

THE FLOW STUDIES - WHAT NOW?

One of the fundamental questions to be asked in the analysis of the international flow of information is: what are the effects of the scientific-technological revolution to the formation of public awareness in the world?

It seems obvious that the increasing intensity and quality of foreign correspondence and coverage of international affairs have, among other things, lead to the situation where international information and the mass media have become a component of international politics. Instead of merely reporting public events and commenting on them, the media are among the forces shaping them, accelerating or retarding different socio-economic processes and creating a political climate. They are also central in the threat-perception.

When studying the mass media in the periods of international tension Tomasz Goban-Klas points out the mass media adopt certain ideological assumptions in presenting international issues. Of the Western media he quotes well-known studies from the past. Already in 1920 W. Lippmann and Ch. Metz concluded in their analysis of the news coverage of the Russian revolution that "the news were always distorted and to this point that at the time of great crisis very many people were not supplied with minimum information on an extremely important event." In 1947 M. Kriesberg pointed out in *Public Opinion Quarterly* that news of the Soviet Union "were determined not by the journalistic criteria of objectivity but by the current state of American-Soviet relations."

Other examples on the media coverage of major social revolutions based on serious social scientific research could be quoted from the case of Cuba or Iran. The Iranian case is most illustrative; during the Shah period this leader was presented as modernizer and progressive politician and his opponents as Islamic militants or criminals.

The *Columbia Journalism Review* states that

"By and large the American news media routinely have characterized the Iranian conflict as the work of turbaned religious zealots in league with opportunistic Marxists rather than - as they might have - the reaction of people outraged by a repressive regime. By doing so the press has helped to misinform American public opinion and narrowed the range of debate on this bellwether foreign policy crisis." (Jan.-Febr. 1979)

In fact, the Iranian revolution has revealed many new dimensions in the relationship of mass media and public diplomacy. It is probably true that the major Western media approached the crisis from their own ideological viewpoint. Thus, for example, such details as the attempt of the mediator of the Pope in the hostage-crisis was given much publicity but not the answer of Ajatolla Khomeini to this representative of the great Christian leader which was rather informative. It has been a situation where the powerless of the world wanted to speak to the

powerful through the world media with certain success. This communication strategy is not new in the history of modern mass media as pointed out by Alex P. Schmid and Janny de Graaf in their study "Insurgent Terrorism and the Western News Media" in the Dutch State University of Leiden (1980).

Some representatives of the powerful media centers of the world have reacted to the new trends in world news coverage. Because of the new technology, notably portable videocameras and satellite stations, there is almost instantaneous and sometimes live coverage of such processes as the Iranian revolution, the Nicaraguan or Salvadorian civil war, etc. But this progress in the coverage has been accompanied by certain other changes which indicate anxiety in the Western media establishment. Michael Mossettig and Henry Griggs wrote in *Foreign Policy* (No 38/Spring 1980):

"However, the technology that made this kind of coverage possible has been accompanied by a growing sophistication on the part of governments, especially those in the Third World, and of revolutionary groups . . ."

The authors continue that a former under secretary of state, George Ball, has bluntly asserted that "the greatest communications network in the world has been at the service of the government of Iran." What concerned him as well as the broadcast profession was that the instantaneous communication was one-way . . . "The Iranians talked to the American government and public via the three privately owned U.S. networks but they did not make their state-owned television system available for Americans to talk to Iranians."

A veteran U.S. broadcast correspondent says that "correspondents of his generation were expected to live in a country and know its language, culture, and history. Now, he says, a group of mobile correspondents without that background is covering stories of increasing complexity. They are dealing with countries and people who know how to use the American media." What the authors conclude is that "*we are becoming more vulnerable as they are becoming more skilled.*"

Is this really the case in the global flow of information and what do we really know on the basis of past communication research in the flow of news and other mass media?

It seems that we have at least two types of studies. One group is composed of empirical surveys and analyses of the actual state of information and mass media flows and the other of more ambitious attempts to understand or interpret the nature of international communication. Unfortunately the conclusions are often on a level of sophisticated journalism rather than solid social scientific thinking and the policy recommendations reduced to such thing only as a quantitative increase of the flow or improvement of the technical facilities of the communications media as if the core of the problem would be socio-technical only.

