The value of being first

LARS LUNDGREN

Göran was my doctoral supervisor. And I was Göran's first doctoral student. I initially met Göran as an undergraduate student at Stockholm University, where he taught at the time. After completing my bachelor's thesis, I went on to study at University of Copenhagen, where, one day, to my considerable surprise, I received a phone call from Göran. He wanted to ask me if I was interested in pursuing a master's degree at this new university south of Stockholm, Södertörn, where he now worked. I must admit it was pretty flattering to be called on like that, and as I remember it, while I might not have given a positive reply right there and then, I more or less decided on the spot. On arriving at Södertörn University I discovered something that I had not realized before: a career in teaching and research actually did not seem like a bad prospect. After completing my thesis, I applied for a doctoral position at Stockholm University, and Göran was, together with the late Jan Ekecrantz, appointed as my supervisor.

The title of this essay paraphrases one of Göran's early international publications, *The Value of Being Public Service*, and it nods (bluntly, I admit) to a key concept in most of Göran's work, that of value (Bolin 2004). We share that interest to a degree, as the idea of cultural values was present already in my bachelor's thesis, supervised by Göran, and it played an important role in my dissertation as well. And Göran has also elaborated on the idea of value in relation to game shows, generations, or nation branding to name just a few areas.

We also share an interest in the idea of being first. To me it is a theoretical and empirical interest, whereas for Göran it is a bit more of a practice. Following this introduction, I will present (an incomplete account of) Göran's academic biography in order to point to his practice of being first. Then I turn my interest to firsts in media and communication studies, both in the intellectual history of media and communication research and in communication firsts as empirical objects of study. In conclusion, I argue that firsts in the intellectual history of the field may be hazardous objects of study, whereas firsts in communication may help us better understand communication history as well as communication technologies in their contemporary forms.

Göran's firsts

Göran defended his doctoral dissertation on *Film Swappers* in early 1998. He was not first doctor among the pioneers at Södertörn but was beaten by Hillevi Ganetz, who defended in late 1997, by a few months. As a new doctor Göran was thus one in a group of young scholars, supported by professors Kjell Nowak and Jan Ekecrantz from Stockholm University, that had been given the opportunity to establish Media and Communication Studies at the new university college in the southern suburbs of Stockholm. A couple of years later, however, he was the first in the department to become docent, associate professor. In 2004 he was also the first to become full professor of media and communication studies at Södertörn, even though the university later hired a professor senior to Göran, his former supervisor Johan Fornäs.

Göran was also among the first in the department to receive external funding for research. In 1999, together with Michael Forsman he attracted a large research grant from the Swedish Foundation for Humanities and Social Sciences, the project was called *Bingolotto – ett spel om svenskhet*, and was about a then immensely popular television game show. Since then he has headed a large number of research projects, securing the inflow of doctoral students to the department, and often working together with other faculty members at Södertörn.

Göran was also among the first in the department to publish his work in international journals such as *Media, Culture and Society*, *Social Semiotics* and *International Journal of Cultural Studies*. Since the early 2000s publication patterns have changed, and today faculty and doctoral students alike publish their work in such journals. At the time though, the pace and number of Göran's articles astounded at least this author. Many of the articles published first appeared as conference papers, and while Södertörn faculty always was eager to participate and present papers at Nordic and international conferences Göran was the one pushing other faculty to participate in conferences like the ICA, and created scholarly networks and exchanges already early on. This list of firsts can, I am sure, be made a lot longer. But as we will see later, my interest lies not so much in chronicling "firsts", as trying to grasp their meaning and value.

Firsts in communication

What is the value of studying the first? In media and communication studies there are at least two types of "firsts" that have garnered considerable interest.

