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# DEFINING INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATION AS A FIELD

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By Robert L. Stevenson

*This essay finds major trends that can be identified from the diverse studies in international communication: Anglo-American dominance (but with increasing competition); a resurgence of culture, including global culture; the triumph of independent journalism; and the growth of some powerful media moguls around the world. The essay outlines key questions for researchers to ask of their own studies, and sketches some parameters for scholars seeking to make major contributions to the field of international communication.*

International communication has something in common with Justice Potter Stewart's famous observation about obscenity: it's hard to define, but you know it when you see it. The variety of material submitted for review as "international communication" is staggering. One day can bring a manuscript so filled with mathematical notation that members of the Communication Theory & Method Division would have trouble deciphering it. The next can bring a heavily footnoted legal manuscript or a Marxist "critical theory" polemic exposing some new capitalist mischief midst the wreckage of communism. All presumably are part of international communication. And there is more.

At first glance, their only common ground seems to be a focus outside the United States. If so, the field has neither substance nor method, only geography. Yet there is something else out there. The International Communication Division is one of AEJMC's largest, and a good handful of professional organizations and journals incorporate "international" or an equivalent word into their names. Unless the field exists only as a smoke screen for tax-deductible international travel, something interesting must be taking place in international communication and some useful ways of study it must exist. Presumably there is even some body of knowledge distinctive enough from communication itself to justify its claim as a field of study.

The manuscripts in this issue of *Journalism Quarterly* are a reasonably representative sample of current research in the field. This introductory essay considers what is happening in international communication, how it is — or could be — studied and what current research is adding to our understanding of a fast-changing subject.

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*Robert L. Stevenson is professor in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of North Carolina and is associate editor of *Journalism Quarterly* with a responsibility for international studies.*

**Journalism  
Quarterly**  
Vol. 69, No. 3  
543-553  
Fall 1992  
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In an age of suitcase satellite telephones and global CNN, it is hard to imagine any spot on earth not touched by international communication. Much has been written about the unprecedented Anglo-American dominance in all aspects of international communication in recent decades. It is usually decried as some kind of "cultural imperialism" that uses multinational information industries as a replacement for the colonial armies of the 18th and 19th centuries. Almost as much has been written in the past year about the technological innovations that brought the Gulf War live to the world and about the new generation of marvels that lie on the horizon.

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## Global Trends in Communi- cation

These are facets of a broader picture. There are various ways of organizing the details, but it may be useful to think of five global trends in international communication.

1. *Anglo-American Dominance.* The phenomenon of an emerging global culture that looks like it was created in Hollywood, New York and London is the source of a great deal of the "cultural imperialism" argument. It is not infrequently invoked at international academic conferences by delegates wearing Levi's, smoking Marlboros and drinking Coke, of course. This dominance has several facets, which can be grouped into four main areas.

a. *Language.* Estimates of the number of people around the world who know at least some English vary from about one in six to one in three.<sup>1</sup> More people in Russia and China are studying English than speak it as a native language. The frequency with which world leaders give interviews and protesters paint signs in English is an indication of its utility in a global culture.

English has gone from the language of British colonialism and American post-war hegemony to a third stage, independent of either of its roots. It is now the universal language of international politics, science, computers and air traffic control as well as tourism, business and pop music. Until it fragments into a family of languages similar to the Romance or Slavic families, it will belong to the world.

b. *News.* No part of Anglo-American dominance is as visible as news, or as contentious. Most students can come up with the names of the big four news agencies — AP, UPI, Reuters and AFP — but few recognize the news film counterparts of Visnews, Worldwide Television News and CBS International. CNN, of course, is a global fixture as are the *International Herald Tribune*, international editions of the *Wall Street Journal*, *Time*, *Newsweek* and the *Economist*. In most parts of the world, the BBC World Service and the Voice of America are an important part of the media mix; in some, they are the major sources of information. For the record, it can be noted that all of the media listed here are Western and all except AFP are Anglo-American. The collapse of communism and failure of the concept of "development journalism" left the world with two media philosophies: old-fashioned authoritarianism (still very much in use) and Western, which is essentially Anglo-American.

