

# Communication research and teaching: The Australian Communication Association at 40 years

Media International Australia

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## Abstract

This article presents responses from a range of Australian scholars on communication research and teaching in the context of a roundtable in celebration of the 40th anniversary of the Australian Communication Association (ACA), the precursor organisation to the Australian and New Zealand Communication Association (ANZCA). Emphasising the range and diversity of approaches and epistemologies in this field, the roundtable invited a 'situated' response to questions considering scholarship, frameworks, and theoretical perspectives useful in thinking through the near and mid-term challenges facing the area. Emerging from the exercise is a snapshot of different agendas for research and teaching, many of them future-oriented and reformist in their emphasis on responsible practice and social change.

## Keywords

Communication, teaching, research, media, work, news, public, digital methods

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The Australian Communication Association (ACA), the precursor to today's Australian and New Zealand Communication Association (ANZCA), recently reached a 40-year milestone. To mark the occasion, the 2020 conference convened a group of scholars to discuss the history, present and future of communication research and teaching. In doing so we purposely sought to make room for a plurality of agendas, and value different perspectives on communication research and teaching. We are not the first to put a premium on a plurality of views. As Robert Norton noted:

An advantage of the size of the ACA and the Australian Communication Community is we are forced to confront a range of theories and epistemologies and their underlying world views. (Norton, 1992: 43)

This passage underlines the often taken for granted reality that, in forums such as ANZCA and ACA, many different perspectives and traditions of thinking about, and working with, communication are brought together 'in the same room'. The quotation stands within a long line of thinking about 'eclecticism', and the generalist character of the Association, as one of its great strengths (see Petelin, 2013: 7).<sup>2</sup>

Over the last 40 years, different views of communication and the problem of communication have proliferated (see Peters, 1999; Waisbord, 2019). It is important to acknowledge a number of developments which have recast the terrain in which communication scholars teach and research. This includes the diverse range of scholarship covered by ANZCA and contestations around the standing of the field in Australasia and beyond (see Maras, 2020). In addition, communication research has been shaped by a shifting institutional terrain, with many scholars experiencing the challenges of restructure and new forms of precarity. Of course, COVID-19 has also accelerated challenges facing the sector as a whole, with simultaneous declines in revenues, additional workload, and the impacts of redundancies affecting many universities.

On the level of broader communication scholarship we can also highlight several key developments. These include (inter alia) the enormous challenges associated with changes in the media landscape and incorporating digital convergence and globalization, the emergence of different interest groups and internet, network and software studies; the emergence, growth and transformation of journalism studies; the rapid emergence of research around platforms and data, and with it transformations in research design and digital methods. We have also seen the rise and increased

prominence of very significant areas of research in disability studies and Indigenous and environmental communication, which inter-connects with critical race and gender studies.

This changing field set the scene for the roundtable. Participants were encouraged to adopt a 'situated' approach to the key challenges presently facing the area, and what this will mean for the way in which we teach and research communication in the near to middle future. The group were invited to discuss their own work and discipline area, and focus in on a recognised part of the disciplinary landscape they inhabit, or to focus on the problems they were working with. This article bears traces of its origins at a conference panel conceived originally in hybrid form and across four time zones during the COVID-19 pandemic. Emerging from the exercise is a snapshot of different agendas for research and teaching, many of them future-oriented and reformist in their emphasis on responsible practice and social change.

### Gerard Goggin

Every national context has their own institutional or other configurations of communication. Look across the world – and I do so through an International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) lens – it is extraordinary to see how each country configures communication; and also what's normative; what gets centred *as* communication. The great thing I think over the last 10 or 20 years is that what is communication has been so contested. I think you've seen the strain at the level of the international scholarly associations such as ICA (International Communication Association) and IAMCR levels with people asking: 'Well, where's your diversity, where's the equality, what about the languages of your scholarship? How do people get to your conferences? How do they get to them now?'

