

RESEARCH REVIEW
Communication Science
2014-2019

ONDERZOEKERIJ

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Preface

The study of communication and media is an exciting field. Not a year goes by without a major new development. New technology emerges continuously and leads to new media, new types of content, and new ways that people use the content. Being a communication and media researcher means specializing in a topic area that constantly evolves and continuously surprises.

One of the nicest aspects of academic life is the opportunity to interact with like-minded people from across the world. Combined with the amazing openness to critical examination and feedback that is an integral part of being an academic, this culminates in the willingness to open the house to colleagues from other universities and expose both the strengths and weaknesses of your own environment.

For the members of the evaluation committee this felt like a privilege and an obligation. Our colleagues of VU and UvA worked hard to show us what they are made of. We have taken great care to examine this strong plant with its firm roots carefully in the hopes of identifying ways to preserve its strength and encourage it to grow bigger, stronger, and better.

The COVID pandemic upended the process. A lot can be learned from site visits, where the committee can witness the environment people work in, and get a feel for what it is like to be a professor, or a staff member, or student at UvA or VU. We did not have that opportunity. But the process we followed instead offered, perhaps, more focus and less room for subjective observations. It is a different way of learning and knowing.

What you are reading is the result of our careful examination and consultation. We have visited two magnificent units with amazing strengths, but also with room for growth and improvement. We are looking forward to the next chapter in their development.

Jan Van den Bulck, Chair of the Evaluation Committee



1. Introduction

1.1 Terms of reference for the assessment

The quality assessment of research of Communication Science is carried out in the context of the Standard Evaluation Protocol For Public Research Organisations by the Association of Universities in The Netherlands (VSNU), the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO), and the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW).

The committee was asked to assess the scientific quality and the relevance and utility to society of the research conducted by Amsterdam School of Communication Research (ASCoR) of the University of Amsterdam (UvA) and the Department of Communication Science of the VU University, Amsterdam (VU) in the reference period 2014-2019, as well as its strategic targets and the extent to which it is equipped to achieve them. Accordingly, three main criteria are considered in the assessment: research quality, relevance to society, and viability. During the evaluation of these criteria, the committee was asked to incorporate four specific aspects: Open science, PhD policy and training, academic culture and human resources policy.

This report describes findings, conclusions and recommendations of this external assessment of the research of Communication Science.

1.2 The review committee

The Board of the two participating universities appointed the following members of the committee for the research review:

- Prof. dr. Jan Van den Bulck, University of Michigan;
- Prof. dr. Jörg Matthes, University of Wien;
- Prof. dr. Amy Jordan, Rutgers University;
- Prof. dr. Shannon McGregor, The University of North Carolina;
- Prof. dr. S. Shyam Sundar, Pennsylvania State University;
- Sanne Tamboer, MSc, Radboud University (PhD committee member).

The Board of the participating universities appointed dr. Annemarie Venemans of De Onderzoekerij as the committee secretary. All members of the committee signed a declaration and disclosure form to ensure that the committee members made their judgements without bias, personal preference or personal interest, and that the judgment was made without undue influence from the institutes or stakeholders.

1.3 Procedures followed by the committee

Prior to the site visit, the committee reviewed detailed documentation comprising the self-assessment report of the institute including appendices.

The committee proceeded according to the Strategy Evaluation Protocol (SEP) 2021- 2027. The assessment was based on the documentation provided by the institute and the interviews with their respective management, selections of senior and junior researchers, and PhD student representatives. The interviews took place on January 28 and January 29 2021 (see Appendix A).



The committee discussed its assessment during its final session of the site visit. The committee chair had the coordinating role in the writing procedure and delegated the writing of sections to members of the committee. The members of the committee commented by email on the draft report. The draft version was then presented to the institutes for factual corrections and comments. Subsequently, the text was finalised and presented to the Board of the universities.



2. General remarks

2.1 The Societal Relevance of Communication Research

The roots of Communication scholarship were most established in the 40's, 50's, and 60's of the previous century, driven by concerns about the political use of media by totalitarian regimes (propaganda) and the commercial use of media (advertising) to influence the beliefs, emotions, and behaviors of large groups of people. From its inception, the discipline was focused on studying the impact of technological advances on individuals and on society. Dutch Communication Research shows that these concerns are as important and urgent today as ever before. Both at the UvA and at the VU, researchers in communication study what defines the central focus of the discipline: how are changes in the media affecting political engagement and influencing democracy? What are the psychological, societal, and ethical influences of exciting, but also potentially threatening, new developments such as robotics, artificial intelligence, machine learning, and more? How are developments in (new) media affecting young people?

Most people now use so many electronic media, often at the same time, that most of our waking lives are accompanied by media use. Understanding what media use means, and does, has become one of the most crucial questions in human existence.

Young people around the world are often more in tune with developments in the media, and with the attractions of the media than other generations, and it therefore comes as no surprise that departments of media and communication are among the most popular study choices of university students. Even students who graduate with a specialisation other than communication benefit from exposure to this discipline. According to data gathered by the National Communication Association in the United States, having studied communication helps graduates get better jobs.