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<sup>1</sup> The one in three figure is from the *Universal Almanac 1991*, p. 306; the one in six is from Robert McCrum, William Cran and Robert MacNeil, *The Story of English* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1986), p. 19.

For details of this aspect of global dominance and some of the fire and fury that surrounded debates about its cause, impact and resolution, the reader is advised to punch "New World Information Order" or "New World Information and Communication Order" into any academic or news data base.<sup>2</sup> The result will be a bookshelf of material, covering roughly the 1970s but extending into the 1980s with detours to the withdrawal of the United States and Britain from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and a renewal of interest in communication and development albeit with telecommunication rather than mass media as the focus.<sup>3</sup>

c. *Pop Culture.* It might be a tossup between news and pop culture if one wanted to know what aspect of Anglo-American dominance gets more people angrier faster. Among politicians of the world, it is probably news, but among intellectuals and academics, it is surely pop culture. Consider the uproar over Euro Disneyland, the European Community's determination to rid itself of an excess of Hollywood TV imports and the mileage politicians (or academics) can get out of labeling anything they don't like as "cultural imperialism."

It is ironic that as real Anglo-American power in the world diminishes, its influence in pop culture continues to climb. The best popular description of this phenomenon is Anglo-Indian-American journalist Pico Iyer's tour of Asian capitals.<sup>4</sup> Whatever our beliefs about its origins and implications, we ought to be sensitive to the unique situation that allows Anglo-Americans to travel the world in a cocoon of familiar language, news and culture.

d. *Technology.* While most of the innovation in consumer electronics now comes from Asia, the satellites and computers that make the global village possible are still created in the United States, and the electronic playthings are created with the media-saturated English-speaking markets in mind. "Fast Forward" and "Read-Only Memory" are part of the universal vocabulary.

The unexpected demonstration of digital high-definition television over existing channels in the spring of 1992 offers the possibility for the United States to re-establish its dominance in consumer electronics over Japan and the Europeans, as well as the chance to see another Yankee invention lost in the practical application stage through short-sighted corporate policy and the lack of any government policy. Similar outcomes are possible for a new generation of portable, satellite-based, global telecommunication, messaging and navigation systems.

2. *Resurgence of Culture.* It is ironic that the first product of the end of the cold war is an explosion of ancient ethnic animosities, the cultural conflicts that for generations have separated "us" from "them." A melancholy list of cultural flash points includes most parts of the world, even Western Europe, where language rather than religion or race is the focus of assertion of cultural independence in Wales, Belgium, Spain, even the European Community itself. In our own part of the world, there

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<sup>2</sup> My recommendation for an overview is William A. Hachten, *The World News Prism*, 3d ed. (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> A point I developed in *Communication, Development, and the Third World; the Global Politics of Information* (New York: Longman, 1988).

<sup>4</sup> Pico Iyer, *Video Night in Kathmandu* (New York: Knopf, 1988).

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is the possibility of the disintegration of Canada over separate identity of Quebec and the various battles over multiculturalism and English as the official language in the United States. This does not seem to be what Francis Fukuyama had in mind when he (citing Hegel as his authority) proclaimed the end of history.<sup>5</sup> Nor is it much of a dividend from the collapse of communism.

3. *A Global Culture.* It is a curious counterpart to the resurgence of cultural conflict around the world that simultaneously the outline of a global culture is emerging. The bad side of the global culture is that it is relentlessly commercial, superficial and possibly threatening to real culture. The Canadians worried enough to exclude cultural industries from the free trade agreement with the United States. The European Community — hardly part of the cultural imperialism cabal — wants to protect the Italians and Dutch from too much exposure to mindless Hollywood programming on the dubious assumption that mindless British, French and German programming is acceptable.