I did my main work on the international flow of television programmes and news some ten years ago and some more studies on the European television news exchanges a few years later. At this time we could in an empirical way demonstrate the real nature of the world information system and the one-way flow. It

was a time when there were growing needs to get a two-way flow or at least a balanced flow between and within nations. There was also a period of improving international relations in general and a prospect of detente at least between the Western and Eastern countries with a major consequence in the European level also in the field of journalism and information exchanges.

The theoretical frame of these studies was not well developed and was practically non-existing in the reports. This made it easy to use the findings in different countries with different ideologies. However, it would be wrong to say that there were no theoretical assumptions at least implicit in those studies.

Although many of my own findings were presented in form of a state-centric approach (such as imports and exports of programmes in given countries), the real school of thought behind the exercise was rather one of a global stratification approach. The data gathering was planned and carried out in order to find the concrete forms of international relations in the field of information as seen in the light of imperialism theory, dominance theory or world system approach. It was known that the international system was characterized by certain dependencies, inequalities or even penetration and there was notable interest to get an idea on how these relationships are formed in the field of communication and information. In addition to this, the efforts to create new forms for exchange between East and West as well as in the new international order gave impetus for critical and quantitative surveys.

The main findings of my 1973 study can be summarized as follows. There are two indisputable trends to be discovered in the international flow: (1) a one-way traffic from the big exporting countries to the rest of the world, and (2) dominance of entertainment material in the flow. These aspects together represent what might be called a tendency towards concentration. The same tendency is clearly noticeable in the importation and exchange of newsfilm: the distribution of TV news materials is concentrated in three world-wide agencies: the British *Visnews*, the half British and half U.S. *UPI-TN* and the U.S. *C.B.S.-Newsfilm*.

In the East-West flow it could roughly be estimated that of the approximately 3000 hours of programmes flowing from the Western countries to East Europe roughly one third is composed of sports, 10-20 per cent of news, current affairs and documentaries, and the rest - approximately a half - consists of films and entertainment. Similarly, the reverse flow of approximately 1000 hours flowing from Eastern Europe to Western countries can be estimated to include almost two thirds of sports, some 10 percent of news, and the other quarter mainly feature films and series. (*Television traffic-a one-way street?* Unesco 1974).

In another study of television news exchanges in Europe I found out in 1976 that the news-film flow very much follows the common trade in the flow of television programme material as a whole. Although satellite communication creates technical possibilities for the two-way flow of information, the experience so far proves that there is only a one-way flow: from Northern America and Europe to the developing countries and even to the socialist countries. I myself concluded at the time that "there can hardly be expected any essential changes in the imbalanced flow of news-film between East and West because of the various kinds of news criteria". The exchange can, I thought, in the existing international

climate of the time be increased in various special theme groups. (*Television news in Europe*, University of Tampere 1976).

When drawing together the research findings of the 1970's the British journal *Communication Research Trends* concluded in 1980 (No 2/1980) that in the nineteenth century the line of international communication tended to follow the paths of the North-Atlantic empires. After World War II national liberation movements in Africa, Asia, and now in Latin America, have changed the political organization of the world. Yet the old structure of economic and information dependency persists. The new nations, says the journal, rightly contend that they will not achieve real independence until they build a new pattern of equitable and horizontal communication themselves.

It was further concluded that the past research was mainly analysing the structure and functioning of the "old order" as contrasted to the demands of "a new international information and communication order." Priorities for research were analysis of the economic and political processes by which dependency in communication institutions is maintained, study of how national liberation movements generate more independent communication policies and indigenous cultural expression, and study of trends toward more horizontal and cooperative communication between developing countries.

The studies of the information flow aroused much attention including my own studies. It is therefore a little surprising how little other efforts were made in this direction. Some attempts to elaborate or redefine the problem as analysed in my own flow studies were made. The most serious quantitative analysis is the one by the *International Institute of Communications* on TV flows. Any serious researcher will soon find the difficulties of compiling any representative data on these issues from different social systems and countries.

