

Generating a communicative perspective with “Ferment in the Field”

Generando una perspectiva comunicativa

con “*Ferment in the Field*”

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From an analysis of the fundamental volume in the field of communication research “Ferment in the Field” (1983), we have obtained ideas, that is, perspectives, functions, objectives and objects of study from which to develop communication research, ideas that transcend the conception of communication and of media as isolated elements, allowing the development of a communicative perspective aimed at generating more democratic environments.

KEYWORDS: Epistemology, Ferment in the Field, history of communication research, communication meta-research, communication theory.

A partir de un análisis del volumen fundamental en el campo de la investigación en comunicación “Ferment in the Field” (1983), se aportan ideas, esto es, perspectivas, funciones, objetivos y objetos de estudio para desarrollar investigación en comunicación. Se identifican en el volumen citado herramientas conceptuales y procedimentales para trascender la concepción de la comunicación y de los medios de comunicación como elementos aislados y desarrollar una perspectiva comunicativa orientada a generar entornos más democráticos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Epistemología, Ferment in the Field, historia de la investigación en comunicación, metainvestigación en comunicación, teoría de la comunicación.

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INTRODUCTION

The scientific field of communication can serve different sectors of society, but it is a field to be built intellectually (Lacasa-Mas, 2017; Peters, 1986) that faces shortcomings at the epistemological, theoretical and methodological levels. From an epistemological point of view, despite the need for research aimed at social change, the so-called administrative research predominates, meaning a research that obviates evaluating the assumptions and concepts from which is generated, motivating the lack of a critical investigation, that is, of a deep investigation (Sjøvaag & Moe, 2009, p. 136) that seeks alternative paths, going further from what we can see with our eyes, imagining a more desirable world (Carey in Bermejo, 2009, p. 5).

By not questioning epistemological hegemonies, a standardization of communication research is generated (Martínez Nicolás et al., 2019). Furthermore, the field of communication research suffers now a lack of intellectual memory whose paradigmatic example is the volume of the *Journal of Communication* entitled “Ferments in the Field” (2018), published commemorating the 35 years of the volume “Ferment in the Field” (1983). This commemorative volume is characterized by its welcome to an interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary approach and by the omission regarding the endeavor for building a discipline and also apropos of the debate between critical and applied research, present throughout the original volume (Pooley, 2020).

Regarding the methodological dimension of the field of communication, most of research is focused on conducting media content analyses in the study of journalistic discourses and of other media products (Martínez Nicolás, 2020, p. 414). There is also an abundance of investigations exploring or only celebrating the “magic” of tools and/or consequences of the use of technologies, such as that children can do many things at the same time (Gripsrud in Sjøvaag & Moe, 2009, p. 135).

In a context where the field of communication research has intellectual deficiencies (Lacasa-Mas, 2017; Peters, 1986), meta-research can be a valuable device not only to (re)construct the scientific field for being useful to the society as other scientific fields are, but to present itself as worthy to be funded.

Conducting meta-research means inquiring about the investigation carried out within different scientific domains and it can present different modalities and objectives.² Therefore, meta-research in communication can have several aims, such as studying the authors’ profiles and their professional practices (Lazcano Peña & Reyes Lillo, 2020; Martínez Nicolás & Carrasco Campos, 2018), analyzing the influence of contexts on scientific production (Berkas, 2014; Fuentes Navarro, 2011, 2017; Gaitán et al., 2018; Lozano, 2017; Martínez Nicolás, 2020; Martínez Nicolás et al., 2019; Soriano, 2008, 2017), or identifying the perspectives from which inquiry is performed, the methods used and the objects of study addressed (Anderson & Middleton, 2015; Bermejo Berros, 2014; Berrio, 1998; Bryant & Miron, 2004; Cáceres & Caffarel, 1992; García Jiménez, 2007; Jones, 1998; Martínez Nicolás, 2001, 2009; Martínez Nicolás & Saperas, 2011, 2016; Potter et al., 1993; Rogers & Dearing, 1988).

In this last line of inquiry is situated this work that conducts a meta-research close to meta-theory (Ritzer, 1991) that we name *meta-research of ideas* (Gómez-Diago, 2020) because it is intended on identifying ideas, that is, perspectives, concepts and procedures that define the field of communication research. This is the type of meta-research demanded by Rogers and Dearing (1988) for the Agenda Setting studies instead of more empirical works, and it is a necessary meta-research in a context in which communication research is lacking epistemological, theoretical and methodological institutionalization.

