Ideological Contestation and Disciplinary Associations: An Autoethnographic Analysis

ABSTRACT

An autoethnographic and self-reflexive theorised analysis of aspects of the South African Communication Association reveals that its internal tensions mimicked wider contradictions both during and after apartheid. The historical role played by the Association is critically examined in relation to issues of governance and naming, and with regard to its shaping of the South African scholarly community as it negotiated different paradigms, different constituencies and different historical-political-economic contexts. The analysis is embedded in a critique of neoliberalism and how this condition has impacted management procedures of the Association.

Keywords: research position, autoethnography, South African Communication Association, apartheid

This article was written in response to a Call for Papers for a special issue of Communicatio that was to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the South African Communication Association (Sacomm) in 2014. Although the special issue did not materialise, seemingly due to a lack of interest, this self-reflexive analysis serves as one experiential historical narrative amongst others. The institutional, epistemological and paradigmatic shifts that occurred both anticipated and mirrored the broader socio-political changes in the South African milieu since the late 1970s. The account of change in the Association is posited as a microcosm of change on a national level.

A second argument is threaded within the article - that of legitimacy of the use of ‘non-scientifically’ verifiable methods such as memory, autoethnography and ‘lived-experience’ in academic research. Some academics solely trained in more positivist aspects of communication and media studies may balk at the use of first person pronouns and the use of memory to recount the history of the Association. The resulting account may be considered useful by them, but not deemed worthy of the mantle of ‘rigorous’ research and is often relegated to the status of ‘commentary’ as it fails in the hegemonic supposed objective discourse that underpins orthodox scientific methods. It is this relegation that has on occasion characterised my interactions and disagreements with the Association. While the narrative below does not theorise these issues, they are flagged as ideological, methodological and theoretical issues to be addressed in the years ahead.

One of the paradigms in which I work draws on the methodology of ‘lived-experience’ as a means of validating the veracity of this account. ‘Lived experience’ is a research practice that acknowledges the existence of researchers as a thinking, feeling, and subjective entities who are institutionally required to interpret and disseminate their findings – even if there is nothing to be found. This lived methodology acknowledges that memories are fallible, and that impressions of events fade and change over time (Mboti 2012). In the absence of concrete archival material, the use of memory, contentious as it may be, serves as a necessary methodological starting point. As this account offers the perception of a single individual, bolstered by the publications and insight of a few others, the original project being conducted...
by Arnold de Beer to pin down the history of Sacomm, invited other perceptions and interpretations of the Association’s history. Regrettably, few experiences were forthcoming for De Beer’s task which followed a unanimous decision at the Sacomm AGM in 2013, and so triangulation or contestation of different positions was not possible.

A problem with writing on a topic of commemoration (of the 40th anniversary of the Sacomm is that one might have become susceptible to descriptive celebration. What is to be celebrated, and what is to be critiqued? How would one approach a critique of an organisation whose own history has been so poorly archived that only a sketchy framework was the outcome? (De Beer 2014). ¹

A successful history of the Association would need to draw on the memories of those interviewed, and the recovery of what documents remain. Then one would need to mesh the two sources into an analysis illustrated by a narrative that has some resonance with at least some still living founder members of the Association. Hopefully, this article will encourage present and former members of Sacomm to enter and exit the story from the respective perspectives of their own memories, ideologies and experiences. Such an approach is seen in some circles as being ‘unscientific’ and therefore to be distrusted; while others would argue that such an interpretivist method is more likely to result in due problematisation of the issues at hand. I am to follow the latter course.

**Problematising Research Position**

‘Problematisation’ is an awful cultural studies term that refers to modes of writing that admit and engage opinion, ideology, identity, and the subjectivity of the researcher who aims to de-familiarise the familiar. The objective is to devise a conceptual framework through which impressions, paradigms and experiences can be critically processed in order to arrive at a more holistic understanding of something. In Antonio Gramsci’s (1971) parlance, how does one dislodge “common sense” (that which is taken for granted) from “good sense” (that which enables a strategic intervention, questioning the familiar, exposing hidden discourses and structures)?

In my approaching this task I run the risk of contravening a key tenet that the editors of *Communicatio* hold dear – a journal that in the past at least has clung to the notion that ‘science’ must be objective and written about in the third person. This version of science holds that experiential approaches are ‘unscientific’, as is the use of first person pronouns used by researchers applying self-reflexivity and autoethnography in establishing research position (see also Tomaselli 2005). On occasion (in the past) *Communicatio* has requested the elimination of my presence from my direct observations and to write about an event in which I participated as if I were absent.