2020 offered one of the most important illustrations yet of the relevance of the field of communication research. When the COVID19 virus hit the world and upended daily life for literally billions of people, it soon became evident that this was not just a medical, virological, and logistical crisis. The spreading of faulty, even harmful information, and human resistance against correct, and helpful information turned out to be one of the most important vectors through which the spread of the disease was affected. Communication researchers are working frantically to unravel the many elements at play, before this opportunity to study this terrible process in situ disappears, but it is clear that COVID19 appeared alongside a perfect storm of political and technological facilitators and catalysts, and that these are all tied to the most current developments in media platforms. In sum, studying communication is as relevant now, as it was when people worried about World Wars and totalitarian propaganda.

The Communication Departments at VU and UvA are at the cutting edge of the study of important issues in present day society. They are world leaders in their research on the impact of old and new media on the lives and development of children and adolescents, on the increasing role of robots and artificial intelligence in all aspects of private and public life, on political information and what has come to be known as “fake news”, and many other issues. The study of media and communication has never been more important, and UvA and VU are at the forefront of research and theorizing about the most relevant areas in this field.

2.2 Research Quality

While the study of media and communication has long been dominated by researchers from the United States of America, Dutch researchers have played and play a role in the field that is much bigger than the size of the population of the Netherlands would predict. Nowhere has this been more evident than



in the International Communication Association, an originally American organisation that now spans the whole world. As soon as this organisation became truly international, Dutch researchers, be they PhD students, junior faculty, or seasoned full professors, played major roles in the organisation. UvA and VU, in particular, have contributed strongly to the governance and growth of the organisation. They have been interest group chairs, division chairs, even president of the organisation. From at least the 1990s onwards, VU and UvA have been an explicit and loud voice in the internationalisation of the communication discipline.

The strengths of the two departments are obvious. In the Shanghai rankings of academic subjects, UvA ranks literally at the top of the international list of communication departments, and its smaller cousin VU is ranked in the tenth position, ahead of academic giants such as Cornell, University of Pennsylvania, and the University of Southern California. While such listings are sometimes contested, they do offer evidence of a sustained effort to create research output of the highest quality and the most consistent quantity. That VU and UvA rank among the absolute top in this field, aptly summarizes many of the findings in this report. The committee hopes that Dutch political and academic leaders are sufficiently aware of the stellar departments that UvA and VU have in place and that every effort is made to help them solidify this position, and to support them to work out the challenges that remain.

2.3 Viability of the research units

The success of both units is not a coincidence. It is the impression of the committee that it is the result of a consistent effort to strive for excellence. All researchers in these units, from PhD students to full professors, are focused on international, academic excellence. They are expected and taught to focus on aiming for the highest level of contribution to the field. This is evidenced by the consistency with which UvA and VU research appears in the top journals in the field of communication and even far beyond. Important studies have been published in top ranking medical and psychological journals. This is not just the work of a few talented people with a research topic that happens to be fashionable, but a structural strength. Members of both units aim to contribute to the field, and are willing to evolve with it. Cutting edge research about robotics and AI and debates about open science are just two examples that show that both units are fully in touch with an evolving field.

The researchers working in both units are also very successful at complementing the resources of their universities with large research grants. This is one more testament to the quality of the work, but is also evidence of a well-oiled machine that suggests high sustainability of the quality and quantity of the output, even though the committee is concerned about the funding uncertainties this brings with it, and by an over-reliance on junior staff with limited options for career advancement.

2.4 Open Science

The social sciences, and those drawing heavily on inspiration from psychology in particular, have been rocked, world-wide, by scandals involving fraud, and by what has been named the “replication crisis”. Fraud involved falsified results, while the replication issue is more often described as “sloppy science”. In its eagerness to produce results, many in the past have been a little too willing to ignore warning signs, and have inflated the importance of research results that, it now appears, were sometimes accidental outcomes of random fluctuation, or artefacts of over-zealous “p-hacking”. The few bad apples in international science have made many look with suspicion at a lot of honest researchers.

Instead of turning a blind eye to what has happened elsewhere, or resisting attempts to prevent more mishaps, both UvA and VU have been international front-runners in the Open Science movement. Open Science is an uncomfortable burden for a researcher: by being open and up-front about expectations,



data-gathering procedures and analysis plans, researchers are no longer seduced by the tendency to “massage” their theory or data until either or both produce results that they would have liked to have produced. Both VU and UvA have embraced this movement, and have not waited for outside pressure to introduce fully the implications of open science. This has been (and continues to be) important for the international communication research community. Because both units are such important players on the world stage, they have influenced key subdisciplines of the field. If communication research is part of the movement towards more open science, it is in no small measure thanks to VU and UvA and their sustained effort to be a major player in this area.

2.5 PhD Policy and Training

Both VU and UvA produce excellent researchers with strong CVs that are internationally competitive. This is one area, however, where the UvA and VU PhD students have to deal with a considerable hurdle. Because the number of academic jobs in the field of communication is limited in a country the size of the Netherlands, the PhD candidates have to deal with a lot of job insecurity. Departments as successful as VU and UvA attract growing numbers of strong PhD students, which inevitably creates a larger supply of strong people with academic ambitions than the job market demands. PhD students deserve a lot of transparency about the job market and their future options, and should be supported in their efforts to develop the skills they need to have strong options on the job market.