The good side of a global culture is that it is truly global, despite a patina of Anglo-American glitz and the inevitable English language. Another possible advantage is that it may be the only alternative to never-ending cultural conflict. Sending the Serbs, Croats and Bosnians to Euro Disneyland or supplying them with "Rambo" tapes might not end the fighting, but nothing else has worked. It's worth a try.

4. *Triumph of Independent Journalism.* The most dramatic and immediate victor in the collapse of communism was the Western media. No one had anticipated the speed and intensity with which the communist media systems — all fashioned according to Lenin's model of propaganda, agitation and control — would be attacked and discarded or the influence of Western media. *Pravda* went bust, and Radio Moscow sold its jamming transmitters to Western broadcasters. VOA became the most popular station in Sophia and indispensable in China. Gorbachev spent his short captivity during the failed coup listening to Western short wave stations.

Development journalism, which was advanced as an appropriate alternative to Western and communist media theories, suffered the same fate. The Non-Aligned News Agencies (NANA) pool headquartered in Yugoslavia and the Pan-African News Agency (PANA) — both models of development journalism — were never successful and entered the 1990s universally ignored and perpetually on the verge of collapse. In the Third World, as in the rubble of communism, people turned to Western media for information and models for the future.

Even the most optimistic assessments of the future would not exclude government efforts to influence the media in the West or government control of the media in other parts of the world, but the legitimacy of government control is gone. The proliferation of faxes, e-mail, DBS TV, desktop publishing and VCRs means that a government monopoly on information — never successful anyway — is no longer a realistic policy.

The main question for Fukuyama's post-history is whether *glasnost* precedes *perestroika* or follows it, the 1990s formulation of the question of the linkages between democracy and economic growth. Middle Europe

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<sup>5</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992), expanding his prescient essay, "The End of History?" in the *Public Interest*, 16 (Summer, 1989), 3-18.

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chose to emphasize democracy, hoping it would lead to economic growth, while the tigers of Asia put an emphasis on economic growth with full democracy pushed into the future. The record to date suggests that the *perestroika* first-then glasnost (maybe) in Asia outperformed *glasnost* now-*perestroika* later (with luck) in Europe. The global experiment will be an important case study for the subset of international communication devoted to the role of communication in national development.

5. *New Media Moguls*.<sup>6</sup> The growth of global communication systems has been accompanied by the emergence of a new generation of media moguls who share some characteristics of the older generation of Hearst and Pulitzer, but not all. Many of them are relatively unknown and, perhaps surprisingly, given the dominance of Anglo-America in global communication, several of the most important come from outside the English-speaking world.

Rupert Murdoch, Australian born but now a U.S. citizen, is the best known of this breed. With operations in various media from Australia across the South Pacific (including papers in Fiji and Hong Kong) to Britain (both the *Sun* and *Times* and the only DBS TV system) and North America (*TV Guide*, the Fox studios and network, and several major newspapers quickly bought and sold), he is highly visible, openly partisan and at home astride the global arc of Anglo-American influence. Only the late Robert Maxwell could compete for Hearst-style flamboyance and partisanship.

Most Americans know little about these two bigger-than-life characters and virtually nothing about others from non-English-speaking countries. The list of modern moguls includes several who are powerful political partisans at home (Hersant and Lagardere in France, the Springer house in Germany, Berlusconi in Italy, Marinho in Brazil, O'Farrill in Mexico) and others who are virtually recluses even at home (Kirch and the Bertelsmann organization in Germany). Some are conglomerates without a dynamic leader, and almost all have some ties to the fountainhead of the global culture, the United States.

From an American perspective, a growing concern is not our real or imagined use of information and culture to maintain global influence but the speed with which we are selling off our popular culture industries. The reason is not hard to find: if you were a foreign company with several billion dollars piled up from an intractable trade deficit, what would you buy, General Motors or a Hollywood studio?

