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How Technological and Societal Developments Shaped the Agenda of ASCoR

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2. How Technological and Societal Developments Shaped the Agenda of ASCoR

Peter Neijens and Patti M. Valkenburg

Abstract

This chapter highlights characteristic lines of research in the 25-year history of the Amsterdam School of Communication Research (ASCoR) against the backdrop of key technological launches and changes in the media and communication landscape. We roughly distinguish four subsequent eras over the past 25 years. Each of the four eras, with their unique media developments and issues, gave rise to fundamental research questions that became part of ASCoR's agenda. Our overview also shows the programmatic mission of ASCoR's research throughout its history: The development of theories that help us understand the rapidly changing digital society, along with a strong emphasis on empirical research to explore, confirm, or disconfirm these theories.

Keywords: media and communication scholarship, institutional development, discipline formation, media and communication research, media history

Introduction

Over the past 25 years, the topics on the research agenda of the Amsterdam School of Communication Research (ASCoR) ranged from political communication to entertainment, from health communication to (deceptive) advertising, and from public opinion to family relations, and included communicators such as journalists, social media influencers, robots, and chatbots. Since the

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foundation of ASCoR in 1997, its mission has been to contribute to knowledge and insights about the way media and communication influence society, organisations, and individuals. In doing so, the institute takes a broad view of media and communication, including traditional media (e.g., television) and new technologies (e.g., social media, virtual assistants, and robots), mass communication, and (mediated) interpersonal communication.

On the occasion of its 25th anniversary, we reflect on the contributions ASCoR has made to the international scientific community and society. Communication science is unique in the sense that no other social science discipline has centred its expertise around technological changes and their impact on individuals and society at large. Our goal is to put the contributions in this book in the perspective of the history of ASCoR's research agenda, and to show how its research has evolved, and how that research has responded to key changes in media and communication.¹

It is impossible to discuss all studies and contributions of ASCoR over the past 25 years, considering that researchers in ASCoR have published over 3,000 refereed articles, books, and book chapters in this period. What we have in mind for this chapter is to highlight several characteristic lines of research against the backdrop of key technological launches and changes in the media and communication landscape of the past 25 years. In the next section we present a list of these changes and we roughly distinguish four subsequent eras. In the sections that follow we discuss typical studies from each era, selecting examples from the different research groups. Some studies included in this chapter, which are exemplary for the period in question, were not published until later due to, among other things, lengthy review and publication processes. For this chapter 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 information from these reports to inform our overview and adopted the verbatim descriptions of the research programme and mission whenever appropriate.

Technological developments in the digital society: Four eras

It is almost a truism: The past 25 years have witnessed numerous fundamental changes in the media and communication landscape. Many of these changes have been important impetuses of ASCoR's research agenda.

1 A more extensive and broader perspective on the recognition and development of communication science in the Netherlands can be found in Hemels (2017).

Table 2.1 shows key technological launches and media changes influencing ASCoR’s research, from the liberalisation of the telecom markets in the pre-ASCoR period, and the start of the internet with relatively “simple” affordances in the early years, through the rise of digital, online, social, and mobile media, to the widespread application of big data and AI in media and technology.

Table 2.1. Key Media and Communication Launches from 1989

1989	Liberalisation of the telecommunication markets; rise of commercial broadcasters
1993	Internet for the general public (in the Netherlands)
1997	ICQ
1999	MSN Messenger; Nu.nl; Epinions
2001	Smart phones (Ericsson, BlackBerry)
2002	Google Search (Dutch language)
2002	Google News
2003	Skype
2004	Facebook (USA)
2005	Hyves (Dutch social medium); YouTube; Google Review
2006	Twitter
2008	iPhone (in the Netherlands)
2008	Facebook (Netherlands); App Store
2009	WhatsApp
2009	News apps
2010	Instagram; iPad
2011	Facebook’s Messenger; Snapchat
2012	Tinder; Google Play Store; NOS app (Netherlands)
2017	TikTok
2022	ChatGPT; DALL-E; Bard; Ernie

In this chapter, we roughly distinguish four subsequent eras in the development of media and communication technologies. First, the Deregulated Media Markets Era, in the Netherlands from about 1990, which was late compared to other countries in Europe (Bardoel & van Cuilenburg, 2003). This first era is characterised by the liberalisation of the telecommunication markets, the arrival of commercial broadcasters, and the modest start of the internet.

