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Amsterdam School of Communication Research / ASCoR

ASCoR Research Program 2016-2020

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Introduction

Life in contemporary Western societies heavily depends on media and communication technologies. How we work and how we spend our spare time; what we do as citizens and as consumers; how we relate to others and to ourselves – all of this is now heavily pervaded by new media and communication technologies. The pervasiveness of our current media and communication technologies presents many exciting challenges for communication researchers: Older notions of media and communication need to be reassessed critically; the new media and communication environment needs to be charted; and the consequences of the rapid changes in media and communication need to be studied thoroughly, both for individuals, groups, and societies. These and other important challenges form the context for the fundamental scientific questions and issues that lie at the core of ASCoR's research program 2016-2020.

ASCoR research program 2016-2020

In the past 25 years, we have witnessed an unprecedented change in how we use media and how we communicate. Politics, business, and education as well as our private lives have dramatically changed in the wake of new media and communication environments: Politicians use social media to communicate with their voters and companies and public institutions mine big data in search of business models and new services. Our private lives have also changed fundamentally: The television set, radio, and telephone used to have their fixed place in the house. Now, they are on our smartphones and we use them wherever we are, whenever we want. The changes have been enormous. Who would have guessed some 25 years ago that we would spend considerable time communicating with our friends on social media, apps, and websites? Who would have expected that, in such new media and communication environments, parties would conduct entire political campaigns? Who would have predicted that companies and businesses would radically change how they communicate with their clients? Never before has communication been so immersive and pervasive.

ASCoR has traditionally been at the forefront of research institutes that have recognized and studied the immersiveness and pervasiveness of media and communication environments. This focus preeminently equips ASCoR researchers to deal with three further important developments that guide ASCoR's Research Program for 2016-2020. These developments are the personalization of media content and communication; the increasingly dynamic character of media and communication and environments; and the convergence of media content and communication devices.

Developments guiding the research program

Personalization
The times that everybody received the same information are over. Although newspapers, radio, and television continue to produce content that technically is meant for everyone, the last years have seen, along with an explosion of choice in the media environment, an enormous trend toward the personalization of content. What we encounter is increasingly tailored to our interests, predispositions, and needs, for example on shopping or search websites and on newsfeeds. The content we read, watch, and hear is personalized *for us*, often intentionally, for instance to make us buy particular products. However, we may also encounter content that has been personalized for us unintentionally through the networks we belong to. Because people in our networks are at least to some extent similar to us, they share information with us that often merges with our interests and predispositions. At the same time, content is also personalized *by us*. Through social media, nearly everyone with internet access can create personal information and distribute it to audiences of varying sizes. Similarly, people progressively produce personal information through various tracking devices. The rise of content personalized for us and of content personalized by us presents a significant change in our media and communication environment. It raises important questions, for example, about privacy, societal cohesion, and political participation, to which we need evidence-based answers achieved through rigorous research.

Dynamics

It is hard to think of any epoch in the history of humankind when media and communication has been more dynamic and where public responses have been more rapid and extreme. The changes in our media and communication environments that we have witnessed in the past few decades have happened so quickly and at the same time so profoundly that we are constantly challenged to understand their full implications. With the changes in our media and communication environment bound to continue and possibly accelerate, three important clusters of issues arise. First, digitization, connectivity, and mobility have been at the core of the recent developments in our media and communication environment, and politics, business, companies as well as individual users are constantly confronted with new types of media and communication whose consequences need to be understood. Second, with the dynamics of the media and communication environment comes the opportunity to observe and analyze, across a relatively short time span, crucial longitudinal developments in media use and communication behavior, along with their effects. Third and finally, a longitudinal perspective on media use, communication behavior, and effects also requires us to pay attention to approaches that adequately represent the dynamics of the changes we are witnessing.

