

Editor's Note

Advancing Communication Science: Reflections on My Editorship at *Asian Communication Research*

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In early 2021, I assumed the role of Editor-in-Chief of *Asian Communication Research* (ACR). Over the past four years, I have overseen the publication of 12 issues in collaboration with an exceptional team of associate editors and editorial board members. The first issue under my editorship (Volume 18, Issue 1) included only two research insights and two review articles. In contrast, this 12th and final issue of my tenure features an invited scholarly essay by David M. Markowitz, four articles as a part of a special issue on *The Past, Present, and Future of the Korean Wave (Hallyu)*, and six original articles—an impressive achievement reflecting remarkable growth. Most importantly, we established an effective journal website, enabling online open access to articles, which ultimately led to the inclusion of ACR in SCOPUS, marking a major milestone for the journal.

Over the past four years as Editor-in-Chief, I have reviewed numerous manuscripts on communication, including those that did not pass the peer review process. Drawing on my experience in this role, I would like to offer several suggestions for the progress of communication studies.

Is Communication Studies Making Progress?

In his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1970), Thomas S. Kuhn made insightful arguments about the nature of scientific progress. He observed, “To a very great extent the term ‘science’ is reserved for fields that do progress in obvious ways” (p. 160). When asked whether science progresses, he answers that progress is what fundamentally defines science. He argued that even knowledge in the natural sciences is relative, bound within specific paradigms. However, within these paradigms, scholarly outcomes accumulate and advance gradually, a state he termed “normal science” (p. 10). Kuhn also emphasized that the accumulation and advancement of knowledge within a paradigm

is not exclusive to hard sciences, such as physics. He recognized that certain social sciences also accumulate knowledge, advance, and thereby progress as sciences. For researchers questioning whether their discipline qualifies as a science, Kuhn posed a thought-provoking inquiry: “Why does my field fail to move ahead in the way that, say, physics does?” (p. 160).

Is knowledge in communication studies being accumulated and advanced? From a quantitative perspective, the answer appears to be yes. Over the past three decades, the number of publications produced across the social sciences has increased significantly, with communication studies being a particularly notable example. According to the *Journal Citation Report* (Clarivate Analytics, 2019), between 1992 and 2019, the number of communication journals indexed in the *Social Sciences Citation Index* increased by 219% (from 44 in 1992 to 92 in 2019). Additionally, the number of articles published nearly quadrupled (from 1,110 to 4,300), and the aggregated impact factor rose by 253% (from 0.631 to 1.594). Communication research is undeniably expanding and accumulating as a “science.” The methods employed to test theories have become increasingly diverse and sophisticated. Studies now handle larger samples and often report multiple experimental results within a single paper. It is also evident that the completeness and quality of individual articles have significantly improved. For instance, I recently submitted a paper to *Journal of Communication*, which underwent four rounds of review and revision over the course of two years before receiving final approval for publication. This clearly demonstrates that our field is advancing and solidifying its scholarly rigor.

Where is the News on New Research?

Despite the quantitative advancements, skepticism remains about whether communication science is truly making progress. One of the reasons for

skepticism about the progress of communication studies is the absence or scarcity of “news” about new research. Just as in any community, “news” and “stories” also exist among researchers. When a groundbreaking discovery occurs in a field, it quickly spreads among researchers, even without formal media coverage. Initially, such discoveries circulated within the group of researchers studying the specific topic. They then spread to adjacent research groups and, in some cases, to researchers in related academic fields and beyond. At this point, these studies often attract widespread media attention and are introduced to the broader public. When groundbreaking research is published, stories related to them naturally emerge and are passed on.

As an editor and an active researcher, I have always been attentive to such stories. Recently, it was particularly exciting to hear that several communication scholars published in *Nature* (Hopp et al., 2023; Sundar et al., 2024). It was also gratifying to see Timothy R. Levine’s book (2019) being referenced in a bestseller (Gladwell, 2021) and discussed among the general public. However, such news is rare in the field of communication studies and often remains confined within narrow boundaries, failing to reach a wider audience. When these stories extend to the broader public, people will begin to recognize the existence and value of our field. The lack of news about groundbreaking research raises the concern that communication studies may not be achieving significant qualitative growth.