In part, this problem can only be solved at a policy level far above that of the departments. However, given the anxiety the job market creates, departments and their universities could explore more creative options. If a larger proportion of the PhD students were from outside of the Netherlands, the number of people with a Dutch PhD looking for jobs outside of the Netherlands may increase. Offering PhD students a better view of the international job market, and perhaps job-hunting training, may also improve this situation. One of the downsides of the success of both departments was a strong sense among PhD candidates that these are the only two departments worth considering as employers. While this reflects well on both the success of the departments as the atmosphere on the work-floor, it merits more attention.

2.6 Academic Culture

Both departments are acutely aware and conscious of the importance of a healthy work-life balance. Even though the output is strong and expectations are high, this work-balance seems to be monitored carefully, with attention to potential equity issues. Both VU and UvA have an open and collegial culture.

Nevertheless, the limited job openings keep assistant professors in rank for a longer-than usual time and keep the feeling of competition high. Burn out is a constant risk. The committee also fears that this disproportionately may burden those with care responsibilities – an issue which has been highlighted by COVID. The limited number of people at the full professor rank is problematic. Providing funding for more of these lines would provide more opportunity to build realistic succession plans and more opportunity to build in gender diversity, as well as other types of diversity that are valuable in the academy (nationality, race, religion, socioeconomic background, etc.)

2.7 Human Resources Policy

In the Dutch system, an assistant professor does not automatically have a path towards tenure, and pathways from assistant to associate and on to full professor require that new positions have to be made available, instead of depending on promotion as the result of reaching certain criteria. It is,



however, not uncommon for assistant professors to have job-stability in their position. At VU, creating tenure tracks seemed to be considered more explicitly than at UvA. This is another issue that probably needs to be addressed at higher levels of policy making and funding. However, those with aspirations to reach the next step on the employment or promotion ladder seemed to have no idea where the next opening was likely to appear and which specialisation (and, therefore, whose profile) would match upcoming opportunities. More transparency about the decision-making process and the policy decisions of the department, the faculty, or the university would probably go a long way towards dealing with this uncertainty.



3. Amsterdam School of Communication Research University of Amsterdam

3.1 Organisation, strategy and targets

The Amsterdam School of Communication Research (ASCoR) is one of the most highly respected and visible programmes in the field of communication. With approximately 75 senior researchers and 30 PhD students, it is the largest research institute of its kind in Europe and is among the largest worldwide. ASCoR is seen as an educational institution that conducts rigorous and timely communication research, produces very highly qualified doctoral students, and is cutting edge in the topics it addresses, the methods it uses, and the theories it develops. The quantity and quality of publications that come out of ASCoR is exceptionally high (averaging 150 refereed journal articles in high impact publications per year), and the number and size of the awarded competitive grants (e.g., NWO and ERC science foundation) is enviable. The people of ASCoR are, themselves, leaders in the field. As champions of particular movements, such as open science, they can and do shift what the larger field pays attention to. As leaders in academic associations, they cement ASCoR's international visibility and reputation and help shape disciplinary priorities. Most importantly, the work they do on an individual and collective level are front and center to the societal issues currently facing the Netherlands, Europe, and, indeed, the world. Research at ASCoR is carried out in four programme groups (Corporate Communication, Persuasive Communication, Political Communication & Journalism, and Youth & Media Entertainment) – each of which is distinct but all of which provide bridges leading to effective collaboration. This constellation of research groups highlights how communication as a discipline should be working to solve pressing problems – from health to education to politics. Their outreach efforts to engage with key stakeholders across a variety of domains provides an excellent model for communication scholars around the world who seek to engage with communities and make their research relevant to broad populations.

3.2 Research quality

The research produced by ASCoR is high quality and high impact. Over the years, ASCoR has taken a team-based approach to the research it conducts. The collaborations it has established within and across disciplines create opportunity for increased innovation, reach, and impact. ASCoR scholarly pursuits reflect a strong coherence: it prioritizes understanding the differential way people use media content and communicate through media, and stresses the cognitive, affective, and emotional processes that underlie media use and its effects. ASCoR scholars were at the forefront of establishing the theoretical foundation of the differential effects of media model. Moreover, ASCoR scholars investigate communication process within and across a variety of levels: individual, group, institutional, and societal. It is not surprising, then, that ASCoR members – both junior and senior – have won more than 100 awards in the 2014-2019 period, and many significant research grants to fund their work. ASCoR researchers are editors and editorial board members of prestigious journals, and leaders within national and international academic associations.

The research output, as noted above, has been prolific and publications are in influential journals that have broad reach and impact. ASCoR has been substantially affected by budget cuts over the past few years. Despite this, they have remained leaders in developing new concepts, theories, and methods that are necessary to understanding the rapidly changing media technologies, platforms, and affordances. They are leaders in developing new concepts, theories, and methods that are necessary to



understanding the rapidly changing media technologies, platforms, and affordances. As host of RPA Communication, the Digital Communication Methods Lab was launched in 2018, with a focus on expanding digital communication research in ASCoR – including mobile communication and artificial intelligence (AI) – two of the least understood and most important technologies in the current media landscape. The lab has been cutting edge in how it uses these technologies as both objects of research and tools for research. ASCoR has also been involved with a second RPA, Information, Communication, and the Data Society and has leveraged this collaboration to develop young talent and significant research infrastructure. They have worked to share the fruits of this project through its organisation of scientific conferences, symposia, colloquia, and workshops – including outreach to health communication practices in the Netherlands. More recently, ASCoR has been centrally involved in other university-wide RPAs focused on humane AI, urban mental health, and European studies. These are incredibly relevant topics on which to focus the talents of ASCoR staff, and it is clear the centrality of communication to these interdisciplinary activities.