Convergence

Until not so long ago, media content could be distinguished clearly along the lines of, for example, its informative, entertaining, or persuasive focus: A news show presented information, a television series entertainment, and a public service announcement tried to persuade people to do something. In the past years, information, entertainment, and persuasion have increasingly converged. Information has become entertainized and traditional entertainment formats have been used to inform or persuade people. However, not only has media content converged, but so has our media and communication environment. Not long ago, we needed a particular device for a particular communicative activity: the newspaper to read the news, the television set to watch a movie, or the telephone to call somebody. Today's devices afford many previously separated activities: We can read the news, watch a movie, and call someone on our smartphones. The convergence of media content and our media and communication environment challenges us to question critically what we know about media use and communication and their effects. At the same time, we need to rethink how we communicate, not only with each other, but also with and through new communication devices. The progressive connectivity of our communication devices will create unprecedented links between our media and communication behavior. As a result, we will have unparalleled control over our communications. Conversely, our communications may also be subject to ever more surveillance and manipulation. The opportunities, but also the risks, of these developments require our utmost attention.

Blurring boundaries – new horizons

Against the background of more personalized communication, the dynamics of media and communication environments, and converging media content and communication devices, many of our traditional notions of communication boundaries become increasingly blurred. At the same time, this opens up new horizons for research. At least three blurring boundaries, and thus new research horizons, are central for ASCoR's research in 2016-2020.

Private – public
As media and communication environments are bound to become ever more pervasive, much of what we previously considered private and public has been blurred. Content that is personalized for us or personalized by us inevitably crosses the boundary between the private and the public. With converging media and communication environments, it is also increasingly difficult for us to separate our private lives from our public or professional lives. Finally, with the networked nature of media and communication, all of our most private data are in principle subject to scrutiny.

Online – offline
It is hard to imagine that only some 25 years ago, there was no such thing as an online life, neither for political institutions and parties nor for companies and individuals. In principle, online and offline activities tended to be separate. Today, a significant part of what institutions, parties, companies and individuals do takes place both online and offline. As a result, the boundaries between what used to be separate worlds have blurred. Campaigns take place on- and offline, companies target consumers on the Internet and outside of it, individuals entertain relationships both through social media and without them, and people often no longer distinguish between on- and offline. Given the trend toward more personalized content and ever more converging media and communication environments, the already blurred boundary between online and offline will likely become even fuzzier.

Professionally produced information vs. Non-professionally produced information
As a result of the digitization, connectivity, and mobility of communication, information in all its variety and diversity has become abundant. Whereas in the era of print and broadcast media, information was usually produced by professionals, today's information is produced by everyone who wants to share it. Given the sheer amount of available information, it has increasingly become more cumbersome and difficult to distinguish between professionally and non-professionally produced information. Users are confronted with the demanding task not only to select appropriate information, but also to evaluate the quality of the information, notably its accuracy and trustworthiness. With progressively personalized content, the ability to see through the blurred relation between professional and non-professional produced information will become crucial, particularly for traditionally underprivileged or disadvantaged groups.

Goals and ambitions

The enormous changes in our media and communication environment have profoundly affected people's lives, at an individual, group and institutional level. A society has emerged in which communication plays a central role. It is the main goal of the ASCoR 2016-2020 research program to explore, analyze, and understand this new communication society. Specifically, the program centers on the theoretical and empirical analysis of the contents, uses, and consequences of media and communication. A particular emphasis lies on understanding the differential character of how people use media content and communicate as well of its consequences: Depending on the interaction between individual dispositions and contextual factors, people may differ considerably in whether and how they use particular media content, how they communicate, and the consequences it elicits.

In addition, the research program stresses the role of the cognitive, affective, and emotional processes that underlie media use and communication and help us to explain its effects. Finally, the research program acknowledges that communication takes place at the individual, group, institutional and societal level as well as across them.