Well, I have been present in SACOMM activities and discussions since 1978. This direct, immersed and almost daily 38 year experience cannot be wished away by an archaic rule of writing that requires authors to be all-seeing objective flies on the wall rather than being experiencing flies in the soup. Indeed, it is this fundamental paradigmatic difference and their respective intellectual regimes that typify continued contestations within SACOMM itself, not only in conference organisers’ assumptions
about science, but also in the very selection mechanisms used to assess annual conference paper submissions.

In developing the sticky soup metaphor, this analysis needs to admit my researcher/subject/ideological position. Included in this triad are a number of determinations: class, ethnicity, language, race and whatever else gets in the way or which shapes the ways in which so-called scientists make sense of things. In nailing my researcher position/subjectivity to the mast, my argument below must also be read in relation to my early liberal, then subsequent Marxist, analyses, my English-Afrikaner-Italian-German heritage, my privileged (white) middle class position that collaborated in anti-apartheid activity with small sections of the working class and *lumpen proletariat*, and also with a multiracial Durban urban social movement, in opposing the Group Areas Act from within officially designated ‘white’ boroughs. In ‘taking sides’, so to speak, I located myself in a nexus of often contradictory qualitative and quantitative paradigms through which I both encountered and tried to make sense of my contradictory experience in the world I was then engaging.

This paper, then, is multi-layered, a kind of thick diachronic description and impressionist analysis of interacting and competing discourses and practices that have shaped my own entrance and exit points vis-à-vis SACOMM during different periods. These have been defining for me if not for anyone else. The incidents and issues raised in the course of this autoethnographic exploration of my experiences of SACOMM may well be remembered differently by those with whom I have interacted. Some memories will be discomforting also, but that is the nature of the autoethnographic method (see Ellis 2007; Ellis and Bocher 2000). One cannot defamiliarise the familiar if one remains in one’s comfort zones governed by an ahistorical common sense that is legitimised by an unproblematised and uncritical belief in the infallibility of science. Autoethnography was the method applied when I first systematically encountered the broader Afrikaans communication constituency at a two day retreat held on the then Rand Afrikaans University Island in the 1970s. For me then, and later, there was no other way that I or at least three of my English-speaking colleagues present, Arthur Goldstuck, John Battersby and Dennis Beckett, could make sense of our mutual experiences where we were positioned as ‘other’ by many of our peers (Tomaselli 2004). What was familiar to our Afrikaans-speaking colleagues was initially totally alien to us – and perhaps vice versa also. Autoethnography provided me a route towards a mutually understood explanation.

**De-familiarising the Familiar**

To start the defamiliarisation process let me refer to a number of paradigmatic differences that I and Ruth Teer-Tomaselli have raised at SACOMM annual general meetings over the years. We and some others questioned the familiarity of what so many of our peers appear to take for granted:

i) institutional mimicry, where a representative academic organisation internalises the more oppressive characteristics of our employers’ performance management procedures that turn academics into factory workers subject to technical e valuation criteria
ii) a synchronic understanding of the role of SACOMM which plays out in two main ways: a) forgetting the genesis of SACOMM during apartheid; and b) overlooking the *de facto* official status of the Association in the current conjuncture (see below), and

iii) even with acceptance of cultural and media studies into the Association’s ambit in 2006, a continued positivist tendency denies an imaginary that was constituted as a critique of positivism. This imaginary contested the narrow Comptean methodological restrictions adopted by Communication Science and argued for pro-active interventionist paradigms and lived methodologies that aim to locate academics and organic intellectuals at the heart of social, economic and political change. Self-acknowledged researcher position constitutes one aspect of this imaginary.

In addressing the above three issues – there are many more that cannot be dealt with here - readers are referred to the 2007 Internationalising Media Studies conference held at the University of Westminster 2007 commemorating the 50th anniversary of the International Association of Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) (Mansell 2007). Part of the discussion was allocated to the role of disciplinary associations in both developing the field and facilitating the travelling of theory and methods across the globe. How theories travel, what happens when they arrive at new destinations, and how are they changed, interpreted and misinterpreted by the adopting scholarly communities, is key to studying the sub-texts that circulate during SACOMM conferences and its affiliated journals and proceedings. Theories derive from particular political economic and historical contexts but may be adapted in different ways by different societies and put to completely different uses. One example, of how some key South African intercultural theorists disarticulated and the totally rearticulated Edward Hall’s (1977) theories into an apartheid context for which it was not intended is discussed in Tomaselli (1999). This analysis, initially presented at a SACOMM lecture in Pretoria, was absolutely bewildering to some sections of the then intercultural communication studies constituency.

