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Editorial

Communications and Research

"IN THE BEGINNING was the Word . . .": in creation myths from all parts of the world the power of the Word is celebrated. But, even so, explanations and theories of the place of communications in the scheme of things seem mostly to have had an uneasy time. Until very recently, information and communication were treated as marginal phenomena, at best as supporting activities.

Now, suddenly, communication has been given such a place of honour that it risks becoming a bandwagon. The succession of theories and rapidly increasing research, however, does not seem to have lessened the confusion about what communication is. There are theories but no general theory of communication; technical work concentrates on separate modes of communication and lacks an overall view.

There are, though, some more fundamental new approaches resulting from the use of concepts which have been developed in other areas of scientific thought. In the view of the French biochemist and information scientist Joel de Rosnay, the 'natural history' of communications starts with chemical communication at the molecular level: the oldest form of communication used by living systems. He traces the development of communication in the behaviour of cells and organisms, animal and human. Communication between human organisms is conditioned by language. The real explosion in human communication occurs with the coding of information and the development of telecommunications. What is implied by the next step in communications development, an irreversible process of integrating the human brain, telecommunication networks and the computer?

Conversely, de Rosnay applies information theory to his analysis of systems behaviour. This approach is significant in that it exemplifies a number of recent and novel approaches which do not deal with communications as a separate activity but as an integrated part of a global holistic approach. Similarly, another French scientist, the economist Jacques Attali, has formulated a new economic theory where such classical concepts as capital and labour have been replaced by 'energy' and 'information'.

Thus, advanced concepts in a number of other disciplines are being applied to information and communication which, in turn, have been moved to the centre of scientific explanation in many fields. A theoretical framework can now be found apart from traditional or even recent communications theories.

The languages of genetics and of telecommunications coincide. It would seem natural to apply more systematically concepts and findings in such field as linguistics, semiotics, cybernetics, general semantics and neurophysiology. New approaches have also been indicated by the application of structuralist concepts.

The most fruitful new approach seems to be the application to communications of general systems theory and its offshoots, which join recent developments of concepts and methods in ecology and the study of eco-systems, energy analysis and in modern theories of spatial organisation and perception of evolution, thermodynamics and time.

In this perspective, the information-communication complex may be given its rightful place, in full recognition of the double meaning of information as, on the one hand, the acquisition of knowledge and, on the other, a shaping and ordering principle.

We are pleased that the series of articles in this issue on communications research sets forth a gamut of approaches which provide both new wine and new vessels. **EWP**

COMMUNICATION RESEARCH is discussed in this Special Issue from a variety of different perspectives, ranging from descriptions of past activities to proposals for future work. The theme of the issue is the communications researcher looking at his own profession and activity in order to maximise its value to communicators.

The provocative article by George Gerbner and Larry Gross (this page) suggests that television's new dominance in society requires new research models based on "the concept of broad enculturation rather than narrow changes in opinion or behaviour."

Two analyses of the theory of communication -- or, rather, the lack of it -- propose other, broad approaches. Francois Mahieux (page 4) gives a typology of communication research and stresses the increasing awareness of communication as an overall concept. Osmo Wiio (page 5) takes a similar holistic approach in the context of General System Theory and contingency analysis.

These theoretical questions are followed by surveys of activities in Latin America (page 7) and Africa (page 10), and by some general discussions.

The World of Television:

Towards Cultural Indicators

by George Gerbner, Larry Gross, Annenberg School of Communications

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Our world has both grown and shrunk. The social, political, and economic integration of modern industrial society has created a system in which few communities, if any, can maintain their independent integrity. Whether we like it or not, we are part of a Leviathan whose nervous system is comprised of telecommunications. Publicly-shared knowledge of the world of which we are inescapably a part is what this nervous system transmits to us. Television is the broadest form of transmission and thus of social cohesion.

Television is the chief common ground among the different groups that make up the USA's large and heterogeneous national community. No national achievement, celebration or mourning seems real until it is confirmed and shared on television. 'History' now is witnessed before it can be written.

Never before have all classes and groups (as well as ages) shared so much of the same culture and the same perspective while having so little to do with their creation. Representation in the world of television gives an idea, a cause, a group its sense of public identity, importance, and relevance. No movement can get going without some visibility in that world, or on the other hand, long withstand television's power to discredit, insulate or undercut. Other media, used selectively and by special interests or cultural elites, cultivate partial and parochial outlooks. But television brings its images and messages to all from penthouse to ghetto tenement or thatched hut. TV offers a universal curriculum that no one teaches but everyone learns, including those who expose themselves to information only when it comes as 'entertainment'. The world 'entertainment' stands for the most broadly and effectively education fare in any culture. The crucial boundaries of the future may be not so much between nations and classes as between heavy and light (or non-) viewers of television.

Television is the flagship of mass culture. It now rivals ancient religions as purveyor of the organic patterns of symbols -- 'facts' (news) and 'fiction' (entertainment) -- that animate national and even global communities' sense of reality and value. It comes close to fulfilling the dream of Scottish patriot Andrew Fletcher who once said: "If a man were permitted to write all the ballads he need not care who should make the laws of the nation."

The implications for research are far-reaching. They call into question essential aspects of the traditional research paradigm that has stemmed from historic pressures for behaviour manipulation and marketing efficacy. They suggest a model based on the concept of broad enculturation rather than of narrow changes in opinion or behaviour. Instead of asking which communication 'variables' might propagate what kinds of individual behaviour changes, we want to know which types of common consciousness whole systems of messages might cultivate. This is less like asking about preconceived fears and hopes and more like asking about the 'effects' of Christianity on one's view of the world or -- as the Chinese have asked -- of Confucianism on public morality. To answer such questions, we must review and revise some conventional articles of faith about research strategy.

