

The Founding Parents of Communication: 57 Interviews with ICA Fellows

An Introduction

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This special feature aims at the center of communication by portraying the most successful scholars in the field—the Fellows of the International Communication Association (ICA).

Fifty-seven famous professors from all over the world talk about their careers, from their beginning to today. The interviews start with family background, early days, and professional dreams, before moving into the world of ideas. They look back to dealing with decisions over which graduate school to attend, main academic teachers, and the state of the discipline at the time, and then continue with both the intellectual and the institutional steps which led to fame and recognition within and, in almost all cases, even outside the field. Last but not least, all interviewees were asked about the discipline itself: What is communication all about? Is there a kind of core, although the discipline is highly diverse in methods, theories, and objects of study (Stanfill, 2012)? What is the reputation of the subject today? Is communication still seen as an “academic Taiwan” (claiming all of China as its own tiny island; Peters, 1986, p. 544), or, similarly unfavorably, as a stepchild that is tolerated by U.S. university administrators only because it helps to pay the bill for the departments they really care about? What about the “rest” of the world, and what about the “big unknowns” (Sonia Livingstone), such as China, for example, where they seem to open a new university every week? These interviews are not only a source for future historians of the discipline and a blueprint for junior scholars that strive for a professorship, but also a document of the early 21st century: Where did communication come from? What does the worldwide landscape of this fast growing academic enterprise look like today? And where do we go from here—let’s say, until 2030?

Aims and Scope

This special feature is anything but fortune-telling. The diviners are women and (mostly) men that own as much field-specific capital as possible. Beyond doubt, ICA is taken as the world’s most important scholarly association in the scientific community of communication today. Fellow status in ICA, as Jon Nussbaum puts it in his interview, is “the highest honor that can be given to a communication

¹ A note of thanks to my daughter, Juliane, for attracting me to the USA, my wife, Antje, for joining me on the trip, and Alexa Kourafas for her assistance in editing the interviews.

scholar." Of course, one can challenge every testimony about the king given by the king himself, but the nomination and election procedures seem to guarantee that the title ICA Fellow is taken as a hallmark of excellence. It's not only the "distinguished scholarly contributions to the broad field of communication" that are required (www.icahdq.org), but also the idea that ICA Fellows are elected by ICA Fellows exclusively. In other words, the scholars that are already recognized by the scientific community have to decide if the nominees are at the same level.

Although almost all interviewees claimed to be awarded "for their research with no exceptions" (Bradley Greenberg), ICA's website mentions a second group of criteria: "service to the ICA and socially or professionally significant service to other publics such as business, government, education, etc." As a result of all those criteria, fellow status in ICA is an indicator that the people who get that recognition are seen as moving powers in the academic discipline of communication. Who else sets a model for junior scholars? Who else can define the criteria for success and failure (or to be more concrete: for hiring and promotion of faculty), and who else decides about the issues and problems that are worthwhile to get involved in, if it isn't the people at the dominant pole of any given academic field? So, this special feature offers a particular view on the state of the art. It neither reports the latest fashions in all the different research areas (although most of the interviewees name such trends), nor sums up the evidence that the field has built up over time; instead, it collects the (academic) life stories of the researchers that are responsible for those things, in both good and bad senses. Who are the people that rule the field of communication? Where do they come from, and how did they get into academia? From whom did they learn to do good science, and what are the principles and parameters that guide their work?

These questions emphasize the key theme of this special feature: There is strong connection between scientific work and life experiences. That is, there is no understanding of communication research if personal, societal, and academic backgrounds of the people who do the research are not taken into account (Löblich & Scheu, 2011). This idea is grounded in the sociology of knowledge at large, and in the sociology of Bourdieu (1984, 1988) in particular. Although biographical approaches (Rogers, 1997) have been criticized as "great-men-make-history" (Löblich & Scheu, 2011, p. 4), this special feature asks about actors, hierarchies, and the autonomy and logic of the field. Which agents play a role, how does their habitus fit in, which capital was (and is) necessary to advance professionally, and what does all that mean for research and teaching—for the problems, theories, and methods a discipline like communication is dealing with?