Where are the Great “Old” Studies?

As a discipline progresses over time, the pivotal studies that drive this advancement—those that serve as milestones by elevating research to new levels—gain widespread recognition and appreciation from scholars. Over time, these foundational works become known as “the classics” within the field. In our field, it is not only rare to hear news about groundbreaking new

studies, but also difficult to identify classic works. During the past two years, ACR published two special issues: *Hidden Gems in Communication Studies* (Carpenter, 2023) and *Hidden Gems in Media Studies* (Chung, 2024). This special issue invited leading scholars in our field to introduce significant yet underrecognized studies—works that could be considered classics but remain relatively unknown to researchers. Among the 22 hidden gem articles introduced in the two series, only seven were published in media and communication journals. The fact that many communication researchers, when asked to think of classic studies, tend to recall works from adjacent disciplines rather than from our own field gives us much to reflect on.

Of course, there are seminal studies that served as the foundation for major theories in media and communication. These studies are significant in that they introduced new concepts and explanations with fresh imagination. However, such ideas typically gain systematic structure and academic legitimacy as they are further developed by subsequent rigorous studies and thorough empirical testing, ultimately becoming established theories. Do we have such classic, milestone studies in our field? If such studies exist, are they widely recognized and appreciated by many researchers? Probably not. The scarcity of such classic and milestone studies in the field of communication raises doubts about whether our discipline is truly progressing and evolving as “science.”

Are Communication Theories Evolving?

Another reason for skepticism about the progress of communication studies is the lack of evolution in its theories. No theory can be perfect, and thus, all theories are expected to evolve. Scientific theories evolve by self-correction, progressing toward more advanced and refined forms. At times, theories encounter irrefutable falsifications, bringing their lives as a theory to an

end. The death of a theory, unable to withstand falsification, can also be considered progress in the advancement of knowledge. Newton's theory of gravity evolved by negating itself through Einstein's theory of special relativity, which in turn evolved into the theory of general relativity. The evolution of theories is not a spontaneous process but rather the result of collective efforts by researchers to refine, elaborate, and revise them.

The process of theory evolution can be easily observed in the social sciences as well. When Festinger and Carlsmith (1959) first proposed the theory of cognitive dissonance, it was a very simple model suggesting that counterattitudinal behaviors influence attitudes through cognitive dissonance. However, as numerous hypotheses were later proposed, debated, and tested, up to eight mediating variables between counterattitudinal behavior and attitudes were identified and validated (Cooper & Fazio, 1984). This process ultimately refined the model into a highly sophisticated theory.

Choice shift and group polarization (Friedkin, 1999, for a review) also serve as excellent examples of theory evolution. This theory began when Stoner (1968) serendipitously discovered that in decision-making scenarios involving risk, group decisions tend to shift not toward the average of individual opinions but rather toward more risk-taking positions. Subsequent research revealed that group decision-making does not necessarily make opinions more risk-taking but rather intensifies initial opinions, leading to greater group polarization (Myers & Aronson, 1972; Myers & Lamm, 1975). Moscovici et al. (1972) discovered that these group polarization processes apply not only to individual opinions about risk-taking but also to attitudes on a wide range of issues. These works uncovered group-polarization processes and refined the model, and stand as a milestone in the evolutionary process of this theory.

