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AN INSTITUTIONAL APPROACH TO MASS COMMUNICATIONS RESEARCH

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T HE MOST DISTINCTIVE CHARACTERISTICS of the largest groups of people are acquired in the process of growing up, learning and living in one culture rather than another. Individuals may make their own selection of materials through which to cultivate personal images, tastes, views and preferences. They cannot cultivate what is not available, however, and will rarely select what is rarely available, seldom emphasized or infrequently presented. A culture cultivates patterns of conformity as well as of alienation or rebellion after its own image. The message systems of a culture not only inform but form common images; they not only entertain but create publics; they not only satisfy but shape a range of attitudes, tastes, preferences. They provide the boundary conditions and overall patterns within which the processes of personal and group-mediated selection, interpretation, utilization and image-formation go on.

Change in the public communication patterns and perspectives of a culture means a transformation in the processes of institutionalized public acculturation and social policy-formation.

We are in the midst of such a profound historical transformation. Study of the nature and process of public communication is central to understanding the emerging human condition. In this paper, I would like to suggest considerations which underlie the need for and define some terms of such study. In the first part, I shall explore the general significance of mass communication as a new stage in institutionalized public acculturation, suggest elements of a "strategic" approach to the study of communication effects in a culture, and relate the terms of public acculturation and socialization to the process of social policy formation. In the second part, I shall de-

scribe research directions which attempt to answer some questions raised by the institutional approach to mass communications.

INSTITUTIONALIZED PUBLIC ACCULTURATION

Communication is interaction through messages. Messages are formally coded symbolic or representational events of some shared significance in a culture, produced for the purpose of evoking significance (1). Social interaction through such message "events" is the "humanizing" process of man. The terms of this interaction, from the time of birth until death or extreme isolation, define for members of the species the realities and potentials of the human condition. These terms provide functional perspectives of existence, priority, value and relationships; they structure our notions of what *is*, what is *important*, what is *right* and what is *related to what else* (2).

The process can be private or public. It is *private* when the messages are specific to certain individuals or groups; those not specified are not expected to share in the interaction, or if they did the messages would be altered. All varieties of private communication are either face-to-face or extensions of person-to-person interaction, limited by considerations of the specific relevance of message content to specific recipients.

Communication is *public* when the messages form the basis for open interaction among groups of generally anonymous individuals. The communication may or may not be face-to-face. A quiet conversation between two men in a hotel lobby is of course private communication. Words exchanged so loudly that *anyone* within earshot might hear them is public communications. (Chances are that the content of the messages and the nature of the interaction will differ considerably.) Anyone may participate in public communication. In fact, messages are usually disseminated ("published" or "broadcast") as broadly as possible within general publics.

Public communication provides the *common* currencies of social interaction and defines public perspectives. It cultivates the most broadly shared notions of what is, what is important, what is right and what is related to what else.

Every society develops specialized agencies making authoritative decisions in the field of public communication. These institu-

tions receive special recognition, benefits or protection as being central to public acculturation, socialization and to the conduct of public affairs. This recognition may be religious or secular; it may take the form of public subsidy or state monoply; it may be expressed in making participation compulsory; it may be in the form of unique privileges and certain exemptions from due process of law (as in the First Amendment to the Constitution).

Perhaps the oldest branch of institutionalized public acculturation is what we today call religion, the cultural organization which once encompassed both statecraft and the public philosophy of the tribe or the nation. Two recent branches of institutionalized public acculturation are offsprings of the industrial revolution. One of these is public education or formal schooling for all, born of the struggle for equality of opportunity, and sustained by the demand for minimum literacy, competence and obeisance in increasingly mobile, de-tribalized, de-traditionalized and nondeferential societies. The other major branch of institutionalized public acculturation is mass communication.

Mass Communication

Mass communication is the extension of institutionalized public acculturation beyond the limits of face-to-face and any other personally mediated interaction. This becomes possible only when technological means are available and social organizations emerge for the mass production and distribution of messages.

The concept of mass production is, of course, closely related to the major general transformation in the quality of life, i.e., to the industrial revolution. The revolutionary aspect of mass *production* is the ability to produce and distribute commodities beyond previous limitations of handicraft production. Mass *communication* is the extension of mass production into the cultural field. It is the mass production and distribution of *message systems* to groups so large and widely dispersed in time and space that they could never interact face-to-face or through any other but technologically produced and mediated message systems.

