

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN EUROPEAN COMMUNICATIONS THEORY

Communications research and theory has its origins in the development of the media of communication, particularly mass media. In the beginning, starting around the turn of the century, studies of mass communication were occasional exercises carried out from the traditional bases of history, law, etc. But as the social importance of mass communication increased with mass-circulated commercial press and particularly after the introduction of radio broadcasting in the twenties, this field of social communications research began to grow and take shape. First it was usually associated with particular media, like German *Zeitungswissenschaft* ('Newspaper science') or American 'radio research.' The latter was strongly stimulated by the market needs of rapidly expanding commercial broadcasting which in this form of audience research at the same time served as the main force to develop general public opinion surveys.¹ Gradually, however, media-bound approaches were replaced by a more general view of the mass media; in the German area this development led between the wars to the emergence of *Publizistik* ('Science of public communication') while the concept of 'communication

¹ See, e.g., Herbert I. Schiller, "Waiting for Orders—Some Current Trends in Mass Communications Research in the United States," *Gazette*, 1974, pp. 11-21.

research' broke through in the American arena towards the end of the forties (significantly enough, Paul Lazarsfeld and his colleagues even changed the title of their series 'Radio Research' into 'Communication Research').

During the three decades that have passed after the last war mass communication research in Europe has constantly increased. This increase, however, is far from the boom which has taken place in the United States. In fact, compared with the rise of social sciences in general and sociology in particular, the field of mass communication research has in only a few countries become an especially popular area of study (one of the rare exceptions is the country of this author, Finland).

Consequently, the European arena of mass communication research is not a very abundant source of intellectual exercise: usually there are only one or two significant bases of communication research in a country. And yet, even if it may be easily accessible as far as quantity is concerned, qualitatively it provides a most varied spectrum of activities, approaches and traditions. They extend from routine audience research carried out for the press and broadcasting organizations to experimental studies of media effects, content analyses of media output and various kinds of journalism research. And besides this research activity, which is more or less repeating American patterns, there is much such research which might be characterized as genuinely European: for instance, semiotic and structuralist schools particularly in France and Italy, studies of contemporary culture particularly in Great Britain, and Marxistic orientations in Eastern Europe but increasingly also in the West, particularly in the Federal Republic of Germany. Right now it is a fascinating field which seems to be in a state of rapid expansion (mainly because of increased interest in communication policies) and also in a state of 'identity crisis.' Accordingly, speaking of intellectual exercise, the American arena, despite its abundance, might well turn out to be relatively poor compared with the European arena with all its qualitative variation.

Given this variety, a fair and balanced reporting of the whole European arena—especially if Europe is considered (as it should be) to include the socialist countries—is therefore impossible in this presentation. What I shall try to do instead is an overview of current trends in the more basic theoretical

orientations, i.e. in the conceptual framework in which European communications research is being carried out. I shall limit my review to the Western part of Europe because the socialist countries would deserve a completely separate treatment.

It is typical of current European orientation in communication research to expand the focus of attention beyond the media, their messages and the psychological reception process of the messages to the social and material living conditions of the people. As I once put it, in listing factors that determine the reception of adult education programs, "however good the timing policy, however dominant the channel, however close to real-life experiences the programs may be, however easy the language, and however much promotional information and even organizational mobilization may be exercised, nothing helps if a person is seriously deprived in his objective and physical surroundings, and consequently, if he is psychologically so apathetic and alienated that the total motivation for improvement and change in his socio-economic situation is missing."² Manifestations of this way of thinking are the Scandinavian projects started in the early seventies and called in Finland 'citizens' informational needs' and in Sweden 'information gaps in society.' Both were initiated and are mainly being carried out within the broadcasting organizations, which incidentally is an indication of the social and informational commitment of these mass communication institutions.

