



Mapping Media and Communications Research in Finland

Juha Herkman
Miika Vähämaa

Our task was to chart the main trends, focuses and challenges in contemporary communications research in Finland. By communications research, we understand original research done in a socio-scientific context on media, mass communications and communication studies. As such, our definition of communications research is rather broad. However, our main emphasis is on original work on questions related to the media; much media research also has a societal slant. Less emphasis is placed on organizational communications and research related to communication technologies. These areas of communications research are included in case the work at hand links in with other media research, revealing a societal slant of its own. By way of comparison to investigations conducted in a purely academic context, industrial research is our primary concern. To that end, industrial research is not excluded by the same criteria that excluded some of the academic communications research. Most industrial research does not employ an outspoken societal or other theoretical framework, but takes a more practical problem setting as its starting point.

To map out the state of contemporary communications research, we decided to gather both quantitative and qualitative data for an analysis. Thus, we collected academic publications, research reports (both academic and those carried out by media industries) and books dating from 2000 until the present day, and interviewed some 31 scholars, media industry experts and research personnel from research enterprises. The majority of the experts interviewed were academic researchers. Similarly, the vast majority of our collection of publications consists of academic work. However, a number of our interviewees and the publications from the private sector gave us a chance to compare both the academic and the entrepreneurial contexts of communications research.

What follows is a summary of the research results based on our data. The following brief chapters aim to provide an overview of the main characteristics of contemporary Finnish communications research.

Number of Publications Stagnant – one Publication per Day!

According to our study, communications departments at universities around the country produced in total around 1,500 masters theses, licentiate theses, dissertations and other publications between 2000-2007 (see Table 1). If we include books, industrial research reports and academic articles, the number of publications rises to 2,172 over the period 2000-2007. It seems that the volume of publications increased until 2004 and then stagnated to its current level. However, a slight decrease in the total amount of publications is observable in the past two years. The average number published per year is thus about 360 papers and books. In other words, one publication is produced almost every day of the year.



Table 1. *The amounts of scholarly theses and dissertations at the central communications faculties from year 2000 to the present day.*

University (by city)	Number of theses	Percentage of total
Jyväskylä	401	26,8
Helsinki	385	25,8
Tampere	240	16,1
Vaasa	133	8,9
Turku	96	6,4
Lapin yliopisto	81	5,4
Other	159	11,0
Together	1495	100

The table above shows that there are three large and three average-sized communications faculties at the universities in Finland. The larger ones are located at the University of Jyväskylä, the University of Helsinki and the University of Tampere, while the average-sized faculties are at the University of Vaasa, the University of Turku and the University of Lapland (Lapin yliopisto).

In addition to this, there are a number of smaller scale communications faculties and units spread widely across the Finnish academic system. For instance, the Helsinki University of Technology has its own laboratory for communications technology, which annually conducts original research on a wide array of communications technology related topics. Some of this work is linked to societal aspects of communications and can thus be categorized as social scientific media research as well engineering science.

Research Units and Funding Outside Academia

At the Universities of Helsinki, Tampere and Jyväskylä there are independent research units which each conduct original research on communications related topics. The Journalism Research and Development Centre at the University of Tampere and the Communication Research Centre at the University of Helsinki are academic research units whose funding derives primarily from non-academic sources. The research unit at the University of Jyväskylä is more academic in the sense that it receives funding both from the university and from outside. In contrast to those in Helsinki and Tampere, the Jyväskylä research unit also features an educational curriculum.

The Helsinki and Tampere units, as well as several polytechnic institutes across Finland, conduct lots of research and development work in association with media companies, governmental organizations and certain NGOs (including private foundations). Most research cooperation, however, is conducted between ministries, media companies and research units. Funding is provided by the company or governmental unit, and the research is designed and conducted by the research unit. In recent years such cooperation has become more commonplace and popular. Such privately funded research projects are typically short-



term and often focus on a problem setting specified by the funding body. The same applies to research cooperation with governmental institutions. For example, the Ministry of Communications regularly “commissions” media observance studies from these academic units. Such funding is comparable to that acquired from media companies that often engage research units in projects related to journalism development. Other common topics in privately funded research are audience and consumer surveys and the development of organizational communications.