Do the theories in our field demonstrate such evolutionary processes? Let us examine the third-person effect as an example. The third-person

effect theory was first introduced as an idea by Davison in 1983 in *Public Opinion Quarterly*. Later in 1988, Cohen, Mutz, Price, and Gunter published a systematic test of this idea in the same journal, bringing it to the attention of many researchers. Subsequently, numerous studies on this theory were conducted and published, followed by a wave of further research over time.¹ In 2008, the third-person effect was ranked fifth on a list of “most popular theories” in 21st century communication research (Gunther et al., 2008). Research on the third-person effect peaked between 2006 and 2010, after which the number of published articles began to decline (see footnote 1). This decrease could indicate that the theoretical explanations have been sufficiently developed, leading to the establishment of a well-defined theory. Alternatively, it might suggest that the theory has reached the limits of its explanatory power and began to lose scholarly attention. In this regard, Shen et al. (2018) argue: “the TPP literature largely remains as a disentangled puzzle” (p. 2). According to this claim, despite numerous studies conducted over the past 30 years, the theory has failed to achieve progress through refinement and expansion.

The third-person effect theory consists of two main hypotheses. The first is the perceptual hypothesis, which concerns the gap between perceived media influence on others and on oneself. The second is the behavioral hypothesis, which posits that this perceptual gap influences attitudes or behaviors. Regarding the perceptual hypothesis, there was a debate over whether this perceptual gap is a form of optimistic bias (Gunther & Mundy, 1993) or not (Wei et al., 2007). However, the issue remains unresolved and lacks clear conclusions.

The behavioral hypothesis has faced several

critiques regarding the methods used to test the hypothesis (Chung & Moon, 2016; Schmierbach et al., 2008). However, there remains no clear consensus on which methods are most appropriate. Additionally, the academic community has yet to agree on the validity of the behavioral hypothesis itself (Chung & Moon, 2016). This lack of consensus stems from insufficient collective efforts to resolve these debates. Meanwhile, as leading researchers in third-person effect studies, Gunther and Storey (2003) proposed the *Influence of Presumed Influence* (IPI) model, describing it as “[a] more general model with broader application than TPE” (p. 201). Yet, this proposal was made without thorough evaluation of the existing third-person effect theory. If it is indeed a more generalized theory, it could certainly be regarded as theoretical progress—positioning the original third-person effect theory as the one possible instantiation of IPI, applicable only under specific conditions. In response, Sun (2012) argued that the third-person effect theory and the IPI model are incompatible and mutually exclusive frameworks, directly challenging Gunther’s assertion.

Despite these debates, discussions aimed at further developing these theories have been scarce since then. Both the third-person effect theory and the IPI model continue to be widely used with little critique or debate. Examining the progression of research on the third-person effect theory reveals a lack of debate, falsification, refinement, or confirmation processes essential to theoretical development. Consequently, the theory has stagnated, failing to evolve as it should and contributing to increased theoretical confusion.

The spiral of silence theory (Noelle-Neumann,

¹ A search in the *Communication & Mass Media Complete* database for academic papers with “third-person effect” in the title yielded a total of 197 articles. The number of articles published approximately every five years is as follows: 1983–1990: 5 articles; 1991–1995: 7 articles; 1996–2000: 15 articles; 2001–2005: 37 articles; 2006–2010: 55 articles; 2011–2015: 35 articles; 2016–2020: 31 articles; 2021–2024: 12 articles. Additionally, a search on Google Scholar for all types of research outputs related to “third-person effect” returned a total of 10,300 results.

1974)—the assertion that individuals are less likely to express their opinions publicly if they believe their views are in the minority out of fear of social isolation— is also one of the main theories in media studies. A search in the *Communication & Mass Media Complete* database for academic papers with “spiral of silence” in the title revealed a total of 274 papers, which is more than those related to the third-person effect theory.² Despite decades of scholarly attention and numerous empirical studies, is the spiral of silence theory evolving? Has the original model become more refined? Have researchers’ confidence in this model increased over time? Probably not.