Communication history has produced numerous studies of emerging communication technologies and their societal impact. The intellectual history of communication research is another field rich with scholarly accounts of the introduction of concepts, the formation of schools and intellectual traditions, etc. In the balance of this essay I will use these discussions as a means of addressing the value of being first.[1]

Innovations, breakthroughs and moments of imagination

Research into the history of communication has long since abandoned the practice of chronicling firsts and dedicating innovations to individual geniuses. Or has it? When I decided some years ago to read seriously the literature on communication and change, a wise man suggested I begin with Brian Winston. In Winston's "How are media born and developed?" (1995) he scrutinizes two types or cases of technological determinism, as well as two cases of cultural determinism. He presents his case as a critique of technological determinism, and particularly the idea that eureka moments of "great men" serve as starting points where technological innovations are introduced and historical and social change are spurred. In its place, he advocates a cultural determinism qualified by what he describes as an interplay between "supervening social necessities" and "the 'law' of suppression of radical potential", both forces of the social sphere that influence the diffusion of technology (Winston 1995, 1998). To Winston, this model allows for going beyond a mere technological history, making it possible to "pose more general questions about how the pattern of innovation and the diffusion of electrical and electronic communications illuminates the broader role played by such technologies in our civilisation" (Winston 1998, 2). By pointing to our civilization he thus asks us to consider a wider set of forces as drivers of change in media and communications. At the same time, his model also asks us to look at innovations in media and communication in order to unveil these forces and gain a better understanding of how our culture and society works.

To some this focus on innovation is a red flag. David Edgerton, writing about the history of technology, laments the focus on radical breaks and how historical accounts tend to reflect past boosterism about technology. In

—

[1] Coincidentally, the division between, on the one hand, the history of communication, and, on the other, the intellectual history of communication research, has been foundational in the undergraduate programme at Södertörn University. Already the very first course designs, which Göran developed together with colleagues, included the courses "Media history: Technology and cultural form", and "Intellectual traditions in communication research".

reviewing some of the most influential books in history of technology, Edgerton notes that there is a tendency to confuse the history of technology with the history of innovation, and that the "innovation-centric" perspective most often fails even to be a history of innovations in a particular period (Edgerton 2006, 2010). Rather, most studies are histories of some successful innovations, failing to consider failures or faded technologies.[2] Further, he argues that the problem is not so much the interest in innovation than the conflation of innovation and of use, since there is often "a focus on the early history of selected technologies which later came into widespread use", constituting "neither a history of technologies in use at a particular time, nor yet a history of invention or innovation at that time." (Edgerton 2010, p. 687).

I can sympathize with Edgerton's perspective. There is a certain irony in the way that media and communication historians (this author included) sometimes lament mainstream media and communication research's "presentism" even as they engage in a kind of presentism of yore, echoing past boosterism. But other than that, does Edgerton hit the nail or is there still a value in studying firsts, as in early reincarnations of contemporary media?

There are a number of hugely influential books in communication history that engage in early histories. I am thinking for instance of Elizabeth Eisenstein's *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (1980) or Carolyn Marvin's *When Old Technologies Were New* (1988).[3] And if we take a closer look at Marvin's argument we can notice already in the introduction that she proposes a move away from "artifactual approaches" to a model where "the focus of communication is shifted from the instrument to the drama in which existing groups perpetually negotiate power, authority, representation, and knowledge with whatever resources are available" (Marvin 1988, p.5). To Marvin, and a large number of scholars who have followed her example, the shift toward power, authority, representation and knowledge is clearly an attempt to situate new technologies in a historical context that extends beyond artifacts, innovations and geniuses. And I also believe that in histories of communications we may find fine examples that neither neglect failures nor conflate innovation and use, and that nevertheless focus on communication firsts, on the emergence of communication technologies.

---

[2] In communication this is perhaps less so than in more general writing on the history of technology. For examples of histories of failed media, see for instance Schwoch 2002, 2009, Light 2006.

[3] Both of these books are on the top ten of The Atlantic's "The Atlantic Tech Canon" published in 2010, with Marvin in the number one spot (Madrigral 2010).