The Field of Communication

It goes without saying that the field of communication is part of the larger scientific field, which functioned differently in the 1950s or 1960s than it does today. But at that time, too, the scope of people and institutions were shaped by objective relations between positions within the field (i.e., individuals like professors and institutions like departments, universities, journals, or academic associations). Communication is the latecomer of the social sciences. In the first half of the 20th century, other social science disciplines like sociology, economics, anthropology, psychology, and political science were born, but not communication (Abbott, 2002). It took World War II, with its interdisciplinary work on propaganda—work that was clearly conditioned by Rockefeller Foundation's interest; military, CIA, and

State Department funding (Pooley, 2008); the search for effective propaganda design in the early Cold War sponsored by the very same agents (Glander, 2000; Simpson, 1994); and last but not least, a growing interest on the parts of both the media industry and students—before “communication research began to be recognized as a distinct academic field” (Craig, 2008) or, as in the case of German *Publizistikwissenschaft*, solved its legitimacy crises by shifting from a humanistic approach to one of an empirical social science pleading for the use of quantitative methods (Löblich, 2007). However, Craig (2008) associates the “rapid growth and institutional consolidation as an academic discipline” that communication underwent in the post-war era with certain problems: strain on resources, an overemphasis on practical training of undergraduates, and the threat of co-optation by commercial interests. To put it in a nutshell: In terms of scientific capital, the latecomer communication seems still to be at the bottom of the table, rather than at the top.

According to Bourdieu:

[T]he scientific field is the locus of a competitive struggle, in which the specific issue at stake is the monopoly of scientific authority, defined inseparably as technical capacity and social power, or, to put it in another way, the monopoly of scientific competence, in the sense of a particular agent’s socially recognised capacity to speak and act legitimately . . . in scientific matters. (1975, p. 19)

So, all scientific practices aim at the acquisition of scientific authority and thereby at the evaluation criteria of those practices themselves. What is at stake in the struggle is no less than the definition of “good science”—of the questions, theories, and methods that “may be regarded as scientific,” and that a field or a subfield such as communication is all about. Since the acquisition of scientific authority (reputation, prestige) requires recognition by colleagues (Bourdieu, 2004, p. 55), and since competitors are those who are “least inclined to grant recognition without discussion and scrutiny,” scientific fields are not only about distinction: Scientists must also integrate their rivals’ work into their own. “There is no judge who is not also a party to the dispute” (Bourdieu, 1975, pp. 23, 25). In other words, the main clients of a scientist are his competitors as well. If that claim seems suspect, just think of peer review. It’s important to know the other side of the coin: Acknowledgment from the outside world (national and local politicians, media people, the cultural avant-garde, parents) can’t be more than a surrogate for scientific authority, at least not in a matured academic discipline.

Seeing the academic world through Bourdieu’s lens, scientific work is always a social practice—framed by the interests of those who are part of the very same field, by the autonomy of that field, and by its position in the larger social space. There are neither “pure” research interests (maybe in a certain discovery) and intellectual controversies nor “objective” judgments on any talk or paper. Scientific work is first and foremost about social power, and every investment is organized by (conscious or unconscious) reference to anticipation of the chances of profit. So, every “choice” (area of research, theories and methods, place of publication) is directed toward maximization of scientific capital (ibid., pp. 22–23). The structure of a scientific field or subfield at any given moment is “defined by the state of the power distribution between the protagonists in the struggle.” It is the collective result of previous struggles, a

result “which is objectified in institutions and dispositions and commands the strategies and objective chances of the different agents and institutions in the present struggles” (ibid., p. 27).

Even without any reference to Bourdieu, the hierarchy in academia is a reality which shapes the perceptions of both research outputs and outgoing students. There are countless approaches to measure, to prove, and thereby to reinforce that hierarchy. Those lists are a kind of “social grid” that tells academics who they are and how they relate to their colleagues and to the outside world (Hakanen, 2002). In the field of communication, there is research on almost all the facets of an academic hierarchy available: on the relative positions of the different areas in relation to others in the field (Donsbach, 2006), on programs (Barnett et al., 2010), on “the most important theorists” (Beniger, 1990), on citation patterns (Feeley, 2008), and on the research productivity of both individual scholars and departments (Bunz, 2005; Hickson, Stacks, & Bodon, 1999). That literature is by no means art for art’s sake, but a weapon in the ongoing competitive struggle within the scientific field and the social space.

The social position of an agent is the most important determinant of his or her *habitus*, the third main concept that Bourdieu offers after field and capital. *Habitus* is, as he put it, a “socialized subjectivity” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) or a “structured and structuring structure” (Bourdieu, 1994). Bourdieu used this notion in order to describe the dispositions people have, as well as everything that may have shaped them since their earliest childhood: family, school, living conditions, career, individual, and collective experiences. *Habitus* determines what is achievable—the way a professor perceives the world, the way he judges other people, the taste and values he has, his ways of thinking and acting, how he appears and moves his body. So, the concept of *habitus* indicates what kind of subjects an agent is interested in, as well as the theoretical and methodological perspectives he or she comes up with. The *habitus* of a communication professor is not only structured by his or her personal capital, but also by the logic of the field and the position of the discipline in both the larger scientific field and the social space.