In the spiral of silence theory, the fear of isolation plays a pivotal role as a mediating variable. Numerous studies have shown that fear of isolation decreases individuals’ willingness to express their opinions. However, existing research has revealed that fear of isolation has been measured in highly inconsistent ways (Hayes et al., 2013). Furthermore, many studies have assessed fear of isolation not as a state-based variable capable of functioning as a mediator, but rather as a stable characteristic of the individual across various situations (Wu & Atkin, 2018). If such issues exist in the measurement of fear of isolation, previous research findings will need to be reevaluated. Katz and Fialkoff (2017) argued that the spiral of silence should be considered one of the concepts that ought to be retired from the field of communication studies. However, the researchers who originally proposed this theory do not appear to have engaged in self-reflection, nor has there been rigorous debate regarding its validity. Consequently, the evolution of the theory also seems to have stalled.

Suggestions for the Progress of Communication Studies

Communication studies have undoubtedly experienced significant quantitative growth, yet it is challenging to assert that the field is truly progressing in a qualitative sense. While the volume of published papers has increased substantially, questions persist whether the research outcomes are having a significant impact within academia or broader societal contexts. Collective efforts are necessary to transform this quantitative growth into qualitative advancement. To achieve this, I would like to propose a few recommendations.

Dialectical Integration Through Critique

Although many of the studies are conducted quantitatively, if such research remains isolated and is cited only on an individual basis, it is unlikely to lead to qualitative progress or collective achievements. For meaningful advancement, individual studies must be interconnected, systematically organized, and integrated at a collective level. In this regard, meta-analyses that comprehensively present the results of existing research play a crucial role in the development of theories. However, while meta-analyses present aggregated results, they have limitations in pinpointing which specific aspects of a theory need to be revised or improved. For research to truly advance, it requires more than a mere summation of findings but a *dialectical integration* that synthesizes and refines ideas.

The Hegelian dialectic (Hegel, 2010) describes changes in the forms of thought through their own internal contradictions into concrete forms that overcome previous oppositions. A simplified Hegelian dialectic is a process where the initial viewpoint (i.e., *thesis*) comes into conflict with a contrasting viewpoint that contradicts or negates the thesis (i.e., *antithesis*), ultimately leading to a

² More than 150,000 research results are available on Google Scholar as of December 17, 2024.

new viewpoint that resolves the conflict between the thesis and antithesis (i.e., *synthesis*). Looking at the process of theoretical development, it becomes evident that many theories have progressed through the thesis-antithesis-synthesis cycle. Based on a particular explanation (i.e., thesis), new discoveries are presented, prompting other researchers to propose alternative explanations (i.e., antithesis) and supporting evidence. Through this process of debate and critique, the field moves toward a more integrative, comprehensive theory (i.e., synthesis).

To achieve such dialectical integration, it is vital to not only appreciate existing research but also to cultivate a critical mindset in students and researchers. We need to be more reflective about the theories we propose, more mindful of their limitations, and more receptive to those who challenge them. The problem is that publishing papers that critique existing theories or research findings is very difficult. Few academic journals actively welcome logical rebuttals or counterarguments to prevailing theories. Even when presenting empirical evidence that contradicts existing theories, researchers often face stricter scrutiny and resistance from reviewers who are more familiar with and inclined toward those theories. If journal editors or book editors are not open to criticism, it becomes difficult for critical papers to be published, and productive debates are unlikely to occur.

For the field of communication studies to progress, it is essential for individual researchers and research labs to adopt a more critical and open-minded approach toward existing theories and studies. Moreover, it is equally crucial for leaders responsible for academic institutions and systems to cultivate and demonstrate a more critical and open mindset.

More Platforms for Academic Debate

Compared to studies that apply existing theories, it is much more difficult to publish research that challenges or critiques established theories or

findings. Furthermore, if criticisms of existing theories are carried out individually, they are unlikely to lead to collective advancements. Conscious and systematic efforts from the academic community are essential. Through academic conferences and journals, the academic community needs to actively create spaces for theoretical debates, fostering meaningful and productive discussions. For this reason, the role of academic journals and conferences is crucial. These platforms must serve as venues that facilitate integration through critique and enable productive debates.