The ways in which travelling theory plays out in the articulation, disarticulation and re-articulation of the signified meaning of SACOMM and how it is interpreted by different constituencies is partly ideological, and not just geographical. This is a semantic process where an original denotative meaning of a term is disconnected or disarticulated/amputated from a word and then semiotically re-articulated to connote something else. The Unesco-affiliated IAMCR conferences, for example, would during the Cold War alternate between the Western and Soviet blocs. In contrast, the then largely administrative research-led International Communication Association (ICA), despite ‘international’ in its name, like the United States baseball World Series, rarely left US shores. ‘International’ for IAMCR (which excluded South Africa due to the academic boycott) was different to ICA’s parochial definition. The tiny but very mobile World Communication Association (WCA) that indebted SACOMM in 1993 when their respective conferences were twinned in Pretoria was basically tax deductible academic tourism for its then small group of American members studying peace around the world. For WCA, ‘world’ signified ‘travel’ (by Americans to somewhere else). For some of us the event was farce (if not imperialism), not because of the ensuing unnecessary costs incurred by SACOMM on behalf of WCA, but because of the way that some of these (un)worldly Americans
used the event not only to see wildlife, but more insensitively, to travel through hostile black townships from the inside safety of military escorted armoured vehicles. South African academics and protestors were subject to their gaze also even as we were not invited to the WCA AGM held during the Pretoria meeting.

South African exceptionalism (sourced to apartheid) was what WCA had come to experience. WCA’s intentions were no doubt honourable. Many of its members were indeed involved in peace initiatives, and some had cross-association memberships. But for previously isolated and intellectually starved South/ern Africans, their offer to co-host the conference was irredeemably tempting. This was the newly internationalising context out of which SACOMM emerged into the post-apartheid transition. In turn, WCA members were astonished at the ignorance of most of their South African colleagues: the Professor of Journalism at Kent State University observed that very few of us were aware of the significance of his institution, four of whose students had been killed and nine others wounded by the Ohio National Guard in 1970. This event proved to be a turning point in American opposition to the Vietnam War, galvanising many hundreds of universities and colleges in anti-war resistance.

The moment signified by the joint conference was a cauldron of ideological contestations requiring reassessment of what ‘international’ meant and of Sacomm’s integration into a globalising world. Remember, South Africa had just jettisoned the days of ‘international toilets’. During late apartheid ‘non-whites’ were permitted to use these designated facilities in a few selected ‘international hotels’ where they were also allowed to consume alcohol. These hotels had been approved as official places at which black diplomats from the surrounding countries and the so-called homeland states could legally reside in ‘white’ South Africa.

While SACOMM from its start in 1977 was blessed with a non-racial and bi-lingual constitution, one of a few disciplinary societies to accord itself this status, the early title incorporated “Southern Africa”, not “South Africa” (see De Beer 2014). This was not an anomaly as it was read by the Association’s ideological detractors as implicitly admitting the fact of geographical apartheid, as it included the so-called independent and self-governing homelands in which a number of fledgling (often dissident) universities were beginning to appear. It seemed to me that perhaps this was the contradiction that the writers of the SACOMM constitution had to negotiate in order to evade the colour bar, restrictions on travel and accommodation to be inclusive rather than exclusionary?

Notwithstanding the intimate relation of SACOMM to the unique history of South Africa and the so-called homelands, and their unification for the first time in 1994, curiously, ‘Southern’ was inexplicably re-imported back onto the current SACOMM web page (but not the URL), quite without any sense of discursive or historical irony. In discursive terms, semiotic signs (like ‘Southern Africa’) conceal their histories and here is a perhaps contested example of how a lack of historical consciousness results in an articulation of ‘South/ern’ (during apartheid) that was dis-articulated after 1994 and returned into a new articulation of ‘Southern’ nearly 20 years after political liberation.
Though an amendment to the SACOMM constitution had modified the name, its unproblematised use in the web site after the late-2000s forgets the contested history of the word as applied during the apartheid political economy. This (unintended) erasure of history is what I mean by synchronicity as perhaps the restoration of ‘Southern’ in the website may be a well-intended attempt to accommodate (and welcome) conference delegates drawn from the surrounding countries of Zimbabwe, Namibia, Botswana, Swaziland, Mozambique and Lesotho. SACOMM, however, can in no way ‘represent’ delegates from these other countries as it is a national organisation. Whether or not the re-substitution of ‘Southern’ is an error, a lack of historical understanding, or a slip of the tongue, in terms of the above history, this loose use is a wonderful example of how myths endure even as they have been subjected to semiotic critique.

