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Overview of communication science research in the Netherlands and Flanders

The fastest growing subject in the social sciences over the last fifteen years, in both the Netherlands, Belgium and beyond, has been communication science. In terms of the number of students, it has become the largest social science subject at many universities. Communication scientists study salient characteristics of the society which rose from the ashes of the economic crisis at the beginning of the 1980's, usually referred to as the information, communication and network society. The fax, the mobile telephone, the PC and the Internet have vastly increased the density of the world-wide information and communications network. These new opportunities have brought about a revolution. Hierarchical organisations are changing into network organisations, within which co-ordination is achieved using transparent intranet databases and anarchic ad hoc contact by e-mail, telephone and mobile phone. Personal contact within our own physical environment is frequently interrupted by or interspersed with external contacts via the mobile phone, radio, television, e-mail, and reading material of all kinds. Government bodies, pressure groups and political actors, which traditionally derived their power from exclusive mutual access, are being turned into points in a network within the information and communication society. However, alongside such developments, classical and traditional media continue to fulfil important societal functions.

This overview edition provides an inventory of the academic progress in this fascinating field of study. We asked one representative of communication science departments from each university to write a summary of the recent academic progress made at their own institution. The articles in this overview edition cover scientific results from the *Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam* (EUR), *Katholieke Universiteit Brussel* (KUB), *Katholieke Universiteit Leuven* (KUL), *Katholieke Universiteit Nijmegen* (KUN), *Landbouwuniversiteit Wageningen* (LUW), *Universiteit Gent* (RUG), *Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam* (VUA), *Vrije Universiteit Brussel* (VUB), *Universiteit van Amsterdam* (UvA) and *Universiteit Twente* (UT). Unfortunately not all the universities are represented. Research at the *Universiteit van Utrecht*, *Universiteit van Leiden* (main subject Child and Media) and *Universitaire Instellingen Antwerpen* (focus on teaching professional

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communication) could not be included in this volume. It should be pointed out that this inventory only deals with research, and does not necessarily imply that the same emphases, priorities or gaps are present in the subjects taught to students. To an even greater extent than their Dutch counterparts, the academic staff in Flanders are heavily burdened with teaching tasks and are therefore forced to make choices in the field of research.

The contributions in this edition demonstrate that significant progress has been made at the various universities in a range of areas, thereby entirely justifying the publication of this special edition to gain a new general perspective on the current state of affairs. Although there are all kinds of connections between research activities at the various universities, it is easy to lose sight of these if one focuses on the way in which each institution describes its main subjects. Each university combines research themes in its own way, which means that it is not easy to arrive at a comparative overview of the wide-ranging field of research in communication science in the Netherlands and Flanders. The reader of this special edition is strongly advised to put the labels of the research themes of the individual universities into an overarching perspective. In order to facilitate comparisons between research activities at various universities, this introduction makes an inventory of current research at a less abstract level than in the individual contributions to this edition. This introduction only deals with *areas* of research, however. Readers are referred to the separate contributions for the academic *progress* made within each area.

Paradigmatic developments

The opposition between neo-positivist, neo-Marxist and interpretivist research from the 1970s no longer exists, even though traces of a neo-Marxist legacy can be found, amongst others, in the contribution from the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. During the eighties new paradigms based on the work of Foucault (structuralism) and Stuart Hall (cultural studies) enjoyed popularity. In the nineties these old oppositions reduced to a distinction between mainstream research, which is not based on an explicit paradigm, and the interpretivist-culturalist approach (most notably the University of Nijmegen, Wageningen Agricultural University, the University of Groningen and the Vrije Universiteit Brussel) in which the paradigmatic principles are explicitly expressed. At least three interpretations of the interpretivist-culturalist approach can be distinguished:

- a change from an instrumentalist top-down vision of communication to a bottom-up, receiver-oriented interactive vision of communication;
- a change from pure quantitative to more qualitative research;
- a genuine interest in popular culture.

From 'the study of the press' to 'communication science'

As radio and television came of age, the term 'study of the press' ('perswetenschap') came to be replaced by the term 'communication science'. In the Netherlands and Flanders the label "media studies" is not a label of an academic discipline, but a label of the interpretivist-culturalist approach to media reception. More recently, the scope of this discipline has been extended still further to incorporate the study of new media. Table 1 presents an overview of the specialists at each university who focus on specific media. A disclaimer is in place here. The function of the tables is merely to enable comparisons between communication research at different universities. We do not pretend that researchers included (often) in the tables are the most productive authors. Especially junior researchers are underrepresented.