After the publicity surrounding their sales, a fair number of Americans probably know that four of the seven top Hollywood studios are foreign owned (two by Japanese, one by an Italian, and Fox, which is owned by Murdoch's Australia-based News Corp.). About as many probably know that CBS Records is owned by Sony but few realize that a German company, Bertelsmann, is the largest publisher of books in the United States and a major player in other media, including records and printing.

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<sup>6</sup> See Jeremy Tunstall and Michael Palmer, *Media Moguls* (London: Routledge, 1991); Ben H. Bagdikian, "The Lords of the Global Village," *The Nation*, 248, No. 23 (June 12, 1989), pp. 805-820; William Fisher and Mark Schapiro, "Four Titans Carve Up European TV," *The Nation*, 248, No. 2 (Jan. 9-16, 1989), pp. 52-58.

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Other major foreign owners include the Canadian Thomson chain with more than 100 (mostly small) daily newspapers, the Middle East ownership of the apparently doomed UPI and several European conglomerates snapping up magazines. In the opposite direction, of course, is CNN — truly the world's most important network — and the commercial networks whose news operations may be merged with global film agencies (NBC with Visnews, ABC with WTN, CBS with TBS in Japan). In news, if not in popular culture, American dominance seems secure. Somehow we need to make sense out of this kaleidoscope of change.

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## **Studying International Communi- cation**

How to organize a vast, amorphous body of research that shares neither common method nor agreed-on substance? Is it even possible to find commonalities in an undefined field that overlaps every AEJMC division? Perhaps not, but the following outline can serve as a starting point for organization of the field and for a critique of existing research.

Some years ago, William Paisley proposed a two-dimensional matrix placing the study of mass communication within the context of traditional and emerging disciplines.<sup>7</sup> He first defined communication as one of the elementary behavior-defined disciplines such as cybernetics and systems analysis that served as elements of other, more general disciplines such as education (learning), economics (value) and political science (power). He noted that many of these disciplines were relatively new and sometimes undefined. The orthogonal dimension comprised disciplines defined by their unit of analysis, ranging from atom and molecule (natural sciences) through cell and subsystem (biological sciences) and then to individual, group and culture (social sciences).

Thus, one studies some behavior at some unit of analysis. While theoretically one could study any behavior at any level of analysis — feedback systems of cultures, distribution of power among living cells — most disciplines specialize. Although the differences are blurred, American communication studies traditionally concentrate on the individual and group (with emphasis on data analysis), while Europeans usually focus on national and global levels of analysis (with little emphasis on empirical test). Most of the research in international communication uses a relatively large unit of analysis, typically a national media system or culture. Sometimes individual behavior nested within a nation or culture is the basis for cross-cultural studies.

A third dimension added to this matrix both defines the minimum criterion for inclusion in "international communication" and distinguishes its four subsets. Foreign studies are single-country or single-culture studies that are usually heavy on description and light on explanation. Comparative studies contrast communication behavior of individuals or institutions within one culture or nation with equivalent behavior in another, usually with some element of the nation or culture as the basis for explanation of differences. International and intercultural studies consider the flow of information and influences from one nation or culture to another. Global studies, often associated with sweeping

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<sup>7</sup> William Paisley, *Communication Research as a Behavioral Discipline* (Stanford, Calif.: Institute for Communication Research, Stanford University, 1972).

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theories of global hegemony, of course, see the entire planet as a unified system.

These three dimensions form a cube whose sides define the field of international communication in terms of (1) a focal variable, which is some aspect of communication, (2) a unit of analysis that can range from the individual to the entire globe, and (3) the delineation of national or cultural boundaries that, in most studies, provide the basis for comparison or explanation.

A schema such as this is neither unique nor all-encompassing. For one thing, it does not distinguish between culture and nation, although the usual definitions can be invoked as necessary. A nation is an independent political entity that is identified by a flag, airline and seat at the United Nations, if nothing else, while a culture is more amorphous but usually more persistent. The traditional definition is that a culture includes the behaviors and values, derived from a common history, that unite one group of people and separate them from others. Scholars can debate whether culture or nation is a more useful unit for research, but nation probably gets the edge in mass media studies since media institutions are usually linked to the national political system. In other disciplines, particularly where one wants to explain individual differences as products of cultural values and experience, cultural studies may dominate. Obviously every nation is—so to speak—multicultural, a point that is brought home almost daily in news reports of cultural conflict and assertion of cultural independence.