The political connotations of this naming interacted with Sacomm’s early conservative paradigmatic functionalist, scientific and administrative research which underplayed the role of power (Tomaselli 2005; Tomaselli and Teer-Tomaselli 2007). It was from this late apartheid moment that many dissident English-speaking scholars derived their suspicion of the Association. For example, Lynette Steenveld’s (2000) invited keynote address at the small conference held at the University of Pretoria in 2000 implicitly addressed the issues of paradigm, position and power. She had participated in her capacity as the Rhodes University Chair of Media Transformation, a position then endowed by Independent Newspapers following the purchase of the Argus Group by Tony O’Riley’s Irish interests, a deal facilitated by Nelson Mandela. The discussion that ensued, at which she could not be present due to other commitments, was lively, productive and very revealing in that it suggested that few, if any, of the 30 or so delegates present had associated administrative research – or academia in general, let alone their own practices - with issues of (class) position and power, let alone apartheid or politics of any kind. This was an instance where constructive dialogue was triggered by an enduring sceptic whose provocative intervention partly defamiliarised what had been previously taken for granted amongst the delegates who were mostly drawn from Afrikaans-speaking universities. It must be said, however, that in deference to change, and in recognition of South Africa’s unified, liberated and new international status, the deliberations have been conducted in English since the 1993 SACOMM/WCA conference. Indeed, the original Afrikaans co-title had been deleted from the Constitution in recognition of the post-apartheid condition. This deletion had been proposed by the SACOMM Afrikaans-speaking constituency itself at the 2000 AGM and effected in 2002.

In many ways, however, the three discursive sites – mimicry, synchrony and positivism - continued to course through aspects of the Association’s post-2010 conference organisation philosophy, largely concealed under the administrative discourse of ‘standards’, ‘peer review’ and of inclusion/exclusion in deference to the new managerialism that took hold after 2000 (see Higgins 2013, Chetty and Merrett 2014).

**Institutional Mimicry**

Institutional mimicry occurs when creeping instrumentalism becomes an accepted form of professional practice. Under these conditions academics implicitly absorb and internalise in their work increasingly restrictive neo-liberal managerialist
practices of the very administrations that are over-bureaucratizing the academy and that are alienating scholars from their civic and philosophical duties. While there are good reasons for efficient managerial procedures and staff performance, we are fooling ourselves if we think we are going to get any brownie points from simply applying proceduralism for proceduralism sake. At root, what neo-liberalism refers to is a phase of capitalist accumulation that has transmuted social values into economic value (Haivan 2014:58-9), resulting in:

Massive cuts to the social sciences and humanities as well as increased competition even among critical intellectuals to ‘perform’ (publish papers, earn grants, ‘advance’ fields of study). The result has been a crisis of overproduction in the fields of theory and cultural analysis, an obsession with increasingly incomprehensible theoretical posturing and ‘knowledge production’ that creates the illusion of progress while actually feeding the system (Haivan, 2014: 60-1).

These observations of the US education system are now directly replicated in the post-apartheid South African situation and especially within reified versions of cultural and media studies that refuse the evidentiary. Students have internalised this beguiling generalised global discourse which I have elsewhere typified as “psycho-babble” (Tomaselli 2001) that travels so easily and which can cause immense damage to the polity. Such students want to buy rather than [l]earn their education and their ever-helpful lecturers are more than happy to sell them the generic codes and linguistic software (see, e.g., Sokal 1996). Universities have become edu-factories, and academics desperate to retain their jobs now mimic the factory quality control mechanisms imposed by management. The objective of a critical education producing a social good whose value escapes quantification no longer fully drives the academic sector. Just as universities have become degree-granting apparatuses, so does conference organisation sometimes become a CV-ticking, performance management (PM)-inducing, productivity unit-rewarded activity. Check the box and move on to the next conference or journal.