The academic culture of ASCoR likely contributes to the tremendous productivity of its members. Although at all levels so-called work/life balance is stressed, and at all levels there is high collegiality, it is also an intensely competitive place. PhD candidates work hard to gain post-docs, assistant professor positions, or teaching contracts. Those with teaching contracts work hard to become assistant professors, and even assistant professors feel they cannot stop producing at an extraordinarily high level because if and when the rare associate professor position opens up, they want to have the best possible CV to be considered for that coveted job. Similarly, those who are associate professors do not have a clear path to becoming full professors, particularly as those lines are the rarest of all. This likely has implications for the ability of ASCoR to diversify, and the lack of diversity at the senior and management levels has implications for the texture and future of the research programme. As will be noted below, diversity matters for viability.

3.3 Societal relevance

It is often the case that academic research is read only amongst those in the scholarly community, in part because we are neither trained nor rewarded for performing outreach to those who would be affected by or benefit most from the knowledge gained by our studies. At ASCoR, it is clear that tremendous efforts have been made to build connections with key stakeholders outside of the academy, such as policy makers, parents, educators, and business. Moreover, ASCoR scholars contribute to the broader public discourse about critically important issues through their intentional engagement with the media. The committee was impressed by the efforts made to train scholars on how to make their research relevant, how to talk with reporters, and how to track their community engagement.

An element of efforts to bring down the walls of the “ivory tower” of academia can be seen in ASCoR’s commitment to open science. In principle, open science means transparency in the research process such that those outside of the immediate research team can see whether the team went into the project with a particular set of hypotheses and how the data led to a particular set of conclusions. ASCoR’s commitment is evident in its appointment of an Open Science Coordinator, who can help train and facilitate the processes involved in scientific transparency. Moreover, adjacent to this notion of open science is open access, allowing all potential audiences access to scientific research by bringing down the “paywall” that prohibits non-academics from reading original research. This commitment to open access can be seen, for example, in the fact that all journal articles are published as open access (a substantial and laudable financial commitment). In addition, ASCoR published an open access book with a very well-regarded academic publisher, Yale University Press. The book, “Plugged in”, reviews research



about media effects on youth that is relevant for a broad swath of audiences, and offers guidelines that are meaningful to parents, educators, and policymakers.

ASCoR's research has also been at the forefront of societal needs, and has been influential in policymaking. For example, research on how to disclose online sponsored content for minors resulted in a discussion in the Dutch Parliament to take action to protect minors from unwitting persuasion online. This research, moreover, informed the US Federal Trade Commission's thinking on online disclosure of sponsored videos. ASCoR researchers have also partnered with the Ministry of Health, Welfare, and Sport, the Trimbos Institute, and the Dutch Cancer Society.

ASCoR's research has been influential in the commercial sector, too. Researchers work in close collaboration with the Foundation for Scientific Research of Commercial Communication and this collaboration has opened up opportunities for interacting with approximately 200 corporate sponsors; including advertisers, media agencies, and PR companies. ASCoR researchers translate research into guidelines and strategies for industry professionals, and their work has been made available through multiple platforms, including blogs, an event for practitioners, and a book.

A final "outward" facing research area that has great societal relevance has been research on media and communication effects in the political arena. Researchers with the Hot Politics project, which looks at the role of emotions in political thinking and behavior, has led to participation in public events, school visits, media appearances and an outreach award. The Political Communication and Journalism group organized an event called "CPC University", right before the Dutch general elections, for 150 secondary students to introduce them to the role of media during elections.

The depth and breadth of partnerships that ASCoR has developed, and the variety of ways their research speaks to pressing community needs, has provided valuable opportunities to give societal recognition and significance of the people and the projects that make up ASCoR. ASCoR researchers do not shy away from engaging communities with their work, nor do they shy away from giving their time for interviews, events, and advisory boards, to name a few.

3.4 Viability

The leadership of ASCoR strives to maintain its research integrity, visibility, productivity, and engagement while also maintaining its current size and structure. The programme has proven itself to be adaptable to changing funding streams. Over the years, as direct funding has decreased, research grants and contract research has increased proportionately. The current and future research foci of ASCoR are forward looking and will continue to meet the needs of the many communities – from educators to policymakers to businesses to health care providers. At the moment, the funding climate is uncertain, particularly given the economic instabilities facing the world. However, ASCoR has the infrastructure that is needed in terms of its tools, techniques, relationships, and a deep bench of scholars to continue to contribute to society's challenges and opportunities with communication science.