Since the early 1990s I've worked on communication and media and social justice and rights questions, and particularly interested in the social and cultural coordinates of communication. Interestingly, colleagues were happy to see me arriving in Singapore because I was a 'qualitative scholar'. Perhaps in a more Australian context, we find it a bit weird to say that, but it really made me think that, in some ways, my work has been very much shaped by an Australian confluence of the debates, but particularly the interaction between media and cultural studies has been really formative for me, among other things.

My work has revolved around technology and communication: whether that's the work on mobile communication; interests in internet and digital histories; and then work on disability and media, and various things have been showcased here as well. Since moving to Singapore in 2019, of course, I have become much more interested in Southeast Asian locations. It is a long-standing interest because I went to high school in Singapore, and studied in the Indonesian department at Melbourne University alongside doing English literature. Increasingly, I'm interested in how questions of communication work through different Asian locations and context, and particularly the Southeast Asian. I'm now taking on the directorship, with my colleague Vivian Chen, of the re-launched Asian Communication Research Centre at Nanyang Technological University – so we have a great opportunity to build on earlier efforts in Singapore to conceptualize Asian communications now and into the future.

Across the areas I've worked ANZCA has played a crucial role for me, often in tiny gatherings, with people who might have wandered into the wrong room, which we've all done, but who have really engaged with our ideas. I just wanted to mention disability and media as one area where ANZCA has played an important role. The Association still has the Christopher Newell prize,<sup>3</sup> a key symbol of this. Giving papers over many years to small groups of people has been really influential, including the panels that Katie Ellis and I convened at this conference, to think about where

things have gone. The number, the calibre, the different career stages, the contributions of scholars, that have been nurtured through ANZCA, and have gone on to be internationally influential, have been impressive. You see this role of ANZCA also in areas such as Internet studies as well as mobile media and communication studies that now have significant formations internationally.

The future challenges are many. The role of national associations is challenging. What's the relevance of an ANZCA and other national organizations, particularly when people have been pulled more into the international associations and conferences? This is a big issue, but also an opportunity coming out of the pandemic. The relationship between the local and the global has been a trope of the work of many of us (Goggin and McLelland, 2009, 2017) – because we didn't quite fit. The global circuits suited us in some ways, particularly given an Anglophone trajectory, but in other ways, they didn't. So many of us have been invested in rethinking the international, rethinking the global and local, and working on that level. I think that at a scholarly association level that is important—that 'the national' is critical, for its capacity to imaginatively rework the trans-local and the International. Particularly for environmental and sustainability reasons, for reasons of diversity and equality, but also for the reasons of strained resources. We are trying to do things more creatively at different scales in different places bearing in mind what we have.

In closing, I wanted to mention a couple of imperatives. A key issue is about sustainable work careers, research development and opportunity for researchers, particularly given academic life and work is very much an international kind of undertaking although in very specific locales. These are really difficult questions and I think it's great to see the association taking the opportunity to find ways to do that, and people in some ways gathering around associations: to replicate the experience that you can have at a conference. The opportunity to just have that felicity and serendipity of meeting people is invaluable to us.

During the pandemic especially, Singapore has been an extraordinary place to work. I've really felt for colleagues dealing with the devastating things that have happened in Australian universities: a triple whammy of loss of international students, fee changes, and not getting Job Seeker and Keeper [payments] in universities. The experience in Singapore has been different. The universities are really valued for research and innovation. There's a different set of politics and imperatives, and the government has, to a large extent, 'sandbagged' the Singapore universities during the pandemic. Inside of the two countries I've had the experience of, Singapore and Australia, the challenges in the pandemic are massively different. So I wonder what the world looks like in the coming years when we are working in the national context, working with our colleagues in a region like South America, as well as in other parts of Asia, where it's not clear when will they get to the next conference to travel. They're going to be engaged in a massive process of national and institutional restructuring to do things at all.

One of the things that we could be doing in our region and, from an ANZCA perspective, is much more engagement with different locations in Asia. That's been such a strength of Australia in terms of its research. Such engagement, as we know, has often been funded fitfully: Indonesian language and studies get funded in the 1970s and gets kind of forgotten about for the next 20 years. Many other areas of Asian language, culture, and society research have suffered similar fates. Yet there's great research capabilities in Australia in which *Asian* media and communication have been crucial. So finally: what are our linkages with communication associations in the region? What are the opportunities for collaboration?