The literature is full of references to *cross*, *inter* and *comparative* as criteria for separating the field from other specialties that find an outlet in *Journalism Quarterly*.<sup>8</sup> The distinctions are more important than the labels. As a general rule, any study that invokes nation or culture as the basis of explanation needs a second data point in another nation or culture to demonstrate concomitant variation. Without it, any explanation becomes equally tenable. The cultural imperialists are often vulnerable on this point. They array their evidence to attack the media in Western capitalist nations but fail to demonstrate that people, governments or media are any different in non-capitalist, non-Western countries. Usually they are the same or worse.<sup>9</sup> Despite confusion over theory and method, the output of international communication research is enormous as well as disparate. Some systematic way needs to be found to assess it.

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Even on the basis of volume, international communication is a growing field. Although overshadowed in numbers in AEJMC and

## Assessing the Field

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<sup>8</sup> See Alex S. Edelstein, Youichi Ito and Hans Mathias Kepplinger, *Communication & Culture; a Comparative Approach* (White Plains, N.Y.: Longman, 1989), for a similar approach and summary of alternative specifications. This is one of the few works to define the field and discuss the theoretical and methodological implications.

<sup>9</sup> The theoretical importance of the uniformity of media content across a wide range of political and economic systems is developed in my "A Critical Look at Critical Analysis," *Journal of Communication*, 33(3):262-269 (Summer, 1983). This important finding is documented in a large study of foreign news in the late 1970s (Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi, et al., *Foreign News in the Media: International Reporting in Twenty-Nine Countries* (Paris: UNESCO, 1985)) and recently in the largest study of national news around the world to date. See *InterMedia*, published by the International Institute of Communications, London, Vol. 20, Nos. 1 and 2 (Jan.-Feb. and March-April, 1992), which are devoted to the study.

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*Journalism Quarterly* by several other specialties, the field can claim the *International Communication Association*, the *International Association for Mass Communication Research* and regional organizations around the world. It overlaps the *International Studies Association* and dozens of discipline-defined and area studies organizations. The list of journals published in the United States is long and diverse. Every region of the world has a least one academic organization and journal as well so that the conscientious scholar needs both foreign language skills and a hefty bank account.

Achieving quality is a challenge in any field but especially in international communication, which lacks a common focal variable, method and literature. There may be some comfort — but not much — to know that *JQ* associate editors often confront the problem of low reliability of manuscript evaluations. “Brilliant and groundbreaking! Publish at once!” says one reviewer. “Pure dreck! An insult to the reader!” says another, about the same manuscript. A roll of the dice is one way to select the one manuscript in five or six that gets accepted, but we’d like to think that a rational process of critique can do better. It can, and usually does.

At one level, all methods of research share a common set of requirements. They are reliability and validity of observation and adequacy of evidence. International communication, lacking a common method as well as body of knowledge, seems more prone than most of its companion fields toward disagreement over what is good — or even minimally competent — research.

The old fight between “administrative” and “critical” research reaches the flash point when ideology poses as theory and polemic as research. By polemic, I mean starting with the conclusion and assembling evidence to support it. Polemic is fine in a courtroom or debating chamber, but what distinguishes academic research from polemic is the uncertainty of the outcome. I expect my defense lawyer to make the best possible case for my innocence, but even my most brilliant scholarly insight may fail for lack of logic or evidence. A special edition of *Journalism Quarterly* might usefully be devoted to clever research ideas that failed the test of empirical verification. If nothing else, we would have an inventory of factors that do not influence mass media and are not influenced by them, something akin to Edison’s large collection of unsuccessful light bulb filaments.