Failure. I have already hinted at James Schwoch (2002, 2009) and Jennifer S. Light (2006) who have presented the short life and eventual failure of *Ultrafax* as an example of a late 1940s proto-internet. *Ultrafax* – a transoceanic airborn radio relay system designed not just to transmit texts but ultimately also television images – was the brainchild of David Sarnoff of the RCA. Similar attempts were made in efforts to globalize the television broadcasting system, such as for instance *Narcom*, consisting of extended terrestrial networks that would bind together North America and Europe by means of relay towers on Greenland, Faeroe Islands and Iceland, before reaching the United Kingdom. Another interesting example is Benjamin Peters' book length study of the failed Soviet Internet, which was in the making from the 1950s up until he 1980s (Peters 2016). This is not the place to evaluate the arguments of individual studies, but it is noteworthy that these accounts of failures of communication share one important historical context – the Cold War. *Ultrafax* and *Narcom* were both children of the Cold War and thoroughly entangled in a dual ambition, at once increasing capabilities of surveillance and security, and to foster friendship and understanding. And Peters' story about a failed Soviet Internet is very far from a US triumphalist account, but instead attempts to challenge some of the taken-for-granted notions about the development of communication infrastructures during the Cold War.

Innovation and the everyday

Another study of communication infrastructure is anthropologist Brian Larkin's *Signal and Noise* (2008), in which he studies the introduction of the railway, the radio and the cinema in Nigeria. As an anthropologist, the everyday is never far away for Larkin, and he introduces what he calls the colonial sublime in order to account for how the construction and maintenance of communications infrastructures such as the railroad and radio is deeply embedded in colonial power and rule, and thereby inseparable from everyday life.[4] But not only anthropology has widened our perspective and moved beyond what Marvin called the artifactual approach, while retaining an interest in the early years of a new medium: William Boddy underscores the way in which industry perspectives, regulation, and audiences are inseparable and must be studied in relation to one other. In doing so, they offer an opportunity to gain insight, by looking at the public's earliest experiences of a medium, those "privileged moments of uncertainty and improvisation,

—

[4] Larkin (2008) draw more on Immanuel Kant and Edmund Burke when discussing the sublime, than on historian of techology David E. Nye who famously wrote about the technological sublime.

where the prospect of destabilizing technological innovation served to throw into relief prevailing industry models, regulatory rationales, and consumer practices." (Boddy 2004, p. 3).

In my own work on communication infrastructures I have emphasized another argument for looking at these early moments. With infrastructures tending to be invisible and taken for granted by users once they are in place, it makes sense to turn back the clock to the moments when they first were imagined and introduced (Hu 2015: xii), and look for "infrastructure in the making" (Bowker et al. 2010: 99; cf. Bowker, 1994). Doing so is not so much a quest for radical breaks and innovation, but a means as to uncover the contested, disputed and negotiated in media infrastructures that today are all too familiar and naturalized.

Firsts and founding fathers, or figures, formations and flows

There is no shortage of "founding fathers" in the field of media and communication research, and especially not if we turn to writings on the history of its American branch, which will serve as my main example in the following.[5] In Bernard Berelson's much debated 1959 article on 'The State of Communication Research' he points to what he calls "four innovators of communication research": Harold Lasswell, Paul F. Lazarsfeld, Carl Hovland and Kurt Lewin (Berelson 1959). After celebrating the innovations the four founding fathers brought to communication research, Berelson declared that the field was "worn out" and the debate that followed often engaged the question of whether the field was dead or not. Besides noticing that the field seems to live on, commentators have also noted that Berelson's innovators all came from outside the field of communications, being imported from psychology, political science and sociology.[6] While Wilbur Schramm was not exactly content with the diagnosis provided by Berelson, four years later he turned the same four "innovators" into the "founding fathers" of the field (Schramm 1963).[7] Schramm's 1963 article was republished on several occasions, even

---

[5] And of course, if directing our interest outside the US a different roster of innovators and founding fathers would appear. In Sweden such as roster would be names such as Karl-Erik Rosengren, Karl-Erik Wärnerud, Kjell Nowak, Olof Hultén, Stig Hadenius and Lennart Weibull (Carlsson 2007, Högskoleverket 2001).