Only a small part of Finnish communications research is funded by the academic faculties themselves; most research funding comes from various foundations, corporations, the Finnish ministries and the EU. The Finnish government, however, allocates funding to research through the Finnish Academy and Tekes (Technology oriented research fund). These funds also contribute to communications research. On top of these funding institutions, there are several private funds which contribute to communications research. A newcomer, but a substantial supporter of the field, is the Helsingin Sanomat Foundation. This foundation, established in 2006, annually allocates around 4 million euros towards communications research. With this sum, the Foundation is the greatest individual funder in the field. Other funding bodies annually allocate around 3 million euros to communications research.

Popular Culture and Media Culture Most Common Topics

Chart 1 shows how different topics are represented by percentage in our quantitative data (2,289 publications). The publications in this study were gathered from public databases, primarily from an academic context. The most important source was NORDICOM’s listing of academic theses from 2001–2006. NORDICOM is a knowledge centre in the field of media and communication research, a cooperative group working between the five countries of the Nordic region – Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. Starting from academic research, NORDICOM collects and adapts knowledge, mediating it to various user groups in the Nordic region, Europe and elsewhere in the world. In addition to the NORDICOM database, information on research publications was gathered from LINDA, the library database of the University of Helsinki. LINDA is a massive online database of academic literature and articles.

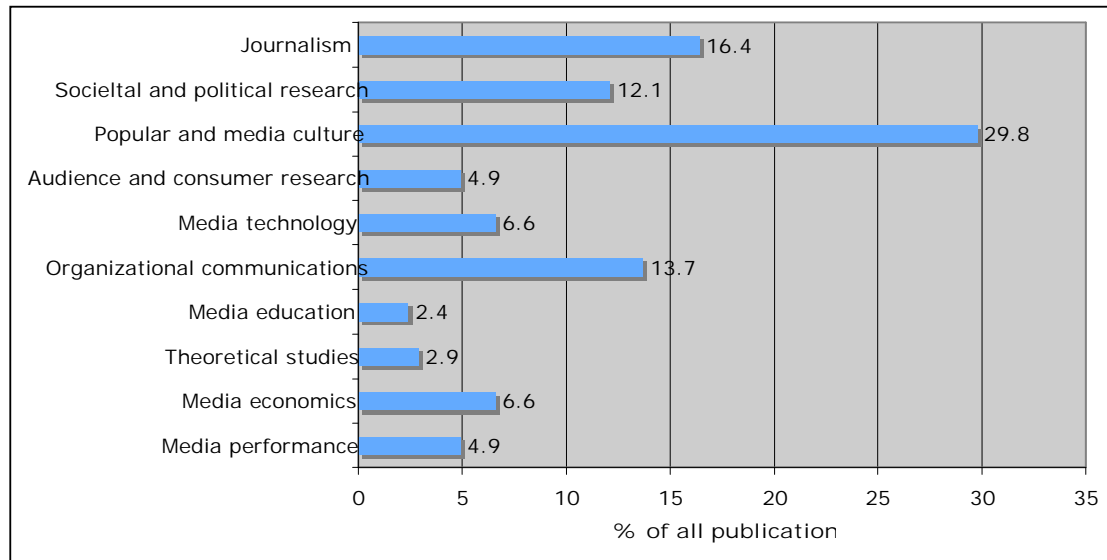
Other important sources were the leading Finnish academic referee journals *Lähikuva* and *Tiedotustutkimus*. *Lähikuva* concentrates on articles about media and popular culture, whereas *Tiedotustutkimus* is more focused on mass communication research with a more social scientific orientation. *Lähikuva*’s articles are theoretically linked to approaches that are common in the arts and humanities.

Rather curiously, the most common topic in Finnish communications research is the study of media culture and popular culture. We expected journalism to be the biggest subfield of research, but it appears that journalism comes only second. Third is the study of organizational communications, while societal and political media research is fourth. Part of the organizational communications research is included here only because it is part of NORDICOM’s listing. Therefore not all of the organizational communications research



examined is related to media or mass communications. If one were to exclude studies that do not fulfill the criteria of communications research set previously, societal and political media research would count as the third biggest topic group.