TABLE 1 **Media related research**

	KUL	*KUN*	*VUA*	*VUB*	*UvA*	*RUG*	*UT*	*Others*
Newspapers			Klein-nijenhuis	Witte Verstraeten	Hemels Van Neerven Van Cuilenburg	De Bens	Gutteling	
Radio/TV	V.d. Bulck	Renckstorf Van Snippenburg Van der Haak	Oegema	Burgelman	Wieten Vochteloo Emons	De Bens Saeys Coppens	Heuvelman	
Film, music	De Meyer					Biltereyst		
Regional media		Hollander Jankowski Hageman			Bakker	Raeymaeckers		
New Media	Hesling De Grooff	Jankowski		Verhoest	Van den Hooff Postman Frissen	De Smaele De Bens	Van der Geest De Jong	Universiteit Utrecht Van Dijk, Bouwman

It is clear from Table 1 that only research departments with large numbers of students can still permit themselves the luxury of employing specialists in the field of specific media. Keeping abreast of the rapid developments in the new media represents a formidable challenge, even to the larger departments.

Production, distribution, and reception of symbolic messages at macro-level

The most important development within communication science is probably the shift in focus away from the study of separate media. Modern communication science focuses on the underlying communication *processes*, which take place through the media. The current, greatly expanded description of the subject of communication science as the production, distribution and reception of symbolic

messages at the macro-level (society), the meso-level (organisations) and the interpersonal level is very much in keeping with this shift. Table 2 presents an overview of the aspects of the social communication processes at the macro-level in which researchers at each university are engaged.

TABLE 2 **Communication processes at the macro-level (societal level)**

	KUB	*KUL*	*KUN*	*VUA*	*VUB*	*UvA*	*RUG*	*UT*
Production and distribution								
National Communication (technology) Policy	Servaes	Van Poecke			Witte Burgelman Pauwels Verhoest	V. Cuilenburg Slaa Verhoest	Voorhoof De Bens	
International Comparison	Servaes Lie				Burgelman Thevissen	Hamelink Brants	De Bens Biltereyst Saeys Voorhoof	Gutteling
Symbolic messages								
radio and tv-programming			Van der Haak		Verstraeten	Bardoel	De Bens	
Informational content; News selection		Roe	d'Haenens Beentjes Van der Rijt	Kleinnijen-huis Oegema	Goyvaerts	Schönbach Semetko Neijens De Ridder Valkenburg Brants Van Praag Van Zoonen	Saeys Coppens	
Reception and effects/ consequences								
media- and information consumption	Servaes	V.d. Bulck Roe	Renckstorf Van Snippenburg Hendriks Vettehen			Schönbach Neijens Van Zoonen	Biltereyst Voorhoof	Heuvelman
Effects, consequences, Impact		V.d. Bulck Roe Minnebo Eggermont	Beentjes	Kleinnijenhuis Oegema Caljé		Schönbach Semetko De Ridder Valkenburg	Biltereyst De Bens	Gutteling Kutt-schreuter

Table 2 reveals that only the larger universities study all aspects of communication processes. At the *University of Nijmegen* and the *Vrije Universiteit* in Amsterdam, little emphasis is placed on the social production of communication, while at the *Vrije Universiteit Brussel*, the independent emphasis on the reception of communication is limited.

Production, distribution and reception of symbolic messages at the meso-level and the micro-level (organisational and interpersonal communication)

Recent developments in information and communication technology have led to the insight that complex organisations (e.g. companies, government bodies) are the most important agents within the area of communication processes. The interactive databases,

