

puts it most directly in positing simply that communication research “is about effect. It could have been otherwise—consider the study of art, for example—but it is not” (p. 9472). Some trace the intellectual origins of communication scholarship back hundreds or even thousands of years (Peters, 1999). But the modern field of scholarship defined by scholarly associations, key journals, and academic departments is roughly a half-century old. The field has grown dramatically. The membership of the seven scholarly communication associations in the United States numbers over 10,000, with over 1,000 doctoral students currently enrolled and preparing to enter the field as scholars and practitioners. Thus, at the 50-year mark, it seems appropriate to ask—how much progress have we made? Focusing on the broadly defined issue of media effects, is there evidence of accumulative theoretical progress, scientific convergence on key findings, and improved methods of measurement and analysis?

Some analysts have suggested that we have witnessed a troubling lack of progress. The question of progress and disciplinary identity has been addressed in the *Journal of Communication* under the heading “Ferment in the Field” (Gerbner, 1983; Levy & Gurevitch, 1993) and in several recent presidential addresses of the International Communication Association’s annual meeting (Bryant, 2004; Craig, 2005; Donsbach, 2006). One sometimes gets the impression we are still debating the same fundamental questions that inaugurated the field in midcentury. A particularly cogent analysis, focusing on the media and children, makes the case that we actually recycle strikingly similar questions about effects—almost always defined as negative effects—addressing in turn the historical sequence of mass communication technology, from movies and comic books to television and, more recently, video games (Wartella & Reeves, 1985).

Robert Craig’s (1999) widely cited article paints a cautious picture of theoretical convergence and potential progress:

Communication theory as an identifiable field of study does not yet exist. Rather than addressing a field of theory, we appear to be operating primarily in separate domains. Books and articles on communication theory seldom mention other work on communication theory except within narrow . . . specialties and schools of thought. Except within these little groups, communication theorists apparently neither agree nor disagree about much of anything. There is no canon of general theory to which they all refer. There are no common goals that unite them, no contentious issues that divide them. For the most part, they simply ignore each other. (1999, pp. 119–120)