Attempts to both manage and respond to this corporatisation of performance sometimes results in the further internalisation of these kinds of control practices. While I do support institutional efforts to assess performance and impact, PM assumptions are largely disconnected from what academics actually do, and are simply remotely controlled procedures applied by intrusive bureaucrats whose own product has largely alienated, and highly irritated, most competent academics – especially those who do attempt to make a critical disciplinary difference. Where Sacomm is concerned, one example relates to the myth of peer review (of short conference abstracts). The procedure requiring that 200 word abstracts be peer reviewed is largely based on lack of historical imagination, let alone an appreciation of the richness of paradigmatic difference and contestation, debate and argument. When conference paper selection is subjected to inflexible tick box evaluation criteria the contradictions can enter the realm of farce. For one conference a number of papers that had nothing to do with the conference theme were accepted by one working group, but rejected by another, even though, historically, conference themes are not determining of individual topics.
SACOMM should not mimic the often mindless neo-liberal enterprise but rather nurture its members, especially its less experienced emergent scholars, to confidently interact with all paradigms and disciplines that are housed by the Association, an appeal again made by Sonja Verwey at the 2014 conference. Peer review is for the final presentation and article that follows, while selection is only needed for structuring the programme, eliminating product pitches and other inappropriate submissions. Open discussion from the floor following conference presentation is also a form of peer review. At the UFS 2005 conference where students were located in a parallel set up, the UKZN students intervened after the first two presentations, insisting that discussion be made an intrinsic part of the sessions. For them discussion was taken for granted as the key learning mechanism. Later conferences where students were commendably put in charge of sessions revealed their lack of understanding of the role of debate, how conduct it, or even how to chair a session other than ensuring that the technical aspects were under control.

While the 2002 Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) conference did referee actual papers prior to the conference, even enabling the publication of a refereed proceedings, no-one was to my knowledge excluded (see Conradie et al 2006). Presenters who had failed to engage with prior written referee recommendations found during their presentations that they were now confronted with the same (and new), now much more forcefully expressed, responses which they could not evade in the face-to-face encounters. Though exhausting work for the TUT conference staff, the experiment worked well because the procedures enacted had learning – rather than procedure for procedure’s sake - as their objective.

In recent years, the pandering to gatekeeping power required by ill-advised performance management (PM) indices imposed by university HR departments, is argued to offer scientific legitimacy and administrative justice when applied also to conference abstract submissions. My argument is that we should not mimic an oppressive bureaucracy or unnecessary gatekeeping mechanisms because we think that our bosses will take more kindly to us wasting our time (in their eyes) outside of the academic factory protected by its turn styles, high fences and regulated through time sheets and productivity indices.

This also relates to the lip service that contemporary university managements pay to community engagement. Association office, the writing of text books, and civic activities, are key performance indictors in many American universities, but are often considered a distraction by South African academic managers in their scramble for international rankings, and who then link direct participation with publication irrespective of learning. There is nothing wrong with the push to publish, but the result is to turn conferences into product displays that are coterminous with the time allocated each paper. Notwithstanding this pressure, most SACOMM plenaries have managed to bite the bullet and ensure that the bullet bites even when one does not have a published copy to claim as a productivity unit. An incisive soft presentation might change the direction of the organisation, or fundamentally impact its members’ ways of doing things, as did the Research Forum at the 2004 meeting in Port Elizabeth (De Beer 2004).

Synchrony/Diachrony
The founder members who established and developed the Association will have a
diachronic (historical) memory of the process, whereas younger contemporary
members will have had a synchronic (ahistorical) interaction. Since the founders are
now dying off, and others retiring, it has taken the one who has not retired, Arrie De
Beer, to search for the missing history.

The issuing of two obituaries (for Hennie Groenewald and Gavin Stewart) by De Beer
during 2014 was not just to pay one’s respects to forgotten SACOMM founder
members. Rather, his intention was to spark members’ memories of their respective
contributions. De Beer’s eulogy on the role played by Gavin Stewart on his early
insistence on adopting a non-racial constitution for SACOMM is historically
instructive. De Beer had proposed recognising both English and Afrikaans, and with
Stewart, non-racialism, as precepts. The posting generated a furious private exchange
with another senior academic as to the accuracy of De Beer’s recollection that were it
not for Stewart that the non-racial constitution would not have materialised. Such are
the difficulties faced when the archive is incomplete.