### Kate Fitch

I specialize in critical and socio-cultural approaches to public relations. My research has drawn on historical and feminist perspectives to understand the broader social impact of communicative

activity and promotional work. My main contributions are advocating critical feminist research to address gender inequality, and promoting more evidenced histories that recognize the impact of the professional project. More recently, I've focused on popular and promotional culture, considering how public relations shapes meaning in everyday life.

For me, UK scholar Jacquie L'Etang's body of work offered an important alternative to instrumentalist approaches and the dominant American paradigm that has proved remarkably persistent in Australian public relations education and research. L'Etang's training as a historian, interest in propaganda and her forensic use of archives reconceptualized the historical development of public relations in the United Kingdom and challenged the dominant paradigm.

ANZCA has played a key role in the scholarly development of public relations. Ros Petelin commissioned a special issue of the *Australian Journal of Communication*, 'Public Relations on the Edge' (Leitch and Walker, 1997). It remains a landmark in critical public relations history, with a scholarship from Jacquie L'Etang, Magda Pieczka, David McKie, Shirley Leitch and Judy Motion. More recently, the ANZCA 2015 conference led to the first *Media International Australia* special issue (Fitch et al., 2016) dedicated to public relations.

History has been important for me in understanding both disciplinary history and the professional narratives of public relations. The success of Communication Studies in tier-two universities was significant for the development of public relations in Australia, offering public relations a disciplinary home in the academy (Fitch, 2016). As Steve Mackey of Deakin said to me, it was a nice, sexy vocational subject that the top universities were turning their noses up at. Public relations faced fierce resistance from both more scholarly and co-emergent professional fields. One journalism educator likened public relations to the manipulation and propaganda of Machiavelli and Goebbels and 'any self-respecting journalism school must resist the planting of PR and other forms of "persuasive communication" within their department' (Henningham, 1999: 187). This resistance to public relations is an important part of the history of Communication and Media Studies. Even now, public relations scholarship has a limited impact outside its field. Too many public relations scholars don't engage much with communication and media studies, cultural studies, or with broader societal and cultural concerns.

My current projects include work on gender and history and thinking about public relations as an important site for understanding feminized labour and media work. I also find promotional culture helpful for moving away from defending public relations and reinforcing its apparently unique boundaries, towards thinking more broadly about how promotional industries such as public relations are institutionalized in business and government and this communicative activity has significant societal impacts.

For me, public relations is a communicative activity, which both commodifies culture to promote organizational self-interest and can also be used to challenge that organizational self-interest. How do we teach communications and public relations to develop students as socially responsible communicators? My approach is not to teach public relations as a profession, or as a narrowly prescribed set of industry practices founded on professional aspirations, but rather to open up thinking about public relations and to situate it firmly within Communication and Media Studies. Another challenge is whether public relations really enables meaningful engagement, and can be harnessed to support progressive social change? That is precisely the question I foreground, in my teaching and in my research.

### **Diana Bossio**

I work mostly in journalism studies with a particular interest in how journalists use social media. I look at the impacts on digital and social media on journalist's labour, mental health, and professional norms and identity. I think right now we're probably a pretty good example of what I do

in my research, as we talk to each other from a distance, on our screens. The promise of social media to connect and inform seems obvious. Yet, the reason we're separated is a global pandemic that hardly anyone in the country that I'm speaking from is fully vaccinated against yet. That's due mostly to government ineptitude, but slow take-up rates can also be seen to be part of increasing misinformation circulating especially on social media, about which vaccine is best, whether they're safe, and even whether a pandemic exists at all.

In that context, the challenges in my discipline seem fairly obvious as well. Those problems aren't new in my discipline, but we are seeing its ramifications very clearly during the global pandemic. We're also seeing the ramifications in journalism both in its production and consumption. There's no doubt that global shifts are occurring in news consumption towards social media. There are growing trends for news consumption amongst young people towards image-based social media like TikTok or Instagram. Journalism studies have spent a lot of time interrogating the professional identity of the journalist as an authority over truth. But the journalist is not always the authority on social media.

