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Trendsetters or trendfollowers*

The contribution of research some concluding comments

Perhaps I should commence this presentation by accusing the organisation of provoking me by saying that my task here today is that of "a chucker out". They wrote that, although I do not exactly know what they meant. They didn't make it clear. But if I am a chucker out, I think I can relate the chucking out in one way or another to the idea of ambulance and firebrigade research.

I am reminded by this task of chucker out, if I understand it correctly, of the old English adage that, after the Lord Mayor's show comes the muck cart. This is a reference to an age before the internal combustion engine, so you can imagine what sort of sweeping up had to be done. Now I don't want to press this point too far. Incidentally, I am referring to the *function* of sweeping up, rather than to the quality of the things I have to sweep up, and that have been presented before me. However, just in case I am misunderstood, I am very fortunate indeed to have such things to sweep up. The quality, I think, has been excellent. But, back to the ambulancemen and the firemen. I will stick with the firemen for the time being. In England the firemen are not just called upon to put out fires; they also have another function, which is perhaps best illustrated when they have to climb up large trees to bring down cats. Now, again, if you would like to link that reference to some of the earlier presentations, I shall try to look at some of those that are out on the limb, or out on the branch, and try to bring them down to

earth. But, in so doing, I hope I don't bring them too far down, and dig my own grave, so to speak, because then I would have to suffer an obituary notice from Carl Erik Rosengren or Herman Franke.

So my down to earth approach has something to do with what Bob White said yesterday. It has to do with my approach to mass communication research in relation to policy and in relation to problems, as I define them. For twenty years now, amongst other things, I have in some way or other performed the role of a research politician, and it's from the standpoint of a research politician that I want to take up one point in Bob's excellent and comprehensive exposition yesterday. The point that I want to take up here is that in presenting the various divisions, the conflicts and the different schools of thought that he did so well, my feeling is that he may have given a too neat and tidy picture. My experience suggests (and this is one of the reasons why, I think) that Bob was correct to say that not very frequently has mass communication research informed policy, although Elihu Katz and George Gerbner, and others, think it has informed policy more in Britain than it has elsewhere in the U.S.A. If that is so, it must be because it has not informed policy at all in the U.S.A. or elsewhere, for we only manage to get through a very little.

But to look at the relationship of research to policy and to the development of mass communication research generally, one characteristic stands out (Larry Gross gave clues to it this morning), and that is "*accident*". There has not been an ordered and planned development. I know it is good from one angle, to talk about the develop-

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ment of a Marxist approach, the development of an ethnographic approach, the development of a positivistic approach, and so on. That is important, but most of the research that has been done in the twenty years that I have been associated with it has come more or less by chance, or even mistakes. There was one time not so very long ago when nearly 70% of all published mass communication research in Britain came from the Leicester Centre. But we need to remember that, in a sense, this institution was founded on an inadequate definition of a problem. We were given a lot of money simply because somebody decided at the time that television was ruining society. Larry Gross may think that was a good position, that it was not the wrong definition of a problem. But my main point is that the funding stemmed more from social-political concern (nothing wrong with that in itself) than from an informed approach to the communication process and the role of media in society. The terms of reference were drafted accordingly.

I wish to draw attention, then, to accidental funding and accidental development. Incidentally, one of the things that I would be really interested in doing when I retire would be to concern myself not so much with the questions that we have asked in research, but the questions that have never been asked in research, because we can't get any money to ask them. I shall come back later to what Bob White was telling us about policy yesterday. But I know that, even today, money is available for certain types of uncritical research, but not for critical enquiries such as those directed at studying the social implications of the development of new communication technology. Social implications are not important – only commercial ones. In a sense, all we can talk about at the research level is what has been done. We can extrapolate from research in various ways, but we can only extrapolate from what has been done. It is very impor-

tant, then, to pay great attention to what has been allowed, to what has been permitted in the field of research. When we do this we will find that there are many of the most vital questions that no one has ever been given the resources to ask.