The key to the historic significance of mass communication does not rest in the concept of "masses" as such. There were "masses" (i.e., large groups of people) reached by other forms of public

communication long before the advent of modern mass communication. The key to the cultural transformation which mass communication signifies is the *mass production* of messages forming message systems characteristic of their technological and institutional bases. Mass communication is the technologically and institutionally based mass production and distribution of the most broadly shared continuous flow of public messages in advanced industrial societies. Its rise to popular cultural dominance in the twentieth century represents a major cultural transformation in human affairs, extending the impact of the industrial revolution into the cultural field.

The media of mass communications—print, film, radio, television—are new ways of selecting, composing, recording and sharing symbols and images. They provide new perspectives on life and the world. Mass media are also new social organizations acting as "governments" (i.e., authoritative decision-makers) in the special domain of institutionalized public acculturation. As such, they are products of technology, corporate (or other collective) organization, mass production, and mass markets. They are the cultural arms of the industrial order from which they spring.

Mass media perspectives reflect a structure of social relations and a stage of industrial development. American mass media, for example, established as adjuncts of an already high degree of productive development, became generally consumer and market oriented. In countries where mass media were established at less advanced stages as agents of planned industrialization, they are generally production and development oriented.

Mass media policies reflect not only stages of industrial development and the general structure of social relations but also particular types of institutional and industrial organization and control. Corporate or collective organization, private or public control and the priorities given to artistic, political and economic policy considerations govern their overall operations, affect their relationships to other institutions and shape their public functions.

The Problem of Effects

If it seems reasonable to assume that mass communication research is primarily concerned with mass communication rather than

with assorted tactics of changing personal behavior, we need to formulate a theory of effects and of public policy consequences based on that assumption. Such a theory would define mass communication effects as the relationship between mass-produced and technologically mediated message systems and the broadest common terms of image-cultivation in a culture. It would ask not so much how to *change* ideas and behavior, but what public perspectives, conceptions and actions different types of mass communication systems tend to *cultivate*.

The "tactical" approach to communication research has tended to ignore the cultural and institutional context in its concentration on individual image and behavior formation and change. However, the position of individuals or groups in the flow of the cultural process does not necessarily indicate the nature and direction of that flow itself. People swimming in a river can make "progress" in many directions. All directions, and even the meaning of "progress," are relative to the direction and speed of the current itself. If the current were to change, all these directions and speeds would be altered without any change in behavior on the part of the swimmers. Similarly, the formation of images, concepts and behaviors in a culture are related to the general processes of cultivation, but *do not define it*. The meaning and measure of ideas and behavior are relative to the general flow, composition and direction of the message-production process. It has little significance to know that "Person X believes in Santa Claus" until we also know in what culture, at what point in time and in the context of what message systems cultivating or inhibiting such beliefs. The meaning of an image, opinion or action is thus relative to the context of cultivation. "Effect" of communication in a culture is, therefore the *nature of message-image relationships* defined at any one time by the terms of message systems entering into the cultivation of images as well as the nature of images entering into the production and perception of messages.

Communication effects cannot be expressed as *change* in the image which a message system presumably cultivates, let alone as change in personal behavior loosely and inferentially attributed to specific communication tactics. An image (or behavior pattern) must be sustained to exist at all. Once a pattern is established and

sustained, it affects messages and tactics as much as (or more than) the other way around. Specific attitude or behavior "change" may be the *least* significant indicator of "effect" unless it is part of a general transformation of the message-production and image-cultivation process, and is, therefore, supported and reinforced by changing circumstances of life. As Leon Festinger suggested recently, even "when opinions or attitudes are changed through the momentary impact of a persuasive communication, this change, all by itself, is inherently unstable and will disappear or remain isolated unless an environmental or behavioral change can be brought about to support and maintain it" (3).