Recent work by Jacob Nelson and Seth Lewis, adds to a number of research studies showing that increasingly how people approach the news, stems not only from how they perceive the trustworthiness of individual news outlets but also from their own self-perceptions. They said news consumers believe journalism generally suffers from issues of bias, but that they are savvy, and independent-minded enough, to see through those biases to find the truth, even if that isn't always true (Nelson and Lewis, 2021).

This year's wonderful keynote, Edson Tandoc Jr. shows us that people's trust in the news is as dependent on what perceptions they bring to the news, as it is on what the news brings to them (Tandoc et al., 2020). Closer to home, our ANZCA ex-presidents Sora Park, Terry Flew, as well as Uwe Dulleck and other colleagues (Flew et al., 2020) recently published a report saying Australians are prepared to trust the news generally but they have expectations for greater accountability and transparency in news reporting that are not often being met. I think there's a number of good but complicated reasons for this. One of the things that I've been focusing on, and a number of other studies have been focusing on, is how journalists have had to take on increased labour to try and engage audiences on different social media platforms. My own work has shown the impact that ever-increasing employment precarity and pressure to do the affective labour on social media, has led to disconnection, mental fatigue, and burnout. My new book with Valérie Bélaïr-Gagnon, Avery Holton and Logan Molyneux talks about the paradox of connection, especially for journalists in online spaces showing some of the impacts of news organizations requiring journalists to really live their work online. Really great new work that my colleague Logan did with Matt Coddington took a longitudinal approach to measuring how journalists use of first, second and third-hand sources has changed over time (Coddington and Molyneux, 2023). And surprisingly, they found that journalists have become more distant from their sources since 2007. Specifically, they showed non-mediated attributed speech – so things like interviews – showed a small but steady decline as a source-type, replaced by mediated speech (mostly social media), and third-hand accounts (usually other news media). So today's journalism can be seen to be more intertextual and less original. However, one interesting trend that they did find is that legacy news organizations and digital native news organization seem to be learning from each other. Newspapers are incorporating more mediated speech, and digital news are conducting more of their own interviews. So, it shows that where legacy media are becoming less original, digital natives are increasingly creating more original content.

So what does this all mean for research? More broadly, it means that we need to think through new ways of improving public trust of news and information, and we do that at the grassroots, in the way that we support journalists to do proper community engagement around the things that matter.

My own view is that we don't just have a massive resourcing problem in journalism, we have a really bad, institutional culture problem. We're under-supporting journalists, while asking them to meet expectations that are unrealistic to begin with. We're burning out the next generation before they even have a chance to get started. And perhaps that's something that we as academics can relate to. The impact of that has been in overall journalistic quality, the number of 'superstar' media organizations with cutting edge investigation diminishes, and the rest start to show the impact of ever-increasing cuts in the quality of what they produce. This increases the audience's mistrust of media organizations and journalists, and they increasingly go to information from sources they trust. Communities they feel part of. Research has shown that this is often family members, friends, and influential but non-expert individuals they engage with on social media (Fletcher and Park, 2017; Neyazi et al., 2021; Valenzuela et al., 2021). This could be communities of newsmakers who are trusted informants for their online and offline communities. One way I think we could encourage this, is by improving the public's trust of the process of journalism. We could, and should, focus on improving people's understanding of how journalists do their work, how truth is arrived at, and transparency and accountability and diversity around the version of truth being presented. This might serve to better demonstrate that good journalism is found when the process is transparent, and modes of accuracy are there *despite* innate individual biases, rather than in the *service* of larger organizational biases.

### *Jonathon Hutchinson*

My background is in online communities, cultural production, and community management, and this all stems from working at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, where I also worked on my PhD. That set me down the path of where I'm currently working, which is looking at digital intermediation. We can break this down into a few different areas: one is around the impacts of technology (so platforms, databases, virtual reality and augmented reality spaces, drone sensors). Similarly, we might think about the impacts of institutions within these technological spaces: advertising agencies, digital agencies, regulations and policies. Finally, there is the question of to what extent automation determines, if at all, the relationship between cultural production and consumption. We increasingly see the role of algorithms, automatically driving media practices of production and consumption. We need to be more aware of what's happening in the digital intermediation environment.