Chart 1. *Most common topics of communications research sorted from publications through 2000-2007. (N=2289)*



All in all, a closer look at the table below reveals the multiplicity of Finnish communications research. It is encouraging to observe that media economics, theoretical studies and media education also have their share in this research. We expected these groups to be smaller than the sample now illustrates. Even media performance, the study of human performing behavior in media, counts for almost five percent of all publications.

Academic Bias Toward Theory Proves to be a Myth

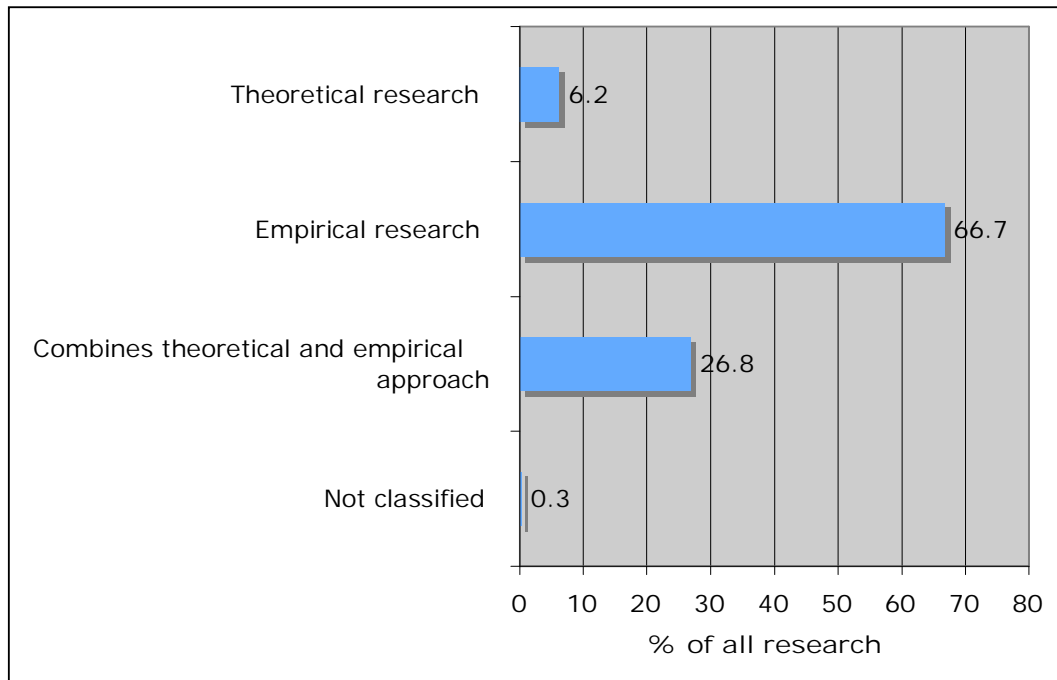
Our data provides an interesting fact about Finnish communications research: the vast majority of original research is empirical (See Chart 2). Communications research has often been criticized for its theoretical emphasis. Critics have claimed that academic communications research has drifted too far from practical problem setting and is thus unable to provide knowledge for use by the media industry.

The majority of the academic research in our study proves to be empirical, with only a very small proportion of the total number of publications employing a purely theoretical approach. This finding debunks the myth of theoretical bias in academic research and invokes discussion on the applicability of the research. Since the majority of the original research is empirical, it can be assumed that the majority of the research has a high level of applicability – even in a media industrial context.



It may be the case that those who condemn academic research for its theoretical bias are unfamiliar with the original research. Part of the problem may arise from the traditional idea that there is a natural gap between academic and entrepreneurial contexts. Some of these problems are discussed in closer detail in the final chapter.