The points of departure of the Swedish project are stated by the researchers as follows:

Marked differences among social groups with respect to access to and utilization of essential information constitute a problem in our society. ('Essential' information is tentatively defined as information that enables the individual to survey and understand the society he lives in, and allows him actively to influence the conditions of his daily life.)—These differences are primarily functions of factors outside the control of mass media, factors such as the structure of society, the social and economic status

² Kaarle Nordenstreng, "Definition of the Audience and How to Increase It," *Adult Education by Television*, Geneva, European Broadcasting Union, 1973, pp. 31-38.

of various groups and individuals, their personal capabilities, etc.—Even so, the roles and potential roles of mass media should not be considered a priori to lack significance. Depending on how they are controlled and utilized—in terms of policy, on planning and production levels—the media may doubtless contribute either to the broadening or to the closing of information gaps.³

The Finnish project on citizens' informational needs shares these points and stresses the socio-economically determined mechanisms which accumulate on the one hand material and mental wealth accompanied by informational activity, and material and mental poverty accompanied by informational passivity on the other. The project refers to a governmental committee on the quality of life in Finland which found that due to the accumulation process differences in the overall standard of living become greater than differences with regard to any single component of the standard of living. In analyzing the mechanism of social inequality the committee had further pointed out the functions of segregation in society: minimization of contacts between the privileged and underprivileged reduces the informational and social fields of operation of both groups, leaving the privileged to enjoy their benefits with good conscience and the underprivileged to remain satisfied with their lot. It was also noted that social studies and official statistics had until recent years largely supported these same overall tendencies.

Empirical results of a nationwide survey carried out for this project further verified the presence of this vicious circle: those who were already well informed were most open to new knowledge and most capable of finding relevant knowledge, whereas the ill-informed, i.e. socio-economically underprivileged, were passive and unable to tell where to find relevant knowledge; furthermore the latter group did not regard information and knowledge as particularly important.

An essential theoretical distinction applied in the project is between subjective and objective informational needs. It was not found sufficient just to carry out an opinion survey and

³ Sveriges Radio (Swedish Broadcasting Corporation), Audience and Program Research Bulletin No. 3, 1973.

register subjectively perceived informational needs and wishes; besides these it was necessary to construct an all-round picture of the respondent's objective living conditions and his possibilities for social action. The aim was to see an individual's informational behavior (subjective needs) as an integral part of his total living conditions and social environment (objective needs). Expressed in these terms it is evident that objective informational needs are least satisfied among the underprivileged sections of the population and that the greatest difference between the subjective and objective levels of informational need is to be found in the same groups which are left outside the positive accumulation of material and informational wealth in society. The 'haves' do not objectively have many informational needs unsatisfied and yet they subjectively have more informational hunger than the 'have-nots,' whose objective informational needs are burning.

Besides social segregation referred to above the socio-economic system is seen to employ various mechanisms which tend to keep the level of subjective informational needs low. One central concept in this connection is the (bourgeois) hegemony which may be understood as a filter extending to the personal world-view of an individual and biasing or blocking his process of perceiving reality. The *de facto* function of the bulk of mass media is taken to be an overall support of this hegemony, e.g. by means of a longterm indoctrination of certain implicit values and a fragmentation of message supply which prevents rather than helps an individual to construct a holistic view of objective reality.

The Finnish project—as well as the corresponding Swedish one—might equally well be classified as an exercise in political science or in general sociology as a piece of communication research: the problem is to study the actual and potential conditions for social equality and participatory democracy. Consequently, there is a tendency to avoid a narrow communicationist's point of view and instead take a fairly broad perspective with a wide range of socio-economic (objective) factors to interplay with (subjective) communication phenomena. In this context media of mass communication are studied as a dependent rather than independent variable.

It may be said that such an approach is no innovation in the

tradition of communication research. However, a close look will reveal that the theoretical framework used in these studies usually differs from those applied in earlier research into the same problems. The social factors employed go far beyond the primary group considerations which used to dominate earlier receiver studies; now it is the economic structure of society—the ‘total system’—that is taken as the point of departure, instead of some more or less loosely defined groups in society.

