

Can media and communication researchers turn the present challenges of research impact and interdisciplinarity into future opportunities?

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Abstract

This statement critically reflects on two of the main challenges in media and communication research: the disputed societal value and impact of media and communication research and the shortage of interdisciplinary research in the field. The statement makes concrete suggestions about how these two ‘deficiencies’ can be turned into opportunities, with one paving the way for encountering and solving the other. At the same time, it acknowledges the existence of the following two caveats: first, the notion of interdisciplinarity has not yet been sufficiently explored or even comprehended among researchers across disciplines, and its future shape and directions cannot be foreseen; second, impact itself is time- and context-relative and researchers must be in tune with broader developments in the real-life world to sense the changes happening and the emerging areas of impact that require their attention.

Keywords: discipline, impact, interdisciplinarity, Internet research; media and communication research; Research Excellence Framework (REF), research funding, society.

This statement has a two-fold aim:

- First, it critically reflects on two of the main challenges in media and communication research: the disputed societal value and impact of media and communication research, on the one hand, and the shortage of interdisciplinary research in the field, on the other.
- Second, it makes suggestions about how these two ‘deficiencies’ can be turned into opportunities, with one paving the way for encountering and solving the other.

Let me begin with some reflections on research impact in general and associated discourses and controversies. Research impact has broadly been defined as ‘the demonstrable contribution that excellent research makes to society and the economy’ (Research Councils UK) and the ‘effect [of research] on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia’ (Higher Education Funding Council for England). Such definitions are rather generic; nevertheless, they suggest that researchers should not simply make claims of impact but rather demonstrate and provide evidence of impact. Especially in western academic research systems, such as the British system, researchers are increasingly expected to participate in research evaluations (e.g., that under the aegis of the Research Excellence Framework), which require them to – among other things – demonstrate specifically and on a regular basis the societal or other non-academic impact of their research, namely how ordinary people, specific population groups, various stakeholders or policymakers benefit from such research. In such ‘developed’ academic research environments, the requirement for demonstrable research impact has become one of the criteria that determine individual researchers’ careers as well as research institutions’ funding and reputation, creating anxiety alongside new aspirations in the research community at large and adding to the range of other challenges that both research institutions and individual researchers encounter nowadays (e.g., academic knowledge and pedagogy vs vocational

training; student satisfaction in relation to teaching and research quality; limited financial resources in times of economic crisis; reduction of public spending on higher education and academic research).

In addition, research impact per se is a highly controversial issue and involves questions that most researchers find hard to answer, such as how to measure impact (Bornmann 2013; Servaes, 2014). Along these lines, there have been debates concerning the varying perceptions of impact among research evaluators as well as whether impact is reliably determined and independent of external forces (De Jong et al. 2014; Samuel and Derrick 2015). Such debates have led some to suggest that evaluations of research impact should focus on the conditions under which impact is generated, such as the interactions between academic researchers and societal actors, rather than on impact itself and the accompanying evidence (De Jong et al. 2014).

In the context of such controversies concerning the definition and measurement of research impact, although media and communication researchers increasingly embed cases of impact into their research bids and outputs, they struggle to make full sense of societal impact and even more so to find evidence in support of it. Is this ‘deficiency’ related to the broad assumption that media and communication research does not make a tangible difference to people’s lives and, therefore, it is of limited practical value to society? Or is the nature of media and communication research not conducive to researchers producing the sort of ‘reliable’ evidence of impact that research evaluators and research audiences desire to be shown? I would argue that both these factors can explain this ‘deficiency’ to a certain extent, as, in attempting to be of practical value to society, media and communication researchers encounter a range of challenges.