It would be valuable to consider whether new structures can be established for junior staff to be promoted to senior staff levels within ASCoR or to find positions of influence in other academic institutions, non-profit organisations, or media industries. The very real and very hard ceiling that assistant professors come up against presents challenges to staff morale and the potential for burnout for those who feel they cannot stop working 110% to "prove themselves" worthy for the one or two spots that might occasionally open. ASCoR is the premier communication science programme in the Netherlands and potentially all of Europe – many who come to ASCoR as PhD candidates would like to remain, and those who come as assistant professors are willing to stay in that position much longer than



is typical at most universities. Some expressed an interest in paid time to spend away from ASCoR at other institutions (what the US calls “sabbatical leave” and is often granted to junior professors before and after tenure). They point out that the benefits of this would be to highlight for junior staff opportunities within other interesting spaces, as well as expose ASCoR to novel ways of thinking about research and models for academic career development. The committee recognizes that much of the structure, funding, and policies regarding these pathways and opportunities may lie beyond the (formal) authority of the research school. The committee would encourage ASCoR to continue to engage with those institutions to actively seek change.

3.5 PhD policy and programme

The ASCoR PhD programme is doing quite well and is something the management is proud of. The UvA has a quite large PhD programme, with around 30 candidates. As of now, PhD’s are almost 20% of the research staff. The PhD programme exists as a combination of training on research, reflection on their research and social scientific and communication research, and hands-on research and teaching. The programme is set up to prepare candidates for an academic career or a career outside of academia (such as in applied research).

PhD’s are required to do some teaching during the programme, and also participate in a couple of courses. The coursework in the PhD Training Programme is limited to only 9 EC. One required course, “Introduction to a PhD in Communication Science”, is 6 EC; the remaining credits may be used for coursework that fits the student’s particular needs. Next to these courses, PhD’s participate in a bi-weekly PhD Club, in which research is discussed. Candidates meet with their supervision team at least once every two weeks. This team typically consists of 2-3 researchers, including at least one full professor. Support for conference travel and data collection is available to all PhD’s. PhD’s report feeling supported in their first encounters with teaching, especially now that most teaching is online.

Within two months after the start of their PhD, PhD candidates hand in a Training and Supervision Plan, in which they describe their project, as well as agreements on supervision team meeting frequency, coursework, first-year paper topic and deadline, and a publication plan. This first-year paper is one that candidates write within eight months of the project. This paper and a progress report are assessed and must be deemed sufficient to continue the project. Candidates then have annual review assessments with their Programme Group Director or Department Chair. Multiple times each year, candidates submit a progress portfolio, including deadlines, publication output, a work plan, list of completed courses, and statement of feasibility.

The management states the importance of open communication and formal agreement with regard to expectations (both of the supervisor and the PhD candidate), working in supervision teams with at least two supervisors, PhD’s supporting and helping each other in PhD clubs, and to have scaffolding and support in place for when/if issues arise (such as confidential counsellors). The programme seems well set-up and PhD’s are satisfied. Some note that to further improve open communication between PhD’s and supervisors, ASCoR could include mechanisms for more formal evaluation of the supervision. While for some PhD’s this was part of the first progress report, for others this was less clear.

Generally, the PhD programme is for three years, with a two-month extension to be able to do 10% teaching. Although most PhD’s complete their dissertation within the given timeframe, it was stated that a longer timeframe would allow candidates to spend more time learning new methods and to do more coursework beyond the mandatory 9EC. Besides, more attention to topics, such as programming in R instead of SPSS, could be a good addition to offerings available to the PhDs.



PhD candidates choose two representatives to represent them with ASCoR management and the board. At least twice a year, a PhD candidates meeting is held. PhD representatives also coordinate the introduction of new PhD's. Two confidential advisors are available to discuss problems that PhD's cannot solve with their supervisors, and the UvA has a psychologist that can offer tailored help.

There seems to be a great sense of community, PhDs like working at ASCoR. Even though they know there are limited career possibilities within ASCoR (where many desire to continue), meaning that they are aiming for the same job, they report that it does not feel that competitive. Work-life balance is often discussed and although doing a PhD can be stressful, candidates feel supported and balanced.

Most ASCoR alumni stayed in academia, but some also work in the profit and not-for-profit sector. ASCoR has a strong focus on the professionalization of the career guidance of PhDs. To do so, they intensified their relationship with Pro-Actief, a UvA-organisation that provides career guidance, and they organize an annual PhD Career Event. Career plans are also part of the annual review talks. Candidates feel prepared for a future within or outside of academia. Supervisors are open and supportive of their supervisees' career plans.

3.6 Conclusions and recommendations

By and large, students, staff, and management feel well-supported in the work they do, and feel they have the tools and funding they need to collaborate, innovate, travel (when possible), and respond to developments in the field (including the issues raised by the health, economic, and political crises). However, three concrete suggestions were made that might enhance the viability to ASCoR's mission going forward.

First, the PhD programme has been streamlined. Most entrants have a research masters and PhD candidates engage in minimal classwork. Students are mentored carefully and connected to projects with large teams with broad expertise that can be passed on to them. There is a sense among PhD candidates that providing more time and space to learn new statistical approaches or additional methodological skills could be beneficial for their development. Providing this opportunity may benefit the programme as well, since new expertise may be added to the work of ASCoR, along with increased reputation with well-trained PhDs entering the market.