In any case, this problem still seems to trouble some leading figures in the field of communication research. In the last Congress of the *International Association for Mass Communication Research* in Caracas, Venezuela in 1980, one topic for debate was the new structure of international communication. In this congress Ithiel de Sola Pool from the *Massachusetts Institute of Technology*, U.S.A., assessed the role of research in structuring the international communication. He found several interesting aspects to be explored including the historical perspective which was lacking in my own studies. He wrote (1980):

"The existing studies of imbalanced flows have barely touched on these questions (historical perspective, time series, etc. T.V.), for they have been essentially ahistorical. An example would be the Tapio Varis study of TV program imports. Its deficiencies were justified because that study done in 1973 was the first study of the subject. It was hard enough at that time to get any data, much less a time series. What is remarkable, however, is that it is only now a decade later that the crucial questions are being explored. Peter Gould and the *International Institute of Communications* are trying to put together a world atlas of TV flows. If they succeed it will be possible to assess the significance of Varis findings. Many countries at that time had

very rudimentary TV systems. They had limited studios, no backlog of programs in cans to replays, few trained personnel. Naturally they turned to where they could acquire programming most cheaply. What did they do? Did it create a reinforced pattern of dependency or did it allow them to build up a TV system which later on came to have the experience it needed for more independence? I have a guess. Others here may guess differently. The important point is that good research trying to answer such questions in a historical way does not exist . . ."

This rather long quotation is an example of the type of recognition but also criticism of the flow studies. Implicit in the criticism is an attempt to minimize or turn around the main findings of the flow studies. Legitimate criticism, however, focuses on the lack of historical analysis of the problem. But one could equally well point out other weaknesses of the flow studies. This is well summarized in the same world congress by Cees J. Hamelink (1980):

"No pertinent theoretical framework for the study of international communication has yet been developed and as a result there is continuing dependence on: mass media theories (usually fragmentary, and based on obsolete psychological and sociological notions), political science theories on international relations (usually inadequate descriptions of status quo situations), imperialism/dependency theories (usually too narrowly confined to transfer mechanisms)."

I can fully agree with this analysis by Hamelink.

But what is the research policy answer by de Sola Pool and his approach to the flow studies? He points out that recently there was a meeting in Cairo on Third World News Media. For that meeting, content analyses were commissioned in various parts of the world as to the distribution of news coverage. De Sola Pool writes that "the results did not support the notion that the whole world is reading about the West, rather than about the news that affects them." He refers to some studies which show that prime interest in the media is in domestic news, followed by third world and first world news:

This sort of quantitative figures in no way changes the basic claims of the flow studies. In fact they do not even essentially complement them because in addition to the rough quantitative figures of the flow studies we need *qualitative* dimensions and criteria.

We know that the standards of our news media in choosing their items are such as dramatism, spectacularity, actuality, unusualness, stereotypes, comprehensibility, etc. By these standards the news becomes attractive but not necessary a true image of the real world.

When summarizing the evidence of content analysis in international information flows Denis McQuail (1981) finds out that "everywhere the media remain national in their organisation and reach" and that "studies of content clearly confirm the existence of a structure of national media systems, in which some, through

their cultural, political or economic dominance, have become the main providers of the flow of media products, messages and images." He also points out how even the information-rich societies maintain relative poverty in the world view of their media and how the research evidence tends to yield a somewhat pessimistic view of the achievement of mass communication in "moderating divisions, discontinuities and ignorance." McQuail concludes: "In this light, it may not seem so surprising that, at the level of national and international policy making, there is more talk of restriction than of further liberalisation."

It seems to me that there were no satisfactory attempts in the 1970's by communication scholars to give adequate *theoretical understanding* of the issues. I find the work of Karl W. Deutsch most interesting and relevant in this context. His view that "the more effective a communication system gets, the more sharply separate does it become from all those groups of languages which it cannot incorporate" is central in challenging the beliefs of the integrative role of world communications. The national communication system may result in an autonomy which is comfortable and reassuring but also blocks information from the outside environment upon which a social system's adaptive capacity and ultimate survival depend.

