

Philip Tichenor

Structure, communication & social power *)

Evolution of the Knowledge Gap Hypothesis

Knowledge as a principal basis of social power has historically been the focus of social control measures. Exclusive employment of scribes by kings, restricted use of the Gutenberg press by the church, and control of vast bodies of financial data by banks are manifestations of this emphasis. What is transmitted to whom has always been at the crux of maintenance or enhancement of the status of the more powerful segments of society.¹⁾

Advances in communication technology as well as geometric increases in the knowledge base create a need for revision of existing modes of knowledge control. Scientists, educators, politicians, and theologians, as well as leaders in other sectors of society, have traditionally justified information campaigns as essential to providing people with public knowledge for their own development or welfare. This apparent altruism reinforces the belief that maximum diffusion of knowledge would tend to equalize knowledge among the different groups in the social system.

The equalizing effect of information dissemination, while a desirable goal in some social philosophies, is not supported by the empirical research findings that groups gain access to and acquire knowledge at differential rates. The relationship between current knowledge level and differential rates of knowledge growth has been a continuing concern of the research program in Rural Sociology at the University of Minnesota since the mid-1960's. This research on mass communication of information has evolved from an initial emphasis on status-based flow of information to an emphasis on structural factors and knowledge differentials among interest groups. In effect it is a

movement from a micro subsystem analysis to a more macro subsystem perspective of the effect of community organization upon patterns of mass media communication

The initial hypothesis

Early analyses of mass communication in our research emanated largely from the social organization aspects of the Westley-MacLean model, which had the advantage of emphasizing linkages between the source, channel and audience components of the communication subsystem and their implications for information flow and acquisition.^{2,3)} Early on, analysis of data underscored the importance of characteristics of community structure in determining the success which a purposive source would achieve in placing information in newspapers. Usage of county agricultural agents' purposive messages by newspapers was greater in small, more homogeneous communities where agriculture was a dominant part of the local economy. Community structural characteristics were more related to newspaper usage of information than were personal interactions between editors and agents.⁴⁾

A structural perspective appeared to provide a fruitful framework for addressing a fundamental question about why mass media information campaigns often fail to achieve their desired objectives.^{5,6)} The structural approach, rather than assuming information campaign failure, provided the hypothesis that:

As the infusion of mass media information into a social system increases, segments of the population with higher socio-economic

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status tend to acquire this information at a faster rate than the lower socio-economic segments, so that the gap in knowledge between these segments tends to increase rather than decrease.

This hypothesis concentrated on formal education as an indicator of group status. The hypothesis does not contend that lower status groups stay "information poor" or "get poorer" in an absolute sense, but that *relative* disparities in knowledge increase as the flow of information increases.⁷⁾

Relevant evidence supporting that initial hypothesis came from a variety of sources. The gaps in knowledge about outer space research, between more and less educated segments, increased as predicted from the early 1950's to the early 1960's, during a period of high publicity on this topic. A secondary analysis of Samuelson's data on a newspaper strike suggested that temporary suspension of a newspaper may lead to a temporary decrease in the public affairs knowledge gap.⁸⁾ A field experiment in Minnesota indicated higher knowledge gaps for topics that had received higher levels of coverage in the press, compared with those receiving lower levels of coverage. These gaps are consistent with a print media system which mirrors the existence of differentials in the social system.

Evidence from other studies

Other investigators in a number of cultural settings provided evidence supportive of the knowledge gap hypothesis.^{9,10,11,12)} Several of these researchers studying agricultural diffusion programs in developing countries found that inequities in knowledge often emerge in previously egalitarian societies as a result of programs for diffusion that intentionally distribute information to higher status segments. Beltran's analysis illustrates the extent to which the disparity-increasing consequences of developmental programs have become a major issue in third world na-

tions.¹³⁾ Saxer reported knowledge gaps from studies in several different nations.¹⁴⁾ These works indicate that if a program of dissemination consciously denies access to information among certain groups, disparities will occur. The knowledge gap hypothesis indicates that it need not be conscious, but that the elements of the social system will operate to deny equal levels of access and accrual of knowledge.