Collecting Interviews with ICA Fellows

Obviously, the people portrayed in this special feature were able to accumulate the capital that the field of communication requires. It’s easy to link the election criteria for ICA Fellows to Bourdieu’s ideas of scientific capital and scientific authority. In terms of Bourdieu, ICA Fellowships are a better indicator for scientific authority than any awards from NCA, AEJMC, or IAMCR (Nordenstreng, 2008), because in ICA, there is less mixture between scientific, professional, and political evaluation criteria. That was not always true (Weaver, 1977). In this special feature, contemporary witnesses talk about ICA’s very first steps. According to Jack McLeod, both ICA and AEJ moved toward research in the 1960s, but AEJ made more steady progress with the development of divisions or a new constitution. While an AEJ convention as far back as the late 1960s would almost look like one of the present day, “it took ICA more than 10 years to re-form itself as a more substantial association” (McLeod). One step on the way to becoming the premier scholarly organization in the field was the formation of the ICA Fellows in 1979. From then until 2010, a total of 75 individuals had been given that award. Twelve of them are already deceased (James Bradac, Brant Burlison, James Carey, Steven Chaffee, George Gerbner, William Gudykunst, Nathan Maccoby, Gerald Miller, Elwood Murray, Charles Redding, Everett Rogers, and Frederick Williams). According to family and friends, at least two of the others are now in states of

declining health that suggest an interview wouldn't make any sense (Robert Goyer, Karl Erik Rosengren). Six others either didn't respond to any of my requests or were not available for other reasons (Samuel Becker, Michael Burgoon, Brenda Dervin, Mary Anne Fitzpatrick, Randall Harrison, and James McCroskey). From the ICA Fellow cohort elected in 2011, only Ronald Rice is included in the special feature. When I met him in Santa Barbara, California, in April 2011, he was a past president of ICA with a vague knowledge of his nomination as a Fellow. Including Ronald Rice, I interviewed 24 former presidents of the association (including 22 of the 30 most recent). So, the sample shows first, that there is a strong link between fellow status and service work (or vice versa), and second, that the interviewees in this special section ruled ICA (and thereby, the field of communication) during the past decades.

To make one thing perfectly clear right from the beginning: It's neither the intention of this special feature to promote ICA (the association's leadership was not involved in the research process) nor to devalue the work of the other associations within the discipline and on its borders at all. The bulk of the interviewees, after all, have split allegiances. Above all, the people in interpersonal or group communication mentioned the "nice critical mass of scholars" (Judee Burgoon) in NCA. Like 23 other ICA Fellows, Burgoon is one of the 78 recipients of NCA's most prestigious distinction ("individuals selected to showcase the communication profession"). The Distinguished Scholar Award displays "a lifetime of scholarly achievement in the study of human communication" (www.natcom.org). The overlap between both the associations and the recipients of their respective major awards should soften the weaknesses of a sample consisting of ICA Fellows only.

Because communication has no tradition in autobiographic accountability and corresponding monographs are rather scarce, the ICA Fellows were interviewed personally. The decision to collect (biographic) interviews both generates several problems and places certain limitations on the material that is presented in this special feature (Lindlof, 1995). This type of conversation is neither made for theoretical argumentation nor comparable with archive-based elaborations on specific questions. Nevertheless, interviews can reveal interests, motives, and strategies, and they can also inform about personal beliefs and judgments. Additionally, presenting life stories as logical orders of events, we could easily fall into the "biographical illusion" trap (Bourdieu, 2000). Examining our actions retrospectively, we are always able to name a logic behind them. Reading the interviews, it is necessary to know that habitus allows actions before and beyond conscious deliberation. Since we usually don't think about dispositions and often forget about their genesis, agents develop a practical sense of how to act and respond which functions like an instinct and allows them to react to all possible uncertain situations and ambiguities in the everyday (Bourdieu, 1990). To understand the practical sense that professors associate with research, teaching, and service to the discipline, as well as to other social fields (*habitus as modus operandi*), it is necessary to know how each individual has been socialized; to know about dispositions, living situations, and working conditions (*habitus as opus operatum*); and to know how much capital is owned and accumulated (social position). In an open conversation, it is easier to reach the (subconscious) practical sense that leads professors in their actions. Undoubtedly, it's quite impossible to get "the whole picture" within a roughly hour-long conversation, but conducting such an interview is still more close to Bourdieu's ideas than just sending a questionnaire. For the very same reason, most ICA Fellows were visited at their working places or at home. Those visits not only made it easier to schedule the requested one hour of time, but also provided additional information about the interviewees themselves, as well as the settings