Chart 2. *How theoretical has research been in the period 2000-2007? Division between theoretical and empirical research orientations. (N=2069)*



Journalism Research Surprisingly Pluralistic

As Chart 3 shows, journalism research was classified into three major categories based on what the research concentrated on. These categories were 1) journalistic working procedures, 2) media products and 3) visual journalism. 'Journalistic working procedures' denotes the study of reporting conventions, procedures that reporters employ in their daily work and the ways news organizations are run. 'Media products' is a category that denotes the study of journalistic texts and discourses (presented in both print and electronic forms). 'Visual journalism' denotes those studies which take photography and other journalistic images, such as representation on television programs, as their primary focus.

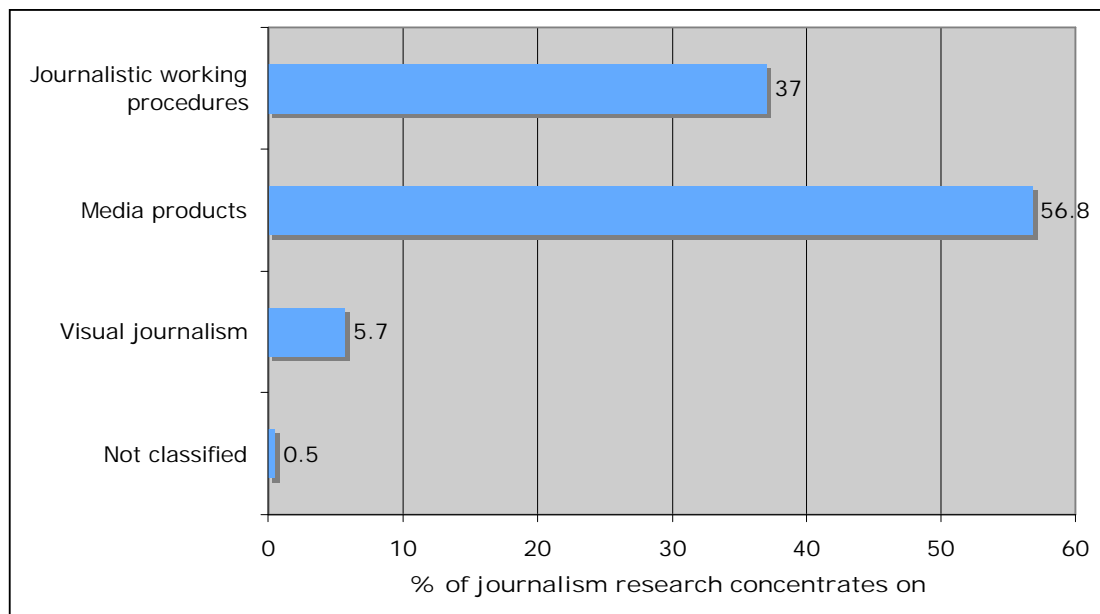
We expected the studies on journalistic working procedures to count for a smaller proportion of the total research than it actually does. Data shows that there are plenty of academic theses that provide information on journalistic working procedures. However, there seems to be a substantial lack of studies with a focus on visual journalism. Given the fact that the average Finn spends almost three hours every day watching television, it is surprising how little research focus there is on the visual elements of journalism. On the



contrary, Finns spend daily about an hour and a half with newspapers and other printed media.

Media products are the major concern in the study of journalism. These studies are concentrated on the textual side of the journalistic material. Thus, it can be said that, on the whole, Finnish journalism research has a significant textual focus.

Chart 3. *What does journalism research focus on? Division among three major topics in journalism research: journalistic working procedures, media products and visual journalism. (N=370)*



Concern Over Maintaining Statistical Know-How

Many of the interviewees in our study expressed their concern over the lack of statistical know-how among communications researchers and students. This concern was surprisingly unanimous among the interviewed experts. Many believed that it was due to the qualitative research interests of university teachers that the majority of students chose qualitative approaches in their bachelors' and masters' theses. The wide interest in qualitative research methods was seen as stemming from the linguistic turn in social sciences. The cultivation of qualitative methods was thus seen as a counter-reaction to the positivist approach to social science; the positivist approach preceded the linguistic turn. Nonetheless, some experts thought it purely coincidental that qualitative methods of research have peaked at the cost of the cultivation of statistical and quantitative research methodology.