In the second era (from about 2002) the emergence of digital technologies stimulated developments such as online news, games and intranets. Particularly relevant for this era is that Facebook (2004), YouTube (2005) and other social media entered the market. We label this the Online and Social Media Era.

Starting in 2007, after the introduction of the iPhone, our screens progressively moved from our desktops to our pockets so that we became permanently connected online. In this third era digital media and communication became omnipresent, influencing all aspects of life. This era also shows a trend toward the personalisation of media content, tailored to our interests, predispositions, and needs. We call this the Mobile and Personalised Communication Era.

The final era that we distinguish is the Big Data and AI Era. This era started around 2015. From that year, media applications collect massive amounts of data of their users, and AI infiltrates these applications with algorithms, augmented and virtual reality, chatbots, and virtual assistants. Challenges and opportunities that this era offer include misinformation and manipulation, algorithmic bias and discrimination, privacy concerns, and the increasing importance of influencers.

The Deregulated Media Markets Era (from approx. 1990)

Until 1990, the telecommunications companies (mail and telephone) in the Netherlands were state owned, there was only public broadcasting, and the internet was not yet a significant factor. The liberalisation of the telecommunications market (in 1989), the rise of commercial broadcasters (in 1989), and the launch of early internet applications (about 1993) completely changed the media landscape, leading to dual markets (public and commercial channels), (increased) competition, advertising dependency, the rise of new “popular” media formats, and the fragmentation of audiences. These fast changes in media market structures triggered debates about the quality of the media on offer and the governance of media as public good. These questions and concerns became a vital source of inspiration for studies in the pre-ASCoR and the early ASCoR period.

A first set of research questions involved the impact of the new market structures on media performance characteristics such as openness, diversity, social responsibility, and accountability, and its implications for media policy. Based on general economic theories and longitudinal studies on television, newspapers, and professional information markets in different countries, Jan van Cuilenburg and Richard van der Wurff showed that moderate levels of media competition and concentration in media markets improved innovation and diversity, whereas ruinous competition produced excessive uniformity of media products (van der Wurff & van Cuilenburg, 2001). Which policies could contribute to media market performance was

examined by Jo Bardoel and Leen d'Haenens (2004). They assessed (best) practices in Europe and argued for accountability mechanisms, such as an ombudsperson, types of self-regulation, and types of public consultation (e.g., civic journalism).

Another development in the changing media markets was the declining interest in traditional newspapers and the emergence of free and online newspapers. A team led by Klaus Schönbach conducted a large-scale study on the use, reception, and effects of traditional media compared to online media. Traditional media such as newspapers, magazines, television, and radio, offer pre-arranged information, often also contextualised and interpreted (i.e., “display media”). Online media invite its users to put together one's own individual news and information diet (i.e., “search media”), with possible consequences for the user's knowledge about public affairs. Results from their study showed that both display and search media can make readers aware of a wide range of public affairs—but only in specific segments of society. Whereas people with little interest in public affairs seemed to profit from printed newspapers, only the best-educated group of online readers showed a greater diversity of topics of interest (Schoenbach et al., 2005).

Piet Bakker's research focused on the new free dailies that were becoming popular at the time (e.g., *Metro*, *Spits*), which were distributed via supermarkets and train stations. Bakker (2007) showed that the consequences of the new free dailies for current affairs journalism were quite minimal, as the professional level of their journalists did not differ from that of journalists of traditional (subscription) newspapers. He also showed that the introduction of free newspapers had a downward effect on the revenues of traditional newspapers, as pressure on advertising markets had increased, damaging the financial bases of most incumbent publishers.

The arrival of commercial broadcasters on the market and the associated increased competition among media channels led to the emergence of popular media formats such as talk shows, soap operas, and infotainment programmes, which were studied by Liesbet van Zoonen and colleagues. They investigated how politicians, women, and minorities were represented in these programmes, and how these programmes contributed to the construction of meaning, identity, and citizenship in its users. It was shown, for instance, that the popular media formats facilitated political communication that produced highly personalised and schematic frames that are characterised by moral rather than political evaluations (van Zoonen, 1998). Kees Brants (1998) concluded on the basis of his research that the alleged dangers of the new infotainment format (e.g., little attention to political content; negative campaigning) were based on questionable premises.