² In another work (Gómez-Diago, 2019) underpinned on the analysis of meta-research in communication carried out by Spanish authors most cited in Google scholar, eight types of meta-research were proposed: 1) reviews of theories and methods; 2) analysis of theory and research methods applied to specific areas of the field; 3) analysis of academic production; 4) analysis of Spanish scientific journals; 5) evaluation of research tools and/or instruments; 6) reviews of lines of inquiry within the field; 7) effects of social conditions on production; 8) proposal of conceptual tools.

SEEKING FOR A “SOUL” FOR THE FIELD:
“FERMENT IN THE FIELD”

Nordenstreng (2007, p. 212) placed the volume “Ferment in the Field” (1983) within what he calls the fourth “ferment”,³ a time when left-wing perspectives were challenged by the growing commercialization of the media and culture. The scholar considers “Ferment in the Field” as indispensable for seeking a “soul” to lead communication research.

At a time when communication research has shortcomings at the epistemological, theoretical and methodological dimensions, a review of “Ferment in the Field” has supplied perspectives, functions and objectives and objects which can function as scaffolding on which this field can be (re)built. “Ferment in the Field” is an essential volume within the field of communication research for several reasons. First of all, it is a volume specialized in meta-research. In this sense, in words of the editors, Gerbner and Siefert (1983), scholars were asked to contribute to the volume with their perspectives regarding their relationship with science, society and politics. Secondly, it is an international volume because, although most of the authors are North American (18) and British (6), the volume includes articles written by authors with German, Hungarian, Italian, Norwegian, Russian, Swedish and North American-Vietnamese nationalities. Third, it is a recognized volume. In this sense, Google and Google Scholar returned 593 000 and 1 350 results⁴ respectively for “Ferment in the Field” and it is a volume also included in different chronologies of communication research, such as the proposed by Baran and Davis (2013).

Most of the articles included in “Ferment in the Field” emphasize the need to utilize a critical perspective understood as a diverse and

³ Nordenstreng (2004, p. 7) places six “ferments” in communication research: in the first (1950s) the left is invisible; in the second ferment (1960s) the left is on the offensive; in the third ferment (1970) the left establishes itself; in the four ferment (1980) the left is challenged, in the fifth ferment (1990) the left is co-opted; and the in the sixth ferment (2000) Nordenstreng asks himself “Is the left returning?”

⁴ Searches were carried out in July 2020.

innovative theory that highlights aspects that are absent in behavioral administrative research, a perspective that welcomes subjective commitments, making visible academic conflicts previously hidden, to articulate and debate them (Real, 1986, pp. 74, 76, 77).

Gripsrud (in Sjøvaag & Moe, 2009, p. 132) expresses that when the “Ferment in the Field” appeared in Norway, the humanities became interested in communication studies, having therefore this volume a relevant role in the turn that took place towards critical theory and qualitative methodology. This motivated a recognition of the virtues of these methodologies for analysis, provoking the broaden of the field at a time when scholars like him were arguing with those called “number crunchers” in the United States, that is, with “data crushers”. Surprisingly or not “data grinders” with which Gripsrud (in Sjøvaag & Moe, 2009, p. 132) discussed in the eighties, occupy now most of the academic journals, in which quantitative research prevails (Martínez Nicolás et al., 2019, p. 37), accompanied by the utilization of diverse technologies frequently used as methods.

AIMS AND METHOD OF THE INVESTIGATION

The ideas obtained from the distillation of “Ferment in the Field” address four fundamental issues: 1) Perspectives that motivate communication research; 2) Functions that communication research can fulfill; 3) Objectives that communication research can undertake; and 4) Objects that can be accomplished by communication research.

This work is a development and continuation of an initial project (Gómez-Diago, 2016) consisting on the distillation of “Ferment in the Field”, and four more volumes also focused and specialized on meta-research in communication.⁵ The volumes were analyzed through a qualitative content analysis, aimed at empirically interpreting the

⁵ The three volumes of the *Journal of Communication* were analyzed: “Ferment in the Field”, 33(3), 1983; “The Future of the Field. Between Fragmentation and Cohesion”, 43(3), 1993; and “Intersections”, 58(4), 2008; and also volumes 1 and 2 of *Rethinking Communication*: “Paradigm Issues” and “Paradigm Exemplars”.

content of texts through systematic classification and coding processes, identifying themes or patterns (Mayring, 2014), consistencies and meanings (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009).