A culture is that system of messages which cultivates the images of a society. The dominant communication agencies produce the message systems which cultivate dominant image patterns. They cultivate the broadest common notions of what is, what is important and what is right. They structure the public agenda of existence, priorities and values. People use this agenda—some more selectively than others—to support their ideas, actions or both, in ways that, on the whole, tend to match the general composition and structure of message systems (provided, of course, that there is also other environmental support for these choices and interpretations). There is significant change in the nature and functions of that process when there is change in the technology, ownership, clientele, outlook or other institutional characteristics of dominant communication agencies. Such change, when it occurs, changes the relative meaning of existing images and practices even before those images and practices are themselves altered.

The "strategic" approach to the problems of mass communication effects considers the dynamics of continuities, as well as of change, in its examination of the nature and composition of mass-produced message systems, the institutional process of their production, and their role under different social and industrial conditions. Such examination is necessarily historical and comparative in its analysis of the processes and products of new forms of institutionalized public acculturation.

The "strategic" conception is broadly behavioral. It regards mass communication as institutional (primarily industrial) behavior in the cultural field, mass-produced message systems as the public

record and product of such behavior, and public image-cultivation and policy-direction as outcomes of such behavior. It calls for analysis of institutional behavior and its products (both message systems and the publics they cultivate) as a step prior and essential to the understanding of image-formation and of the tactics of personal behavior change in a culture. This conception relates message systems to social systems, message-production to technology, and the cultivation of images through mass-produced message systems to the structure of social and technological relations. It asks not how to pursue any given policy goal (which is a tactical concern), but what significance different policies and standards have for a society. In other words, it inquires into long-term institutional behavior in the field of mass communications, and into the circumstances, dynamics and consequences of such behavior.

The Problem of Social Policy

Perspectives cultivated through private and public communication bear upon social policy, and thus the political process, in two related but essentially different ways.

When perspectives, and the political tendencies inherent in them, are privately cultivated (by any number of people but without the knowledge that they are also held by others), they affect policy in private ways: personal rule, influence, power; private choice from alternatives power deems to make available; individual resistance or withdrawal ("apathy"). These private choices of affirmation, indifference and negation exist in any system of government. One can ignore and even defy any rule or law (at a price, to be sure).

Popular self-government is possible when people, acting as citizens, can collectively create policy alternatives rather than only respond to them. This can come about only when knowledge of events and ways of looking at events are public, i.e., shared with full knowledge of their being shared. Private systems of "knowings and viewings" have to be transformed into public systems of "knowings and viewings" in order to form publics whose perspectives will bear upon social policy in ways which can create policy alternatives. The process by which private knowledge is transformed into public knowledge is literally the process of *publication.*

Publication as a general social process is the creation of shared

ways of selecting and viewing events and aspects of life. In its most advanced form, it is mass production and distribution of message systems transforming private perspectives of social institutions into broad public perspectives. This transformation brings publics into existence. Once created, these publics are maintained through continued publication. They are supplied with selections of information and entertainment, fact and fiction, news and fantasy or "escape" materials which are considered important or interesting or entertaining and profitable (or all of these) in terms of the perspectives to be cultivated.

Publication is thus the basis of self-government among people too numerous and too dispersed to interact face-to-face or in any other personally mediated fashion. Publication is the formation and information (and "entertainment") of publics; the creation and cultivation of public perspectives; the ordering and weighting of shared knowledge; the maintainance through mass-produced message systems of vast and otherwise heterogeneous communities of perspective and meaning among people who could interact no other way. The truly revolutionary significance of modern mass communications is in its "public-making" ability. That is the ability to form historically new bases for collective thought and action quickly, continuously and pervasively across all previous boundaries of time, space and even culture.

What I call the institutional approach to mass communications research is, then, the study of technologically-mediated message systems and processes as historically new ways of looking at life, as new forms of institutionalized public acculturation, and as the broadest common bases of social interaction and policy-formation in modern societies. Such study revolves around problems of message system theory and analysis, institutional process analysis and the investigation of relationships between message systems, social and organizational structure, image-formation and public policy. It asks these questions: How do media compose and structure their message systems? How are message-production systems and mass-distribution systems organized, managed, controlled? What perspectives and what patterns of choices do these systems make available to what publics over time and across cultures? In what pro-

portions, and with what kinds and degrees of attention, emphasis and appeal do they weight these choices? What general systems of public images, and what common perspectives on existence, priorities, values and relationships does each structure of choices tend to cultivate? What institutional (mass media) structures, relationships and systems of decision-making shape the composition and structure of mass-produced message systems?