Leaving to one side the huge impact of COVID on our research environments, the challenges that I see emerging in our continued scholarship, and where ANZCA can certainly lead, relate to the interdisciplinary nature of this kind of research. From my personal perspective, this has taken a long time to establish in the first instance, and also nurture. What I mean by 'interdisciplinary nature' is being able to collaborate with people that can work with technological devices. So often we hear about the 'black box' associated with different technologies, and how we need someone to 'crack it open' to understand and interpret them. From a media and communication perspective, this is incredibly difficult when we just don't have that training and are asked to do that kind of work.

Here I'd point to the work of Francesco Bailo (Bailo and Vromen, 2017; Vromen et al., 2016), now situated at the University of Technology, Sydney, who does this amazingly well. He has a history of working with many scholars in media and communications, bringing his expertise in computer science to the table. I know scholars who are currently working with him, or who have worked with him in the past. You can really see a lot of that work starting to emerge that speaks to the importance of cross-discipline and multi-expertise research, especially within the increasing automated spaces of media and communication.

That's something we need to do more work on. That is, having individuals with media and communication training, who are also adapted towards coding and development for this kind of research. These specific skill sets enable groups of researchers to use the connection devices that are part of these contemporary communication technologies, talk about them from the perspective of our specific research fields, then also enable interdisciplinary expert conversations to emerge and new findings to shape what we know about large-scale and often automated platformed media experiences.

There are theoretical areas that we need to address in digital and automated media. I draw a lot from the work that is being done at the University of Amsterdam – Richard Rogers being one of the key scholars (Rogers, 2013). Also, the pioneering work that Axel Bruns, and others, at QUT, have done in social media research (Bruns et al., 2016).

It's important to think about the critical approaches towards these sorts of technologies. So recently we've seen fantastic work by Safiya Umoja Noble (2018), Tanya Bucher (2018), and others, including Frank Pasquale (2015) and Ted Striphas (2015). Particularly work that's coming out of critical race studies (see especially Frazer and Carlson, 2017 for the Australian context). When those kinds of bridges are built between critical media and communication technology and critical race studies, we then begin to open up areas that need to be focused on a great deal more. More recently, I think the emerging field of algorithmic visibility is also important (Bishop, 2019; Duffy and Hund, 2019). All of this work is crucial to incorporate into our contemporary approaches towards media and communication.

To bring this back to the sorts of recommendations or insights into the middle to near future, I want to highlight some specific areas:

- Firstly, the 'environment'. That is, to be able to continue to be a world-leading group of researchers within this arena. To do that, Australian and New Zealand humanities needs to continue investment in the research and teaching of these specialist areas.
- We might also think about this from a research infrastructure perspective. Specifically, *national* research infrastructures. For the most part, a lot of this remains clunky and inaccessible to most researchers. So, making these existing infrastructures become more familiar to communication scholars, to not just access, but to be able to use efficiently and effectively.
- At an institutional level, the integration of computer science and communication in media studies needs to be inherent in our undergraduate, postgraduate and HDR teaching and research spaces. As scholars, I think we need to have that willingness to collaborate with computer scientists and also develop a skill set that enables us to communicate with other disciplines to find common grounds of interest.
- Finally, in relation to ANZCA, I wonder if this is something that we need to start thinking about or start initiating again, around digital methods within the specific ANZCA conference itself.

### *Stephanie Brookes*

We come to our scholarship and our teaching grounded in the training, background, and experiences that grant us insight in visible and less visible ways. The scholarly training I received was interdisciplinary: media and journalism studies, political communication and cultural studies. That mix informs the work I do. It's a reason that ANZCA has been a welcome home for my scholarship. ANZCA is a place where multiple disciplinary and institutional perspectives, theoretical foundations, and empirical approaches have collided, but in constructive and creative ways.