A summarizing content analysis was carried out (Flick, 2009, p. 318), involving several readings of the volumes. First, all the articles were read, obtaining the main ideas. Second, by grouping ideas referring to similar issues, the categories used to analyze the volumes emerged. With these categories, which were polished, we built an analytic framework to conduct meta-research which is composed by fifteen categories organized into six areas: 1) Conception of communication; 2) Heuristic purpose of communication research; 3) Approaches to communication research; 4) Conceptual tools for communication research; 5) The practice of communication research; and 6) Evaluation of communication research.

This work addresses the categories: “Functions”, “Objectives” and “Objects” (area 2: Heuristic purpose of communication research), and “Perspectives to investigate in communication” (area 3: Approaches to Investigate in communication).

PERSPECTIVES, FUNCTIONS, OBJECTIVES AND OBJECTS FOR COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

Attaining a deeper understanding of a field of research involves identifying the perspectives, functions, objectives and objects of study from which that field emerges. Perspectives are linked to how scholars understand research, functions refer to the role or roles that research can have in society and objectives are actions aimed at getting the field achieving certain functions in society. Another fundamental aspect that defines scientific fields and that is addressed on this distillation of “Ferment in the Field” are the objects of research, related to the construction of research problems.

Perspectives for communication research

Research perspectives determine objectives and methods. “Ferment in the Field” contains proposals to investigate by understanding media as elements that make up society instead of as isolated elements,

conception that has been inspiring experiments such as those carried out by Hovland (in Rogers & Kincaid, 1981),⁶ where participants were prohibited from interacting with each other as they do in their daily lives.

Halloran (1983) proposes the sociological perspective for generating a view to study the relationship of media with other institutions. In the same line, Daryl and Allor (1983) defend the need for a critical perspective that links epistemology and politics to understand the sender, the receiver and the message as indissoluble elements in the communication process, permitting to study media and communication processes in relation to other social institutions such as the state or the family.

Also interested in displacing the media from a position of centrality and in approaching them in relation to other institutions, Carey (1983) suggests cultural studies’s approach which consists, according to the researcher, on studying mass media as integrated elements in a social, economic and political context, rather than studying an isolated problem –such as violence or pornography–; an isolated institution –such as politics or the family–; or an isolated practice –such as cinema, conversation or advertising–.

Mosco (1983) also addresses communication as part of a social system that he considers defined by social struggle, and the scholar proposes to conduct critical research aimed at transforming social relations. According to Mosco, critical research differs from positivist

⁶ Rogers and Kincaid (1981, pp. 36-37) place a Hovland experiment on the credibility of sources as the best-known communication experiment carried out at Yale University, becoming the model for research on the mechanisms involved in persuasion. In this experiment, a communication variable, a characteristic of the source, was isolated while experimentally controlling the effect of all other variables. The basic linear model (source-message-channel-receiver) of the communication process was followed in an attempt to simulate the main elements of mass communication and persuasion, and interpersonal communication between subjects in each experimental group was prohibited, preventing the credibility variable from varying in effects through the interaction between the participants.

research not in the use of an empirical method but in the concern for achieving the emancipation of the citizens, focusing on the transformation of social relations.

Functions for communication research

It is mainstream to identify functions for communication research to contribute consciously and with solvency to the achievement of objectives in the society in which it is performed.

While Balle and Cappe de Baillon (1983) claim the need to clarify the relationships of influence between the various forms of social exchange as the core of communication research, Melody and Mansell (1983) assert that for assessing the usefulness of research it is needed to consider its ability to promote beneficial change in society. From this social change-oriented perspective, Smythe and Van Dinh (1983) identify three functions for communication research: 1) Decentralize the control of communications; 2) Democratize communication in institutions; and 3) Motivate masses for organization and action for peace. Regarding this last aspect, Schiller (1983) suggests putting communication research at the service of social sectors and the most oppressed nations, and Mosco (1983) outlines the need to investigate from a critical perspective, concerned with achieving the emancipation of citizens, the self-determination of people.