In fact, after having left the stage of media-boundedness and becoming an overall mass communication research the field may be seen to advance to another stage: from a still narrow approach centered around the media (as separated from society) to a wider approach with the media as no more than integral parts of an overall ideological machinery in society, often called ‘ideological apparatuses.’ And it is usually understood that this machinery, which is seen as an integrated function of all social and cultural institutions with potential effects on peoples’ consciousness, has a hegemonistic character, i.e. it impinges upon the individual consciousness such elements which would not spontaneously prevail there but which will also not be rejected by consciousness as they are so commonly shared by the cultural community. Thus the concept of ‘mass consciousness,’ introduced along with the traditional concept ‘public opinion,’ is seen not only as a sum or average of a number of individual pieces of consciousness (a phenomenon at the micro level) but also as a social phenomenon (at the macro level) relatively independent of individuals. This is why I have titled a recent article describing current thinking in Scandinavian communications research “From Mass Media to Mass Consciousness”.⁴ One might even say that the field, after only recently gaining its identity, has with this orientation started to move from mass communication research towards a general social science, i.e. political economy of society on the one hand and an overall study of culture on the other.

At this point one might observe a dilemma in the theoretical orientation I have been describing: on the one hand it is the material living conditions of people and the socio-economic

⁴ Chapter to be published in George Gerbner (ed.), *Current Trends in Mass Communications*, (Mouton, forthcoming).

structures that are seen as vital in describing and explaining communication phenomena, and on the other hand there seems to be a strong emphasis on the ideological and manipulative processes taking place at the level of mass consciousness or generally speaking at the level of the contemporary culture. Serious questions may be raised concerning the philosophical origins of these levels and their methodological compatibility.

And indeed, a vivid debate is currently taking place in Europe around the relative importance of material and ideological factors in communications theory. Not surprisingly, this debate is taking place in the wider context of the social sciences in general: nothing less is at issue than the very nature of society.

As is well known the western orientation in sociology has largely avoided a materialistic concept of society with structural factors in a central position and has instead constructed a model of society with individual and group interaction, i.e. basically communication processes, as the critical factor. Such an orientation has facilitated, among other things, a conceptual confusion of power relations with the relations of communication—so popular in the dominant western thinking, which tends to reduce the objective power antagonisms to plain linguistic complications. It is not difficult to note how such a notion of society is politically useful in the context of capitalist economy, for instance when disturbances in industrial relations may be explained by notions like 'semantic noise' and pressures towards industrial democracy met by measures to 'facilitate the flow of information.' In this tradition, the political democracy is *de facto* reduced as a phenomenon to be placed mainly at the ideological level: politics is being played usually in the consciousness of the people and only exceptionally in revolutionary situations—in the more fundamental power relations of society.

This approach in social sciences has increasingly been faced with a strictly materialistic approach inspired by the classics of Marxism and Leninism which not only introduces the materialistic socio-economic structures in addition to interaction processes and related phenomena of (mass) consciousness but also claims that they must be taken as primary factors in explaining individual and social behavior. The socio-economic structures are seen to be composed of the material arrangements of production in society, i.e. the productive forces and the relations

of production, with the corresponding social and economic institutions determining relations between individuals (e.g. ownership conditions). The nature of these structures is materialistic, although in practice they may mostly operate by means of symbolic (and in that sense immaterial) communication.

Consequently, the rise of modern communication research advocating a societal approach and equipped with new concepts of non-material social communication processes has taken place within a very delicate context—we might say in an explosive situation. Paradoxically, many of those who have sincerely thought they had advanced a wide approach with a concept of mass communication as a social process and mass media as social institutions are often finding themselves among the traditional 'interactionists' being accused by more orthodox materialists of just being modernized versions of old 'psychologizers' and 'ideologizers' of social phenomena. In fact, the same criticism is being directed towards some of the most outstanding representatives of the current leftist schools in France and Germany, names such as Louis Althusser and Jürgen Habermas. And as is typical of social scientific debates in Europe, criticism and counter-criticism are coupled with statements of political positions in which many of those communication researchers who consider themselves 'progressive'—and who certainly by North American standards would be classified 'leftists' if not 'ultra-Marxists'—have been labeled by the critics as 'right-wing deviants.'