We're *interested*. And this is a key strength of our scholarship, something that has emerged so strongly in the sessions I've attended in the last couple of days.

I'm interested in collective identity discourses. It's through that lens that I work with and defines communication and the ways that it's implicated in identity and belonging. I was reminded during the excellent panel on far-right discourses at this conference of how formative the work of anthropologist and social theorist Ghassan Hage has been in my own scholarship. In particular, his notion of 'governmental belonging' (1998) which highlights how those who claim privileged status within a collective retain the power to define and to worry about that collective.

I've been drawn in research to questions about how constructions and understandings of identity underpin certain kinds of claims about authority within journalism and political communication. I find Matt Carlson's (2017: 13) definition really useful: journalistic authority as 'the contingent relationship in which certain actors come to possess a right to create legitimate discursive knowledge'. This guides questions in my research. For example, on what basis do actors in journalism and politics construct their identity, and argue for their role in democracies? That might be members of the press gallery in Canberra (Brookes, 2018a), campaigning political leaders, or the reporters who cover those same campaigns. Under what conditions is collective identity work realized, and how is this impacted by cycles of disruption and change? Much of my research has interrogated these questions. What I grapple with is how best to do so while taking into account political, economic, technological, social, and cultural shifts that affect news media landscapes.

Tim Vos and Ryan Thomas (2018: 1) argued that the 21st century had seen 'a crisis of journalistic authority' in the US. They positioned journalistic authority as 'a site of discursive struggle', where there was 'ongoing contestation between those who wanted to maintain it and those who wanted to reform or displace or challenge or erode it'. It's a perspective that infuses the boundary-work frameworks that have been influential in journalism studies in the past few years. I've used these to identify ways in which political reporters in Australia and the US sought to reclaim the core identity markers of professional journalism (Brookes, 2019), as a response to changes that they understood as challenges. Things like: the emergence of new competitors; shifting, problematic relationships with increasingly professionalized politics; or the reworking of power balances with audiences. However, I'm increasingly less inclined to think in terms of *crisis* and boundary struggle, shifting more recently to consider the basis on which authority is constituted by, and for, actors within political news and information landscapes.

I've been paying attention to political fact checking in Australia since 2016 – a year marked by elections in Australia *and* in the US. I thought, what an interesting moment, although I did not anticipate just how interesting it would become. The political fact checking I pay attention to is the kind undertaken by places like RMIT ABC Fact Check. In their own words, they determine 'the accuracy of claims by politicians, public figures, advocacy groups, and institutions in the public debate' (RMIT ABC, 2021). I set out to map what I was hoping was going to be the rise of fact checking in Australia – a rise that turned out to be modest and limited (Brookes, 2018b). In doing so, I became interested in the relationship of fact checkers with legacy news organizations seeking to maintain their own authoritative role in a digital news landscape characterized by 'information disorder', in Claire Wardle and Hussein Derakhshan's (2017) terms. They positioned themselves as 'one stop shops' for audience members (Brookes, 2018c): don't worry about these emerging players, visit the legacy news organization and we'll give you everything you need. In more recent projects with Lisa Waller, we're now looking for new ways of understanding the relationships and resources that underpin fact checking in Australia, and thinking through new theoretical options for this: from 'communities of practice' to 'media power'.

This shift away from crisis perspectives in my research has also led me to rethink my teaching. I teach critical media theory and journalism studies in the journalism program at Monash. This

semester I've taught our first-year cohort again after a long time. These are students who bring unexpected and surprising digital and media literacies of their own to the classroom. They spent last year in lockdown watching the world implode with bushfires, with pandemics and with protests. Their perspectives on authority, identity, and hierarchy have thrown so many of my own assumptions into really sharp relief. They've watched the journalism industry grapple with the way that newsroom cultures and the touchstone values that underpin professional journalistic identity (like 'objectivity') privilege certain kinds of identities over others; and the ongoing impacts of the #metoo and Black Lives Matter movements have made that clear.