Referring to Bob White's contribution yesterday, and Karl Erik Rosengren's comments, I agree that it is not very fruitful to pursue the various dichotomies that are frequently used, whether research is conventional or critical, whether it is sociological or psychological, whether it is qualitative or quantitative, whether it is trendsetting or trendfollowing. I don't think we'll get very far following any of these lines. Nevertheless, there is one point I feel I must make about Karl Erik Rosengren's comments when asking us to be aware of the weaknesses in let's say qualitative and quantitative approaches, he then quite softly introduced the idea that the qualitative approach was not really different from anecdotal journalism. I would prefer to refer to what Bob White said earlier, and emphasise the value of the qualitative approach, which ideally would entail systematic observational, ethnographic, participation studies. To reinforce what Larry Gross said this morning, we need multi-methodological mixes, and he gave a good example. Our aim in research, by mixing the methods, is an attempt to put the flesh on the bones. Skeletons are not very attractive, and have limited use. I think all of us appreciate it when they are filled out into a rounder and fuller shape. We might remember that the natural and physical sciences have not been entirely without the benefit of qualitative methods over the years. There is much more to science than quantification. However, I promised not to follow this line too far, and I agree with Karl Erik Rosengren generally about the futility and sterility of pushing these dichotomies and conflicts too far.

If, in the general context of this meeting, I have to find one particular point

that I must stress that marks out what sort of research I would prefer, then it must be the ability to ask the right questions. That comes back to what one of you said yesterday afternoon when referring to Jos Becker's work. It was said that some of this was relatively sterile because there was, in fact, no conceptual or theoretical framework. No one can look at the development of mass communication research over twenty, thirty or forty years without being alarmingly aware of the lack of theory. In this sense we don't want to make some crude distinction between theory and practice. Theory is really the most economical thing we have. It stops us from being over pragmatic, from doing trial and error work every time we go into the field. Unfortunately, so much in mass communication research represents an everyday attempt to reinvent the wheel. Not many people seem to take account of the corpus of knowledge which is there if someone would only try to put it together. This would make our work much more economical and much more fruitful.

Taking this admittedly oversimplified approach about the need to ask the right questions, I emphasise that "right questions" can only spring from appropriate theories, models and conceptual frameworks. We have to think as well as do. We all have our models and favoured approaches. The essence of my model is that it must be holistic, processual and contextual. In other words, we do not look at the media in isolation. The media must be seen together with other institutions and other social processes, and regarded and investigated in the wider social context. If we ask silly questions we are likely to get silly answers, and the fact that we use sophisticated methodology only compounds the problem.

Returning to what Karl Erik Rosengren said yesterday, methods are certainly important, but they are essentially a means to an end, not an end in themselves. I am afraid that I cannot afford

to indulge in Karl's methodological game that will take twenty years to produce the results, and where he may then, as he said, sit under the tree of knowledge with his grandson, having achieved perfection. I have the feeling that by the time twenty years have elapsed there might be no gardens. I feel I must focus *now*, despite our inadequate methods, on the importance of the problem, and the relevance of the question asked, accepting that relevance is decided essentially from a value position.

My approach is also centred more on society than on the media (if I may run the risk of yet another false dichotomy). But even here there are convergencies as well as differences, as we shall see if I compare some of the results from research I have been involved in with some of the material that Larry produced this morning.

Let us take some examples from the much researched area of television/media and violence. I think many people regarded it as a very positive and welcome breakthrough – a turn away from conventional approaches – when George Gerbner, Larry Gross and others began to address the question of media violence not in simple terms of imitation, increased aggression, or something like that, but in terms of the possible repercussions with regard to increased fear and anxiety, and the possible relationships to law and order, and so on. But I would want to go a little further than this. Because of my approach I would want to start with the nature of violence in society – that would be my starting point. I would wish to study the work of criminologists and sociologists and others about the nature, extent, function and causes of violence in society.

If I do this I might even find that there is no need to introduce television into the picture at all. Perhaps it can all be accounted for without the introduction of television. If I look, then, at some of the explanations that have been given by other people for violence in society, by other social scientists, I might come

to the conclusion that violence in society has primarily got something to do with the relationship between goals and means in society, and with overcrowding, relative deprivation, poverty, unemployment, and so on. Following this approach a little further, my first tenable hypothesis about a possible media/violence relationship might not have to do with violence on the screen, but with the degree to which the media – television in particular – is portraying the ostentatious display of conspicuous consumption through both advertising and the display of an affluent lifestyle. Particularly in societies where there is high and ever increasing unemployment, then surely you don't have to be a clairvoyant to look at the possibility of the relationship here between that relative deprivation and frustration and aggression. Now these would be my primary hypotheses.