On the one hand, a lot of the findings, insights and knowledge that media and communication research generates are of too little practical use and, therefore, from a utilitarian perspective, research audiences and related actors find it difficult to apply such knowledge in their life and work contexts. Digging deeper into media-related phenomena and understanding their forces and role(s) is not the kind of story that media researchers are expected to narrate in terms of how they offer solutions and ways forward for research audiences and society at large. On the other hand, media and communication research is marked, both epistemologically and methodologically, by a great degree of subjectivity that raises barriers to the generation of strictly scientific and verifiable evidence of impact. Specifically, media and communication research employs research principles and methodologies that focus heavily on human actors' perceptions and their own experiences of media, thus failing to generate the kind of unquestionable and objective insight that is typically expected from scientific research. Even field-based large-scale research ventures that employ robust scientific protocols are subject to error probabilities (e.g., survey research) and are strongly challenged by the existence of other conflicting research evidence. Thus, media and communication researchers find it extremely challenging to produce cases of impact that are supported by objective measurements and of universal scope and application. As a result, media and communication researchers struggle to convince rather suspicious and puzzled research audiences about cases of significance of media and communication research and how such research can prove useful to the broader non-scientific community (e.g., how researching the principles and practices of media production and use might change the actual media content and services offered to the public; why studying the media can help people challenge dominant and often distorted perceptions of all sorts of phenomena in today's social world).

Besides this 'deficiency' in terms of impact, media and communication research increasingly receives urgent calls for the pursuit of interdisciplinary work and the endorsement of

interdisciplinarity altogether. Here one can identify a fundamental tension: on the one hand, media and communication research involves scholarship from a range of disciplines in social science and humanities, such as political science, cultural studies, social psychology, linguistics and education, and increasingly so nowadays with the rapid growth of the intrinsically interdisciplinary areas of new media and Internet research; on the other hand, media and communication researchers hesitate to go beyond their comfort zone, largely failing to develop profound practices of collaboration with disciplines that speak a different language and belong to different epistemological traditions from their own (e.g., positivism). In a way, disciplinary boundaries, traditions and etiquette remain influential, with media and communication researchers experiencing an anxiety over strengthening and enhancing their disciplinary identity. Even those who specialise in Internet studies and broadly acknowledge the highly interdisciplinary nature of Internet-related research are in fact anxious about developing this area of work into a fully fledged discipline with its own distinct identity and course of action (Dutton 2013; Livingstone 2005; Tsatsou 2014), thus obviating the need for interdisciplinarity.

At this point, many media researchers would disagree with what I argue here, suggesting that they do in fact work with researchers from other disciplines and, therefore, that they value and endorse interdisciplinarity. However, in my view, ‘working together’ should not simply refer to the blatant pursuit of joint/collaborative bids for the pursuit of research funding, nor should it entail that media researchers simply ‘use’ researchers from other disciplines as peripheral collaborators in research work that clearly falls within the remit of media and communication. On the contrary, ‘working together’ should adopt and apply the idea of immersing oneself in the language(s), practices, methodologies and epistemologies of other disciplines, with the aim being either to enrich one’s own research with previously unknown research ideas and practices or to influence other disciplines with one’s own research principles, approaches and so on. As

I note in my recent monograph (Tsatsou 2014), although collaboration with other disciplines is quite an established pattern in the sub-field of Internet studies – see, for instance, work in digital humanities and social computing – Internet researchers are yet to define interdisciplinary research goals, form interdisciplinary frameworks of research, and apply research principles and practices that are formed through the joint input of all involved disciplines.

Although interdisciplinarity requires the engagement of all scientific fields involved, one can observe a sort of resistance to interdisciplinarity both among media and communication researchers and within other disciplines, and this may be related to the impact ‘deficiency’ of media and communication research, amidst other pragmatic (e.g., financial) uncertainties and risks associated with interdisciplinarity. On the one hand, media researchers tend to think that to more successfully demonstrate research impact they need to strengthen the discipline and maintain a pure and distinct disciplinary identity, in a way immunising media and communication research against external research actors and influences. On the other hand, it must be considered why other disciplines with a clear impact standing would want to admit media and communication researchers into their ‘club’, as it is actually media and communication researchers who need to enhance their legitimacy – the sort of legitimacy that is granted to research that generates demonstrable impact. Thus, to those other disciplines it probably appears that collaboration with media and communication researchers might not be of any economic or epistemological value. In this respect, the research impact ‘deficiency’ offers an explanation as to why media and communication researchers are splintering into rather narrow and compact research collaborations with related research communities.

Whereas the challenge of research impact can presumably be one of the drivers of disciplinary conservatism in media and communication research, I argue that in fact these two areas of

‘deficiency’ could be turned into areas of opportunity for media and communication researchers, informing and benefiting one another. But how can this be achieved?