Fry concluded that dependence of high status individuals on newspapers, which are media oriented to high status groups, was one of the operative factors in knowledge gaps about public affairs.¹⁵⁾ Bultena, Rogers and Conner found that coordinated programs on a conservation project in Iowa led to relatively greater information gain among more educated groups.¹⁶⁾ Schreiber suggested not only that increasing publicity leads to knowledge gaps, but that the gap has direct relevance for opinion changes on such issues as support for a woman for the U.S. presidency.¹⁷⁾

Several studies produced evidence that television may have the same effect on knowledge gaps as newspapers. Werner reports a study in Norway, in which televised messages promoting books for children succeeded in reaching five times as high a proportion of middle class families as working class families, even though the working family children were the intended audience.¹⁸⁾ Katz, Adoni, Parness and Cohen found that economic news reporting on Israeli television increased disparities in knowledge between more and less educated groups.¹⁹⁾ In the American televised election debates of 1976, the apparent outcome was increased knowledge gaps. Several studies in Europe reported evidence of this effect, including those cited by Nowak in Scandinavian nations.^{20,21,22)}

Structure and information control

Initially, the knowledge gap hypothesis was derived from a social systems framework. Further elaboration of the structural factors underlying the know-

ledge gap awaited further analysis. As indicated in a basic theoretical statement published in *Journalism Quarterly* in 1973, knowledge is controlled primarily in the interest of system maintenance.²³⁾ The system being maintained might be the media subsystem itself or a source subsystem with which the media have interdependent relations such as a unit of government, business, medicine, academia, or the social system as a whole. System control occurs through two different but overlapping processes within the media subsystem, feedback-control and distribution control. Feedback-control refers to reactive communication, which serves a regulatory function for other subsystems and for the total system. For example, media reporting of (a) one politician challenging another and (b) responses of interest groups to media reports are different aspects of the feedback process. Distribution-control, which can occur independently or jointly with feedback-control, serves a maintenance function through selective dissemination of information and withholding of information. Censorship in this perspective is but one type of distribution-control. Editorial choices constitute another type. A third would be strategic announcing of acts of business or government as accomplished facts, which while distributive in origin may of may not have feedback consequences, depending on the organized capabilities of interested publics to respond.

The structural hypothesis about these processes is supported by data indicating that the distributive aspect of system maintenance will tend to be the overriding concern of media in structures that are less differentiated and more dependent upon primary communication and consensus in decision-making.²⁴⁾ A corollary is that the more differentiated a system, the more likely media are to perform a feedback-control as well as a distributive function. Conflict is structurally inherent in highly differentiated structures, such as large urban communities. As differentiation and conflict situations increase, the primary,

face-to-face type of interaction of the more homogeneous community becomes inadequate for meeting the information needs of the constituent interest groups. The more differentiated structure, therefore, is more likely to have a press and other mass media that report conflict and to have a variety of formal mechanisms such as labor-management negotiations and other bureaucratic procedures that serve to moderate conflict without disrupting the system itself. Less differentiated structures depend on a relative absence of overt conflict, reinforced by media such as weekly papers that play down or avoid conflict. Data from 88 newspapers provided strong support for this model. The form and function of the media are related to the needs of the structure rather than to the needs of the media subsystem itself.

Other considerations in the knowledge gap hypothesis

Analysis of the fundamental characteristics of social structure, and communication processes within those structures, created the need to specify conditions under which knowledge gaps would be greater or lesser in magnitude. Empirical analyses included conflict, the intensity of the conflict atmosphere, and the pattern of media coverage which is determined by the organized forces that initiated the conflict itself.²⁵⁾

Further analysis indicated that within any given structure, conflict is a major factor in knowledge differentials. The higher the proportion viewing the issue as conflictive, the lower the knowledge gap.²⁶⁾ As an illustration, one community had been put on a "mercury danger list" by a state health agency report, implying that the town's popular fishing and resort lake was so polluted that fish from its waters should not be eaten. Local leaders claimed publicly that the community had been unfairly singled out by the report and stood to suffer economically as a result. The "whole town talked" about this issue and knowledge was fairly uniform across different

levels of education. On the other hand, the gap between high and low educational groups was wider in another community where regionalization of political boundaries was an issue of conflict among the leaders but not the public at large. While there has been relatively little research elsewhere on the effects of conflict as a variable in knowledge gaps, Bonfadelli concludes from European research that structures with greater degrees of conflict have smaller knowledge gaps.²⁷⁾