Positivism is out of favor these days, but there is something satisfying and persuasive about a research idea that is fully explicated and supported by properly executed empirical test. Such studies are rare. Research in international communication too often relies on citation of a handful of key ideas — as if enough repetition of an idea makes it true — and fashion. In some cases, it approaches political correctness.

Occasionally — notably in the “critical” school — polemic masquerading as scholarship reaches absurdity. A popular assertion in the NWIO debate was that the Western news agencies “devote only 20 to 30 percent of news coverage to the developing countries, despite the fact that the latter account for almost three-quarters of mankind.”<sup>10</sup> Ignore for

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<sup>10</sup> Mustapha Masmoudi, “The New World Information Order,” *Journal of Communication*, 29(2):172-173 (Spring 1979).

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the moment the implication that, since everyone in the world is equally considered newsworthy, more than 40% of the news in every country should come from China and India or that news flow between the United States and Canada should be ten times in favor of the United States, about what it is.

Masmoudi does not give a source, but comparable statements occasionally acknowledge studies of state domestic wire service files that are a world apart from the international regional services or computer files that most American papers now receive. A similar approach was taken in a recent paper that decried the lack of foreign news in U.S. media based on a content analysis of the late-evening local news in two small TV markets. Such polemic masquerading as research does not qualify as sophistry. It is merely silly.

It should be noted that "empirical" does not mean "quantitative." Some of the most insightful studies of international communication are qualitative research by scholars whose authority is a product of longtime immersion in and sensitive observation of their own or other cultures. It does mean, however, that all scholars need to ask themselves frequently, "Am I describing what I think I am?" (validity), "Would others interpret this differently?" (reliability), "Am I leaving something out?" (adequacy of evidence).

As noted earlier, research in international communication should not pit "critical" vs. "administrative" scholarship or, for that matter, qualitative vs. quantitative or historical method vs. social science. The big issue is research vs. polemic. To separate one from the other — and to evaluate manuscripts fairly that cover every conceivable topic, method and content, four questions can be asked of any piece of research.<sup>11</sup> The interrogatives themselves are harsh but could enliven an occasional session at AEJMC. The purpose they serve in evaluating any piece of research is important, however, especially when one gets beyond the technical aspects of research design and the basic questions of validity, reliability and adequacy of evidence.

*What?* (Description). Too often manuscripts contain the words "exploratory study" or a sentence to the effect that the author's goal is merely to describe some interesting phenomenon. They are frequently found in content analysis projects, but historian colleagues also complain of a glut of biographies of not-so-famous journalists that are devoid of anything beyond a simple chronicle of their lives and newspapers.

Description by itself can be useful, but too often the phrase "exploratory study" means the author didn't take the time to anticipate findings, test the logical conclusion of an implicit theory and link his or her study to other research. The result is a study whose ultimate value depends on the ability of someone else to integrate it into a broader perspective. Otherwise, it will remain isolated from the general body of knowledge of the field, unread and uncited.

Exceptions exist: descriptive studies of media systems in countries we seldom hear about, alternative definitions of press freedom and

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<sup>11</sup> The two middle questions come from Richard F. Carter at the University of Washington. Since my graduate school days there, a recurring nightmare is that he would pose them to me at some public presentation of my research. The others are the product of reading seminar papers and viewing manuscripts submitted to various journals and conferences.

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responsibility, among others. Even these, however, become meaningful when an implicit comparison with other countries is made explicit. A rule of thumb is that if the words "exploratory" or "descriptive" appears in the first few paragraphs, the author is lazy or the study isn't worth much.<sup>12</sup>

*Why?* (Explanation). Almost any purely descriptive study can be made more valuable by adding the word "because" to the key findings. Most of us have scribbled "Why?" in the margin of dozens of seminar papers, adding bolder question marks and multiple exclamation points as our frustration grows. It is probably a product of our system of graduate education that few students present real theses — bold, even controversial conclusions they are willing to defend through logic and evidence. The situation is similar among manuscripts submitted to *Journalism Quarterly*. On one hand, there are the relatively few polemics with fury but little evidence; on the other, there are the many that document interesting facets of the field but offer no explanation.