First, the growing necessity for media and communication researchers to convincingly demonstrate the significance of their work for actors and situations outside the scientific field points to impact as a possible facilitator of rather than a barrier to interdisciplinarity. Specifically, to demonstrate societal impact, media and communication researchers are increasingly invited to consider actors, phenomena, issues and developments, both inside and outside the media domain, that appear to be of importance to societies at large. They need to continually update themselves and be daring enough to look at how their work and expertise can be of importance within and outside their own discipline. In this way, it is increasingly important for researchers in the field to view media-related technologies, phenomena and developments not only as the core object of their study but also as one of the many systemic parameters that one should consider in the study of non-media phenomena so as to demonstrate research impact.

However, to achieve this, media and communication researchers ought to share knowledge and expertise with researchers in other disciplines, as well as contribute to the employment of media-specific methodologies in non-media research. By recognising the multiple affordances of media research for the study of non-media-centric phenomena, media researchers can make themselves ‘important’ for other disciplines and fields of research as well. In this way, media researchers could take advantage of the ‘high impact’ necessity so as to contribute to already ‘high impact’ research in other disciplines and thus embark on interdisciplinarity in a meaningful and mutually beneficial way.

The emerging digital research community, which crosses disciplines and borrows methods, techniques and practices from digital media researchers, among others, could constitute one of

the terrains where such possibilities are taken forward in the immediate future (Tsatsou 2015). In any case, the interdisciplinarity-enhancing role of research impact is anything but static, and media researchers must constantly keep themselves informed as to how they can be useful to the real-life world by pursuing meaningful collaborations with non-media researchers at many different levels and for various purposes.

A second possibility refers to how calls for interdisciplinarity often voice new or alternative areas of research impact that could be pursued and developed. Specifically for media and communication research, discipline-specific insights and practices could be used by other research fields and disciplines while, by the same token, media and communication researchers could immerse themselves in other disciplines and discover research principles, means, practices and methodologies that suggest either newly useful ways to research the same media phenomena or the study of previously undiscovered aspects of those phenomena. In this respect, familiarisation with epistemologies, methodologies and research practices that belong to other disciplines can enable media and communication researchers not only to contribute to the study of important phenomena that lie beyond the media domain but also to discover more epistemologically robust and technically verifiable ways to conduct and report research in the media terrain. In this way, media and communication researchers can successfully encounter the two challenges that currently prevent them from making convincing cases of societal impact: first, the limiting of their research to the study of media-associated phenomena, often placing such phenomena out of context and disregarding their links to non-media phenomena and conditions, and, second, their reliance on data and insights that derive from subjective reporting, thus lacking evidence that can be tested and verified across contexts and conditions. My proposition here concerning the potential of interdisciplinarity to enhance research impact in the field advances the argument that Dutton recently put forward for interdisciplinarity in relation to the impact of Internet studies: 'Interdisciplinary entails a recognition that research

is focused most often on addressing problems, such as understanding the social implications of the Internet, like narrowing digital divides, rather than advancing a particular theory' (Dutton 2013: 8).

Are the above suggestions easy to achieve? Is it possible to offer concrete recommendations on areas of impact and interdisciplinarity that media and communication researchers should draw their attention to in order to encounter the twin challenges of 'impact' and 'interdisciplinarity'? Although one might be tempted to point in certain directions, many different possibilities are open. For instance, media researchers can collaborate with medical researchers for the conduct of technologically informed research in the health sector or with economists and business researchers in order to generate high-impact knowledge of influential technological phenomena in the economic and business terrain. Media and communication research can address the twin challenges of 'impact' and 'interdisciplinarity'. However, it is down to individual researchers, research groups, research institutions and research funders in the field to explore such possibilities, experiment with new impact and collaboration cases, and take the risk to move beyond their comfort zone, being confident that even the worst failures have a lot of lessons to offer for the undertaking of future research. Finally, one should not overlook the following two caveats: first, the notion of interdisciplinarity has not yet been sufficiently explored or even comprehended among researchers across disciplines, and its future shape and directions cannot be foreseen; second, impact itself is time- and context-relative and researchers must be in tune with broader developments in the real-life world to sense the changes happening and the emerging areas of impact that require their attention.

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