I am not suggesting that the work done by other people is not valid or useful, but I am suggesting that our main starting point should be with violence in society, and not with violence on the screen. I am concerned with the contribution of the media to this particular situation. I am not going to argue that this is the better approach, but this is an illustration of what I mean by having a model or a theory about society which helps to guide and focus your enquiries.

Let me look at another subject which is central to our concerns here, and on which we have done quite an amount of work over the years. I refer to the relationship between media and racism. We were reminded yesterday by Bob White and others that one needs to locate mass communication research, studies of media, studies of the communication process in an historical setting. This is absolutely essential when you study the development of racism and racial prejudice in Britain, for our starting point here should be that racism and prejudice is endemic in Britain. This is tied to our history, to our colonial past, to our

educational system, and to the development over the years of certain types of economic, cultural and political institutions. It could be that the most interesting thing for a researcher to do in Great Britain is find out the reasons for those few people in Britain who are not prejudiced.

In our study of the media over a long period (and I have to put this in very shorthand terms), we found that the media in Great Britain presented black people – and I use that in the widest collective sense – as a threat and a problem. Therefore, on the whole, the media in Britain tend to exacerbate racial prejudice. This might even be the case with newspapers with liberal editorial policies, for it is the news presentation process over a period of time, governed by the same set of professional news values in all cases that is at the heart of the trouble.

Some of the things mentioned yesterday prompted me to look at what I called the three cornered relationship between mediated experiences on one side, situational, personal or social experiences on the other, and the interaction of these two to produce something that we might crudely call social consciousness. But when we look at this in relation to the research I have just mentioned, we find that the people got their racial labels and stereotypes mainly from the media, so that some people who had no contact with black people at all still had the same stereotypes as those who had contacts, but not necessarily the same degree of prejudice. The emotional, attitudinal level of prejudice came primarily from personal and situational experiences. This may also show that perhaps the situation is somewhat more complex than we are willing to believe.

Still on the same level and the same topic, I have to ask with regard to what has been said over the last day or so, what about behaviour? Larry Gross reminded us this morning that the Americans found themselves talking about "behavioural science" by acci-

dent rather than by rational decision. It is possible though that this might have been a good thing, because I often wonder why social scientists spend so much time studying what people say they do, what they think they do, or what they would like to do, rather than what they actually do. On the occasions when it has been possible to check expressed attitudes against behaviour, there have often been considerable discrepancies.

If we really wish to establish the nature and degree of racial prejudice and discrimination in society, we would be better to examine the practices of housing agents, the rules of working mens clubs, sports clubs, and so on. There you will find out about racial prejudice. Is this not better than asking what would you do in a certain situation and why? There are enough observable, behavioural, structural, organisational indicators all over the place to provide indications of prejudice and discrimination in our society. The main point I am making here – and I hope this will be appreciated – is not to do so much with violence, or race, or discrimination, but has to do really with the need for researchers to adopt a wider approach. It illustrates my holistic or societal approach to the exclusion of other approaches.

Let me give you another illustration of a comparative study that we completed about a year ago on the views of 13-14 year old children in the four countries participating in the study (Canada, Hungary, West Germany and Great Britain), about other countries and people. The essence of this has to do with conceptualization – the giving of meaning – along the lines mentioned this morning. I have only time here to look at the illustrations from the British results. I give you the results only about the four countries the children mentioned most frequently. They happened to be the U.S.A., the U.S.S.R., France and West Germany.

The children were asked to evaluate the four countries, positively or negatively; give the reasons for their evalua-

tion, and name the main sources of relevant information. The reasons were classified into "political" and "environmental" (a fun or pleasure orientation), and the sources into media and non-media.

In general, the U.S.A. was positively evaluated – it was seen in environmental, pleasure or non-political terms, and the main sources of the relevant information were the media. The main sources of information about the U.S.S.R. were also the media, but here the evaluation was negative, and the reasons given were political. Information about France was obtained from non-media sources (holidays, schools, etc.), and the evaluation, essentially non-political, was positive.

There were differences amongst the children, of course, but the aforementioned results held for a clear majority in all three cases. But the position with regard to West Germany was different. Here the sample was split. The better educated or upper-class children were favourably disposed, mainly in an environmental or non-political sense, and these children obtained most of their information from personal contacts or experiences, or via the school. On the other hand, the working-class children, not so well educated and without the same degree of contact and personal experience, took a more unfavourable view about West Germany, relying on films and comics for most of their information.