Even the null hypotheses can be interesting. Why are media systems so similar around the world, despite great differences in ownership, control, organization and purpose? Why did the great campaigns to use mass media to change behavioral patterns fail in both communist countries and Third World development programs? Why is culture so persistent, even when it is clearly destructive to itself and others? We are appropriately cautious about using the word "cause," but conservatism in claiming knowledge should not let us avoid explanation. Look for "because" in any research paper, especially in the introduction. Then the reader can follow the argument and evidence to see if the description justifies the explanation that comes at the end of the manuscript. A sentence in the first paragraph with the phrase, "A causes B because C" may lack literary style but is a valuable road map for writer, reviewer and reader. Even better, put it in the title. After obligatory cute phrase in front of the colon, insist on something like, "The Influence of X on Y" or "A as a Factor in the B of C." It informs the reader and forces precise thinking.

*So What?* (Implication). The temptation arises frequently at the end of conference sessions to raise one's hand and ask, "So what?" Usually politeness and the lure of the coffee shop are stronger. The question can be rephrased: Now that we know that, how is our understanding of international communication expanded?

Sometimes the fault is lack of adequate hypotheses. Usually we start with the familiar "If X, then Y; not Y; therefore not X" formulation. A more complete formulation begins, "If X leads to Y, then Z." The Z represents both the logical implications of the simple formulation that ought to be the basis of the specific observation and the practical implication of the broader questions inherent in the study. If the *New York Times* and the *Times* of London (or, for that matter, the *People's Daily*) cover an event differently, what does that tell us? That media operate within and reflect their national political systems? That the concept of objectivity is a fraud? That reporting is influenced by

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<sup>12</sup> A corollary applies to method. If the method appears in the title, the purpose of the study was probably to see if a specific method could be applied to a particular research problem. The answer is that it usually can, although rarely with useful results.

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ownership? Or merely that different reporters in different places at different times with different sources come up with different stories? All of these explanations may be true, but so what?

*Who Cares?* (Importance). In theory, every individual, every culture, every nation has something to teach us. But in news as in politics and sports, there is a bias in favor of the big, the important and the powerful. The same is true of research. Realistically, not every research question is equally important, and not every research setting is equally informative. For most purposes, the *New York Times* is more important than the *Times of Zambia*, and a study of the role of mass media in the collapse of communism in 1989 is more informative than a study of the role of media in the collapse of the government of Liechtenstein.

But not always. The less familiar setting, the less prominent medium or state can often provide the off-diagonal exception to the general principle. How do some cultures maintain integrity and identity against the tide of influence from the West? How do some cultures maintain diversity of media voices and press freedom without reliance on the equivalent of the First Amendment?

Good theory is protection against both the So what? and Who cares? questions. Facts come and go, but theory remains. Probably no one at this point remembers whether the U.S. Army training films in World War II were effective or ineffective (or even what they were about), but we all know some of the principles of persuasion that came out of the Yale project. Certainly no one remembers what public issues were on the agenda in Chapel Hill in 1968, but the agenda-setting theory, as they say, is history. Think theory to avoid this question.

The manuscripts that follow were not commissioned for this special issue or pulled from the queue of manuscripts awaiting publication for it. They represent a snapshot of research in the field now and have survived the review process that accepts less than one in four manuscripts submitted to *JQ*. Readers are invited to use them to assess the field in two ways. One is to see how the field is defined, using the three-dimensional matrix introduced above. The other is to evaluate their contributions to a distinct sub-discipline of international communication by applying the four questions.

On the whole, *JQ* articles stand up well. They are the best of a field that is vigorous, contentious and growing in importance. Research in international communication in the early 1990s, it turns out, is a lot like international communication itself. In a dynamic field, how could it be otherwise?