Second, it is critical that the pool of talent that is so evident among the junior staff be mentored, recognized, and rewarded with clear (and clearly communicated) paths to promotion. More financial resources should be directed to ASCoR to support promotion from assistant to associate, as well as from associate to full professor. It is particularly important to create these pathways to achieve ASCoR's stated goal of diversifying its senior staff and management. Structural barriers exist which must be recognized – from the extra burden of care that may disproportionately affect some more than others during a pandemic to the collaborative networks that may unintentionally overlook talent because that individual is someone whose questions might be a bit different from ASCoR's usual research paradigm. Diversity matters not only for “window dressing” but for setting a more inclusive scholarly agenda, creating role models for students and junior staff, and for positioning ASCoR as a truly international center that does meaningful work that reflects the diverse needs of society and advances a more equitable discipline.

Finally, many ASCoR researchers need access to cutting edge computer and other technical devices in order to carry out their work. It appears that the lack of ASCoR dedicated personnel to facilitate troubleshooting, accessing, and utilizing these tools presents problems for junior and senior staff alike.



4. Department of Communication Science, VU University

4.1 Organisation, strategy and targets

The unit being assessed is the research programme Communication Choices, Content and Consequences (CCCC), housed in the Department of Communication Science at Vrije Universiteit (VU) Amsterdam. The CCCC research programme is institutionally embedded in the Faculty of Social Sciences (FSS), which is jointly responsible (along with the department's management team) for the scholarly activities and institutional resources governing individual researchers.

CCCC is comprised of three research groups, each one chaired by a professor in the department—Media Monitoring (political communication and computational communication methods), Media Psychology (particularly effects of media and newer media technologies), and Social Media (especially in the organisational context). Together, the groups study a variety of research topics that span the spectrum of media-related communication science—from media choices made by consumers to social and psychological effects of consuming media. For all three areas, there is a clear focus on digital media as well as new media technologies (e.g., social media, virtual worlds, robots). Across the three areas, there is a growing emphasis on developing innovative methodologies. The focus on methodologies, especially in computational communication research, social media analytics, statistics, and neuroscientific approaches, is part of the unit's unique strategic positioning.

Strategic aims of CCCC include the conduct of cutting-edge, interdisciplinary research that is both fundamental and relevant to society, publication of its research in highly ranked international journals, active contribution to national and international academic conferences as well as public debates, stimulating open science practices in the conduct of research, obtaining substantial grant funding for research, high-quality training and supervision of PhD candidates, implementing policies for enhancing research integrity and stimulating diversity, and strengthening ties with VU's Institute for Social Resilience (ISR).

4.2 Research quality

CCCC researchers have published over 30 refereed articles per year during the period under assessment, with a high of 70 in 2015. Several of these are agenda-setting publications in premier outlets such as *Nature Communications*, *Journal of Communication*, *New Media & Society*, and *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*. Some of them have already garnered a lot of citations, indicating the strong impact they are having on the field. For example, a 2015 article on social media use and corporate reputation has already received nearly 500 citations.

The unit's researchers have also been at the forefront of promoting open science practices in the discipline by editing a special issue on publication bias for the field's premier methodological journal as well as publishing an article on open computational science and generally fostering an academic culture centred around open science.

The unit has shown an upward trajectory in the number of research grants obtained over the last five years, including several competitive NWO grants such as VENI and some large consortium grants. However, no ERC grants have been obtained. When it comes to grant writing, there is a supportive and collegial culture. Several important measures to foster the acquisition of grants are in place at both departmental and FSS levels.



Several researchers in the unit have been recognised for their scientific excellence in the form of awards, membership on editorial boards of prestigious international journals, invitations to serve on grant panels and present their research at other universities and forums.

By any measure, the quality and quantity of research output and practices by this unit is outstanding. As one indicator of this excellence, the programme ranks #10 in “Communication” in 2020 Shanghai ranking, which is impressive given the size of the programme and the considerably high teaching and administration loads.

4.3 Societal relevance

All three groups in the CCCC programme have been quite active in reaching out to public stakeholders and finding societal applications for their research. For example, robotics-related research from the Media Psychology group has stimulated the use of social robots for healthcare and educational applications. Tools developed by the Media Monitoring group have been used to guide voters in elections. The Social Media group has partnered with a blood donation institution to design social media campaigns for stimulating donors. Faculty members from the three groups have made numerous media appearances and shared their expertise on a wide variety of topics of public interest. They have also consulted extensively with governmental entities and collaborated with non-profit agencies in bringing the products of basic scientific research to the masses.

Admirably, the programme has formalised its societal outreach activities through a dedicated unit established in 2019. Named SIM (Societal Impact of Media) lab, it aims to reach out to target groups in society that are particularly likely to benefit from current developments in media technology. It has five branches: 1) Digital traces: Big Data and Computational Methods; 2) The Internet and Social Media; 3) Social Robotics and Artificial Intelligence; 4) Virtual and Mixed Reality Applications; and 5) Communication as Experience. Within each of these branches, collaborations are ongoing with societal partners such as Hogeschool van Amsterdam, Amsterdam Sustainability Institute, Deloitte, Wilhelmina Kinderziekenhuis, VIVA eldercare, Eating Disorder Clinic Ursula, and KLM. In addition to benefiting a wide variety of community partners, the SIM-lab embodies the spirit of Open Science by operating according to the principles of Open Science in making research data available for reuse, allowing detailed insights and reproducibility of analyses, and open access publications for a wide audience.