Grandi (1983) proposes studying the relationships between the different branches of the communications industry to see how they affect the development of technology and policies; while Blumler (1983) urges to become critical researchers, determined to unmask the ideological functions of mass communications.

Bellow, we include in a table some of the suggested functions for communication research in “Ferment in the Field”.

Objectives for communication research

Regarding the objectives which can be accomplished by communication research, Gans (1983) raises the need to assess the influence of media in the generation of opinions, suggesting to evaluate the causal hypotheses of the Agenda Setting, to check to what extent media news influence citizens' thinking about certain issues.

TABLE 1
FUNCTIONS FOR COMMUNICATION RESEARCH IN
“FERMENT IN THE FIELD”

Functions for Communication Research	Articles
1. Clarifying the relationships of influence between the various forms of social exchange	“Mass Media Research in France: An Emerging Discipline”
2. Decentralization of communications control	“On Critical and Administrative Research: A New Critical Analysis”
3. Democratization of communication in institutions	“On Critical and Administrative Research: A New Critical Analysis”
4. Motivating the mobilization of masses for organization and action for peace	“On Critical and Administrative Research: A New Critical Analysis”
5. Serving social sectors and the most oppressed nations	“Critical Research in the Information Age”
6. Achieving the emancipation of citizens	“Critical Research and the Role of Labor”
7. Exploring and developing alternative political choices	“The Limitations of the Sociological Approach: Alternatives from Italian Communications Research”
8. Unmasking the ideological functions of the mass media	“Communication and Democracy: The Crisis Beyond and the Ferment Within”

Source: The author.

Questioning concepts imposed by liberalism, such as artistic freedom, freedom of expression or journalistic objectivity is mainstream for the critical perspective (Garnham, 1983). In the same line, Jansen (1983), in order to reverse the trends towards a privatization of information resources, raises the need to abandon the claim of the superior morality

of journalistic objectivity, as well as the need to discredit copyrights, royalties, patents and other objectified concepts related to the property of information.

If Tunstall (1983) argues that industries must be investigated, putting attention on their relationship with the social, economic and political context within they operate, Schiller (1983) emphasizes the need to identify the sources of power for knowing how they exercise that power, especially regarding to information and communication.

Slack and Allor (1983) propose different objectives for communication research and group them in three levels: international, national and community level. At the international level, according to the researchers, it is necessary to study theories related to liberation, social movements, politics, structure and issues such as the radio spectrum, the behavior of transnational corporations or the experience of Third World innovations. At the national level, the authors suggest to analyze the economic policy of new technologies and the reaction of the masses towards them, as well as the militarization of communications. Finally, at the community level, Slack and Allor encourage to start educational projects intended on understanding and resisting imposed communication systems.

According to Balle and Cappe de Baillon (1983) the first objective of communication research is to gauge the importance of the different forms of mediated communication, considering their influence on interpersonal and institutional communication. Understanding research as an assessment device as well, Grandi (1983) considers mainstream to develop alternative technological and political choices to those normally used, and in a similar vein, Halloran (1983) contends that communication research should explore possibilities and alternatives to facilitate greater access and participation, emphasizing the need to use horizontal processes as opposed to hierarchical communication flows.

Below we include in a table some of the objectives suggested in “Ferment in the Field” to be achieved by communication research.

TABLE 2
OBJECTIVES FOR COMMUNICATION RESEARCH IN
“FERMENT IN THE FIELD”

Objectives for communication research	Articles
1. Assessing the influence of media in generating opinions	“Mass Media Research in France: An Emerging Discipline”
2. Questioning concepts imposed by liberalism such as artistic freedom, freedom of expression, or journalistic objectivity	“Toward a Theory of Cultural Materialism”
3. Investigating industries and their relationship with the social, economic and political context	“The Trouble with U.S. Communication Research”
4. Understanding what the sources of power are and analyzing how those sources exercise power	“Mass Media Research in France: An Emerging Discipline”
5. Evaluating the importance of the different forms of mediated communication	“The Political and Epistemological Constituents of Critical Communication Research”
6. Initiating educational projects that involve people in understanding and resisting the imposed communication systems	“The Political and Epistemological Constituents of Critical Communication Research”
7. Exploring, evaluating and developing alternative technology and policy choices	“The Limitations of the Sociological Approach: Alternatives from Italian Communications Research”
8. Exploring possibilities and alternatives to facilitate greater access and participation	“A Case for Critical Eclecticism”

Source: The author.

