Progress is our most important product, proclaimed General Electric ads of a few decades ago. Nowadays, that slogan has been appropriated by the social sciences. Is there a discipline practiced by any herd of academics exceeding 100 for whom some publisher isn't regularly pumping out a series entitled, Progress in ________ (you fill in the blank)? Skeptics will doubt that progress is so persistently regular a product.

Nevertheless, if we apply a crude empiricism to these volumes, the reader is clearly hot on the trail of progress. Both contain nine articles each of about 30 pages, with most reviewing a literature running from three to 10 pages of bibliography...in small print no less. Clearly, researchers in the communication sciences prefer publishing to perishing.

Volume VII reviews developments in areas as diverse as cultural industries internationally, human-computer interaction in retrieval systems, and communication in coping with stress. Judged by the more severe and subjective standards of quality, I fear the progress in less evident. The authors have been thorough and have struggled valiantly to bring order and find direction. In the end, however, they seem to have discovered a group of pioneers, speaking several diverse languages (only partially intelligible to each other), who in autumn are harvesting their first crops.

A few articles don't fit this assessment, but consider first these examples that do. Emile G. McAnany runs across a poverty of substantial work as far as cultural industries internationally are concerned. "There is much, almost everything, yet to be done in this field" in pursuit of a research agenda. His inclusion of a "brief review of recorded music" as useful since "it has rarely been considered as part of the communication field" is both accurate and astounding. That recorded music is communication seems to be known to everyone save scholars of communication.

Christine L. Borgman tells us about information retrieval behaviour by noting that "not surprisingly, the list of unknown is longer than the list of knowns." Since she is writing about human-computer interaction, a newer area of technology than recorded music, the criticism of communication research is muted. But when summarizing a useful article on among other things ideology in mass media studies, Myles Breen and Farrel Corcoran tell us that despite some notable exceptions, there remains a "resounding silence of the notion of ideology in American media theory." They detect the hint of change. One hopes they are right.

In short, these writers have done diligent jobs of reviewing the literature and summarizing it for us. I'm not sure that what they've reviewed is progress.
Two articles deserving of particular commendation are by Beth J. Haslett and Gavan Duffy. Haslett attempts a short synthesis of van Dijk's theory of discourse, a literature scattered in a host of publications. Not content to parrot, Haslett provides a critical assessment by demonstrating the importance of van Dijk's work as well as mapping some of the minefields. My only caveat is that she needed another five or 10 pages to be completely successful.

Duffy's "The Normative Ground of Spectrum Policy Debates" is impressive because, while his head is in the rarified air of John Rawl's philosophy, his feet are on the practical ground of allocation of spectrum property rights. And he manages to connect convincingly his head and feet. People who argue from philosophical positions often produce a fuzzy set of generalizations of little practical help. So-called practical people can produce down-to-earth suggestions but with little detectable rationale beyond economic self-interest. Duffy falls into neither trap. While critical of parts of Rawls' reasoning about social justice, Duffy argues that Rawls supplies a sound ethical rationale for broadcast regulation in the United States. It's indicative of Duffy's approach that after reaching a set of generalizations derived from Rawls, he provides a section called "brass tacks." Here, he advocates very clear policies, e.g., that the United States should push cable more than has been the case thus far.

The pieces constituting Volume VIII comprise, if anything, an even greater variety of unrelated, communication areas: communicative competence, traits in interpersonal communications, communication and the unconscious, the tactile communication system, the communication of deviance, news cameras in the courtroom, organizational grapevines, satellite communication policy issues, and teledemocracy. They run the gamut from the useful through the bland and undistinguished to the just plain bad.

Virginia W. Cooper's review of the current state of research about the tactile communication system is typical of articles calling for more empirically-precise and theoretically-sophisticated activity. Cooper concludes that our grasp of how this important communication channel works is weak. On the basis of her evidence, the assessment is perhaps generous; feeble might be a more precise description. This state of affairs will persist, Cooper says, until more research examines message exchange in sequential interactions, more attention is paid to attribution of meaning, and methodological problems, for instance, weak reliability of self-reports, are tackled.

To my mind, the strongest article is by Rolf T. Wigand on policy and regulatory issues in satellite communication. Despite some dated figures about direct broadcast satellites in the goodly amount of well-chosen raw information supplied, it is his summary of the major policy issues that makes the article worthwhile. His topic raises every issue from local zoning laws (can my neighbor really put that "dish" there?) to former U.S. Senator Barry Goldwater's view of civil rights (he was sponsor of The Satellite Viewing Rights Act) to transborder information flows.
A promising article by Susanna Barber in the end is disappointing. In reviewing the empirical literature on news cameras in the courtroom, she looked at 19 studies examining the effects of cameras on judges, jurors, lawyers and witnesses. Alas, the studies don't prove very much. A person tends to report that the cameras didn't affect his conduct very much, but did affect the behaviour of other trial participants. None of the studies investigated establishes whether the outcome was affected by camera coverage. It is disappointing to find no reference in her bibliography later than 1983 and only two of those at that.

The most disappointing article is one by Ted Becker and Richard Scarce on teledemocracy, that is, the use of interactive television systems to distribute information to citizens and to receive feedback from them. There have been a number of tests of the concept in places as diverse as Sweden, Hawaii, Alaska and Washington state. But none of these is presented in enough detail to give us confidence in the authors' enthusiasm for town meetings by TV. For instance, about one Pennsylvania test they enthuse:

The innovative experiment in Reading continues. It is, and remains, proof positive that government-by-TV works for the citizens, for the government, for the media, for the society that cares to embrace it, and for everyone touched by it.

And what evidence are we offered to back this giddy assessment? The whole Reading experiment is dealt with in six paragraphs, one of which is the quote above. Obviously, a reviewer can't judge whether the fault is the authors. Perhaps space limitations imposed by the editors did this article in. But the result is a sales pitch for teledemocracy, not an analysis of the concept and the research illuminating it.

To summarize these volumes, progress there is in the communication sciences. But, the communication sciences are areas of human endeavour. That means progress is a fitful beast, one not easily harnessed to publishing schedules.

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*Current Research in Film: Audiences, Economics, and Law. Volume 3*

Austin, Bruce A. (ed.)

The film research in this volume is current in two ways, for not only are these studies all of recent origin, but they also represent the growth of film research in the social science model. Its 13 reports use both quantitative and qualitative research methods rather than the literary or semiotic methods long employed in more common studies of narrative and representation in film content.