While characteristics of community structure and conflict conditions are important, other characteristics of information programs are equally important in the magnitude of gaps. In applying the structural perspective to an experiment on nutritional information for children, it was found that the degree of organizational support in the school nutrition education program was more important than socio-economic characteristics of the family.²⁸⁾ But any information program that wishes to reduce disparities must be organized in such a fashion as to counter the existing structural factors that lead to differential accrual of knowledge. Shingi and Mody reported evidence from India, as did Galloway from Australia, that diffusion programs do not lead to increasing knowledge gaps in all cases. The type of knowledge and the way in which the information program is structured can limit or reduce those gaps.^{29,30}

Media structure, leader roles and gaps in power

Most of the studies on the knowledge gap concentrated on differentials between higher and lower status groups. The consequences for maintaining the relatively low social power of groups was clear in a variety of programs, including the rural development programs mentioned earlier. In the U.S., the enthusiasm behind the War on Poverty in the 1960's was dampened by findings that projects designed to ameliorate differences actually increased power status for groups that were initially more

advantaged. Project Head Start, Model Cities programs, and the internationally-distributed "Sesame Street" were all found to increase the relative advantage in skills among middle-class groups, over the more deprived and lower status target audiences.^{31,32)}

Given that social power is the basic issue in the knowledge gap phenomenon, research in recent years has shifted to a more general question about knowledge distribution. The emphasis goes beyond concentration on differences among status groups per se to knowledge differentials among all types of groupings that have vested interests in generation, dissemination, acquisition and utilization of information. This suggests that media organization be analyzed in terms of consequences for (a) power distributions within communities and (b) the power of a particular community vis-a-vis other communities within the larger social system.

At least one other research group, Genova and Greenberg, demonstrated empirically in the mid-1970's that topical interest among individuals was more closely related to knowledge than was education.³³⁾ Interest is a collective concern, the initiating point for social action groups. Power of special interest groups is dependent on relationships with other groups, including mass communication systems that have networks with groups throughout the system.

Pursuit of these structural considerations has led to serious questioning about whether newspapers, or other media, serve as the autonomous channels that a "Fourth Estate" philosophy might imply. Media are as integral to the system as are churches, schools, businesses, or any other social agency. Media reflect the dominant perspectives of the system, and that means the perspectives of the dominant centers of power. In American society, the general outlook of the media channels, especially newspapers, has been described frequently as conservative and pro-business in character.^{34,35,36,37,38,39)}

This is not to deny that they have also been described by threatened power figures as liberal or even radically leftist. The extent to which established power groups themselves may recognize the support they get from media has been investigated. In two communities, public officials and leaders of citizen groups were interviewed, as members of other established groups or less-established, emerging groups. They were asked whether media were "harmful" or "helpful" to their organizational goals. The results were clear. The established leadership group was far less likely to perceive "harmful" media impact on their organizations than were the less established citizen group leaders. Similarly, members of a newly-organized agricultural protest group were more critical of newspaper coverage of a "tractorcade" demonstration than were leaders of government agricultural agencies or older, established farm organizations.

The clear implication of this research is that media, which are structurally constrained channels reporting on public issues, systematically project definitions of issues which are conducive to the interest of established power groups. By doing so, they reinforce or increase, through their feedback and distributive functions, the gaps in social power between established groups and other groups.

Media support of the status quo may not be apparent in highly charged conflict situations. Intense conflict often produces criticism of media by members of the status quo as "unstabilizing influences" or "sensation mongers" that "blow issues out of proportion". Media as social mirrors reflect perspectives not merely of power alone, but of power *relationships* in society. Where power is vested in a small group, monarchical or oligarchical, media will exclusively project that groups' perspective unless another group develops a countervailing power base for organized media strategies. Serious challenges lead to uncertainties in power relationships, and reporting these uncertainties elicits

criticisms from groups whose power is in question. Even in periods of great political instability, media reporting supports the basic institutions and agencies deemed central to survival of the system. In the American system, this means reinforcement of the courts, legislative bodies and executive offices whose authority goes basically unquestioned. The debates are over role performance *within* those bodies, and not whether they should exist or not. In reporting these debates, the weight of media coverage is structured in large part to reinforce the status quo, and therefore the existing power structure.