It is not so much the results just mentioned which I wish to stress here, but the research approach which accepts the complexity of the social situation and attempts to analyse, at levels other than the superficial and the obvious. Some of the implications are most interesting. For example, the evaluations, the views and the information obviously do not stem solely from what information is available – there is plenty of political information available about the U.S.A. and France – nor for that matter, as far as we could tell, are they closely related to the *amount* of relevant viewing or reading. It seems,

then, that children come to the viewing situation with a set of predispositions about particular countries and that they attend to, perceive and interpret the information provided by the media in terms of these predispositions and expectations, and within their sets or frameworks. The possible implications of this could be even more interesting. For example, should the media present positive political information about the U.S.S.R. (admittedly unlikely), the children may not register it because they are not appropriately geared for such a positive reaction.

On the whole, most of the children turned out to be ethnocentric – trouble, "bad places", etc., are usually distanced and made remote, although without much respect for political or geographical reality. An additional point of interest when you ask the children about countries which they have never heard of, or are not sure about, they tend to say that if these countries are not seen or heard about on the news, then they must be good.

A piece of research which touches very closely on what Larry Gross was saying this morning has to do with some work that again we have done in four countries (Hungary, Denmark, Australia and Britain) on the media presentation of the family. Larry, in his work, used different conceptual frameworks and different methods, but our results square very much with his. For example, there is the under-representation of the old, the under-representation of ethnic minorities, the under-representation of the poor and the under-representation of the lower working class. The normal media family is made up of generally middle aged, middle class people.

But let us draw attention to another point. At one level the media picture does represent a distortion, but at another level it could be a very accurate representation of the distribution of power in society – a very clear representation of what is actually happen-

ing in society in relation to power.

Also it is worth noting that television has very little to say about problems associated with changes in the family or related institutions, and when problems are highlighted they tend to be interpersonal, individual problems. Solutions are also presented at the same individual personal level. They do not deal with organisational, structural or societal factors. You have here a heavy orientation towards personalising and individualising everything in terms of both the creation of problems and their solution. It is basically our own fault, and if you want to get out of it – get up and go. I would like to continue, really stimulated by what people have been saying here over the past few days, and take advantage of my wide remit and "chucker out" status, to speculate a little further and wider in terms of possible social trends which could provide a context or framework in which we might consider communication development, trend setting or trend following. So let me look at research – not just mass communication research – but other research in sociology in general, and see if I can suggest a set of even wider trends which might possibly provide indications of the parameters or frameworks within which the developments in new communication technology, so frequently referred to here, should be studied.

First, let us consider the movement of work, or certain aspects of it, away from the conventional work place so that it is no longer confined inside specific time/space frameworks, as in the past. With this change, and the development of work in the home, some degree of overlap may occur between compulsory working time and what hitherto has generally been regarded as free time within the same space. In families where this takes place, there would no longer be a clear break between work in the home and outside work. *Of course, there are families and families, and the implica-*

tions will be different in different classes and social groupings. For example, certain groups – usually relatively elite groups – already rely for vital "work" information and communication exchanges on business lunches, cocktail parties, entertainment in the home, weekend social and sporting occasions, and so on.

Secondly, we might ask if there are some indications of the beginning of the end of the school's monopoly of education – a change which might possibly lead to the development of a widespread phenomenon of self-education, and a genuine "continuing education" for which the family (*again, certain types of family*) could assume responsibility.

Signs of the gradual reduction of investment and involvement by the State in the social sector (health, housing, amenities and education), and the end of the conception of public and social services, as some of us have come to know it over the past half century, have been detected. In fact, in some countries, deliberate policies in this connection are being vigorously pursued. Where such trends develop, people might be forced to consider the possibility of finding new ways of managing social relationships, where the emphasis could be on self-organisation, self-supervision and the development of voluntary work and mutual aid systems, based on associative relationships and organisations.

The decline of party politics as we have known it in many countries, and the development of referenda on specific issues and/or in selected areas "community-chest politics", decentralisation and the growth of pressure groups is another trend which could be relevant for our work.

In some places there has been a change in emphasis from productivity to distribution and sales promotion, and this has been accompanied by a change from mass advertising to more specific targeted advertising, and an

increasing diversification of goods corresponding to a fragmentation of the consumer population.