This debate, as hot and bitter as it may be to those concerned, will certainly prove to be a very useful medicine for the field—and not only for communications research but for the study of social and cultural phenomena in general. First of all, it serves as a guarantee that the field does not fall back into the era of narrow communicology but continues to be socially oriented. Secondly, such a climate of scientific debate will eliminate what might be called a 'petit-bourgeois reform' of the field, i.e. a superficial reorientation without questioning the fundamental theoretical conceptions. Examples of this type of risky 'half-way approach' are studies of the economic structure of the media industry and critical appraisals of media contents (often ambitiously calling themselves exercises 'in the political economy of mass communication') *not* accompanied by a conceptually comprehensive theory of socio-economic processes.

Thirdly, the debate compels research in this traditionally quite eclectic field to undertake an explicit analysis of its basic theoretical and philosophical propositions. And, finally the debate on the nature of communication and communication research is a welcome phenomenon because there seems to be a tendency in several traditional social and even humanistic sciences to 'find' the concept of communication and consequently to recapitulate their own theories in terms of human communication.

Naturally there is nothing wrong as such in attempts of the traditional fields to incorporate concepts and findings of communications research and information theory in their (often quite poor) theoretical frameworks. But in Western tradition there is a potential risk of communication becoming another magic phenomenon which would easily occupy a dominant position in many fields of arts and sciences (from literature to economics) and rather mask and obscure than clarify and advance the state of the art in these fields. A German participant in the debate on the nature of communication and its research has directed the following bitter words to both modern communication researchers who are overlooking material elements in the process and to those outsiders who have become so fascinated by the concept of communication that it is understood as *the element* of human nature and is thereby mystified: "The general tendency to explain everything from communication... is not science but *ideology*. As not a single one of the objects of communication research is essentially composed of communication, communication becomes a *fetish* which not only explains nothing but even largely disturbs"⁵

As has become clear by now, all these developments and debates are certainly not isolated from the general trends in social and humanistic sciences or from the changing patterns of the overall socio-politico-economic system. I should like to conclude my presentation by discussing not only European but more universal tendencies of the field. I am in fact suggesting that the reorientation taking place in the field of mass com-

⁵ Karl Held, *Kommunikationsforschung—Wissenschaft oder Ideologie? Materialien zur Kritik einer neuen Wissenschaft*. Munich, Carl Hanser Verlag, 1973, p. 184.

munication research more or less everywhere in the western (i.e. capitalist) world is characterized by precisely the same tendencies as the current European thinking. Significant global tendencies may just become more visible in European (and particularly Scandinavian) circumstances.

The global trends in the field of mass communication research can be summarized in terms of two interrelated tendencies on change: (1) a tendency towards a more *holistic framework*, and (2) a tendency towards *policy orientation*.⁶ The holistic approach, for its part, may be seen to imply two sub-aspects, namely, (a) a stressing of the *processual approach* covering simultaneously various stages of the communication process, and, (b) a stressing of the *contextual approach* tying the particular communication phenomena into wider socio-politico-economic settings.

It is not difficult to trace in these tendencies a rebellion against the positivist-behaviorist tradition. In terms of the philosophy of science it is exactly this shift from positivism towards anti-positivism that may be seen as crucial in the present reorientation of communication research—as well as in the so-called crisis of western social sciences in general.