When we ask about the composition and structure of mass-produced message systems we ask about mass media content. When we ask about influences, relationships, decision-making procedures governing the production of these message systems, we ask about the institutional process in mass communications. The balance of this paper will be devoted to a consideration of some aspects and methods (but not techniques) of message system (content) analysis and institutional process analysis attempting to answer some of the questions raised above.

MESSAGE SYSTEM AND PROCESS ANALYSIS

Selection and symbolic representation of phenomena is in part contingent upon existence—upon the importance and the relevance of certain events to a communicating agent or agency. Policies, however, (or consciousness) relating to existence, importance and relevance, are socially structured. This structure of assumptions, views, ideas, tastes, habits, etc., and their existential content (subject reference) is what we call the *image*. The image thus prestructures the world of events and ideas to be considered real, important, relevant. Policies, rules, codes, working assumptions and the set of industrial, market and organizational relationships in which mass media operate compose their institutionalized "image" of what is to be selected for mass production and how it is to be treated. The position, ownership, purposes and functions of mass media in a social system form this institutionalized "image" which, in turn, shapes the message systems cultivating the structure of public images in a society. The terms of broadest social interaction are those available in the most widely shared message systems of a culture. Whether one is unaware of them, supportive of them, critical of them or even alienated or rebellious of them, the terms of the culture shape the course of the response.

Message System Analysis

Mass-produced message systems are thus seen as the common public currency of social interaction, and as expressing the broadest popular terms of image-formation.

What distinguishes the analysis of message systems as a social scientific enterprise from other types of observation, commentary or criticism? A central purpose of social science is to deal systematically, rather than only selectively or only qualitatively, with problems of collective life. We make no assumptions about such conventionally demarcated functions as "information" and "entertainment" or "high culture" and "low culture." Style of expression, quality of representation, artistic excellence or the quality of experience associated with selective exposure to and participation in the communication exchange are not considered critical variables. Informative, entertaining (or both), good, bad or indifferent by any standard of quality—these are selective judgments applied to messages quite independently from the social functions these message systems actually perform. These judgments are irrelevant to the basic questions of the presentation of what *is*, what is *important*, what is *right*, and what is *related* to what else in mass-produced message systems.

Just as we make no *a priori* assumptions about the significance of style, quality and subjective experience associated with different types of message systems, we do not recognize the validity of conventional distinctions of function attached to "nonfictional" vs. "fictional" modes of presentation. "Fact" may be stranger than fiction, and the veracity of "fiction" greater than of the presumably factual. Regardless of verisimilitude, credibility or what is actually "believed" in a presentation, message systems cultivate the terms upon which they present subjects or aspects of life. There is no reason for assuming that the cultivation of these terms depends in any significant way upon the mode of presentation, upon agreement or disagreement with or belief or disbelief in the presentations involved, or upon whether these presentations are presumably factual or imaginary. This does not mean, of course, that we do not normally attach greater credibility to a news story, a presumably factual report, a trusted source, a familiar account, than to a fairy tale or to what we regard as false or inimical. What it does mean

is that in the general process of image-formation and cultivation, "fact" and "fable" play equally significant and interrelated roles.

There is, however, an important difference between the ways "fiction" and "nonfiction" deal with life. Reportage, exposition, explanation, argument—whether based on fact, fancy, opinion or all of these—ordinarily deal with specific aspects of life or thought extracted from total situations. What gives shape, focus and purpose to the "nonfictional" mode of presentation is that it is analytical; it implicitly organizes the universe into classes of subjects and topics, and it devotes primary attention to one or more of these subjects and topics.

The usual purpose of the fictional and dramatic modes of presentation is to present *situations* rather than fragments of knowledge as such. The focus is on people in action and interaction; subjects and topics enter as they become significant to the situations. The re-creation of significant aspects of a human condition which characterize and explain situations and action, and which characterize and motivate characters in action, is the outstanding feature of the fictional and dramatic modes of presentation.