I want my own teaching and scholarship to pay closer critical attention to these kinds of questions. There is inspiration in the #CommunicationSoWhite and #JStudiesSoWhite movements, that have called for a different approach to authority, expertise, hierarchy, and visibility within our own disciplines. I found the work of Nikki Usher from the University of Illinois particularly useful as an intervention. This is because of her willingness to publicly ask really uncomfortable questions of herself, her own scholarship, and her own teaching beyond the paywall of the scholarly journal. For example, in her 2019 keynote at the 'Future of Journalism' conference, where she asked that we pay closer attention to things like the composition of the editorial boards of our journals (Berry, 2019); or in her highlighting of the problematic philanthropic relationships that big tech platforms like Google and Facebook have with news organizations (Usher, 2020a). And even more recently in her work she thinks through privilege, newsroom culture, and journalistic values in the aftermath of the 2020 US election (Usher, 2020b).

There is an opportunity for refocusing on the ways that we operate as tour guides, as gatekeepers, and critical insiders for the disciplines in which we work, while also considering how our scholarship can move forward in really situated and reflective ways. This has been something I've heard in sessions, in panels, across the last couple of days. Colleagues talking in open, personal and reflective ways, about why it is we do the work we do, and why we ask the questions that we ask.

### *Julie Freeman*

My research focuses on exploring the lived experiences of rural and regional communities in shifting communication environments, which includes interrelated areas of local and hyperlocal news media, connectivity and digital inclusion, and local governments and civic participation. I'm a qualitative fieldwork researcher; I don't naturally align with a specific discipline within communications, but instead, cover a variety of issues and cases depending on what challenges particular communities are experiencing. I publish on topics from how the National Broadband Network (NBN) impacts farmers, to environmental activism, to local news gaps, to the need for infrastructure development to help disaster resilience. My work is therefore multidisciplinary in nature. Like everyone on this panel, I often rely on research from other fields, particularly sociology, policy and political science, geography and regional studies. As others have recognised, the value of communications in Australia is that this type of approach is embraced, which speaks to the historical strength of ANZCA and journals like MIA in supporting diverse research.

One of the conceptual problems that I grapple with is how to ensure that I consider 'rurality' through a communication and media studies lens. 'Rurality' is about recognising the diversity of communities, their political, social and economic environments, and the place-based challenges they experience. I've been working on how to theorise and reconceptualise why media and communication technologies are fundamental to understanding rurality, and the meaning-making processes involved. We have a wealth of research in Australia that broadly covers these areas, but we

haven't taken that next step to rethink the rural from a communications perspective, and we don't yet have a well-established theory of rural communications.

That means I tend to gravitate to the work of communication scholars who cross similar conceptual boundaries through empirical work. This includes authors like Christopher Ali in the US, who explores the intersections between media localism, broadband policy and rural communication practices (Ali, 2017, 2018, 2021), and research on hyperlocal media environments by people like David Harte and Andy Williams in the UK (Harte et al., 2018). It has also meant that I rely on strong mentors and collaborators to help maintain my research track in communications. I've been privileged to work with and have ongoing guidance from some of our leading Australian scholars, which is invaluable to me. But not all developing academics have those opportunities, or that type of support available. There's space for ANZCA to potentially facilitate an informal mentorship program, between our senior scholars and our emerging HDR and ECR members, which could generate further value for the field.

In terms of the challenges I can see arising for qualitative researchers, there are a few on the horizon given decreased research funding available and ongoing government and university travel restrictions. There's a push towards digital research methods, which brings opportunities to innovate and compliment more traditional approaches through activities like network mapping. But we also need to acknowledge that these approaches are not necessarily going to provide the same sort of 'thick' data and insights that many of us rely upon. For example, there are problems for research when you have to use Zoom to talk to people in remote areas who are experiencing challenges connecting to the internet. I'd like to see more cross-institutional and cross-state collaborations to help address these types of challenges.

In terms of teaching-related challenges, there's a disconnect between cross-disciplinary rural communication research, and teaching rural communications at the undergraduate level, where the rural is often only used as a fleeting example of the digital divide or as a case study of local journalism. That creates concerns when undergraduate students enter the workforce. For example, many of our journalism students receive cadetships in regional mastheads, which brings risks that they don't properly understand the complexity of issues that exist in rural and regional Australia, the fact that politics extends beyond the metropolis, or the role that they play in articulating nuanced issues to diverse communities.