The ASCoR research program 2016-2020 has several more general ambitions. First, the research program aims at developing new concepts and spearheading theoretical developments that help us understand the communication society. Within this context, the program secondly aims at detecting, describing, and analyzing important current and crucial emerging developments in our media and communication environment. Thirdly, the program encourages questions that are initially driven by fundamental questions in communication research, but also address societally relevant issues. By doing so, the program emphasizes the dissemination of knowledge and its implementation in societal processes. Fourth, the program strives to stimulate intellectually rewarding and scientifically creative collaboration between the program groups. Finally, the ASCoR research program 2016-2020 has the ambition to break new ground in important communication scientific issues and thereby facilitate collaboration with the best national and international communication researchers and institutes.

The goals and ambitions of the ASCoR research program 2016-2020 find their home base in several large-scale research projects including the University of Amsterdam's Research Priority Area located at ASCoR, and notably within and across ASCoR's four program groups: Corporate Communication, Persuasive Communication, Political Communication and Journalism, and Youth and Media Entertainment.

Corporate Communication

Program Group Director: prof. dr. R. Vliegenthart

Central in our research in Corporate Communication is the dynamic interaction between organizations, stakeholders, media and the general public. Our focus is on organizations in a broad sense, encompassing corporations, small and medium businesses, non-governmental organizations and (semi-)public institutions, as well as pressure groups, social movements, and other informal and emerging forms of organizations. On the media side, we consider both traditional news media and new media, investigating news in all its forms, including the new (and less conventional) manners in which information is presented, such as entertainization and soft news. Generally speaking, Corporate Communication research follows three overarching themes:

1. The impact of (new) media and technologies within organizations

The first theme focuses on media and information effects within the organization and in particular on (team-level) cooperation, and employee attitudes, perceptions and well-being. New technologies have altered the way employees work (new ways of working) and the way they express themselves (for example, through social media). Research takes place in the context of increasingly blurring boundaries between professional and private life, internal and external communication, and focuses on comparing the effects of online versus offline communication.

2. The construction of news about organizations and their issues

The second theme focuses on understanding how news about organizations and their issues (such as corporate social responsibility, crisis events, employability) comes about and how various actors try to influence the news. It deals with news production, similarities and differences in communication by organizations and actual news content, with a focus on salience of issues and frames. Specific interest lies in how crisis situations moderate the interaction between organizations and media. Guiding theoretical notions are agenda- and frame- building, news value theory, and gatekeeping. Organizations are not studied in separation, but it is taken into consideration that they act in multi-organizational (issue) fields, in which a constant struggle for attention and favorable coverage takes place. In this context, the convergence of media content and blurring boundaries between organization and media, and traditional and new media are deemed important developments that deserve theorizing as well as empirical consideration.

3. The effects of news and information

The third theme deals with state-of-the-art media effects research and focuses on the effects of news and information about (or from) organizations on (segments of) the general public and other stakeholders. Public responses can be considered traditional attitudinal and reputational measures, both at the individual and aggregate level. It also considers attitudes and behavior of specific stakeholders, such as the reflection of traders' perceptions in stock market ratings. Finally, the consequences of the way the general public or specific stakeholders discuss the organization and its issues on social media or mobilize themselves to influence organizational behavior are part of this research theme.

Methodologically, our research relies on a variety of methods, ranging from traditional experimental methods and manual content analyses combined with survey research to intervention studies, interviews, and other types of qualitative research. Furthermore, there is an increasing reliance on computational social science methods and in particular large-scale computer assisted content analysis, using both bottom-up and top-down (machine learning) approaches. A special interest lies in the dynamic over-time interaction between the organizations' communication and portrayal and perceptions in media and among other stakeholders. This comes with a reliance on various types of time series analysis.