[6] The Swedish "founding fathers" also originated in other disciplines, to a large extent the same as their American counterparts.

[7] Schramm published a comment immediatly following Berelson's article, noting that being dead "is a somewhat livelier condition than I had anticipated."

posthumously, despite being, as described by Jefferson Pooley, an "unabashed origin myth", cartoonish and without a single reference to back up its claims (Pooley 2008, p. 46).

A different path to fame and fatherhood is to write one self into the history of the field. In the perhaps most influential of influential books in the field, *Personal Influence* by Elihu Katz and Paul F. Lazarsfeld (1955), the authors make a case for a paradigmatic shift in communication research. In the introduction they present pre-war communication research as naïvely invested in the idea of powerful effects, or the so-called magic bullet or hypodermic needle theory. To be fair, though, these terms were never used by Lazarsfeld and Katz in *Personal Influence* but in the received history of communication research the Columbia School was firmly positioned as a counterweight to the simplistic effects model of communication. Again, as noted by Pooley, the portrait of pre-war communication research was to a large extent a caricature or a straw-man, but one that served its authors well (Pooley 2006, 2008).

Innovators and founding fathers make for good stories. But recent scholarship has repeatedly criticized these good stories for also being flawed histories. One such critique has been that surely every child must not only have a father, but also a mother? Consequently, the question follows; where are the founding mothers? There have been two strategies employed in order to address this question. The perhaps most obvious is to look for mothers and matriarchs, identifying women that have made important contributions to the field. Staying in the American context this would typically mean pointing towards Herta Herzog's pioneering work.[8] Casting the net a bit wider, even in the American academy, female researchers are conspicuously unknown. Aimee-Marie Dorsten, for example, has argued that scholars such as Mae D. Huettig, Helen MacGill Hughes, and Hortense Powdermaker ought to be seen as innovators, firsts and founding mothers in that they "helped define communication studies during its emergent, interdisciplinary development" (Dorsten 2012). Dorsten follows in the footsteps of Gertrude J. Robinson (1998) who argued the need to "think dirty" in order to illuminate the contributions made by feminists and female scholars to our field. Robinson, somewhat rhetorically asks why so few have heard of, much less read, scholars such as Lana F. Rakow or Linda Putnam who published important work in the 1980s. One reason, argues Robinson, is that too few of the authorities of the field have read these authors.

—

[8] For an overview, see Klaus and Seethaler 2016.

Another way of addressing the issue is to look further into the complexity of research and how in the end the limited space on the spine of a book often reduce authorship to one or two persons, and typically a man. Returning to the Columbia School, recent scholarship, digging into the archives, has illuminated the collective effort behind books such as *Personal Influence* and *Mass Persuasion*. Authorship, it is argued, is pinned down on a few highly recognized men only, while the actual empirical research was done with the help of a large roster of people, many of whom were women (Simonson 2012). Particularly in the 1940s, due to the war, work in places like the Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia relied heavily on women. In the case of the Bureau this also had consequences for the type of research conducted. According to Karen Lee Ashcraft and Peter Simonson, communication research at the Bureau in the 1940s and early 1950s "was possessed by gender in a radically different way" (Ashcraft and Simonson 2016, p. 61). For instance, qualitative interviews had a more prominent role in the early years than the quantitative methods and surveys that is now part of the remembered history of the Bureau. However, "[b]y the mid-1950s, spaces for women in communication research contracted considerably, in tandem with a masculinization-professionalization of the field that dominated into the 1970s (and after). The gendered labor market changed drastically. Beyond secretarial occupations, the market for women in academic communication research became severely limited" (ibid. p.66).