Where some other disciplines were fractured into pro-apartheid (mainly Afrikaans-
speaking) vis-a-vis anti-apartheid non-racial disciplinary organisations during
apartheid, there was no need for unification talks after 1994 as far as SACOMM was
concerned. Other associations were ‘unified’ so to speak after 1994, having negotiated
internally divided by English-Afrikaner rivalries and often previously irresolvable
mutual suspicion.

De Beer has assembled much of the missing SACOMM archive, having been helped
by a few others from their own incomplete files and memories, but in the gaps remain
the traps. For me, an alarming realisation is an impression by some recent office
bearers that SACOMM is but an informal club (notwithstanding its tightly managed
conference selection.) We do need to recover the fundamental role that SACOMM
played in the 1990s and beyond in formulating policy and procedures that many of its
members have made with regard to the National Research Foundation (NRF) ratings
and Focus Area panels, the work they did for the SA Qualification Authority, and the
phenomenal recent contribution done by De Beer on the Academy of Science for
South Africa (ASSAF) Scholarly Editor’s Forum, where he and two other SACOMM
members significantly shifted national policy and procedure and indeed understanding
about journals’ publishing, and archaic assumptions about peer review. Further, was
the research contracted by the pre-NRF Centre for Science Development on the State
of the Discipline studies that I coordinated with Arnold Shepperson and De Beer’s
assistance during the late 1990s. SACOMM is not just an annual conference. It
always has been this and much more. For example, SACOMM, an affiliate of the
Right To Know (R2K) Campaign, offered R2K major exposure at the 2014
conference, supported by a no-holds barred presidential address by Julie Reid.

Where once the SACOMM website in the mid-2000s reflected the deeper academic
remit, now it has been sanitised, minimised and de-historicised. The site had
previously contained conference programmes, policy documents and the constitution,
newsletters and other useful historical material. Now, all the remains are some basic
working group statements, a membership application form and related documents.
The relocation from its original hoist witnessed a grievous haemorrhaging of many
aspects of the archival record of Sacomm’s history.
The 2014 conference blog requesting memories, stories and vignettes attracted not a single entry, though the conference website hosted by University of the North-West oozes energy and enthusiasm at an event where contemporary threats against freedom of speech was uppermost in everyone’s mind. We should not forget that we are now again at a crucible, as previously was the case in the 1980s. The conference host’s website should be linked to the SACOMM home page, but was not. Again, this goes to the heart of how academics’ time and effort are managed by managers whose policies disengage academics from ordinary conversations which are just as important as are the finished published ‘accredited’ products that generally attract very few readers. It also indicates a cautioning of academics from writing in styles and platforms that are not ‘academic’, again vitiating the richness of the interaction with wider constituencies – civil society as a whole.

SACOMM has fallen off the NRF dial. The lack of information in the minimalist website suggests the lack of a sense of history also. Tens of thousands of rand have been spent on a dead website that sports but basic pages, in comparison to its previous scope when managed by academics from two universities on a university server. In semiotic terms the website conceals more than it reveals, or what it once revealed. Apart from the timeline constructed by De Beer, the new page is synchronic, its entire previous (diachronic) history is now a structured absence, and as such, the only history exists in the fading minds of its now departing members apart from the attempts to reconstruct a data base of who, where, and what, but without an analysis of to what effect.

Critique and Subjectivity

Critique (in the Kantian sense) on the one hand, and negativity (superficial criticism) on the other, are not the same thing. My sustained critique of SACOMM has always had a positive objective, to enable dialogue, negotiation and democracy, to promote inclusivity and participation. Process rather than a celebration of form (like the now vacuous website, tick box conference evaluation forms) is my emphasis: strategy, delivery and participation, are the real issues.

My relationship with SACOMM – and indeed many SACOMM members – has been a productively dialectical one in that we have engaged each other, tested each other, and changed each other - sometimes the relationships were acrimonious but always resolved. My life-time investment in SACOMM occurred as I considered it to be a potentially productive site of struggle, a micro-public sphere, through which change could be driven. Where my English-speaking colleagues largely ignored SACOMM as other, focusing on trade union and other forms of popular resistance like the Mass Democratic Movement, I also engaged the prevailing intellectual hegemony on Sacomm’s own terrain. That small space had been tactically prised open by Stewart and De Beer with the consent of the Association’s founders. This was the Faustian pact that had to be made – on the one hand was the tacit acknowledgement of the so-called “constellation of ‘Southern African’ states” but on the other was the space opened by the contradiction through which dissidents like Stewart could manoeuvre.