Persuasive Communication

Program Group Director: prof. dr. J.C.M. van Weert

A major challenge for communication professionals and policymakers is to optimally use the potential of communication and media to achieve specific persuasive goals in marketing and health communication, while at the same time empower citizens to make informed decisions. The Persuasive Communication research group aims at studying factors that explain the development, reach, processing and effects of professional and consumer-generated messages in marketing and health communication. These factors include individual difference, situational, medium, and message factors. We study how people use media to fulfil their needs in commerce and health, how companies, providers and consumers communicate, and how this influences their attitudes, cognitions and behavior. With the digitization of the media, marketing and health communication are increasingly shifting towards personalization and tailoring. We examine the use and effects of communication strategies that emerge from this shift with a special focus on target audiences at risk. Central in our research is how communication can be used to empower people and to decrease health disparities. Within the increasingly dynamic character of media and communication environments as described in the general part of the ASCoR Research Program 2016-2020, the Persuasive Communication group particularly focuses on the following four research lines:

1. Online media developments

Today's media are characterized by digitization, interactivity, connectivity, mobility, ubiquity, multitasking and fragmentation. Devices such as smart phones and tablets afford reading, watching and listening and are able to integrate and complement previously separated media activities. A major aim of this research line is to understand what influences the perceptions and the way consumers use digital media, and with what consequences, with a specific focus on the use and effectiveness of personalized communication. Within this line, we study the possibilities and challenges of new interactive digital media and technologies such as augmented reality brand applications and location-based advertising apps that blur the lines between online media and offline life. This also includes the possibilities and challenges of health information and communication technologies, such as mobile health apps ("m-health"), for collecting health data and real-time monitoring of health behavior and outcomes.

2. Consumer empowerment

Communication technology not only increases opportunities of personalized persuasion, but also increasingly disguises the use of personalization tactics, which increasingly blurs the boundary between the private and the public. The above described online techniques make use of personal data that are collected via surfing or search behavior, installed apps and games, social media profiles or are bought via list brokers resulting in targeted messages. Within this research line, we study the implications of the shift towards data-driven personalized communication with the aim to disentangle (hidden) persuasion and resistance mechanisms, to inform users about strategies, and to develop tools to empower consumers.

We investigate to what extent people are informed about persuasion techniques (disclosures), to what extent they are able to resist persuasion, and if so, what role this awareness play. This includes how people respond to personalization tactics, whether they are able to disregard persuasion techniques and to balance the trade-off between more personalized, perhaps more relevant messages, and their online privacy.

3. Online and offline interactions

In today's society, interpersonal and mediated communication increasingly intertwine and interact, thereby blurring boundaries between the online and offline world and making it more dynamic than ever before. Communication does not only involve organizations communicating via various media outlets to the public, but also the way in which citizens communicate about this information amongst each other. Moreover, digital environments such as the Internet, social media and mobile devices produce a trail of data that record, often in great detail, interactions between brands/organizations and consumers/patients. This means an increasingly important role for consumer reviews, (e)Word of Mouth, consumer posts on social media, but also for consumers in (viral) campaigns. It also implies a need for companies and organizations to develop adequate webcare. Next to user-generated interactions via the Internet, social media and social devices, we also study offline and online peer-to-peer, parent-child, teacher-student and patient-provider interactions. We investigate how interpersonal interactions interfere with exposure to health interventions and how this influences health behavior. In addition, we study patient-provider interactions and how online activities, such as online health information seeking and the use of digital tools, affect these interactions during consultations and, consequently, patient outcomes.

4. Communication campaigns and interventions

Theory- and evidence-based campaigns and interventions are more effective in the behavior change process than those that are not. In this research line, we apply communication and behavioral theories to design, evaluate, and implement communication campaigns and interventions, with a special focus on the understanding of the underlying mechanisms. We test message design theories and frameworks to gain insight in which content elements, design elements, behavior change techniques, and modes of delivery work best under which conditions for which target group. A major aim is to optimize information processing and outcomes for groups at risk. Campaigns and interventions may vary from school education or blended learning to educational digital tools or behavior change support tools.

Methodologically, mixed methods are used across all research lines, with methods ranging from lab and field experiments, surveys and qualitative research to observational content analysis, eye- tracking, behavioral tracking, and digital analytics.