From the point of view of the analysis of elements of existence, values and points of view inherent in message systems, fiction and drama thus offer special opportunities. Here an aspect of life, an area of knowledge or the operation of a social enterprise appears imaginatively re-created in its significant associations with total human situations. The selection and shaping of the "worlds" of fiction and drama in a culture may, therefore, reveal values and judgments underlying but not necessarily manifested in the operation of other types of message systems. The requirements which make the treatment of specific subjects, professions, institutions, etc., secondary to the requirements of telling a "good story" make the treatment of those subjects more indicative of the assumptions underlying their nature and role in the story-telling process, and of the images, values and gratifications cultivated by the story-telling process.

It should also be pointed out that characteristics of message systems are not necessarily the characteristics of individual units composing the systems. The purpose of the study of a system *as system* is to reveal features, processes and relationships expressed

in the whole, not in its parts. Unlike most literary or dramatic criticism, or, in fact, most personal cultural participation and judgment, message system analysis attempts to study media content as *the record of institutional behavior in the cultural field,* representing dynamics of message-production and image-formation, but not necessarily qualities of selective personal experience and response.

The purpose of message system analysis is, then, to examine terms of message-production and image-formation represented in mass-produced message systems. Methods of analysis are designed to inquire into characteristics of systematic processes composing and structuring message systems. The process of *composition* denotes the way a message system is put together; *structuring* means the way elements composing message systems relate to one another.

The terms and concepts used to designate aspects of the process of composition are attention, emphasis, value and tendency. The process of structuring is seen as a matter of correlation. Explanation of these terms and concepts follows (4).

Attention is the process of selection of phenomena attended to. A measure of attention is an indication of the presence and frequency of subjects or content elements (topics, themes, etc.) in a message system. The significance of attention as an aspect of the process of message-production and image-formation is that it stems from, and in turn cultivates, assumptions about existence; it provides common conceptions about what "is" (or at least what is sufficiently common and public knowledge to form a basis for social interaction).

Emphasis is that aspect of the composition of message systems which establishes a context of priorities of importance or relevance. The context of emphases sets up a field of differential appeal in which certain things stand out as more significant than others. Emphasis "structures the agenda" of image-formation and public discourse cultivated in message systems. Measures of emphasis may be based on such indications as the headlining of topics in news items or the featuring of certain topics or themes as the major points of stories.

Value is a term used to combine attention and emphasis into a single concept and measure. As a quantitative measure, "news

value" or "story value" are indexes combining the other two meas-
ures into a single figure heavily weighted by the measure of empha-
sis. The reason for this weighting is that attention in a large and
fairly diverse message system is diffused; the process of emphasis
plays a major part in allocating the energies going into image-for-
mation. In other words, a newspaper or fiction story "attends to"
many more things than an individual reader or viewer consciously
contemplates or uses. Although all things "attended to" may re-
late to the image of the reader in one way or another (things we
know we cannot or do not want to read or view play a part in our
thinking), the selective allocation of interest, appeal and conscious
cultivation is largely governed (and can even be forced) by the dis-
tribution of emphasis. Few can escape a banner headline, a major
theme, a vivid picture.

A measure of news or story value is also an expression of certain
overall priorities which govern distribution. Distribution here means
not frequency of occurrence at one time but frequency of produc-
tion and circulation over time. In other words, the higher the
"value" of a certain content element (as indicated by attention
weighted by emphasis), the more that element is an ingredient of a
"good story," and the larger distribution it is likely to receive.

Tendency: The position of a system (or of an individual) in
time, space and in the overall structure of social relations enters
into the approach, point of view or direction from which it deals
with aspects of existence. The directionality of presentation, the ex-
plicit or contextual judgment of qualities of phenomena expressed
in the presentation, is called tendency.

The broadest over-all dimension of judgment is a summary
evaluation of the goodness or badness, rightness or wrongness of
things. A measure of the favorable-unfavorable associations ex-
pressed in the comparative study of press systems is called *critical
tendency;* it is based primarily on whether a subject or topic appears
in a supportive or critical context.

But judgment is, of course, multidimensional, as the research of
Charles E. Osgood and others has demonstrated. *Differential* ten-
dency can be used to describe a measure indicating directionality
of judgment in several different dimensions. Such a measure, called

"personality differential," was developed for a study of composite traits of fictional characters in the mass media of different cultures (5).