Objects of study for communication research

Next, we address some of the objects of study that are proposed in “Ferment in the Field” for communication research and that refer to four issues: 1) Structure of the communicative system; 2) Uses of the media; 3) Mediation; and 4) Social relations.

Structure of the communication system

Regarding the objects of study related to the structure of the communicative system, Blumler (1983) proposes analyzing the relationship of media with the sources. For his part, Grandi (1983) highlights the need to study the socialization of users, the relationship between institutions and sources and the prevailing ideologies and sources of information available to the public. In addition, according to the scholar, it is needed to identify the relationships between the branches of the communication industry to assess how they influence the development of technology and politics.

Tunstall (1983) posits the importance of analyzing how television network ownership works and of investigating industries and their relationship to the social, economic and political context. In this line of inquiry, Dallas and Van Dinh (1983) propose to address the structures and negotiations related to the radio spectrum, the behavior of transnational corporations, particularly of corporations involved in media activity, as well as economic policies related to technologies.

According to Halloran (1983) to study the generation of news based on historical, economic, political, technological or professional factors is needed; influencing the selection, production and presentation of news in different media and in different countries. In addition, the scholar suggests conducting research focused on informed participation of citizens in the Information Society and on increasing differences between the information and the entertainment available for the rich and for the poor.

Halloran (1983) expresses the need to critically analyze the functioning of media for transcending what media say about their purposes and objectives by applying criteria that take into account the degree to which they satisfy basic communication needs. Therefore, according to the researcher, it is necessary to analyze whether there is enough diversity in the presentation of news for allowing participation in democracy.

Uses of media

Regarding the objects of study linked to the uses of media, Mattelart (1983) proposes putting attention on how audiences consume, interpret and appropriate programs, and Gans (1983) raises the importance to investigate the journalistic enterprises by paying attention to elements outside the organization, such as the functions and dysfunctions of news in people’s lives to check whether the news are useful or if, on the contrary, they generate dependency and slavery.

In a similar line to that proposed by Gans, De Sola Pool (1983) encourages to study the uses that people make of media, analyzing their motivations, their knowledge needs, their behavior and evaluating how media are institutionalized and modified to respond to what is socially demanded. Stappers (1983), combining a concerned perspective on the production, a perspective on the reception and a perspective on the use of communication, contends the need to conduct investigation centered on how and why information becomes available and how and why people share and spread information and knowledge. In a similar line, Blumler (1983) highlights the importance to identify and analyze the sources of information available to the public and the need to investigate about how audiences receive the news, understanding them as interpretation maps whereby the members of the audience are encouraged to perceive significant social facts.

Regarding the effects of media, Noelle-Neumann (1983) encourages to study them in the long term since, according to the researcher, the effects occur first at an unconscious level, provoking that asking direct questions to the recipients does not produce results.

Mediation

Regarding objects of research connected with mediation, Katz (1983) points out the importance of studying genres as an element situated between industry and audience, while Tuchman (1983) proposes to investigate how communicative frameworks produce and reproduce, innovate and replicate class relations.

According to Gerbner (1983) the study of communication revolves around the production, nature and role of messages in life and in society and, in this sense, the opinion of the scholar is that storytelling provides the capacity for humanization and for the evolution of our species.

Social relations

From “Ferment in the Field” we obtained objects of study for communication research related to social relations. Slack and Allor (1983) argue that communication research should focus on the transformation of social relations. The scholars contend that the restructuring of labor, motivated by the introduction of telematics and robotics, extend the control of the workforce in the name of productivity, justifying the need to consider labor issues as object of study for communication research. They state that communication research can challenge established research perspectives, for the most part guided by elites, that use media to boost their power and benefits, causing that questions posed and the methods employed to be influenced by the demands of media industries and by political authorities. Finally, these authors propose to study class and subcultural styles as mediating levels between media messages and individual consciousness and behavior.

Below we are including a table containing several objects of study proposed in “Ferment in the Field” to be addressed by communication research.