Again, given the modest size of the programme, the impact that the researchers in this programme are having on society is clearly head and shoulders above any comparable programme.

4.4 Viability

As part of its future strategy, the programme aspires to strengthen its already strong track record of cross-disciplinary research, with emphasis on quality and open science, enhance its grant acquisition efforts with greater emphasis on team science, and improve academic culture and diversity in its ranks.

As evident in the interviews conducted as part of this assessment, there is an abundance of talent and good energy in the programme to be able to comfortably achieve its research goals for the next five years. There appears to be strong support from University administration for the programme, with several mechanisms in place to improve work culture and foster academic excellence. In general, a major change in culture is afoot at VU, with a positive emphasis on transparency in decision-making at all levels. PhD candidates reported getting a great deal of support from their supervisors as well as the FSS. The ready availability of confidential counsellors and the inculcation of sound scientific practices through mandatory modules are sound strategies for building a better academic culture. Junior faculty



reported seeing improvements in the transparency surrounding tenure criteria, promotion procedures and career development. They said that “it’s a system in adjustment,” but felt that they could grow as an independent scholar. In particular, they noted the healthy culture of grantsmanship in the programme, with a good buddy system among junior faculty and dedicated mentoring by certain members of the senior faculty. Overall, the programme seems to be driven by an admirable culture of collegiality and generosity among researchers at all levels.

To be sure, the unit has its set of challenges to overcome in the years to come. The number, quality and time to completion of PhD candidates have all been in a state of flux in recent years, attributable in part to the dependence on uncertain grants for funding them. Securing more reliable sources of financial support, perhaps from central FSS/VU resources, is important to ensure stability. Another major issue is the lack of gender and ethnic diversity among researchers, especially at the middle and senior levels. While all those interviewed acknowledged this to be a problem, there appears to be no urgent measures to resolve it. The programme has a longer-term outlook, premised mostly on tenure and promotion of current female assistant professors down the road, but no immediate plans. On this one aspect, the programme seems to be at odds with the kind of determination and resilience it has shown for overcoming the many other challenges that it has successfully addressed, such as obtaining grants, publishing interdisciplinary research, distinguishing itself from another strong communication programme in the same city and responding to societal needs.

4.5 PhD policy and programme

In 2019, a total of 17 PhD candidates were enrolled in the CCCC programme. It is part of the Graduate School of Social Sciences (GSSS), which offers an extensive training programme for PhD’s. Candidates have to follow at least 30 EC from this interdisciplinary programme, including some obligatory courses such as on research integrity. Further (research) training happens in seminars, summer/winter schools, workshops and (informal) meetings that are being organized for PhD’s. Preparation for the job market, including perspectives of pursuing a career outside of academia, is part of the training programme.

The quality and progress of the research project is evaluated in confidential annual progress reports. PhD’s are part of a departmental PhD-club to discuss papers, presentations, and academic skills. There is funding available for conference visits. After eight months, the candidate has to submit a Go/NoGo product (including budget, proposal, training plan, and study planning), which is evaluated by peers.

Overall, the PhD candidates are very satisfied with the programme, which offers good training possibilities and great flexibility. The supervision team and meeting frequency are tailored and based on each candidate’s unique needs. Most PhD candidates work within the different groups of the CCCC programme, but also feel connected with their peers in the other groups. The graduate school as well as the department organize various activities for their social and academic development.

The coursework is at least 30 EC, with lots of space for individual input and preferences. PhD candidates can propose a course, and even if it is only for one candidate, courses are being developed. PhD’s can follow courses at other institutes. This encourages PhD candidates to fully dive into topics of their personal interest and to have the freedom to take the time to learn new methods.

PhD projects are generally planned for 4 years, but PhD candidates are given the possibility to spread this over 5 years and gain more teaching experience in the process. During this time, they can also work on gaining a university teaching qualification.

Although there is great flexibility within the projects and PhD candidates are enthusiastic about the programme, there seem to be some difficulties in stimulating PhD candidates to finalize their



dissertation on time. This is part of the future strategy, but more concrete plans are still needed. Another point of improvement noted by PhD candidates whom the committee interviewed is increasing transparency and communication. Regulations change quickly, and there are many parties involved at the University and department levels, which sometimes makes it difficult to keep up. Therefore, it would be even better if changes in policy and regulations were communicated more clearly and promptly.

4.6 Conclusions and recommendations

Overall, the committee finds the performance of the CCC research programme during the evaluation period to be excellent. The programme is characterized by strong research productivity, international recognition, societal impact, leadership in open science practices, sound PhD policies, academic liberty, as well as a healthy and collegial academic culture. The research programme is coherent, productive, well-organized, and successful. Strengths and weaknesses are well-reflected by the programme's leadership.

The committee recommends the establishment of additional measures to support diversity among researchers, especially with respect to gender. Currently, all associate professors are male, and there is only one female full professor. The unit is strongly encouraged to address this under-representation of women with aggressive measures such as additional support for female assistant professors to achieve tenure and promotion, a more nuanced discussion about the role of gender when filling new positions, and in particular, a clearly articulated plan for achieving gender representation in the mid- and long run. Female hires from outside the programme are encouraged. A deeper reflection about the situation of female researchers during the COVID-19 pandemic is also encouraged.