in which they live and work. Since both the timeframe and the geographical reach of that roundtrip were limited (mainly to January, March, and April 2011), and since not all of the fellows were right in place when I visited the United States from Germany, six of the Fellows were interviewed at the ICA conference in Boston, and two interviews (with Cantor and Bavelas) were conducted via Skype.

The interviewees were informed about the proceeding beforehand. For preparation, the interviewer tried to use all publications which might give information about an interviewee's curriculum vitae: the scientific workings of the Fellows, bibliographies, biographic entries in subject-related journals, student magazines, resumes, and the Internet. There is a certain emphasis on the word "tried." First, not all interviewees reveal personal information on their professional websites (a few don't even have one). Sometimes, it was even difficult to get information as basic as the interviewee's year of birth in advance. Second, the interviewer is, by socialization and academic environment, more familiar with journalism, mass communication, and media effects research than with areas such as nonverbal, interpersonal, group, organizational, or intercultural communication. For example, it was much easier to talk with Lawrence Grossberg about Marxism, cultural studies, and rock music than with Mark Knapp about lying and deception. At least, it was easier to leave a competent impression and thereby to strengthen the interviewee's motivation by mentioning current trends and key authors within the subfield. When interviewing contemporary witnesses, one always deals with recipient-related constructions, in which biographic experiences are rearranged and presented according to both their social and emotional importance, and according to the narrative and normative necessities combined with the current knowledge. And third, at the end of the interview series, the interviewer was much more knowledgeable of the structures and problems of higher education in the United States at large (and the communication field, in particular) than at the beginning. Inside knowledge about both typical careers and the symbolic capital of the different institutions sophisticates questions. Ellen Wartella, for example, long-term dean at UT-Austin, then provost at UC-Riverside, and interviewed on only the third day of my trip in her current post at Northwestern, escaped with general statements about those moves ("I like change. I get bored easily"; "I won't answer that. That could get me into trouble"; "I would have stayed at Texas as a dean longer"). After visiting Austin, the questions I would have asked her would have been more to the point.

However, as every reader easy could learn, the interviewees only partially got personal questions. Some formulations were used in every single conversation, primarily for comparability reasons, but also because the approach had proven its worth in a similar project in the German field (Meyen & Löblich, 2007). It made a point of trying to ask my questions indirectly and rather openly, to project motives and beliefs, and to provoke the interviewees (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). This way of interviewing allows second questions, although, as in the case of Ellen Wartella, not every opportunity to ask them was taken. As the material should show, the difference in status between the world-leading communication researchers and an unknown professor from far away didn't play any role at all. ICA Fellows are by no means an "ultra-elite," such as Nobel laureates in science (Zuckerman, 1972). In fact, quite the opposite is true. Courtesy, curiosity, and the appeal of doing something completely new are part of the fellows' habitus. Most of the interviewees seemed to be glad to get the possibility to talk about themselves and their work.

The published versions of the interviews follow two main criteria: First, they should stay close to the conversations that were recorded on tape, and second, the text should deliver information, as well as pleasure, to the reader. That explains why there are almost no redundancies and a lot of phrases that go to the heart (unusual in face-to face talks). Editing here did not mean translating the spoken language, but staying as close as possible to the language of the interviewees, and sometimes, even adding questions. The interviewees were asked to check their respective manuscripts first and foremost for accuracy, to add missing data and facts (dates or names of important colleagues, teachers, and so on), and to authorize the so-constructed final version. Compared to the earlier project in Germany, all the changes being made were somewhat marginal, and rather about elaboration or clarification. Anything else would have been a surprise. For people at the dominant pole of any social field, there is no reason to be too careful. "When habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it finds itself 'as a fish in water,' it does not feel the weight of the water and takes the world about itself for granted" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1989, p. 43). Even without any analysis, the following collection of interviews should be more than just a shrine of communication or a tool for the field's historiography: a reminder that communication research is not God-given, but made by people with certain backgrounds in certain circumstances.

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