The above critique is grounded in a gendered perspective, that the idea of innovators and founding fathers neglects female scholarship and obscures the work put in by women in large scale projects resulting in publications such as *Personal Influence* and *Mass Persuasion*. The feminist critique is, of course, highly revealing and relevant. But the significance of the problem is wider than that. The assumption that the intellectual history of a field such as media and communications could be drawn by invoking innovators and founding fathers may in itself rightfully be challenged.[9] Rather than dismissing or disputing what have been considered influential or defining texts in the field one may develop strategies for writing intellectual histories that are more sensitive to the nuances and historical contexts in which research traditions find their forms. Recent years have seen a few such attempts, such as Jefferson Pooley and David W. Park's call for "a more serious and sensitive historiography" (Pooley and Park 2008, p. 5) suggesting a number of distinct

—

[9] To challenge this assumption is, of course, to join the ranks of scholars that have debated the limits and possibilities of canonized texts the academy.

practices to guide future work. To them this means engaging in *qualified historicism* (contextualizing ideas, figures and struggles), being open to *explanatory eclecticism*, and not being afraid of *dirty fingernails* (making use of previously untapped archive material), and doing more *international and comparative histories*, and keeping in *dialogue with the historiography of the other social sciences* (Ibid. 5-8). This sounds all good. But it is also easy to see most attempts failing to reach beyond even one of these suggestions, making them more of a research agenda for an emerging or developing field of "new history" in communication research.

In a move toward creating a model that would acknowledge the nuances and complexities of the intellectual history of the field, Karen Ashcraft and Peter Simonson suggest a shift from founding fathers toward what they call figures, formations and flows. The term figure is used in order problematize "the individual" behind the founding father myth. It is also an attempt to point out that these figures are "*inhabitants* rather than agents of history" (emphasis in original). Figures are always historically situated, and Ashcraft and Simonson use the concept of formations in order to move beyond the intersubjective co-creation of reality, also considering the human and non-human, the discursive and material, etc. Consequently, to them formations are "the historical habitats in which inhabitants dwell, the habits that routinely possess them." Finally, then, the term flow is used to underscore the constantly changing nature of these formations, "flows are the particular, fleeting inhabitations that constantly animate them." (Ashcraft and Simonson 2016, p. 58-60). Engaging in the intellectual history of the field thus entails studying the relations between figures, formations and flows – acknowledging how figures rarely are agents of historical change on their own, but that their acts are inscribed in the flow of constantly changing formations.

Last words

Looking at the history of communication and the intellectual history of media and communication studies I have come to two opposed conclusions regarding the value of being first.

The history of communication is complex and notoriously hard to address. Firsts in communication occur continuously through history, with new means of communication being introduced and old ones being gradually transformed. While the conflation of innovation and use, the spectacular and the everyday in new media and communication is a real historiographic problem, I would argue that zooming in on firsts, media technologies in the

making, is an important means for making the familiar strange. Firsts help us to grasp the role of media and communication in their historical settings as well as their contemporary forms.

With respect to the intellectual history of the field I have argued that we perhaps need to devalue our founding fathers. Not necessarily because their work has been of lesser importance, but because naming founding fathers has tended to overshadow other work in the field and obscure the way in which research is carried out. I would nevertheless suggest a continued interest in firsts – in what is perceived as pioneers in local, national and international contexts – but with a sensitivity that acknowledges their positions not as founding fathers or mothers, but rather as figures inhabiting a position in a field which is governed by its formations or structural relations, and flows within those structures. In doing so I would think that we are getting closer to what Göran suggested in the article inspiring this essay, a Bourdieusian field analysis (Bolin 2004).

References

Ashcraft, K. L., & Simonson, P. (2016). Gender, Work, and the History of Communication Research: Figures, Formations, and Flows. In P. Simonson & D. W. Park (eds.), *The International History of Communication Study* (pp. 47–68). New York: Routledge.

Berelson, B. (1959). The state of communication research. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 23(1), 1–6.

Boddy, W. (2004). *New Media and Popular Imagination: Launching radio, television, and digital media in the United States*. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press.