The increasing importance of European integration for Europe-wide and national politics during this period led to studies on agenda setting, priming, and framing of European integration in the news and their impact on public opinion, European elections, and European Union (EU) referendums. Holli Semetko and her colleagues employed a multi-method approach, including interviews with journalists, newsroom observation, content analyses of media and party programmes, longitudinal surveys (in all EU countries), and experiments. It was shown that news frames have important effects on opinions about political and economic issues, on how Europeans think about European integration and the single currency, and how this relates to country characteristics (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; Semetko et al., 2000).

The Online and Social Media Era (from approx. 2002)

Around 2002, ASCoR started researching the social implications of “social media,” a term that had not yet been widely accepted at the time. Although mobile phones already existed, social interaction was still mainly via desktops. In this period, ASCoR researchers massively started to uncover the ethical, individual, and societal consequences of “online communication,” “computer-mediated communication” (CMC), “intranets” (private networks within organisations), and “information and communication technologies” (ICTs) in organisations and families and among citizens, patients, and peers.

In the organisational context, CMC started to play an increasingly important role. The intended and unintended effects of the introduction of new ICTs in organisations were studied by Jan de Ridder and Bart van den Hooff. Topics included the adoption of email in organisations, and the effects of ICTs on social networks and knowledge sharing within and between organisations. For example, Bart van den Hooff conducted several longitudinal case studies into the value of intranets for organisations. His studies showed that the primary value of intranets was in providing information, not in facilitating communication. Moreover, accessibility, user friendly navigation, and a good search engine proved crucial for establishing optimal use and effectiveness of intranets (van den Hooff & de Ridder, 2004).

Around the same period, a team led by Tom Postmes examined the effects of CMC on social processes in interpersonal and group communication within the framework of the social identity model of deindividuation effects (SIDE model). Their research showed that despite the “minimal” transmission of social information afforded by CMC devices, the social effects of information shared in such devices on group identity can be

maximal because normative influences are more accentuated in online than in comparable offline groups (Postmes et al., 2001).

Other researchers investigated the cultural meanings of online communication. For example, Sally Wyatt investigated patients' internet use compared to the use of, and trust in, other sources of information, such as patient folders. Her results revealed that patients rarely rely on one single source of online information but draw on a variety of them (Henwood et al., 2003). Such an active adaptation of the internet and other new media to personal needs also emerged from studies by Liesbet van Zoonen about the uses of the internet in families. She found, for example, that family members often have their unique internet applications to inform and entertain themselves and to maintain their social capital (van Zoonen, 2002).

In 2003, Patti M. Valkenburg and Jochen Peter started to investigate the social consequences of social media focusing on platforms like Hyves, MSN Messenger, and CU2, none of which still exist today. Their publications led to a fundamental re-evaluation of previous, mainly USA-based, research, which at that period had primarily reported negative social consequences of online communication. Together with Marjolijn Antheunis, Alexander Schouten, Susanne Baumgartner, and Sindy Sumter, they showed, for example, that online communication triggers online inhibition, which in turn activates online (sexual) risk behaviour. But they also showed that online communication can result in higher quality friendships and romantic relationships because it induces intimate self-disclosures online, which, in turn, enhance friendship closeness and romantic relationship formation (Antheunis et al., 2007; Baumgartner et al., 2012; Schouten et al., 2007; Valkenburg & Peter, 2009).

The rising popularity of online gaming inspired several ASCoR researchers. For example, Jeroen Jansz and colleagues confirmed in a series of studies with various co-authors (e.g., Jansz & Martens, 2005; Jansz & Tanis, 2007) the stereotype of the gamer (young men who spend a lot of their leisure time on gaming), but also that games are not played in isolation. They showed that motivations with respect to competition, challenge, and social contact were important for gamers. Jeroen Lemmens, Patti M. Valkenburg, and Jochen Peter developed a scale for game addiction and showed that social competence, self-esteem, and loneliness were significant predictors of pathological gaming (Lemmens et al., 2009).