Political Communication and Journalism

Program Group Director: prof. dr. C. H. de Vreese

Understanding the role of media and communication in politics and democratic societies is at the core of the research in the *Political Communication and Journalism* group. The research in PCJ is focused on how political news and information is produced, what the features of the contents are, and what the uses and effects are. The starting points are often at the intersection of concepts from theories about media effects, political journalism, and democracy. The research is concerned with the creation and viability of resilient and innovative democracies and societies. The research spans different types of media, online and offline, and is generally focused on the mechanisms, dynamics, and conditionality of relationships as also outlined in the General *ASCoR* Research Program. The research has an explicit focus on innovating and improving methods and designs and can be organized around three broader themes.

1. **The production of political news and information**

The nature and production of political journalism is changing: economic and technological factors affect the conditions for journalistic production and the dynamic between political elites and media are also changing. We study how these changes affect political journalism, the nature of journalistic products (with more information online and diffusion via social media), and the organization and production of journalism. Moreover, we study what the consequences are of new relationships with users, new modalities of journalism, new features such as user (co-) generated contents, and different conditions for the diffusion and consumption of news and information.

2. **The (changing) contents of public debates**

Public debates are fed and shaped by media. Investigating the contents of public debates and the media's coverage of important issues yields important insights in and by itself, but also functions as the analysis of journalistic end-products and the starting point for understanding effects of political information and news media. This, in turn, informs our theorizing about media effects. We specifically investigate the (change in) coverage of issues such as immigration, the European Union, the economy, and climate. We analyze content features such as topic visibility, evaluations, frames, conflict, (in)civility, and personalization, in a range of media (both traditional and social). Such research offers insights into the diversity of political news, possible polarization in the supply or information, and it sets the boundary conditions for understanding (selective) exposure mechanism, usage, and effects.

3. **Political communication uses and effects**

Fundamental questions arise on how citizens navigate and select or avoid political information in a changing media environment. We investigate patterns of *use* and *selectivity* as well as the effects of different contents and modalities on effects on knowledge, perceptions, attitudes, emotions, public opinion, evaluations, preferences, and behavior in relation to a variety of topics. Examples include EU attitudes, populism, polarization, and economic evaluations.

We also study the effects on elites and the perception of the media and the political system. The research is typically guided by questions about conditional effects and underlying processes; often explicating the micro-foundations of effects using concepts such as information processing, motivated reasoning, agenda-setting, and framing.

Across the three research lines, parts of the PCJ research also have a specific focus on methods and design. This includes a special focus on content analysis (increasingly automated; relating to developments in computational social sciences and big data more generally). There are new ways of studying effects, such as using eye-tracking, observations, and behavioral tracking data. There is attention to measurement (of e.g., exposure), data linkage (using multiple studies and data types), modeling (e.g., networks), and analytical techniques with data from multiple platforms. Parts of the research also focuses on innovating the design of (election campaign) studies to study media dynamics, including dynamic data collection, with multiple waves, apps, and behavioral registration, as well as field experiments.

Youth and Media Entertainment

Program Group Director: dr. J. Taylor Piotrowski

The Youth and Media Entertainment program group focuses on the role of entertainment media in the lives of young people (infancy through young adulthood). In practice, this means asking questions not only about the antecedents and consequences of traditional media use but also evaluating how young people are selecting, experiencing, and being affected by today's digitally mediated environment. At its core, researchers in this group rely on a media psychology paradigm to answer questions about how different users are affected by different media content in   different ways. Through the lens of differential susceptibility, this program is building and extending upon traditional media effects models by asking how individual, social, and developmental factors influence (1) the types of media young people use, (2) how they process this media content, and (3) the extent to which this media content may lead to direct and reciprocal effects. In doing so, this program seeks to extend existing theories and research by offering nuanced answers to the complex questions surrounding media effects in the 21st century.