First, we must reject the conventional research paradigm. We cannot presume consequences without the prior investigation of content. Nor can the analysis of content be limited to isolated elements taken out of context, or to individual viewer selections. The 'world' of television is an organic

system of stories and images. Message system analysis can reveal the gross and relatively unambiguous features and trends of the symbolic 'world' that structure common assumptions and definitions for the generations born into it, and provide bases for interaction (though not necessarily of agreement) among large and heterogeneous mass publics. The system *as a whole* plays a major role in setting the agenda of issues to agree or disagree about; it shapes the most pervasive norms and cultivates the dominant perspectives of society.

Another conventional research assumptions is that experiment is the most powerful method, and that *change* (in attitudes, opinions, likes/dislikes, etc., toward or conveyed by 'variable' X) is the most significant outcome to be measured. In the ideal experiment, you expose a group to X and assess salient aspects of the state of the receivers before and after exposure, comparing the change, if any, to data obtained from a control group (identical in all relevant ways to the experimental group) who have not received X. No change or no difference means no effect.

When 'X' is television, however, we must turn this paradigm around: *stability* may be the significant outcome of the sum total of the play of many variables. If everyone lives to some extent in the 'world' of television, clearly we cannot find unexposed groups who are identical in all important respects to viewers. We cannot isolate television from the mainstream of modern culture. It *is* the mainstream. We cannot look for change as the most significant accomplishment of this chief arm of established culture if its main social function is to maintain, reinforce and exploit, rather than to undermine or alter conventional conceptions, beliefs, and behaviour. On the contrary, the relative ineffectiveness of isolated campaigns may itself be a testimony to the power of mainstream communications.

Neither can we assume that the concepts cultivated by TV can be easily distinguished from those generated by other major entertainment media. (But we cannot emphasize too strongly the historically novel role of television in standardising and sharing with all, as the common norm, what had before been more parochial, local and selective cultural patterns.) We assume, therefore, that TV's standardising and legitimising influence comes largely from its ability to streamline, amplify, ritualise and spread into hitherto isolated or protected subcultures, homes, nooks and crannies of the land the conventional capsules of mass-produced information and entertainment.

Another popular research technique, the experimental or quasi-experimental test of the consequences of exposure to one particular type of television programming, has also become inappropriate. For example, much research on media violence has focussed on the observation and measurement of a viewer's behaviour after he has seen a particular programme. All such studies, however, no matter how clean the design and clear the results, are of limited value because they ignore a fundamental fact: the world of TV drama consists of a complex and integrated system of characters, events, actions and relationships whose effects cannot be measured with regard to any single element or programme seen in isolation.

What, then, is to be done? How can the effects of television be conceptualised and studied?

We believe that the key to the answer rests in a search for those assumptions about the 'facts' of life and society that living in the world of television might cultivate in viewers. In our study on Cultural Indicators we looked not so much for change (although there may be fluctuations over time) as for stereotyped conceptions of social reality, which are rather resistant to change, that viewers may learn from their daily experience with the standard features of TV's synthetic world. Cultivation analysis, as we call our 'effects' study, inquires into the conceptual differences between those who are more and those who are less immersed in the cultural mainstream in which most people swim or drift.

Our study rests on a periodic analysis of the 'facts of life' in the composite world of television drama. What is that world like? Who populates it? Who does what to whom in it? We assume that viewer response or interpretation must start from some knowledge of these messages. Our findings about the nature and composition of these message systems represent the common raw materials of time, space, action and group characterisation to which heterogeneous communities are continuously exposed. Our analysis of these basic facts and premises of the symbolic world reveals the social functions inherent in the system of messages that television drama, as a whole, releases into the mainstream of national consciousness. The data base for this analysis comes from the monitoring of annual samples of network television drama. Trained coders make detailed observations about thematic and other characteristics of dramatic programmes; about the types, personalities, and interactions of characters appearing in these programmes; and about selected types of action. The research began in 1967. By now we have a computerised data archive consisting of the coded analysis of 813 programmes, 2,285 leading characters and 4,068 specific episodes on which to base indicators of trends and overall content configurations.

The second step of the research is to determine what, if anything, viewers learn from 'living' in the world of television drama. More specifically, we are asking what assumptions does television cultivate about the facts, norms and values of society? In order to find the answers, we turn the findings about the fantasy land of teleivsion drama into questions about social reality. To each of these questions there is a 'television answer', which is tuned to the way things appear in the world of television, and another and different answer which is biased in the opposite direction or closer to public reality, 'the way things really are'. We ask these questions of samples of adults and children. All responses are related to television exposure, other media habits, and demographic characteristics. We then compare the response of light and heavy viewers, controlling for sex, age, education and other characteristics. The margin of heavy viewers over light viewers who give the 'television answers' within and across groups is the 'cultivation differential' indicating the kinds of conceptions about social reality that television viewing tends to cultivate in what groups and to what extent.
Our analysis also looks at the contribution of TV drama to viewers' conceptions of the 'facts of life' in conjunction with other sources of knowledge such as 'education' and 'news'. The analysis is intended to illuminate the complementary as well as the divergent roles of these sources of facts, images, beliefs and values in the cultivation of assumptions about reality. •