So what was it that persuaded me in the early days to ‘collaborate’, so to speak, with SACOMM and its mainly Afrikaner constituencies? This is where autoethnography –
shunned by positivists – becomes so methodologically fruitful. Autoethnography problematises Self-Other relations and enables new lenses through which to explain the nature of all kinds of encounters, which sometimes result in surprising, unpredictable and even creative outcomes.

Having grown up in a conservative liberal anti-apartheid household in Johannesburg, with a mother from an anglicised Afrikaans-speaking family, and an anti-Nazi, anti-fascist father of Italian/German/Austrian heritage, a different set of possibilities presented themselves to me when engaging my Afrikaner colleagues, whether or not they were interpellated into apartheid and no matter my own early English-speaking stereotypes about the other. Through the Presbyterian Church of which my mother was a very active member, even as a child I occasionally interacted with dissident Afrikaner organic intellectuals like Beyers Naudé and black members of the Christian Institute. I learned about theology, democracy, reconciliation and participatory governance at St Columba’s Church in Parkview. Afrikaans theatre attendance was a regular feature of our family’s leisure time while my high school experience amongst the very rough and exceedingly tough white working and lower middle classmates at Parktown Boys High exposed me to other sub-cultures and what were then considered ‘deviant’ ways of making sense.

This intensive childhood immersion perhaps sensitised me to the value of difference while also providing me with coping mechanisms to negotiate different cultures. Amongst many of my Afrikaner colleagues I sensed conceptual schisms, moments of glasnost (openness), and doubts visible to me but not my English-speaking compatriots. My multicultural heritage enabled me to spot contradictions in other cultural milieus. I sensed a yearning from my Afrikaner colleagues to know more about my own ways of making sense, a willingness to entertain these and an openness for dialogue at least. Central to the opening of such discursive opportunities were some of the first and second generation SACOMM founding fathers: Arrie de Beer, Bok Marais and Pieter Fourie in particular, while colleagues at the then official Association journal, Communicare, enabled my joining of its editorial board to try to open up the publication to a more eclectic range of critical paradigms. Nina Overton and Sonja Verwey and their colleagues will be the first to reveal that I was not an easy board member with whom to deal. I engaged them on a range of issues, some of which recurred at the 2014 meeting (see Froneman 2014).

We’ve all changed in the dialogue and we changed each other. Bok Marias was one of those who helped to change the state’s ideological research apparatus, the Human Sciences Research Council, whose national Intergroup Relations Project (Main Committee, 1985) heralded the intellectual death knell of apartheid. De Beer started the internal Afrikaner dialogue on the future with his many subject conferences on journalism and in the pages of Ecquid Novi. He and Max du Preez were the only two Afrikaans print journalists to address the media hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (see de Beer 2000),8 and to actively work for the official opposition at grassroots levels, there experiencing first-hand the systematic repression that the rest of us had had to contend with in the trenches over many decades. It would be an understatement to reveal that Pieter Fourie coordinated over many years a fundamental re-engineering of all the UNISA communication courses from the bottom up, thus fundamentally shifting paradigms across the country and bringing conservative communication approaches into a sustained critical dialogue with
cultural and media studies. My own shifts have seen a return to quantitative social science methods where appropriate and an appreciation of the insider work done by so many Afrikaners in all sectors in bringing about fundamental political change.

In many ways, the first generation of SACOMM members lived and breathed their professional lives through SACOMM, no matter the state that it was in, and no matter what they were doing. Everyone should have a story to tell regarding SACOMM. It's a pity that so few are telling them. It was initially a cosy club of heads of departments; then it democratised and was regularised administratively, and after 1994 become a policy-maker working in association with the new post-apartheid state apparatuses. The Association enabled the development of a community of scholars no matter the epistemological, ideological or methodological contradictions that faced it. Many of its previous detractors are now active in the Association which has largely shed its previous ideological divisions, though the paradigmatic differences will of course always remain, be negotiated and critiques, as they were at the 2004 Conference (De Beer 2014). This is why SACOMM must operated best as both a convivial and an official space, critically interacting with all levels of the state and the tertiary sector, and why the inter-paradigmatic dialogue must continue.