In the present context it is particularly important to note the implications of positivism for policy considerations. The crucial notion of positivism—called in philosophical debate the 'Humean guillotine'—argues that one cannot infer from 'how things are' 'how they should be.' Goals of social activity are understood as something voluntary and subjective; value-bound choices are placed by definition outside the scope of objective knowledge. Consequently, research and politics are sharply separated from each other, and there prevails a relativism of values. Anti-positivism, for its part, claims that a study of the objective laws of social processes, in their widest sense, can be derived from social goals grounded on objective facts. These social goals—the 'how things should be'—can be inferred, at least to a great extent, from the laws followed by goal-directed social processes, once the latter have been discovered. Consequently, research and politics cannot and should not be sharply separated.

⁶ Cf. UNESCO, *Proposals for an International Programme of Communication Research* (COM/MD/20, 1971), p. 6.

At this point one might ask why such a reorientation in the social sciences in general and mass communication research in particular has begun to take place. What are the cultural and social determinants behind this 'movement'? In the present analysis only one overall factor will be singled out which, however, seems to the present author to be of crucial importance.

The suggested significant factor is the historical development in western industrialized societies, in consequence of which ideological control over the mass consciousness has become increasingly difficult—and hence ever more vital for the socio-economic system to handle. In spite of the indoctrination influencing individuals through all established institutions in society—not least by the mechanism of fragmentation in education and mass communication—large segments of the population remain dissatisfied, and what is also significant, new elements such as students have become involved in this refusal to digest what is centrally fed to them through socializing institutions, including the mass media. This is not a proper context to discuss the reasons for this surveillance of spontaneity and protest amid the manipulative mechanism of society (including the falsification of the theory of 'repressive intolerance'); it suffices here to note that there is something in the concrete social reality which 'breaks through' all manipulation.

Accordingly, since the traditional methods of ideological control have proved inadequate one has been urged forward to search for more effective means to touch the minds of the masses. This is why so much is said today of 'comprehension of messages,' 'audience passivity,' etc.; these kinds of new looks into the mass communication process (including the activists of 'citizen participation') is a must for the established social order if it is going to maintain in the long run its mental and material control over the bulk of the population. Similarly, at the level of the social sciences it has been an objective need of social forces to turn the positivistic tradition into a more holistic approach. It was no longer sufficient to contribute to the manipulative mechanisms by piecemeal studies and theories which by-pass many significant features in social developments, particularly those generating dissonance and revolutionary potential.

By and large it simply became vitally important to assess the

social reality, including the process of mass communication, more truthfully and in a macro perspective. And this assessment was not to be made for academic convenience but for an emerging, socially determined concern for communication policies.⁷ As is well known, systematic policies and long-range planning are another vital response to the objective development of the socio-economic system ('state-monopoly capitalism' in industrialized countries and the process of 'modernization' in developing countries). Consequently, a need for policies and planning in the communication field of society derives not only from the motives for ideological control but also from a general tendency towards more coherent socio-economic processes. All these pressures have caused a bankruptcy for the positivist tendency to define policy-related goals and objectives as 'non-scientific.' Western social sciences, including communications research, have moved closer to the Marxist concept of social science.

But the philosophical and political situation is far from a simple one. In terms of the present analysis, the new approach in communication research as well as boosting interest in communication policies can be seen to reflect the same basic tendency of having the mechanism of the prevailing social order brought up-to-date, and thus supporting the basic tendencies of the status quo. Accordingly, a 'progressive' communication researcher finds himself in a paradoxical situation: no matter what he subjectively might advocate, his services are largely channeled in the given socio-economic context for the benefit of the existing social order. However, this certainly is no deterministic process—to become a defeatist would be another form of 'ultra-leftism'—and there always remains a certain scope of movement within the scientific tradition as well as in social development in general.

⁷ See e.g. UNESCO, Meeting of Experts on Communication Policies and Planning (COM/MD/24, 1972), and Ithiel de Sola Pool, "The Rise of Communications Policy Research," *Journal of Communication*, 1974, p. 31-42.