Importantly, the program places a focus on young people from infancy through young adulthood. Young people are among the fastest adopters of new media today and are truly developing in a mediated world. For them, the boundaries between online and offline content, between private and public lives, have always been blurry. This environment is dramatically different than the environment that youth were developing in just a decade ago, and yet, our understanding of this 'growing up digital' audience remains limited. On the one hand, this increasingly personalized self-directed media environment is surely offering enormous opportunities. On the other hand, there are also significant concerns not only about media effects but also broader concerns about how youth are managing their media-saturated lives. Indeed, we are witnessing a dramatic change in how youth develop, and this change brings with it questions which are of vital importance to parents, policy makers, and society at large. This program is designed to help address these questions via three major research lines.

1. Entertainment Experience

The first research line investigates the media entertainment experience. This line focuses on why young people select media entertainment and the conditions that predict whether entertainment media will lead to sustained engagement and use. This line asks not only about how and why certain content may be considered particularly appealing for specific audiences, but also asks how the features of entertainment media may appeal to young people. This research line aims to understand how, when, and why today's entertainment media may meet the unique entertainment needs of young people.

2. Opportunities and Consequences

The second research line investigates media opportunities and consequences. Not only is today's entertainment media landscape increasingly blurring boundaries between online and offline worlds, but the boundaries between professional and self-produced content are similarly

less clear. Youth are no longer simply consumers of media content but are simultaneously 'pro- sumers' of media content. What are the opportunities and consequences of such a blurry world? This is a key question for this research line. How, for example, might touchscreen technology or virtual reality aid in the (in)formal education of youth today? Similarly, how might technological developments support the social-emotional skills of young people? Alternatively, how might today's media – media which are increasingly personalized, tailored, and user-generated – lead to negative cognitive, affective, or behavioral outcomes? For example, how are youth today interpreting and experiencing professionally-produced versus amateur media content? Importantly, this means reflecting not only on recipients of user-generated media but also on the creators themselves by studying what researchers have coined 'expression effects'. In all, this research line aims to identify not only the boundaries of media effects but offer important guidelines as to how we can maximize positive and minimize negative entertainment effects on young people today.

3. Media Management

Lastly, the third research line takes a broader view and asks how young people are managing media in the 21st century. Unlike generations before, young people are now finding themselves in a situation where the lines between private life and public life seem nearly non-existent. Private time is rarely un-mediated, and for a subset of young people, the line between media use and media addiction is increasingly being crossed. As a result of this media omnipresence, media multitasking is increasingly becoming the norm. Yet, we know remarkably little about what this means for development. In this research line, researchers are interested not only in the predictors, prevalence, and effects of media multitasking and media addiction but are also investigating ways to help young people manage their 'always-on' lifestyle.

Researchers in this program group use a multi-methodological approach to address research questions. While the group favors a primarily quantitative approach, both quantitative (i.e., survey, experimentation) and qualitative (i.e., observation, focus group) methodologies are practiced. Importantly, as researchers in this group work to understand the dynamic and fluctuating media landscape, these classic methodological approaches will be increasingly complemented with more contemporary measurement approaches (e.g., experience sampling).

About ASCoR

The Amsterdam School of Communication Research ASCoR is a research institute in Communication Science, residing in the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences of the University of Amsterdam. It is one of the largest research institutes not only in Europe, but worldwide. More than 55 senior researchers are associated with ASCoR and its English-language PhD program hosts more than 35 candidates. ASCoR resides at the Department of Communication Science at the University of Amsterdam, and interacts with the Bachelor, Master, and Research Master curricula in communication science. These programs attract more than 1400 graduate and undergraduate candidates.

ASCoR figures prominently in both national and international academic communities: it directs the national communication science research school NeSCoR which is accredited by the Royal Dutch Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW); it attracts a large share of funding from the Dutch national science foundation (NWO) and the European Research Council (ERC); its faculty publish widely in leading international journals and present research at prominent international conferences. ASCoR faculty are well represented in international communication organizations, such as the International Communication Association (ICA), the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA), the European Advertising Academy (EAA), the European Association for Communication in Health Care (EACH), and the World Association of Public Opinion Research (WAPOR). ASCoR faculty members serve on the editorial boards of nearly all major international communication journals.