It's also important to remember that the changes we've experienced over the past couple of years are heavily affecting us and our work environments. We're working to different time structures. We're expected to continuously engage with students and we're providing much more customised, individualised support. We're handling more mental health issues than any of us would have anticipated. Universities are recognising that more needs to be done to support students in the current climate, but there's also a need to address the increasing demands placed on us as educators and the consequences for our workloads, our well-being, and our research time.

## Conclusion

These accounts are products of a simple methodology deployed, in a non-exhaustive manner, to reflect on the plurality of agendas, practices and methodologies that contribute to contemporary approaches to communication. These are 'situated' within ANZCA, a relatively diverse and 'generalist' community of scholarship whose efforts to engage with a broad field of practices are shaped by a collective history. In deploying this approach, we quite deliberately avoided a concern to develop a shared research agenda, but rather provide a 'snapshot' of different agendas, in order to consider both their overlaps and divergences. Nevertheless, it is notable that certain common themes did emerge from this discussion.

There was a powerful emphasis on contest, conflict and a reformist agenda, characterising a field that places a strong normative emphasis on critical work. Panellists emphasised agendas that were progressive, emphasising the role of communication research and teaching as not only the production of knowledge, but of cultural and social change.

Being critical on this occasion did not, however, refer only to a critical perspective on external communication actors and practices, although there was a strong emphasis on the importance of industry engagement, and work addressing urgent public challenges. It also, significantly, referred to the importance of applying a critical lens to communication teaching and research itself. Thus, panellists both celebrated an increased recognition of significant new areas of work, and noted that there remains considerable work to do. Panellists also emphasised how, in some respects, exacerbated by change within the university sector, inequalities may be worsening due to increased work demands, financial pressures, and the adoption of policies that entrench and produce divisions and hierarchies rather than addressing them. There is a strong emphasis placed on the importance of support for emerging scholars, who are often particularly vulnerable in precarious and hierarchically structured work environments.

Finally, in a notable departure from Norton's earlier concern to develop a national communication agenda, panellists significantly eschewed a focus on creating boundaries around the field of Australian and *Aotearoa* New Zealand scholarship. This emphasis is strongly centred on two themes. Firstly, there was a strong emphasis on interdisciplinarity and cross-disciplinary collaboration as both important characteristics of the contemporary field, and something that panellists emphasised should be actively pursued. Secondly, panellists strongly emphasised the importance of recognising the needs of different communities within local and national settings, and of developing international connections, collaborations and dialogue which to further enrich teaching and research.


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
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
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### Notes

1. This article originated as a panel celebrating the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the founding in 1980 of the Australian Communication Association (ACA, now ANZCA), convened at the Australian and New Zealand Communication (ANZCA) Annual Conference, 'ANZCA 2021—Communication, Authority and Power', The University of Melbourne, Australia, 6–9 July 2021. <http://anzca.org/conference/2021/> The convenors of the panel were Steven Maras and David Nolan, who have co-written the introduction and conclusion to this piece. Apologies were offered for not including a colleague from *Aotearoa* New Zealand

on the panel. Despite the best efforts of the convenors, time differences and competing obligations made this impossible.

2. For Lelia Green, a past president of the Association: ‘ANZCA is a rare thing in today’s scholarly world: a generalist organisation.... Very few organisations are as diverse and as friendly’ (<https://anzca.net/awards.html>, accessed 20 July 2021). The eclecticism of the association and its diversity (as a positive and a negative) has long been the subject of discussion (see Maras 2003, 2004: 36).
3. From 2009, ANZCA has awarded the Christopher Newell Prize for the Best Paper Dealing with Disability/Equity/Social Justice and Communication at each annual conference. Newell had been an active contributor to many ANZCA conferences, and in both his individual work and in collaboration with authors such as Gerard Goggin, a pioneer in publishing on disability and communication.

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