbach (Germany) in the early years of ASCoR.

The 1990s were also marked by a strong belief that internationalisation was key when the world was globalising at a rapid pace, particularly for a relatively small country such as the Netherlands. At that time, the Dutch government and academic funding organisations had already begun to invest heavily in the internationalisation of Dutch academia in order to make it a focal point of recognition and funding of academic research. With increasing globalisation and the rise of the internet, it had also become apparent that English would be the international leading language for the next decades to come, and ASCoR embraced this trend.

The international orientation of ASCoR is also shaped by ASCoR's International Advisory Board, which since 2015 has consisted of leading experts in the field. Currently its members are Amy Jordan (Rutgers University, USA), Frank Esser (University of Zurich, Switzerland), Robin Nabi (University of California, Santa Barbara, USA), Mette Morsing (Copenhagen Business School, Denmark), Dhavan Shah (University of Wisconsin-Madison), and Michael Slater (The Ohio State University, USA).

The international orientation of ASCoR did not mean that ASCoR does not also play an important role for communication science in the Netherlands. This is evident from its leadership of the national research school, the Netherlands School of Communications Research (NeSCoR), and its important contributions to the national scientific journal *Communication Science* and to the Netherlands–Flanders Communication Association (NeFCA).

### **Funding orientation**

Funding opportunities are important policy-steering instruments in academia. In the early years, communication science at the University of Amsterdam lacked sufficient funding, while student numbers increased massively. As a result of the imbalance between funding and student numbers, the Dutch Inspectorate of Education highlighted, at the end of the millennium, the need to increase and stabilise the financial support for the communication science programme, ensuring its long-term sustainability. The University of Amsterdam eventually followed these recommendations.

In the late 1990s, the University of Amsterdam wanted to strengthen its research and education capacity by becoming a conglomerate of strong

research and education institutes instead of a centralised university. Teaching institutes and research institutes were, therefore, given more autonomy, including more control over the acquisition and spending of budgets. The founding of the communication science research institute around this time thus meant more control by the discipline over research funding.

Despite assuming an improved financial position, funding for communication science research in the new research institute was not secure. In the 2000s, the Dutch government had already begun withdrawing funds from universities and transferring increasingly higher shares of these funds to the Dutch Research Council (NWO). The government's goal for Dutch academic research was to become more competitive and to secure the country a forefront position internationally. The NWO was entrusted with the task of selecting the most successful researchers and projects for funding. For ASCoR, this was another arena where it could gain more sustained recognition and funding.

## Output

Having a primarily Anglo-Saxon orientation, ASCoR was aware that specific forms of academic research output were increasingly becoming key indicators of success. This trend had started earlier at American universities, where publications in academic research journals were an important criterion for research funding and job promotions, and PhD theses were typically completed within four years after the start of a doctoral programme. The same criteria were increasingly used by the UvA and the NWO to define research success and allocate funding.

In line with the new indicators of research success, the allocation of research time within ASCoR became tied to research publications. This policy increased the chances of success in obtaining competitive grants from the NWO, and soon after ASCoR's foundation the first grants were allocated to communication science at the UvA. PhD research projects at ASCoR were conceptualised by senior faculty and included a series of studies and papers to be written for academic research journals. This ensured that PhD research projects were highly structured and usually finished within the allocated time. Moreover, the projects regularly resulted in several publications in (leading) international journals, giving candidates strong starting positions for further academic careers. Overall, ASCoR's policy thus ensured that key indicators for research success of UvA as well as the NWO were increasingly met. This led to additional recognition and funding, which in turn contributed again to possibilities for further high-quality research and publications.



## The integrating role of research methods

ASCoR's strong empirical orientation was highlighted in its foundational mission statement, which stated: "ASCoR's research is rooted in the empirical tradition and characterised by methodological pluralism. Research is aimed at theory development and testing based on data." These aims have materialised in ASCoR researchers' strong commitment to methodological rigour as well as in methodological discussions and innovations that often fulfil an integrating role across ASCoR's programme groups.

ASCoR research has been known for its focus on social-scientific research methods, especially within the quantitative tradition, including content analysis, experimental designs, surveys, longitudinal panels, diary studies, experience sampling methods (ESMs), and digital trace data donation. In addition, the community of scholars at ASCoR has embraced a qualitative research tradition, often applying it for theory development within new contexts—ranging from intercultural patient–doctor communication to better understanding of how individuals conceptualise communication with machines.

Throughout the past 25 years, ASCoR researchers have also consistently taken up new analytical methods to answer crucial research questions in an increasingly complex communication environment. Examples of this methodological orientation can be seen in the adoption of analytical methods such as structural equation modelling, mediation, and time series analysis, and, recently, endeavours in computational methods (Trilling et al., 2024) or the usage of idiographic methods of analysis ( $N = 1$ ) for theorising person-specific media effects (Valkenburg et al., 2024).