A somewhat different indication of tendency can be obtained from an analysis of different types of *propositions* (rather than subjects or topics), selected for attention, e.g., by political media in a multi-party country. Such an analysis was attempted in a case study of French newspaper coverage (6).

Structure is the system of connections among elements of a message system. It is an indication of which elements (topics, themes, etc.) are most likely to occur together with which other elements. The technique of correlation was used to examine structure in the press system analysis and in the comparative study of thematic elements in mass media fiction and drama mentioned above.

The terms of analysis suggested here were developed to deal with processes operating in message systems as they compose (1) assumptions about existence (what there *is* to attend to), (2) a context of differential appeals (what is urgent, relevant, important or interesting enough to receive, through emphasis, prior claim on time and attention), (3) a set of approaches or points of view which tend to cast things in the light of some dimension of qualitative judgment (good or bad, right or wrong, etc.), and (4) a structural relatedness of things (what is most likely to go together with what else). These are terms of the perspectives message systems are believed to cultivate. The next question is why mass-produced message systems are composed and structured as they are.

Process Analysis

Institutional process analysis attempts to answer questions about constraints and influences affecting decision-making in mass communications. Let me call attention to six types of such constraints: (1) client relationships, (2) patron relationships, (3) logistical requirements, (4) leverage, (5) legal requirements and normative expectations, and (6) supervisory relationships.

While the following formulation of each of these types of constraints is admittedly gross, and methods available for their measurement are often crude, even rudimentary analysis along these lines

might go a long way toward a more systematic understanding of mass media behavior.

(1) *Client relationships* are those with investors, advertisers, sponsors or other groups and institutions which furnish major capital and operating costs in exchange for products and services rendered. This relationship is characterized by high degree of demand, and the availability of client options substantially affecting the level of support of the institution. Communications industries such as the press, consumer magazines and commercial broadcasting are producing organizations as are other industries. Their products are mass-produced message systems. Unlike other industries, however, they derive little or no revenue from the sale of their products to the consuming public which has, therefore, no direct client relationship to these media. They are also service organizations "selling" publics (i.e., audience time and attention) to a special type of client, the advertiser.

The advertisers underwrite the bulk of the operating costs in return for the time and attention of consumers concentrated in market areas providing a base for profitable operation. The quantity and "quality" of audiences as consumers determine the value —and price—of the media's service to these clients.

(2) *Patron relationships* are with those who directly patronize the media—their audiences. While audience demand is never specific and explicit, the necessity for cultivating and gratifying some expectations of a consuming public is an important constraint on media decision-making. The constraint of patron relationships tends to set the broad limits of acceptability within which the media select those policies which are most responsive to client needs and pressures.

(3) *Logistical requirements* are those imposed by the availability (and cost) of resources (ranging from raw materials such as paper or film to the supply of creative talent) and of distribution facilities (ranging from postal service and newsboys to wires, cables, microwave relays and radio frequency allocations).

(4) *Leverage* is pressure that may be exerted (through boycotts, blacklists, strikes, legislation, influence over clients, etc.) by non-client groups and organizations selected for attention (or neglect or

any other objectionable treatment) by the media, or for other reasons.

(5) *Legal requirements* pertain to media as business organizations and licensed carriers; *normative expectations* are the general (and often also legal) obligations to serve some socially valued functions or at least avoid posing major threats to the prevailing moral-political outlook and order.

(6) *Supervisory relationships* are those of chain of command, or administration, internal to the institution, including trade agreements and organizations, "self-regulation," codes, and all working relationships affecting the production of message systems. These are usually calculated to maximize the value and minimize the risks inherent in all other institutional relationships and constraints.

These influences upon the message-production, distribution and "public-making" activities of mass media relate to institutional decision-making in different and sometimes conflicting ways. But their overall operations are likely to add up to a pattern distinctive of the process of mass communication and public policy-formation in a society.

Existing research structured along these lines is scarce, fragmentary and relatively primitive. There have been few (if any) comprehensive attempts to study the composition and structure of mass-produced message systems, the constraints upon the production process, and the creation and cultivation of public images on systematically related terms. I make no claim that this paper has presented a blueprint for such a study. But I submit that the development of such studies is a major task of communications research. No other area of social science makes the study of mass-produced message systems, and of their relationship to social structure, institutional process and public policy its central organizing concern.

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