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Media and social communication studies as a new branch of humanistic studies

Abstract: As of 1995, media and social communication studies are considered a new branch of studies, as decided by the Education Council, part of Journalism and Social Communication Department in which students can now obtain Bachelor's and Masters' Diplomas. They are also the subject of various specialisations and post-graduate studies (pedagogy, media education, public relations, media history, new media, etc). So far, this new field has not been classified for doctoral studies or in order to obtain other higher academic titles and degrees. In Poland, the implementation of the three level (Bachelor, Master, Doctoral) Bolognese programme requires a transformation of the programme system and staff education. From the Master level studies should be multi- and interdisciplinary as well as integrated. In this context, an introduction of a new branch would bring some order into the rapid development of this field of studies.

The Central Committee (on Marks and Titles), based on an article from March 14, 2003 on marks and titles in humanities (Dz. U. nr 65, pos. 595, with changes Dz. U. 2005, nr 164, pos. 1365) determines fields and disciplines of study. To this list, on October 24, 2005, added was a new discipline – media and social communication studies. In other countries, such as in the United States, it has been part of the curriculum for some time, by the name *Communication/ Communications* or *Journalism*, and in some European countries, by the German name *Medienwissenschaft* (media studies) or *Kommunikationswissenschaft* (communication studies). In Poland, proper seems to be the name **Media and Social Communication Studies**. The media are considered to be the technical means of social communication, a fundamental element in the social process of information flow within society. Within the field of study are the traditional mass media (press, radio, television) as well as new means (the Internet, mobile technology). While the practical and theoretical importance and influence of media has generally been accepted by everyone, this process is just beginning in academia.

Presently there are several dozen higher education schools which offer Journalism or Social Communication as a field of study, including many private schools (Bachelor Degree level). There are then several thousand students in the country studying this discipline. On the topic, there are also a number of periodicals published, many conferences, projects (KBN grants), hundreds of articles printed, a good number of academic textbooks and a growing number of specialists and researchers, as well as close to a hundred doctoral level experts. All this means that this relatively new field of study in our country is attracting serious interest and, therefore, should be treated as a fully-fledged academic discipline.

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Detailed argumentation for the acceptance of media and social communication studies as a new field of study

Gerald Maletzke, a German media studies nestor, has posed four basic questions which need to be considered when establishing this new discipline¹:

1. What is the area of study and research, where is the borderline between this field and other disciplines?
2. Which fields are related or similar?
3. What is the structure of mass communication studies, what sub-sections or courses can be delineated within the field?
4. Where is its place within the education system?

Re 1. What is the area of study and research, where is the borderline between this field and other disciplines?

The basic subject of study in this field is the press or periodicals, since their beginnings in the XVII century. Hence, in Poland, this discipline is sometimes referred to as press studies. The press has also been a focus in history, legal, statistical, socio-psychological and political studies. Later, with the onset on radio and television, the media became a subject of studies of economy, semiotics and film. It was, however, not a study of mass communication means as a separate subject, with its own terminology or research methods but a study of media in general.

In the XX century the press, radio and television began to be considered together as mass means of production and distribution of broadcasts, also known as mass media (including film and music records). In the area of study, the term *mass media research* and *mass communication studies* began to be used.

Mass communication is a type of indirect communication (with the use of different mediums), public and collective in character. It began to be seen as a new phenomenon in human history, of unique character but, so far, without its own area of study. Press studies, as a branch of mass communication studies, according to Irena Tetelowska, was treated as its own field of study with theories, models, an analysis diagram (sender – broadcast – recipient), methods (content analysis, readership research and telemetrics) and practical information. It differed, however, from studies on individual or group (interpersonal) communication, communication code analyses (language studies, social communication, semiotics, non-verbal communication), direct group communication (rhetoric, theatre studies) as well as specialist communication studies (computer science, technical communication²). Presently, due to the development of new media as well as mobile and network media (including the Internet), the differences are a lot less distinguishable.

Re 2. Which fields are related or similar?

Mass media studies were, since the beginning, developing as interdisciplinary studies, including three basic fields: sociology, psychology and political sciences. It can be debated which of the three was dominant but undoubtedly it was a combination of all three fields. In this case, sociology ceased to be treated as its own separate study or part of mass communication studies but became an integral part of a broader discipline of studies.

¹ Maletzke, Gerald, *Kommunikationswissenschaft im Überblick, Grundlagen, Probleme, Perspektiwen*, Wiesbaden 1998, p. 15.