TABLE 3
OBJECTS OF STUDY FOR COMMUNICATION RESEARCH IN
“FERMENT IN THE FIELD”

Objects of study for communication research	Articles
<i>Structure of the communicative system</i>	
1. Relations of the media with the sources	“Historical and Normative Foundations of Communication Research. Paradigms of Civic Communication”
2. Relations between companies in the communication industry	“The Limitations of the Sociological Approach: Alternatives from Italian Communications Research”
3. Property of television networks	“The Trouble with U.S. Communication Research”

Objects of study for communication research	Articles
4. Structures and negotiations concerning radio spectrum	“On Critical and Administrative Research: A New Critical Analysis”
Uses of media	
5. Sources of information available to the public	“Communication and Democracy: The Crisis Beyond and the Ferment Within”
6. Ways in which audiences consume programs, how they appropriate them and how they interpret them	“Technology, Culture, and Communication: Research and Policy Priorities in France”
7. News functions and dysfunctions in people’s lives	“News Media, News Policy, and Democracy: Research for the Future”
8. Uses that people make of the media, motivations, knowledge needs, ways of learning	“What Ferment?: A Challenge for Empirical Research”
9. How and why information becomes available, how people disseminate and share knowledge and information	“Mass Communication as Public Communication”
10. How the audiences receive the information understanding it as interpretation maps	“Mass Communication as Public Communication”
11. Long-term media effects	“The Effect of Media on Media Effects Research”
Mediation	
12. Genres as an element located between the industry and the audience	“The Return of the Humanities and Sociology”
13. How communicative frameworks produce and reproduce, innovate and replicate class relations	“Consciousness Industries and the Production of Culture”

Objects of study for communication research	Articles
14. Production, nature and role of messages in life and in society	“The Importance of Being Critical—In One’s Own Fashion”
Social relations	
15. Restructuring of work produced by technologies	“The Political and Epistemological Constituents of Critical Communication Research”
16. Relationship between institutions and prevailing ideologies	“The Political and Epistemological Constituents of Critical Communication Research”
17. Behavior of transnational corporations	“The Political and Epistemological Constituents of Critical Communication Research”
18. Economic policy of new technologies	“The Political and Epistemological Constituents of Critical Communication Research”
19. The class and subcultural studies as mediators between media messages and individual awareness and behavior	“The Political and Epistemological Constituents of Critical Communication Research”

Source: The author.

CONCLUSIONS

After 38 years of the publication of the volume “Ferment in the Field”, it is still relevant, useful and necessary, since many of the approaches it contains have barely been incorporated into the practice of communication research. The distillation carried out aims at serving the objective of contributing to develop a history of the ideas of communication research, providing conceptual and procedural tools that allow recovering the intellectual memory of the field while (re)building it.

The ideas obtained from the volume and organized in perspectives, functions, objectives and objects of study from which it is possible to articulate communication research, allow us to understand this scientific field as one that can have different functions in society and make it possible to (re)generate a communicative perspective that takes into account the relationships between the actors and the elements that shape different realities.

In a context of economic and social crisis aggravated by COVID-19, in a context in which robotization was already leaving a large part of society without employment and where changes at different levels are claimed, communication research can contribute to generate more democratic and healthy societies.

From “Ferment in the Field” we obtain objectives for communication research such as investigating the influence relationships between the various forms of social exchange, decentralizing the control of communications, democratizing communication in institutions or achieving the emancipation of citizens. These objectives are necessary at a time when the use of platforms such as Qualtrics or Mechanical Turk is gaining strength in social research, platforms which, underpinned on the ease of use of their interfaces and on the existence of large samples in need of some economic income, generate a type of research where conversations are not allowed, provoking an increasing distance from society.

Research disconnected from society is characterized by understanding communication as a linear process and by focusing on measuring the effects of media as if people receive the content in the same way, regardless of their social context and/or preferences and as if media were not part of society and were not in relation with other institutions, organizations, and so on. In this type of research, social subjects are approached as passive beings when they could bring interesting perspectives to the investigations.

The field of communication research lacks intellectual institutionalization (Lacasa-Mas, 2017; Peters, 1986) but it has conceptual and procedural tools to gradually achieve that intellectual institutionalization that will come from a (re)construction of the field.

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