Media structure and knowledge

The media system, or media mix, is a component of community structure that has implications for the knowledge levels of communities. Just as knowledge control has implications for power differentials among groups *within* communities, the knowledge control outcomes of media structures have implications for communities as they relate to other communities and to centers of political and economic power. Outlying communities of 5,000 or less in the American system are generally served by weekly newspapers, and cities of 10,000 or more generally by daily papers. Suburban communities have varying types of local newspaper systems, some weekly and some daily.

Differences in media structure, as an aspect of total community structure, appear to have considerable impact on levels of knowledge about public affairs. Generally, level of knowledge about *local* issues is highest in urban centers that have daily papers, compared with small, more homogeneous communities served by weeklies, or suburbs where strictly local news is confined primarily to a weekly that has a secondary or tertiary role in the media mix. Included in this research is the question of the structure of media ownership and patterns of journalistic performance under different ownership arrangements. Leadership marginality in media own-

ership provides a structural basis for active media reporting that may have profound ramifications for community knowledge about matters of civic concern. Hence, it has implications for the power position of the local community vis-a-vis external agencies and other communities with whom there is competition for political and economic resources.

Editor marginality, born of the interdependence between community and larger society, may lead to a pattern of newspaper reporting that is unlikely to occur where the ownership has either an entirely local orientation or an entirely external orientation. Preliminary results from a study of 83 Minnesota newspapers indicates that daily newspapers which are non-locally owned tend to report less controversy than those locally-owned. Given the demonstrated tendency for a conflictive at-

mosphere to lead to a higher public awareness of issues, external ownership may well be a factor suppressing knowledge of public affairs issues. Such ownership might therefore contribute to a knowledge gap between communities, compared with those communities in which the editorial leadership fulfills the type of marginal role that is oriented toward drawing attention to public affairs issues. In an era when local communities and regions find themselves increasingly dependent on external sources of control, the relative disparities in knowledge between communities and other power centers has become a matter for widespread social concern in the world at large. It might be well for research on knowledge differentials to focus on the direct implications for differentials in social power among principal constituent segments of a society.

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Discussie met Ph. Tichenor

Mevrouw Einsiedel (Syracuse University, U.S.A.) bijt het spits af door op te merken, dat kritiek gerechtvaardigd is op de neiging die de media hebben om conflicten op te blazen. Anderzijds is het zo, dat door verslaggeving over conflicten men zich over het algemeen meer bewust wordt van bepaalde zaken. Zij vraagt Tichenor deze discrepantie met elkaar in verband te brengen.

Tichenor beaamt, dat dit in tegenstrijd met elkaar lijkt. Een en ander hangt evenwel erg af van het type conflict dat zich voordoet. Hij verhaalt dan over een onderzoek naar de perikelen rond de aanleg van een bovengrondse hoogspanningslijn in Minnesota. Het eerste stadium van dit conflict speelt zich af in vergaderzalen waar hoorzittingen worden gehouden. Berichtgeving hierover leidt tot een toenemend begrip voor allerlei aspecten die met de aanleg van deze lijn verband houden. Bij bepaalde publieksgroepen is er zelfs een aanzienlijke toename van de kennis over deze kwestie. In de volgende conflictfase wordt er op luidruchtiger, meer demonstratieve wijze uiting gegeven aan de ongenoegens. Er worden protestdemonstraties gehouden en monteurs, die bezig zijn met de aanleg van de hoogspanningsmasten, worden lastig gevallen. Nu er sprake is van een open conflict besteedt ook de televisie er aandacht aan. Dit heeft echter niet tot gevolg dat iedereen goed geïnformeerd raakt. Over wezenlijke aspecten aan deze zaak, zoals de energiebehoefte in het algemeen en de bouw van deze hoogspanningslijn in het bijzonder, stijgt het kennisniveau niet. De publieke aandacht richt zich als gevolg van de behandeling van deze kwestie door de media voornamelijk op de conflictgedragingen zelf.