Recently, the journal *Mass Communication & Society* commemorated the 40th anniversary of the third-person effect theory by publishing a review article (Perloff & Shen, 2023), followed by a special issue featuring contributions from various experts sharing their perspectives (Schmierbach et al., 2023). It was a highly meaningful initiative where researchers who had studied the theory extensively expressed their perspectives. For academic debates to yield fruitful outcomes, it is essential to clearly define the issues of debate. Academic journals can facilitate productive discussions by pre-establishing these key issues when creating platforms for debate. The scholarly discussion on the third-person effect theory in *Mass Communication & Society* was somewhat lacking in clarity regarding its key points of the debate. If the core issues and questions had been clearly defined and experts' opinions solicited accordingly, it could have contributed more effectively to advancing our understanding of the theory. Instead, the discussion was structured in a way that allowed each participant to express their opinions on the subjects and questions they personally deemed important.

In 2018, *Journal of Communication* published a special forum featuring five articles on perceived message effectiveness (Nabi, 2018). O'Keefe (2018) presented several pieces of evidence and logical arguments that challenged the prevailing

academic consensus, which holds that perceived message effectiveness is strongly related to actual message effects and can generally be relied upon. In response, five research groups published articles rebutting O'Keefe's claims. This effort was highly meaningful in that it addressed specific points of contention with differing perspectives. However, it is regrettable that the debate did not progress further and failed to yield conclusive outcomes. Despite these limitations, the attempt to provide a platform for critique and debate is commendable and represents a valuable model for academic discourse.

There are several theories prominently discussed in media studies textbooks, such as cultivation theory, agenda-setting theory, framing theory, the third-person effect theory, and the spiral of silence theory. Decades have passed since these theories were introduced to the academic field. Over time, fragmented dissatisfaction and criticisms of these theories have surfaced repeatedly (e.g., Katz & Fialkoff, 2017). It is now time to open a platform for debate and systematically review these foundational theories. Such a process could lead to their evolution into more robust and systematic frameworks or, alternatively, determine that they are deemed no longer applicable and should be discarded.

Greater Appreciation for High-Quality Research

For the field of communication studies to grow qualitatively, there must be greater engagement with high-quality research and its dissemination to society. First, it is crucial to identify and recognize outstanding research through academic conferences and journals. This recognition should then be effectively communicated among scholars and researchers.

Recently, some communication journals have begun using their social network services to promote newly published articles. It is essential to convey the significance and implications of these articles effectively. Additionally, providing opportunities for researchers to leave comments

or engage in online discussions about these articles would further enhance their impact and foster academic dialogue.

In Conclusion

Upon assuming the role of Editor-in-Chief of *ACR*, I outlined the journal's direction of activities in Editor's Note of the first issue published in April 2021 as follows:

[I]t is doubtful whether our understanding of communication and media at the collective level has deepened and widened as the amount of knowledge has increased. As individual and fragmented knowledge increases, what is more needed is to synthesize such particular pieces of knowledge, resolve discrepancies among findings and claims, and develop comprehensive theoretical frameworks to cover a wide range of phenomena. Such a process also involves the expansion, modification, or falsification of existing theories, which is an evolutionary process of theory development (Kuhn, 1970). Synthesizing fragmentary knowledge and making advances in theory development do not result from individual effects but rather collective efforts such as dialogue, collaboration, and debates. One of the main functions of academic journals is facilitating dialogue and debates among different ideas. *ACR* intends to make such an effort. *ACR* will organize special forums to discuss notable findings, claims, and theories and publish the outcomes of the forums. (Chung, 2021, p. 6)

Over the past four years, we have published three special issues and one forum to foster dialogue and debates among diverse ideas. However, I deeply regret that we were unable to create a broader, deeper, and more intense platform for academic debate. I hope the next *ACR* editorial board will prioritize identifying and recognizing new and outstanding research and further open up meaningful platforms for debate to further advance the field of communication studies.

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