This view may assist in interpreting the McQuail conclusions above.

Konrad M. Kressley used the data of my own flow studies to test the Deutsch's hypothesis that the relative growth of communications within nations tends to be associated with decreasing international exchanges (*The Journal of Politics*, No 2, 1977).

He had a certain time dimension in his approach while it was hypothesized that as broadcasting systems enhance their capacity for domestic production, there will be a corresponding decline in the use of foreign video materials, i.e. communications closure. Kressley concluded that "the Eurovision experience proves that while the sheer volume of international broadcasting has grown, it is shrinking in comparison to locally produced program materials. This supports Deutsch's contention that the dominant forces in today's nation states continue to predispose societal closure despite availability of integrative technology."

In this light, the findings of the research on "News from the Third World" by the *Peace Research Centre* at the University of Nijmegen (1979) of the reception of *IPS* material in the Netherlands may not be so surprising as it may seem in the first reaction. The difficulties of an alternative Third World news agency in entering a Western media market were summarized in four problem areas: the criterium of objectivity, the problem of mentioning the source, aspects of content and theme, and so called professional problems.

The interesting thing in resisting the publicity of *IPS* news in the Dutch news agency was that it was claimed that the Dutch public is interested only in such information that is already connected with the existing Western interests like economic cooperation, energy, traditional communities, and women's problems. The authors of the study conclude that "in fact they only ask for more of the same kind of information."

Consequently, the scant research work with some time dimension and theoretical ambitions do not seem to lead to a conclusion that the technological progress would increase openness and alternative information or inter-cultural communication.

Although there is no real communication research basis for the new orientation of our thinking, there still are certain other authoritative documents dealing with communications. The view of world communications was still rather idealistic in the Hutchins Commission (1946) when communication was seen to link "all the habitable parts of the globe with abundant, cheap, significant, true information about the world from day to day, so that all men increasingly may have the opportunity to learn, know, and understand each other." But this view contained some important elements which were even more stressed elsewhere in the report: "The surest antidote for ignorance and deceit is the widest possible exchange of objectively realistic information - true information, not merely more information . . ."

This view openly challenges the popular political demands for increasing the flow of "all kinds of information" and for a mere quantitative increase without any qualitative aspect of the content. Some groups claim that an unhindered free flow of all kinds of information would be a guarantee for peace and human rights. Llewellyn White and Robert Leigh already openly questioned this philosophy in the work of the Hutchins commission. They point out that "there is evidence that a mere quantitative increase in the flow of words and images across national borders may replace ignorance with prejudice and distortion rather than with understanding."

We can, of course, also question the assumptions of White and Leigh in their work. In that case, however, we should question many other things too, including the philosophy of UNESCO in its very Constitution. The first article of the constitution demonstrates that the object of UNESCO is to contribute to the preservation of peace and security by promoting cooperation between nations by the help of education, science, culture and communication. Furthermore, under the Constitution the Member States of UNESCO

"Believing in full and equal opportunities for education for all, in the unrestricted pursuit of objective truth, and in the free exchange of ideas and knowledge, are agreed and determined to develop and to increase the means of communication between their peoples and to employ these means for the purpose of mutual understanding and a truer and more perfect knowledge of each other's lives." (sixth preambular paragraph)

What is obvious is that one cannot conclude from this Constitutional task a demand of an unhindered free flow of information only but of such free exchange and flow of ideas and knowledge which includes the employment of the mass media for the purpose of understanding and a *truer and more perfect* knowledge. This is clearly a demand on the contents of the flow. In fact the same philosophy has been repeated in the much debated Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe when the Helsinki Final Act speaks of "the need for an

ever wider knowledge and understanding of the various aspects of life in other participating States" (Preambular to the Section dealing with information).

There is a clear momentum for communication scholars to extend the flow studies into an analysis of how such crucial problems of mankind as disarmament, development and human rights are presented in the national media and the news flow. If it is true that the effective system of national mass media rather blocks global information than opens it we need more analyses on how in this situation such vital problems as disarmament, arms race and security are presented in the national mass media systems and international flow in order to contribute to the solutions of these problems.