TABLE 3 **Communication processes at organisational level**

	EUR	*KUL*	*KUN*	*LUW*	*VUA*	*UvA*	*VUB*	*RUG*	*UT*
Production and distribution									
Communication management corporate communication	Van Riel Voorschuur	Fauconnier Vloeberghs		Engel	Van Ruler	Scholten	Thevissen	Vyncke	Seydel Elving Woudstra van Gemert
Communication between organisations (with stakeholders)	Van Riel Van den Bosch	Fauconnier		Van Woerkum Te Molder	Kenis Den Hond				
Internal communication	Van Reekom	Vloeberghs			Van Ruler	De Ridder Van den Hooff Postmes			Seydel Elving, Woudstra van Gemert
Symbolic messages									
paid publicity						Franzen Neijens Smit	Thevissen	Vyncke	Schellens, De Jong, v.d. Geest
free publicity	Van Raay e.a. Stroeker			Bouwman	Klein-nijenhuis Oegema				Steehouder, Gutteling, Heuvelman
"interactive" Interpersonal communication negotiations				Te Molder Van Woerkum	Pröpper				
Reception and effects/ consequences									
Effects marketing communication	Van Raay e.a.		Marsman			Franzen Neijens Smit	Thevissen Cierkowski	Vyncke Verleye	Boer
Effects external "corporate" communication	Van Riel Stroeker Maalman	Roe		Aarts	Klein-nijenhuis Oegema		Thevissen		De Jong v.d. Geest Schellens Steehouder Gutteling Heuvelman
Effects internal communication						De Ridder Postmes			Seydel Elving Woudstra van Gemert

intranet facilities, the fax and the telephone now available to businesses with many international branches, have given rise to new forms of both co-operation and competition between organisations as well as to new forms of both co-ordination and internal competition between units of every single organisation. To an increasing extent, economic progress has come to depend on effective marketing communication, effective internal communication and effective communication within the stakeholders' policy network. Table 3 presents the research subjects being undertaken in the field of organisational communication at each university.

A comparison of Tables 2 and 3 reveals that organisational communication is pushed forward by the Erasmus University in Rotterdam (EUR), the Wageningen Agricultural University (LUW) and the University of Twente (UT) as their primary research area. Among the universities with large numbers of students – and large numbers of researchers – the *University of Nijmegen* and the *Katholieke Universiteit Leuven* devote relatively few resources to this new field of study. Nevertheless the *Katholieke Universiteit Leuven* is known as a pioneer in the field of organisational communication due to professor Fauconnier.
Nowhere does communication at the micro-level form a central focus of research.

Communication with special target groups

The growth of communication science has led to a situation where the integration of the production, distribution and reception effects often take place separately for each specialist subject. The main areas of focus in this respect are research into communication with women, minorities, youth and health care patients (see Table 4).

TABLE 4 **Communication with target groups**

	KUL	*KUN*	*VUA*	*VUB*	*UvA*	*RUG*	*UT*	*Others*
Sexes			Van Ruler		Van Zoonen Hermes	Saeys		
Children and youth	Roe Muys	Beentjes			Valkenburg Vyncke	De Bens Voorhoof Raeymaeckers		RU Leiden: Van der Voort e.a.
Ethnic minorities		d'Haenens		Schelfhout Verstraeten	Pinto	Saeys Voorhoof		UvA: T.A. van Dijk
Health care						Saeys Vyncke	Seydel Boer Elving Taal Drossaert	EUR: Buunk e.a. RU Limburg Kok Damoiseaux

Table 4 shows that the integration of insights at the level of specific target groups is especially prominent at the University of Nijmegen, the University of Amsterdam and Ghent University. Health care communication is a core subject at the University of Twente.

Methodological progress

If the social sciences are to offer more than simply professional knowledge, then conclusions must be based on research methods and techniques which are not (or not yet) widely known in the professions. In recent decades little research time has been devoted to the development of new methods and techniques in the field of communication science. However, there are exceptions to this rule. These include the development, often qualitative in nature, of methods for content analysis and audience surveys at the University of Nijmegen (e.g. Wester, Hendriks Vettehen), the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (Roe, Van den Bulck), the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam (Kleinnijenhuis, Oegema) and the University of Amsterdam (De Ridder, Neijens, Schönbach). In the field of organisational communication, examples are its integration with social-scientific network analysis (Kenis, Vrije Universiteit; Van Rekom, Erasmus University Rotterdam), an efficient method to chart internal communication (De Ridder and Seisveld, University of Amsterdam) and a new method to identify the identity of organisations (Van Rekom, Erasmus University Rotterdam).

Conclusion

As this introduction exemplifies, communication science has become a scientific discipline with many wide-ranging branches, although only a few strong lines in various fields of communication science have come to the fore here. The aim of this overview edition is to provide a summary of the *progress* made up to this point for each field of study. The scope of this introduction is such that only the *fields of study* could be set out. In our capacity as compilers, we wish our readers a great deal of pleasure in reading this volume of articles on the scientific *progress* within these fields of communication science at universities in the Netherlands and Flanders.