The committee also encourages further strengthening grant activities and grant support, especially with respect to ERC and Horizon Europe grants. Successful measures are already in place (i.e., a departmental coaching system and grant staff at the faculty level), but the teaching and administrative loads are high by international standards. The programme may consider additional grant writing support in terms of time, especially at the level of assistant professors (i.e., more grant preparation time), but also with respect to senior professors who supervise grant writing activities by junior faculty.

The committee noted issues of transparency surrounding tenure criteria, promotion procedures, and career development. The committee encourages the programme to increase transparency and communication, especially with regard to junior staff. Although there have been significant improvements during the evaluation period, several faculty members referred to a rather inflexible "pyramid" in the personnel structure. The committee recommends that all faculty members who meet the criteria for tenure and promotion should be moved up the ranks instead of having to wait around for vacancies caused by retirements. This will serve to enhance morale and retention of junior faculty members and foster a more nurturing and stable environment for the entire unit in the long run.

Finally, the review committee noted that there are some difficulties in ensuring that PhD candidates finish their dissertations. Although the PhD programme is positively evaluated, the committee encourages the unit to proactively develop strategies for increasing retention of PhD candidates and timely completion of their dissertations.



Appendix A - Programme of the site visit

Wednesday January 27

Time	Part
15.00 - 15.30	introduction
15.30 - 16.00	Welcome to committee
16.00 - 18.00	Committee meeting

Thursday January 28

Time	Part
13.00 - 13.30	preparatory meeting UvA
13.30 - 14.10	management
14.10 - 14.20	evaluation/break
14.20 - 14.55	junior staff
14.55 - 15.20	evaluation/break
15.50 - 16.00	evaluation/break
16.00 - 16.35	senior staff
16.35 - 17.30	break
17.30 - 17.50	reflections + preparing questions management
17.50 - 18.20	management
18.20 - 20.00	committee evaluation UvA

Friday January 29

Time	Part
13.00 - 13.30	preparatory meeting VU
13.30 - 14.10	management
14.10 - 14.20	evaluation/break
14.20 - 14.55	junior staff
14.55 - 15.20	evaluation/break
15.50 - 16.00	evaluation/break
16.00 - 16.35	senior staff
16.35 - 17.30	break
17.30 - 17.50	reflections + preparing questions management
17.50 - 18.20	management
18.20 - 20.00	committee evaluation VU



Appendix B- Quantitative data

Table 1 Research staff in fte - UvA

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Full professor	3.6	4.5	5.1	4.4	4.0	4.3
Associate professor	3.3	4.0	4.4	5.1	5.0	4.5
Assistant professor	13.5	12.1	14.3	16.0	19.1	17.6
Post-docs	6.8	6.6	4.4	6.8	9.4	11.6
PhD students	28.5	28.7	20.9	19.4	19.1	17.4
Total research staff	65.1	56.3	49.5	51.7	56.6	55.3
Support staff	6.7	5.2	3.6	3.4	6.1	4.5
Total staff	62.8	61.5	53.1	55.0	62.7	59.9

Table 2 Funding – UvA

	2014		2015		2016		2017		2018		2019	
<i>Funding in M€/ %fte</i>	M€	%	M€	%								
Direct funding	5.07	59	5.09	63	4.28	72	4.91	65	4.94	59	4.30	55
Research grants	0.78	22	0.98	20	0.40	15	0.69	15	0.86	20	1.16	23
Contract research	1.01	15	1.16	16	0.71	10	1.00	18	1.21	19	2.01	21
Other	0.08	3	0.25	2	0.29	2	0.15	2	0.07	2	0.45	1
Total funding	100	7.50	100	5.70	100	6.80	100	7.10	100	7.90	100	
<i>Expenditure in M€/ %</i>	M€	%	M€	%								
Personnel costs	4.73	66	4.26	58	4.08	65	4.43	64%	4.90	67	5.19	65
Other costs	2.44	34	3.09	42	2.19	35%	2.45	36	2.43	33	2.81	35
Total expenditure	7.2	100	7.3	100	6.3	100	6.9	100	7.3	100	8.0	100

Table 3 Research staff in fte - VU

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Full professor	0.95	0.90	0.90	0.85	0.85	0.85
Associate professor	1.65	1.89	1.80	2.98	2.43	2.25
Assistant professor	4.58	4.25	3.76	2.43	2.02	1.95
Post-docs		0.20	0.32	0.18	0.72	1.05
PhD-candidates	7.20	5.30	2.70	1.90	2.78	3.93
Visiting Fellow	0.08	0.08	0.08			
Total research staff	14.38	12.62	9.56	8.34	8.80	10.03

Table 4 Funding – VU

	2014		2015		2016		2017		2018		2019	
<i>Funding in FTE/ %</i>	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Direct funding	6.23	43	7.28	58	6.76	71	5.86	70	5.11	58	4.76	48
Research grants	5.30	37	3.69	29	2.52	26	2.01	24	3.65	41	4.92	49
Contract research	2.85	20	1.65	13	0.28	3	0.47	6	0.04	1	0.35	3
Total funding	14.38	12.62	9.56	8.34	8.80	10.03						