ASCoR's methodological orientation is reflected in the formation of the Digital Communication Methods Lab—originally as part of the RPA Communication and now an integral part of ASCoR—which focuses on developing and applying a range of innovative digital and computational methods to communication research. The methodological orientation also includes the commitment to open source research software development, supporting, for example, infrastructures for content analysis, experiments with conversational agents, or data donation pipelines (Trilling et al., 2024, this volume). In addition, ASCoR aims to support, broaden, and institutionalise Open Science and FAIR data principles, not only in its research, but also in its PhD training programme and in the methodological support of the teaching programmes of the Communication Science department, notably the research master's programme at the Graduate School of Communication.

## Individual factors

In addition to the structural factors that have influenced the development of ASCoR, it is the researchers who have made ASCoR what it is today. This includes all ASCoR researchers, PhD students, and support staff. With their commitment and talent, they acquired the grants, the insights, as well as the publications, and they contributed to the development of the discipline. Some examples: Former and current ASCoR members include a recipient of the Spinoza Prize (also known as the “Dutch Nobel Prize,” the highest Dutch scientific award for researchers who belong to the absolute top of science), as well as recipients of European Research Council (ERC) grants, NWO Veni, Vidi, Vici grants, and NWO Gravitation grants. Former and current ASCoR members have been elected president of the ICA, been named a fellow of the ICA, became ICA division chairs, served as presidents of the European Advertising Academy, held international leading positions (such as editors-in-chief or associate editors of flagship journals in our discipline), received the Career Award from NeFCA, been chosen as members of KNAW, been named as chair of the De Jonge Akademie (The Young Academy), been appointed distinguished university professors, held the position of chair of the SSH Council of the Netherlands, received best paper awards at conferences, and served as members of government and industry bodies.

## To conclude

In its first 25 years, ASCoR has met the goals it outlined in 1997, when its 35 members articulated ASCoR’s first research programme. It has continuously produced high-quality research “rooted in the empirical tradition and characterised by methodological pluralism,” with a focus on communication’s social potential and effects. It has become an international organisation, with a vibrant PhD programme and a large community of researchers with a broad set of research topics and numerous collaborations with universities in the Netherlands and across the globe.

The institute’s development across these 25 years has been both a reflection of the time and of the academic environment in the Netherlands and internationally. Some of the factors and policies that have led to its productivity and international orientation also have triggered discussions—not only in ASCoR, but also in other research institutes and research policy bodies in the Netherlands—about the risks of focusing on success indicators such

as the number of publications or acquired funding, a highly performance-oriented culture, and publication pressure.

Throughout the past 25 years, ASCoR has often adjusted its priorities with an eye towards the future of its faculty and with a strong dedication to fulfil its academic and societal mission. While present since the institute's foundation, the emphasis on collaborations and teamwork has increased throughout the years, with a renewed focus on team science and the deployment of large-scale collaborative thematic data collection with participation of many ASCoR members. This emphasis on teamwork is also reflected in the strong collaboration between ASCoR and the teaching institutes—namely the College of Communication and the Graduate School of Communication—as evidenced by the launch of large-scale research and teaching departmental initiatives, such as Communication in the Digital Society, and Mis-/Disinformation.

The institute, now with over 90 members and a PhD programme with about 35 candidates, continues to move forward and to navigate a dynamic and complex (inter)national environment. Building on its foundations, the institute continues its emphasis on interdisciplinary collaboration and team science, on its methodological strengths, on creating lasting societal impact, and on increasing the diversity of its perspectives and of its international collaborations—all the while continuously looking for ways to create room for everyone's talent in line with the national discussions on Recognition & Rewards.<sup>14</sup>

By now, communication has been recognised as a central topic in societal debates and as key component in addressing crucial societal challenges and crises. One cannot think, for example, about solving the societal challenges articulated in the University of Amsterdam strategic plan's pillars—Responsible Digital Transformations, Resilient and Fair Society, Healthy Future and Sustainable Prosperity—without considering the role of media and communication. The ASCoR community continues to rise to the challenge by expanding and accelerating its research aimed at addressing these crucial societal issues.

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## About the authors

**Peter Neijens** is an Honorary Fellow and Emeritus Professor at ASCoR. He held the Chair in Media and Persuasion at the University of Amsterdam until 2019. His research focuses on persuasive communication, in particular media use and effects in advertising and public opinion. He was co-founder and scientific director of ASCoR from 1998 to 2005 and of the Graduate School of Communication from 2009 to 2013. Email: P.C.Neijens@uva.nl

**Sandra Zwier** is Senior Lecturer at the Department of Communication Science. She was the Research Manager of ASCoR during its foundational decade (1997–2007). E-mail: S.M.Zwier@uva.nl