The new high-choice media landscape brought about another new phenomenon, which has been referred to as "brand placement," "sponsored content," or "deceptive advertising." These concepts all refer to the integration of persuasive messages into seemingly non-commercial content with the

aim of influencing the media user. Eva van Reijmersdal, Peter Neijens, and Edith Smit showed that audience characteristics (e.g., attitudes), placement characteristics (e.g., prominence), and contextual factors (e.g., programme type) influence the impact of brand placement on brand knowledge, attitude, and image (van Reijmersdal et al., 2009).

The rapidly expanding commercial media environment called for a better understanding of young people's advertising literacy. Together with Esther Rozendaal, Eva van Reijmersdal, and Patti M. Valkenburg, Moniek Buijzen started a programmatic line of research to understand the potential negative effects of this environment, such as parent–child conflict and materialism (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2003). Buijzen and colleagues also conducted several studies to better understand children's advertising literacy (e.g., Rozendaal et al., 2011). Finally, they introduced an influential framework to understand young people's cognitive and affective processing of commercial content (Buijzen et al., 2010).

Finally, Claes H. de Vreese, Holli Semetdo, and Hajo Boomgaarden continued their research on political communication in the expanding EU with a study of news coverage of the 2004 European parliamentary elections in all 25 member states. Their study provided a unique pan-European overview of the campaign coverage. They found that national political actors (and not EU actors) dominated the news of the elections. In addition, they found that the news in the 15 old member states was generally negative towards the EU, whereas in the 10 new countries a mixed pattern was found, meaning that the broadsheet press and television news were, on average, positive while the tabloid papers were, on average, negative towards the EU (de Vreese et al., 2006).

The Mobile and Personalised Communication Era (from approx. 2007)

This era is characterised by the development of the smartphone and mobile apps and the growth of mobile devices. In 2008, Apple's App store was launched with 500 mobile apps, followed by the Google Play Store in 2012. Although initially the most successful mobile apps were "freemium" games (e.g., *Angry Birds*), mobile apps soon started to cover entire lifestyles, including social networking (Facebook, 2008), dating (Tinder, 2012), news reading (NOS, 2012), book reading (Kindle, 2009), travelling (Uber, 2012), banking (ING, 2013), shopping (Bol, 2014), and even meditation (Calm, 2012). Other hallmarks of this era are the huge trend towards personalised media content, as well as the blurred distinctions between private and public content,

between informative, entertaining, and persuasive content, and between professionally and non-professionally produced media content.

In this era, the same entertainment products (shows, films, video games) can be accessed through an endless stream of mobile channels and devices. This changing entertainment environment inspired Patti M. Valkenburg to investigate the “entertainisation of childhood.” Together with Jessica Taylor Piotrowski, Ine Beyens, and other colleagues, Valkenburg found no evidence for the societal concern that the overwhelming abundance of fast-paced entertainment media would enhance ADHD-like behaviours (i.e., attention problems and impulsivity). On the other hand, they did find that playing video games could stimulate adolescents’ level of problem-solving intelligence (Nikkelen et al., 2014; Fikkers et al., 2019). The results led Valkenburg and Peter to develop the differential susceptibility to media effects model (DSMM) (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013), a transactional media effects model to understand when, why, and who is more or less susceptible to media effects.

Online media offer ample opportunities to personalise or tailor online information to target groups. Ewa Maslowska, Edith Smit, and Bas van den Putte investigated how different personalisation strategies (in which personal cues are added to a message) influenced the effects of the advertising and found, for example, that perceived personalisation increased attention to the message, which stimulated both positive and negative thoughts about the message (Maslowska et al., 2016). Similar work in health communication emerged. Julia van Weert and her team showed that tailoring the type of information to the patient’s personal needs was associated with fewer perceived barriers to medication intake. Tailoring the message to participants’ learning styles and mode preferences increased their motivation to attend and process the information, facilitating learning and recall of information, as well as healthy behaviour change (Smit et al., 2015).