To end, research is not just about formulating a question, or of replicating a known method, or of generating ‘findings’ to be presented in staid formats. Sometimes these categories just mislead, get in the way, and prevent understanding. In much Humanities research few ‘findings’ are to be found; rather what is sought are explanations of lived relationships, historical nuance and explanatory narratives.

My objective in writing this article is as much to reveal some insights about Sacomm as it is to conceptualise how I as an experiencing subject/researcher/participant/activist came to the above conclusions. My story is just one part of a multi-layered, multi-tinted, multigenerational window to which everyone should be contributing. That we are able to begin a contested writing of the history of SACOMM is indeed to be celebrated, but we must take cognizance of the problem of forgetting, of instrumentalism and we must connect the historical dots. In doing so, I have self-reflexively positioned myself both as a researcher and as a SACOMM member: I have examined my motivations and my own subjectivity and cultural experiences and heritage in participating in the Association, and hopefully shaping some of its policies, activities and debates. The tasks were both theoretical and strategic, and tactical and practical. Certainly, as an office bearer, I engaged with Sacomm as a site of national disciplinary-based struggle, itself embedded within many other much wider sites and contestations, many of them global, from the political to the paradigmatic, from the methodological to ethical, and from the objective to the interpretive.

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References


Steenveld, L. 2007. Whither communication studies in the ‘new’ South Africa in the new millennium? *Communicatio* 26(2), 81-6,


1 Large sections of Sacomm’s ‘‘travelling’’ archive was incomplete and decades of AGM agendas and minutes was lost. With the exception of myself, De Beer, and Sacomm presidents such as Sonja Verwey and Julie Reid, there was relatively to interest interest amongst members for Sacomm’s history project. With the exception of a few years, Sacomm never had an official office, hence the ‘‘travelling’’ archive, depending who the secretary in a certain year was.

2 For example, Transkei, Ciskei, Venda, Qua Qua, KwaZulu, Bophuthatswana, nine in all.

3 This issue is recalled very different by Arnold de Beer who observed that:. “Sacomm had members from the beginning from Zululand and Turfloop (University of the North). The change in name followed colleagues from Zimbabwe, and especially Nigeria attending conferences at Rand Afrikaans University and the University of South Africa if I remember correctly. It was changed back to South Africa a few years later when it turned out that the Association is not going to make inroads to the rest of the Africa.”

4 “Though you are right on this score”, comments De Beer, “(too) much of those two articles was perhaps written with the anger and sturm und drang of the 70s to 90s.” Indeed, this is a pertinent conclusion as we were all negotiating the political transition and the ideological divisions had yet to be resolved. When the 2007 paper was presented at the Westminster Conference, Robin Mansell, the then IAMCR President, noted that our presentation during the session allocated to the associations (IAMCR. ICA. ECREA etc), was the only one that actually critically problematised its history.

5 Again, De Beer offers a different insight. He rightly observes that my interpretation is “ really a highly contested version of the history. Steenveld’s self-acknowledged position at the time was that Sacomm was responding – perhaps administratively - to the new dispensation. This is of course correct, as the moment provided an opportunity for an inclusive participation by all members of the disciplines represented by Sacomm. Underpinning her critique is her self-acknowledged outsider position: "Given this perspective, and given my task of giving this address, I was faced with a problem: that of talking into a space with which I am unfamiliar. I am not a member of SACOMM. My perception of SACOMM is that it is an organization of communication scholars predominantly from historically Afrikaans universities. Apart from the language identity, this conveys to me also a traditionally 'conservative' identity. Here, I imagine, communication is seen in functionalist terms: communication in the service of... whomever, and the aim is to produce 'better communicators'. Forgive me if this is a crude, or inaccurate stereotype. But the approach to me, was in terms of wanting to transform this organization, and for it to
become more inclusive of scholars representing different perspectives on what communication studies might be. Because of my background, issues of value and power are central to any theorisation of communication.

6 De Beer comments that ‘‘objective’’ research was at the time the norm in especially American research, and it was a kind of safe haven for some Afrikaans colleagues, because the alternative would have been to do ‘‘subversive’’ research.


8 Their presentation followed an invitation by the TRC when it turned out that the Afrikaans dominated print media houses were not willing to make presentations to the TRC. However, the Media Hearings were followed up when some 120 journalists from Nasionale Pers made a submission to the TRC.