**Claes H. de Vreese** is Distinguished University Professor of AI and Society with a special emphasis on media and democracy. He co-directs the Gravitation Programme AlgoSoc and the AI, Media and Democracy Lab. He holds the Chair in Political Communication and was Scientific Director of ASCoR from 2005 to 2013. E-mail: C.H.deVreese@uva.nl

**Jochen Peter** is a Full Professor and holds the Chair in Media Entertainment at ASCoR. He is Programme Group Director of Youth & Media Entertainment at ASCoR. He was Scientific Director of ASCoR from 2013 to 2017. His research centres on emerging technologies and the psycho-social development of young people. E-mail: J.Peter@uva.nl

**Rens Vliegthart** is a Full Professor and holds the Chair in Strategic Communication at Wageningen University & Research. Previously he held the Chair in Media, Organisations, and Society and, from 2018 to 2022, was the Scientific Director of ASCoR. His research focuses on media content and effects, both on citizens and public opinion, as well as on politicians and political decision-making. E-mail: Rens.Vliegthart@wur.nl

**Theo Araujo** is a Full Professor of Media, Organisations and Society, and Scientific Director of ASCoR as of 2022. His research investigates the dynamic interplay between media and organisations, and what it means for society, with a special focus on trust and technology. His research has also a methodological focus on computational communication science and the implementation of large-scale data collection and analysis for communication research. E-mail: T.B.Araujo@uva.nl

## **Appendix 1.1. Full professors (chair holders) in communication science and their fields of study (*leeropdracht*) at the UvA appointed in the pre-ASCoR period**

### **Mass communication pillar**

Kurt Baschwitz (1947–1956)

Theory of the press, public opinion, and propaganda; Press science and mass psychology

Vacancy (1956–1958)

Maarten Rooij (1958–1972)

Theory of communication media, especially the press

Vacancy (1972–1977)

Denis McQuail (1977–1997)

Mass communication

### **Mass psychology pillar**

Marten Brouwer (1971–1994)

Psychology of collective behaviour; Political psychology

Holli Semetko (1995)

Audience and public opinion research

### **Public information systems pillar**

Jan van Cuilenburg (1988)

Informational aspects of public information systems; Communication policy

### **Other chairs**

Cees Hamelink (1983)

International communication

Joan Hemels (1986)

History of the press, propaganda, and public opinion; Communication history

*Note: Within brackets: date of appointment as full professor. An end date is included if the person had left before ASCoR was launched.*

*Source: <https://albumacademicum.uva.nl>*

## Appendix 1.2. ASCoR's management and staff from 1997

### Directors

Jan van Cuilenburg (1997)  
Peter Neijens (1998–2005)  
Claes H. de Vreese (2005–2013)  
Jochen Peter (2013–2017)  
Rens Vliegenthart (2018–2022)  
Theo Araujo (2022–)

### Research managers

Sandra Zwier (1997–2007)  
Maaïke Prangma (2008–2015)  
Bas Sietses (2014–2017)  
Jasper van de Pol (2018)  
Amber van der Wal (2019–)

### Office support

Margriet Smit  
Pieke Assmann  
Maaïke Dudink  
Kathleen Hair  
Irene Lannoye  
Willemijn van Maanen  
Esther Nipperus  
M. Pitambersingh  
Miriam van der Putte  
Hester Riethof  
Ania Tekien  
Berry Vermolen

### Policy advice

Tijmen Lansdaal

### Data stewards

Aino Koho  
Monica Lodi

## Appendix 1.3. Research programmes and programme directors from 1997

### Until 2000

Communication, organisation, and policies (Jan van Cuilenburg, Jo Bardoel, Jan de Ridder, Betteke van Ruler)

Communication effects (Holli Semetko, Cees van der Eijk, Peter Neijens)

Media, audiences, and culture (Klaus Schönbach)

### 2001–2007

Media, journalism, and public opinion (Klaus Schönbach)

Media entertainment and popular culture (Patti M. Valkenburg, Liesbet van Zoonen)

Persuasive communication (Peter Neijens)

### 2008–2013

Corporate communication (Rens Vliegthart, programme launched in 2013)

Persuasive communication (Edith Smit, Julia van Weert)

Political communication and journalism (Klaus Schönbach, Claes H. de Vreese)

Youth and media entertainment (Patti M. Valkenburg, Hans Beentjes)

### 2014–2019

Corporate communication (Martine van Selm, Rens Vliegthart, Piet Verhoeven, Claartje ter Hoeven, Toni van der Meer)

Persuasive communication (Guda van Noort)

Political communication and journalism (Claes H. de Vreese)

Youth and media entertainment (Jessica Taylor Piotrowski, Jochen Peter)

### From 2019

Corporate communication (Christian Burgers, Toni van der Meer, Piet Verhoeven)

Persuasive communication (Marieke Fransen, Guda van Noort, Eva van Reijmersdal, Hilde Voorveld)

Political communication and journalism (Linda Bos, Claes H. de Vreese)

Youth and media entertainment (Jochen Peter)