Addressing the role of online media in organisational communication, Ward van Zoonen, Joost Verhoeven, and Rens Vliegthart focused on the use of Twitter by employees in mid- and large-size organisations. Based on an elaborate content analysis, they developed a typology of work-related Twitter use based on the distinction between the profession-related, organisation-related, and work-related content of tweets. They found, for example, that Twitter can enhance the integration of personal and professional life domains, because employees often tweet about their work outside regular work hours, but they also tweet on a personal title when being at their work (van Zoonen et al., 2016).

Another characteristic of this era is the increased agency of individuals to obtain and select online information, for example, via recommendation

systems or reactions to online news or health information. Lotte Willemsen, Peter Neijens, Fred Bronner, and Jan de Ridder studied these new interactive processes within the realm of electronic word of mouth, the sharing of reviews or recommendations on social media or websites. They found that the number and diversity of arguments in the review and its valence (positive or negative) played an important role in its perceived usefulness by readers (Willemsen et al., 2011). Interestingly, Julia van Weert and Bas van den Putte and colleagues concluded that such agency to obtain online information does not benefit all individuals. Individuals with (1) a low health literacy, (2) little ability to evaluate online health information, and (3) little trust in the internet as a source of health information were less able to evaluate online health information than individuals who scored higher on these skills and perceptions (Diviani et al., 2015).

In this period, ASCoR continued in advancing framing effects theory and research, both by focusing on the theoretical underpinnings of the effects (e.g., de Vreese & Lecheler, 2012), the duration (e.g., Lecheler & de Vreese, 2013), and the conditional indirect effects (e.g., Schuck & de Vreese, 2012) showing, for instance, that framing effects on political mobilisation is moderated by prior attitudes and mediated by risk perceptions.

In the field of corporate communication, Toni van der Meer and colleagues studied the framing of organisational crisis situations by the “domains” of public relations (in press releases), the news media (in newspaper articles), and the public (on social media). They showed that the degree of “alignment” (congruence) in the frames differed over the course of a crisis. After the initial phase the domains interact and align their frames (possibly to reduce ambiguity and uncertainty), and in the final phase the frames de-align (move away from each other) according to the specific interests and goals of the domains (van der Meer et al., 2014).

Marieke Fransen and Claartje ter Hoeven (2013) examined how managers and executives can improve the effectiveness of their negative written communications (i.e., refusal of employees’ requests) by incorporating the concept of “fit” into their message framing. They showed that a fit between the framing of the message (using promotion-related or prevention-related terms) and the employee (who focuses either on the attainment of positive outcomes, or on the avoidance of negative outcomes) leads to more favourable outcomes.

Finally, this era witnessed a growing populism in the Netherlands (and beyond). More so than ever, new populist parties started to depend on the media for their electoral breakthrough. This growing populism in the Netherlands was on the research agenda of Linda Bos, Wouter van der Brug,

and Claes H. de Vreese. Indeed, they showed that more successful right-wing populist leaders (e.g., Rita Verdonk, Geert Wilders) were more prominent during the national election campaign in the Netherlands in 2006, and that the most successful right-wing populist leader, Geert Wilders, also appeared more authoritative in the news (Bos et al., 2010).

The Big Data and AI Era (from approx. 2015)

This era is characterised by massive datafication, a rapidly increasing application of algorithms and AI in media and communication devices, and a huge surge in new computational methods, including automated content analyses, machine learning, and machine vision (Trilling et al., 2024). The many new methods to collect fine-grained data on the individual and collective level also came with the proliferation of powerful methods of analysis, such as time series analysis (Damstra et al., 2021), latent growth models (van der Wal et al., 2022), and person-specific analysis (Valkenburg et al., 2021). In this final section, we highlight a few exemplary studies and projects that appeared in this era; other examples of studies and projects typical for this era are discussed in various chapters of this book.

New computational methods were used in a study by Anne Kroon, Damian Trilling, and Tamara Raats on ethnic stereotypes in the news. Using automated content analysis and unsupervised machine learning, they analysed more than 3 million news articles. They showed that, compared with ethnic in-groups, news content proved to implicitly associate ethnic out-groups relatively strongly with low-status and high-threat stereotypes. In addition, they showed that, across time, content about ethnic out-groups has become progressively negative and remote from factual integration outcomes (Kroon et al., 2021). In addition, using a sample of more than 5,300 tweets and about 154,000 retweets from global top brands, Theo Araujo, Peter Neijens, and Rens Vliegthart demonstrated how different types of Twitter users (influencers, information brokers, and strong ties) spread tweets through their networks and in doing so build word of mouth for brands (Araujo et al., 2017).