All in all, it is a curious fact that there seems to be a call for yet another turn in communications research. It is widely hoped that quantitative methods again be taken back as a useful tool in the study of communications. The future will show how widely this wish



for quantitative know-how will affect the Finnish research climate and university education in general.

Call for National Unity in Research

Interviewees also expressed other concerns regarding the national characteristics of communications research. Many were worried about the lack of national line(s) of research that would unify the field. It seemed that many were in two minds about the lack of a clear national profile in the communications research field. On the one hand it was considered good that research is pluralistic. The interplay of different theoretical positions and methodologies was seen as contributing to lively academic discourse. On the other hand the lack of national unity in research was seen as a threat to the development of academic traditions in communications research. Many criticized the current situation in the field for its lack of historical orientation. The whole field of communications research was thus considered too sporadic to produce a sense of a historical accumulation of knowledge for the discipline. Many also criticized communications research for being too provincial in its array of research topics and themes. There were hopes for increasing international research cooperation and for a greater focus on global problems and issues related to the media.

Discussion on national disparity in communications research also spawned interesting remarks about the way in which research is now funded. It was said that current funders – both academic and private – prefer national research orientations to international. In addition, private funders in particular were said to prefer short span research projects to lengthy studies and topics lacking in historical perspective. These strong claims point to the fact that there is an ongoing debate within the field about the “right” and “wrong” approaches to research. A strong debate on research policies implies that communications research in Finland is going through a process of change.

Interaction between Companies and Academia Plummeting

Our study has shown communications research to have a strong empirical orientation. However, many private sector experts saw little if no use at all for academic research in their industrial planning and development. In the private sector, more interaction with academia was widely desired, but no special efforts were taken to increase currently plummeting levels of interaction.

It is important to point out that social sciences, such as communications, mass communication and media studies, traditionally engage in less cooperation and interaction with the corporate world than subjects like business administration and engineering. It is clear that, historically speaking, research and its applicability do affect the way in which different disciplines are seen in the corporate domain. Similarly, the academic world has its own historical burden and an advantage in the ways in which it conducts interaction with other parts of society. Both sides, the academic and the corporate, strive for increased interplay.



To enhance this interplay, a number of major shifts in our way of thinking about research must take place. Many of the applications above, which were seen as products of communications research, were largely technological. Companies named innovations related to digital television and mobile applications as the major contributions of communications research. Most current cooperation, therefore, concentrates on research and development related to better reporting practices and better journalism, often with the help of new technology. Lots of R&D work is carried out in conjunction with the polytechnic schools that place an emphasis on communication technology. Societal studies of the media markets and structural analyses were not mentioned as holding particular interest for the corporate side. However, credit was given to the qualitative research methods developed within the social sciences. Many corporate experts considered qualitative methods especially useful tools in an analysis of customer profiles, the structure of the market and the lifestyles of its consumers.

It is worth mentioning that qualitative methods are also of interest with regard to public administration. For instance, the Ministry of Communications applies both qualitative and quantitative methods in acquiring information. Qualitative methods come in handy when administrators need information on citizens' media behavior and needs.

All in all, more discourse among different users of research and its products is needed. As a token of an effort towards increased interplay, we take this opportunity to make a number of propositions to enhance discourse between academia and the corporate world. Based on our interviews, the following propositions and remarks can be made.

- Both academic and corporate experts should make the effort to understand the other's point of view. There seem to be prejudices that hinder these two sides from familiarizing themselves with the research done on the "other side".
- Academic researchers should be aware of what kind of importance their work could hold for media corporations. It is clear that more research cooperation could take place between social scientists and the media corporations. Dialogue could be enhanced with better communications on the academic side.
- Corporate experts should broaden their view of academic media research. It is not constructive to evaluate academic research without thoroughly familiarizing oneself with the actual work. Around 100 masters' theses are produced every year in Finnish communications faculties. Many of these papers examine journalistic working conventions and new ways to report and communicate. Even qualitative analyses on media products could prove useful in planning new program formats and contents.
- Academic dissertations and articles often present theoretical insights that could be useful in media education, public administration and even in creating media business strategies. It is essential for corporate research to understand the world in which the consumer lives. Their aspects and findings could undoubtedly enrich academic discourse and research.