Van Woerkum (Landbouwhogeschool Wageningen) merkt op, dat de lezing van Tichenor nogal sociologisch van karakter is. Hij vraagt zich af, waarom die sociologische verklaringen niet gecombineerd kunnen worden met verklarin-

gen van meer psychologische aard. Tichenor antwoordt, dat eind vijftiger begin zestiger jaren die gecombineerde benadering wel degelijk werd toegepast. Echter, het sociaalpsychologische model, dat daarbij werd gebruikt, bleek niet voldoende. Niet dat hij nu aan het sociaalpsychologisch element afbreuk wil doen, maar, zo gaat hij verder, er wordt nu meer gekeken naar leerprocessen binnen een sociaal raamwerk. Het is dus niet alleen zo, dat mensen die over een grotere kennis beschikken ook sneller iets in zich opnemen. Belangrijker is, dat deze mensen eenvoudig sociaal zijn te lokaliseren. In Amerika is het bijvoorbeeld zo, dat het al of niet bezitten van een eigen huis, een van de belangrijkste variabelen is om te voorspellen of iemand een bepaalde krant leest. Tichenor komt dan op het volgende. Onderzoek in Noorwegen heeft uitgeezen, dat televisieprogramma's die speciaal voor gezinnen met een laag inkomen zijn bestemd, vooral bekeken worden door upper- en middle-class gezinnen. Een verklaring ligt niet alleen in het feit dat deze groepen een hoger kennisniveau hebben. Ook de gebezigde taal in de programma's en het gebruik van andere symbolen blijkt juist deze groepen meer aan te spreken. Volgens Tichenor geldt ongeveer het zelfde verhaal voor het kindertelevisieprogramma Sesam Straat in de Verenigde Staten. Kinderen uit middle-class milieu's behoren tot de meest fervente kijkers, terwijl dat voor de programmamakers niet de primaire effectgroep is.

Van der Haak (NOS) denkt, dat sociaal wetenschappelijke onderzoekers onderhevig zijn aan een 'middle-class bias'. Volgens hem is het heel wel mogelijk, dat mensen die niet tot de middle-class behoren andere, niet middle-class onderwerpen, veel belangrijker vinden. Met name aan het politiek op de hoogte zijn zou door hen wellicht veel minder gehecht worden. Naar de mening van Tichenor is de informatie waarover mensen uit de middle-class beschikken van cruciale

betekenis in een samenleving. Voor het uitoefenen van invloed moet men over die informatie beschikken. Heeft men bijvoorbeeld bezwaar tegen de aanleg van een nieuwe autoweg dan zal men zijn bezwaren op de juiste manier, dat wil zeggen volgens middle-class normen en waarden naar voren dienen te brengen. Doet men dat niet dan zal het protest weinig of geen effect sorteren. Volgens Tichenor zijn protestbewegingen die hij onderzocht heeft succesvol geweest in zoverre zij er in slaagden middle-class methoden te gebruiken. Men denke hierbij aan het door een belangengroepering inschakelen van een professionele public relations manager of het in de arm nemen van een advocaat. Om überhaupt enige invloed te kunnen uitoefenen moet de lower-class het middle-class spel spelen.

De heer Hendriksen (NOS) stelt de laatste vraag. Hij oppert, dat het concept van de kenniskloof een nogal waardengeoriënteerd standpunt inhoudt. Een

kloof mag vooral niet blijven bestaan, doch moet gedicht of overbrugd worden. Hij vraagt dan of kleine kloven te prefereren zijn boven grote kloven, wanneer men bedenkt, dat bij die kleine kloven overeenkomstige lage informatieniveau's behoren voor de mensen uit de lagere sociaal-economische strata. Of kiest men toch liever voor grote kloven met daaraan gekoppeld een hoger niveau van informatie voor de mensen uit de lower-class? Met andere woorden wat zijn de sociale implicaties van de kennisklooftheorie? Tichenor antwoordt, dat het over informatie beschikken en relatief welvarend zijn hoog met elkaar correleren. De vraag welke kloof het meest te prefereren valt, kan door sociale wetenschappers niet worden beantwoord. Dat is niet hun taak, maar die van de verantwoordelijke beleidsmakers en politici. Onderzoekers hebben alleen maar de opdracht aan het daglicht te brengen wat zich in de samenleving voordoet.