ASCoR's research during this period included studies of users' perceptions of disembodied conversational agents such as virtual assistants or chatbots. For example, Araujo and colleagues studied the influence of the conversational agents' language, gender, name, and modality on users' perceptions. It was shown that text-based assistants were perceived as more human compared to voice-based assistants (Ischen et al., 2022). Virtual assistants

with a human name were perceived as more persuasive than assistants without a human name (Voorveld & Araujo, 2020), and the warmth (high vs low) of a chatbot's language and the chatbot's assigned gender elicited stereotypes that affected the perceived trust, helpfulness, and competence of the chatbot (Bastiansen et al., 2022).

Robots were central in studies by Jochen Peter and his team. For example, their studies showed that children readily accepted robots and that acceptance was further affected by social, adaptive robot behaviour, children's sex and age, as well as frequency of the interaction (van Straten et al., 2020). Their research also suggests that hedonic considerations (the perception that using the robot is enjoyable and pleasant) and normative considerations (the perception that robot use is approved by the family) predicted children's intention to adopt a domestic social robot (de Jong et al., 2022).

A possible negative effect of AI-driven communication is when it accelerates the spread of misinformation, contributing to problems for media trust and democracy. Hameleers (2021) showed that misinformation and disinformation are seen as relatively credible and persuasive by the public, and that people do not differentiate clearly between fact-free and evidence-based misinformation in their rating of message credibility and issue agreement. Effects of disinformation in the form of deepfakes showed that deepfakes can have the intended harmful effects (Dobber et al., 2021).

Finally, ASCoR's studies into the perception of algorithms also showed that media users' lack understanding of algorithm-driven targeting (Smit et al., 2014). This lack of understanding was especially prevalent among women, the elderly, and the low-educated (Zarouali et al., 2022). Trying to empower media users, for example, by giving them information about the personalisation process, did not influence consumers' motivation to opt out of personalised ads (Strycharz et al., 2019).

To conclude

Our overview shows how the dynamic communication environment and crucial media challenges have inspired ASCoR's research over the past 25 years. Each of the four eras that we discussed—the Deregulated Media Markets Era, the Online and Social Media Era, the Mobile and Personalised Communication Era, and the Big Data and AI Era—with their unique media developments and issues, gave rise to fundamental research questions that became part of ASCoR's agenda. Some of the early issues seem outdated now, for instance, the introduction of email in organisations, or the introduction

of online newspapers—in that time new and highly relevant and researched in influential studies.

Other of the earlier issues became less urgent, but came back: issues of media performance and public policy were highly relevant in the years after the liberalisation of the telecommunication markets and the rise of commercial broadcasters, became less important in a period of media abundance, but are back on the agenda in the current era of Big Tech dominance with issues such as fake news, populism, polarisation, and privacy. Other issues, such as CMC, underwent a fundamentally different meaning with the advent of AI-dominated communication technologies, including social media (TikTok, YouTube, Instagram reels), robots, and chatbots. In this chapter, we have shown how advances in media and technologies have inspired theory formation and the empirical research of communication scholars in general and those of ASCoR in particular.

Our overview also shows the fundamental characteristics of ASCoR's research throughout its 25-year history. The “aim of studies” within ASCoR has always been the development of theories that help us understand the rapidly changing digital society, along with a strong emphasis on empirical research to explore, confirm, or disconfirm these theories. ASCoR's research places a strong emphasis on the different ways people create, use, and experience their media environment. Depending on the interaction between individual dispositions and contextual factors, people may differ considerably in how they use particular media content, how they communicate, and how they experience the consequences of this content. The fascinating range of highly relevant issues—individual, organisational, and societal—emerging from the dynamic developments in media and communication, and their implications for the way we live, work, play, thrive, and connect with others, continue to be a great source of inspiration for ASCoR's researchers.

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