² Tetelowska, Irena, „Próba określenia przedmiotu nauki o środkach masowej informacji”. Przedruk [in] I. Tetelowska, *Szkice prasoznawcze*, OBP, Kraków 1972, p. 54–73.

The trend is to widen the field of interest and scope of the cooperating disciplines. To the traditional fields added were semiotics and anthropology, language philosophy and mathematical logic. An example of this is a semiotisation of research on communication as an attempt to find a specific perspective for communications research. This is predominantly carried out by French researchers who have, by the way, changed the name of their institutue to Centre d'Etudes des Communications de Masse to Centre d'Etudes Transdisciplinaires: Sociologie, Anthropologie, Sémiologie.

Each separate field of study possesses its own terminology, theoretical systems, and research methods. However, due to the general nature of communication, there is also a tendency for integration of research results and the creation of a new discipline of social studies - communication studies.

One person who has played a central role in the creation of this new field of study was Wilbur Schramm, an American nestor of *communication science*, although, he mentions four other 'founding fathers'.³ According to E. Rogers, Schramm was also the founder of many American academic centres of mass communication⁴. He was the first in the world to obtain the title of *Professor of Communication*. Schramm knew that the focus of research should be the process (and results) of communication which he writes about in his first textbook *Communication in Modern Society* (1948), and which are discussed in one of the most influential books on the subject, also edited by Schramm, *Process and Effects of Mass Communication*, 1954). Schramm, being a philologist, had a good understanding of the process of communication between people, which also aided him in coining the term "communication" as a common name for "all forms of communication between people"⁵. The term's generality allowed many American schools to easily change the field of study "Speech Department" name into "Communication" which is the name used until today⁶. Just as the term "law", which is a general term as well as the name of an academic field of study, the term "communication" is used to describe the process of interaction between people as well as an academic discipline.

Meyrowitz uses the term *medium theory* in order to differentiate it (focus on the development of one specific medium, ie. speech, writing, print, etc.) from *media theories* which many researchers develop⁷. According to Meyrowitz, "medium theory focuses on the characteristics of each specific medium". Generally speaking, theoreticians ask, 'What are the fixed characteristics of each communication medium and which characteristics physically, psychologically and socially differentiate each medium from the others as well in face to face interaction'⁸. The person who has proposed a thorough analysis of media according to the above assumptions was Marshall McLuhan, considered to be the intellectual founding father of media studies (his famous saying, "the medium (transmitter) is the transmission")⁹.

Re 3. What is the structure of mass communication studies, what sub-sections or trends can be delineated within the field?

The communications field of study is part of a more general discipline, that of communication and steering. This, in turn, can be divided into three sub-sections: mass

³ H. Lasswell, P. Lazarsfeld, C. Hovland and B. Berelson ????

⁴ Rogers Everett. *A History of Communication Study: a Biographical Approach*, Free Press., New York 1994.

⁵ Schramm, 1973 ???

⁶ Rogers, 1986 ???

⁷ Meyrowitz, Joshua, "Medium Theory", w *Communication Theory Today*, pod red. D. Crowley and D. Mitchell, Polity Press, Cambridge, England 1996, p. 50-77.

⁸ Meyrowitz, 1994:50 ???

⁹ McLuhan, Marshall, *Zrozumieć media*, tłum. Natalia Sztucka, Wydawnictwa Naukowo-Techniczne, Warszawa 2004.

communication, institutional communication and interpersonal communication. These three sub-sections are not separate but infiltrate and compliment each other. Media digitalisation and convergence lead to a situation where research undertaken takes into consideration two or more of the sub-sections, ie. interpersonal communication within an organization (public sphere).

The two basic trends in this discipline are basic and applied (in other words theoretic (critical) and administrative (practical) research. Another division could be into the traditional academic disciplines (sociological, psychological, political) or trends concentrating on specific elements of the process (political economy of production and distribution of broadcasts, cultural anthropology of reception, semiotics and culture studies based on analysis of media discourse).

Re 4. Where is its place within the education system?

The focus is social communication which can be defined as the flow of information within society. The general theory of communication considers it a process (a collection of processes in a symbolic exchange) which takes place with the use of media. Media are technical means of such an exchange, excluding primary, original, natural means such as speech, gesture, mimicry, etc. The media include picture, sculpture, writing, print, radio, television, telephone, the Internet, etc. Social media are not just technical tools but also people and their methods, including media institutions such as press, radio, TV agencies, film and music shows, advertising agencies, public relations, etc.