Bolin, G. (1998). *Filmbytare. Videovåld, kulturell produktion & unga män*. Umeå: Boréa.

Bolin, G. (2004). The Value of Being Public Service: The Shifting of Power Relations in Swedish Television Production. *Media, Culture & Society*, 26(2), 277–287.

Bowker, G. C., Baker, K., Millerand, F., & Ribes, D. (2010). Toward Information Infrastructure Studies: Ways of Knowing in a Networked Environment. In *International Handbook of Internet Research* (pp. 97–117). Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands.

Carlsson, U. (2007). Media and Mass Communication Research Past, Present and Future. Reflections from a Nordic Horizon. *Nordicom Review*, (Jubilee Issue), 223–229.

Dorsten, A.-M. (2012). "Thinking Dirty": Digging Up Three Founding 'Matriarchs' of Communication Studies. *Communication Theory*, 22(1), 25–47.

Edgerton, D. (2006). *The Shock of the Old. Technology and global history since 1900*. London: Profile Books.

Edgerton, D. (2010). Innovation, Technology, or History: What Is the Historiography of Technology About. *Technology and Culture*, 51(3), 680–697.

Eisenstein, E. (1980). *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hu, T.-H. (2015). *A Prehistory of the Cloud*. Boston: MIT Press.

Högskoleverket (2001). Utvärdering av medie- och kommunikationsvetenskapliga utbildningar vid svenska universitet och högskolor. Högskoleverkets rapportserie 2001:25R.

Katz, E., & Lazarsfeld, P. F. (1955). *Personal influence: The part played by people in the flow of mass communications*. Glencoe, Ill: Free Press.

Klaus, E., & Seethaler, J. (eds.). (2016). *What do we really know about Herta Herzog? Exploring the Life and Work of a Pioneer of Communication Research*. Frankfurt & New York: Peter Lang.

Larkin, B. (2008). *Signal and Noise. Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Light, J. S. (2006). Facsimile: A forgotten "new medium" from the 20th century. *New Media & Society*, 8(3), 355–378.

Madrigal, A. C. (2010). The Atlantic Tech Canon. *The Atlantic*, Sep 20, 2010.

Marvin, C. (1988). *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking About Electric Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Peters, B. (2016). *How Not to Network a Nation. The Uneasy History of the Soviet Internet*. Boston: MIT Press.

Pooley, J. D. (2006). Fifteen Pages that Shook the Field: Personal Influence, Edward Shils, and the Remembered History of Mass Communication Research. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 608(1), 130–156.

Pooley, J.D. (2008) "The New History of Communication Research", in Park, D. W., & Pooley, J. (eds.). (2008). *The History of Media and Communication Research. Contested memories*. New York: Peter Lang.

Pooley, J and D. W. Park (2008) "Introduction", in Park, D. W., & Pooley, J. (eds.). (2008). *The History of Media and Communication Research. Contested memories*. New York: Peter Lang.

Robinson, G. J. (1998). Monopolies of Knowledge in Canadian Communication Studies: The Case of Feminist Approaches: The Dallas Smythe Memorial Lecture. *Canadian Journal of Communication*, (23), 62–72.

Simonson, P. (2012). Mail and Females at the Bureau: The Happiness Game in the Gendered Contexts of Early U.S. *Communications Research*, 6, p. 1277–1289.

Schramm, W. (1963). Communication Research in the United States. In W. Schramm (Ed.), *The Science of Human Communication* (pp. 1–16). New York.

Schwoch, J. (2002). Crypto-Convergence, Media, and the Cold War: The Early Globalization of Television Networks in the 1950s. Presented at the Media In Transition Conference, MIT Boston, May 2002.

Schwoch, J. (2009). *Global TV: New media and the Cold War, 1946–69*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Winston, B. (1995). How are media born and developed? In J. Downing (ed.), *Questioning the Media. Critical introduction*. London: Sage.

Winston, B. (1998). *Media, Technology and Society. A History: From the Telegraph to the Internet*. London & New York: Routledge.