An increasing tendency to question the conventional work/leisure opposition mythologies has been noted. There is some evidence to suggest that a reduction in compulsory working time (this seems inevitable, for one reason or another) has never yet resulted in increased leisure for the groups which are not included in formal work. The lot of some women in Western industrial societies might illustrate this in that non-working women have been said to have no real leisure because leisure cannot exist without work. It has been suggested that the belief that change and freedom can be achieved through leisure, as conventionally defined, *in opposition to work*, is mistaken. Leisure itself can only become an interesting activity, with a creative cultural and social dimension, if it stems from, is an extension of, is complementary to, and is essentially related to the main social activity, which is work.

It has also been suggested that not only is there a decline in the influence of the protestant work ethic, but also in the influence of its successor, the materialistic work ethic. The expressive work ethic, or even the non-work ethic, may have taken over, particularly with younger people who are also said to be more sceptical, questioning of authority, pessimistic, and even despondent as to what the future holds for them. But the evidence is conflicting here, and there are clear differences in attitude, both within and between societies.

It needs to be emphasised that the above points simply refer to some social trends which it has been suggested might possibly apply to a greater or lesser degree in most industrialised societies. They should be seen as examples of some of the things we should consider in what is essentially an holistic approach to research. The

list is certainly not exhaustive, but the development of communication must be examined *in these sort* of terms.

I have already referred to the erosion of the public sector. Coupled with this, and motivated and driven by the same sort of forces, is the attack on the public service concept of broadcasting in Britain. This is a very serious attack, and is related to the development of the new technology. We now have an attack from some of those with vast interests in the new communication technology, who are also press magnates and use their papers in an attempt to undermine the whole idea of the BBC public service concept of broadcasting.

It is worth noting in passing that Bob White referred yesterday – quite rightly – to the peculiar situation in Britain where we have never really had a left wing newspaper – the picture is becoming increasingly unbalanced. Larry Gross also referred this morning to the idea of balance and objectivity in the media, and I would like to emphasise again the unwitting bias which is inherent in the system, and which tends to serve the system and maintain the status quo. Additionally, in more recent times there is evidence of more direct and deliberate control and bias of a clear, political nature.

I come back, Mr. Chairman, to my starting point about firebrigades and ambulances. When I was here some years ago I suggested that most of the research that was carried out was of the firebrigade or ambulance nature, and I pressed for a change. There has been a change, but not in the right direction, for even the firebrigade and ambulances are not called out so frequently, and there have been few, if any, suitable replacements. In the "perfect society" in which we live we have market forces that make sure that everything will be all right. Why should we need an ambulance – there are no sick people? Why do you need a firebrigade – there are no accidents?

In view of what I have already said, you will not be surprised to hear that I would wish to carry out research into the social implications of the new communication technologies. In fact, I am currently doing this, having obtained some funds – not adequate for a comprehensive programme by any means – from a variety of sources.

The governments are not interested in "social implications" – they have made that abundantly clear. But it is possible to obtain public funds to do service, administrative or forecasting research which speaks directly to economic and political needs and interests, as defined by the powers that be. So much for the autonomy of research. Quite simply, innovations in communication technology will be regarded as a success if they make a profit for the operators. Research that might further this end will be welcomed and funded – but research which questions and challenges some of the basic assumptions and existing policies is not likely to be favoured.

We were warned this morning by Larry Gross about the dangers which may spring from certain forms of media ownership and control, and I shall conclude by repeating and reinforcing this warning. If the new communication technologies are introduced, developed and operated according to the policies which obtain in so many of our countries, then the social consequences could be disastrous. We are already beginning to see clear evidence of the widening of the gaps, both nationally and internationally, between the information and leisure rich and the information and leisure poor, and there are other dangerous signals as well.

The signs are not very promising, but we must remember that the answers are still not entirely out of our hands. Essentially, we should all be concerned with *the basic information or communication needs of individuals and/or societies*. Neither technology nor commerce should be allowed to

determine needs. Information and communication needs should be identified and evaluated from a specific value position, and then technological development, communication policy, political and economic decisions should be formulated to meet those needs. One of our main tasks is to identify such needs, and then to do all in our power to meet them. This is no easy matter, but it represents an approach to technological development, media provision and the needs of society which is much to be preferred to the approach which stems from

an unholy mixture of technological and market determinism. It is certainly one that must be explored to the full, for there is ample evidence that basic communication needs will never be met by the unrestricted operation of market forces. The concept of "*public service*" is as essential in broadcasting as it is elsewhere. Unfortunately, at present, in most countries the signs are not good. But it is possible for us to work for change – not just change in the media, but all round change – and that is the challenge.