Paisley, an American methodologist, proposed a division of social studies (behavioural studies in American terminology) into two types¹⁰. The first he named *levelfields* and these are studies which analyse different levels of social behaviours. An example of such are anthropology, psychology or sociology which all examine behaviours but on different level of analysis. The second type he named *variablefields* and these are studies which evaluate the same variable types of social behaviours, for instance the new branches such as system research, social cybernetics, political or communication studies.

In general, according to Rogers, establishing new study disciplines is rather rare and communication is one of such few examples. This branch, to a greater extent than others, possesses not only an intellectual but also an assessment dimension¹¹. There are two basic issues which need to be considered regarding the media. First - the issue of social integration, or to what extent do the media contribute to increasing social unity and to what extent do they replace other social institutions and directly reach fragmented auditoriums. Second – the issue of totalitarian versus democratic form of exercising power. Do the media aid dictatorships or democracy due to their pluralist nature? Theoretical answers to the above are tied to certain ideological issues such as determining the characteristics of a ‘good’ society.

This way, in the XX century shaped was the theory of communication as a theory of mass media, confirming the fact that social reality influences the development of research in various fields. The theory of communication developed in America where the media were most advanced. To prove this, there is Jeremy Tunstall’s book, *Media are American*, hence it can also be said that “media and communication theory is American”.

Soon developed were various takes on the whole issue, introducing entirely new theoretical perspectives. Two of these are particularly worth noting, these are Marshall

¹⁰ Paisely, W., *Communication Research as Behavioral Discipline*, Institute for Communication Research, Stanford University, Stanford 1972.

¹¹ (McQuail, 2000, p. 34). McQuail, Denis, *Teorie komunikowania masowego*, trans. Maria Bucholc, Wydawnictwa Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2007

McLuhan's historiosophy and Abraham Moles' sociocybernetics. What is interesting is that both of these were created outside the United States, one in Canada and the other in France.

Regardless the criticism that McLuhan's theory has received among scholars and the fact that it is no longer 'trendy', it cannot be denied that it was he who outlined the multilevel influence of mass media on the shape of social reality.

Among European countries which are developing their research on communication a good example is the new French Institute des Sciences de la Communication, the equivalent of Polska Akademia Nauk.

It is not surprising that there is growing interest in this field of study. Presently, there are over 500 various institutes in the United States offering studies in communication although they may have different names (or include specialisations such as in journalism, telecommunications, etc.). There are also over 100 offered doctoral studies programmes. The American Education Department estimates that the number of communication students within the last decade has increased by 1500% which makes it the fastest growing field of study within humanities and social studies¹².

Also in Poland observed can be a dynamic growth in the number of places, staff, students engaged in the subject as well as an increasing number of publications. Between 1996-2001 published were close to 7 000 works on media and communication by almost 5 000 people. This includes publications in dailies, weeklies, academic periodicals and in book form¹³.

Periodicals:

Zeszyty Prasoznawcze (since 1956)

Studia Medioznawcze (since 2000, earlier *Przekazy i Opinie*, 1976-1989)

Media i Kultura (since 2006)

Rocznik Historii Prasy Polskiej (since 1998)

Rocznik Prasoznawczy (since 2007)

Global Media Journal (since 2005)

Media i marketing

Press monthly

Media studies academic series:

-by Jagiellonian University

-by Wrocław University

-*Edukacja medialna* by Wydawnictwa Akademickie i Profesjonalne

-*Nowe media* by Wydawnictwa Akademickie i Profesjonalne

Basic questions and research methods:

The new field of social studies should incorporate issues based on four questions formulated by Thomas Khun:

1. What should be researched?
 - Media and people
2. What research questions should be asked?
 - Who controls the media?
 - What are media?
 - What is media activity and influence?

¹² *Employment Prospects in Communication*, 1995

¹³ W. M. Kolasa, J. Jarowiecki, *Polska bibliografia prasoznawcza 1996-2001*, Kraków 2005, p. 21-22.

3. How should these questions be formulated?
 - based on empirical social studies' methods (including specific methods of content research (content analysis) and recipients (surveys))
4. How should research results be interpreted?
 - based on theories of information – network – media society

Conclusion

The modern world is developing in the direction of growing medialisation of all spheres of life – it is the consequence of social, economic and cultural advancement. The transfer from analogue to digital media as well as from stationary to network or mobile technology has strengthened this trend. Therefore, it seems logical that communication or media studies have become of interest to many scholars and are the subject of extensive research. Hence, they require their own methodology, theories and empirical research which would synthesize various hypotheses and research methods from different perspectives and scientific traditions.

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