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Abstract

In the Spring 1959 issue of the *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Bernard Berelson explains why he thinks that communication research may be dead. The pioneers in this field, he says, have abandoned their original interests and those who have followed neither measure up to the pioneers nor have they anything very new to contribute. In passing, he cites the demise of the Committee on Communication at the University of Chicago as symbolic of this state of affairs. In their replies, Berelson's critics say, in effect, that it is uncomfortable but challenging to have to protest their own obituary. They cite numerous areas of inquiry and a variety of studies which, for them, are indicative of a continued vitality in the field of communication research. In the proliferation of examples, however, I think that the critics missed a chance to point out to Mr. Berelson exactly what is and what is not dead. By granting that something has happened to the pioneering type of communication research, it becomes possible to point out more clearly what is alive.

Disciplines

Critical and Cultural Studies

MASS COMMUNICATIONS RESEARCH AND THE STUDY OF
POPULAR CULTURE: AN EDITORIAL NOTE ON A
POSSIBLE FUTURE FOR THIS JOURNAL

Elihu Katz*

In the Spring 1959 issue of the Public Opinion Quarterly, Bernard Berelson explains why he thinks that communication research may be dead.¹ The pioneers in this field, he says, have abandoned their original interests and those who have followed neither measure up to the pioneers nor have they anything very new to contribute. In passing, he cites the demise of the Committee on Communication at the University of Chicago as symbolic of this state of affairs.

In their replies, Berelson's critics say, in effect, that it is uncomfortable but challenging to have to protest their own obituary.² They cite numerous areas of inquiry and a variety of studies which, for them, are indicative of a continued vitality in the field of communication research.

In the proliferation of examples, however, I think that the critics missed a chance to point out to Mr. Berelson exactly what is and what is not dead. By granting that something has happened to the pioneering type of communication research, it becomes possible to point out more clearly what is alive.

The Effects of Mass Media: The Study of "Campaigns"

What Mr. Berelson perceives as dead or dying, it seems to me, is communication research viewed as the study of mass persuasion. Using Mr. Berelson's own analysis, it is possible to show that the pioneers—with the partial exception of Lasswell—devoted themselves to measurements of the relative power of various kinds of communication to change opinions, attitudes, and action in the very short run.³ Elsewhere, this has been called the study of "campaigns"—to sell soap, to reduce prejudice, to induce the enemy to surrender—and this, I think, is what classical mass media research has been about.⁴ Even audience research or content analysis,

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though ostensibly autonomous concerns, may be shown to have been motivated by the problem of short-run effects. The question that best sums up this classical approach, I think, is "What do the media do to people?"

The answer, from study after study, is that the media do less than they had been expected to be able to do. The pioneering phase of communication research discovered that communication campaigns (with the possible exception of marketing) are not often successful in changing opinions, attitudes, and actions. This is a fact that early became apparent to the great men of this field and, in response, they and their students set about devising more complicated, but more valid, models of the process of persuasion. They set out in quest of whatever it is that is really influential (if the mass media are not).⁵ As William McPhee has pointed out, the pioneers of mass media research abandoned the mass media for the more strategic vantage points for the study of social and psychological change such as are provided by psycho-analysis, or cognitive processes, or small groups; in so doing, of course, they have not at all abandoned their original interests.⁶ The trouble with mass media research from the point of view of the student of persuasion, in other words, is that not enough people change their vote-intentions during an election campaign and so it becomes necessary to go to where people do change their votes.⁷ It was the unrewarding commitment to the study of mass media "campaigns", I think, which explains the atrophy which Mr. Berelson has observed. My own opinion is that "campaign" studies may have some life in them yet, if properly reconceptualized.⁸ For the sake of the present argument, however, I am willing to concede the point.

The Functions of Mass Media: The Study of "Uses and Gratifications"

But there is more to communication research, at least potentially, than the study of "campaigns". And there is more—much more—to mass communication than persuasion. Both Mr. Berelson and his critics appear to be in agreement here and, in fact, carefully point out the diversity of interesting possibilities that are open to the communication researcher. Again, however, I prefer to neglect diversity in order to emphasize what seems to me the single, most promising direction for mass communication research. It is promising because: (1) communication research has all the methodological tools necessary to carry it out (as it has not, for example, for the study of long-run effects of the media); (2) communication research has already embarked in this direction with obviously good results, albeit without a clear program; (3) it represents a new kind of interdisciplinary coalition which, although unfashionable, may prove fruitful; (4) it contrasts sharply with the classical formulation of the mass media research problem. The direction I have in mind has been variously called the functional approach to the media, or the "uses and gratifications" approach. It is the program that asks the question, not "What do the media do to people?" but, "What do people do with the media?"

The "uses" approach—as I shall call it—begins with the assumption that the message of even the most potent of the media cannot ordinarily influence an individual who has no "use" for it in the social and psychological context in which he

lives. The "uses" approach assumes that people's values, their interests, their associations, their social roles, are pre-potent and that people selectively "fashion" what they see and hear to these interests.

I do not presume that this is an original idea. Classical studies such as Herzog's or Warner and Henry's studies of the "gratifications" of daytime-serial listening, Berelson's study of what the newspaper "means", Waples' study of "why" people read, Lowenthal's inferences concerning the social functions of biographies in popular magazines all are aimed in this direction.⁹ More recent studies increasingly seem to be approaching mass communications in this way. The purpose of this note, then, is simply to contribute toward making this trend more explicit and more self-conscious.¹⁰

On the Methodology of "Uses" Research

But as compared with the older studies, there is perhaps something essentially new in the more recent "use" studies that have been reported. The well-known study by the Rileys provides a good example: Children who are well-integrated in networks of interpersonal relations with their peers "use" adventure stories in the media for group games while relatively more isolated children use the very same communications for fantasizing and day-dreaming.¹¹ Another example would be the finding that adolescents who are closer to their peers than to their parents prefer movie-going to TV while family-oriented adolescents prefer TV (the hearth of the family) to the movies.¹² Similarly, the opinion-leader studies, looked at in these terms, show that certain kinds of communications "serve" those who are influential for others in performing their social roles.¹³ The key to the newer approach is in the prior selection of significant social and psychological variables in terms of which members of the audience can be classified, e.g., children who are integrated vs children who are isolated. While no less concerned with the functions of the media, earlier studies tended to list a variety of functions without specifying for whom each function was appropriate.¹⁴ Classifying the audience in terms of some meaningful criterion—as recent studies tend to do—makes possible a powerful connection between the book-keeping tradition of audience research, on the one hand, and the concerns of social and psychological theory, on the other. (Incidentally, of course, all this may lead to a considerable increment in our understanding of mass media effects.)

A Bridge to the Theory of Popular Culture

In addition to bringing mass communication research further into the orbit of social science, however, the "uses" approach has the potential for building another bridge, too. This is a bridge to the humanistic tradition of the study of popular culture which has had a continuing interest in the mass media but despite the common concern, almost no interchange with the empirical mass media researcher. There are several reasons for this mutual isolation, but at least one of them is that while mass media research was asking "What do the media do to people?", the popular culturalists were concerned with "What do the people do with the media?". Perhaps this shared formulation will promote communication between the two traditions.¹⁵

Just as this is not the place for a systematic review of empirical studies of mass media "use", neither is it the place for a review of the speculative, provocative hypotheses of the popular culturalists.¹⁶ Their classical theme, of course, is the well-known one of "escape": People "use" the media for flight from political and societal reality. But whether right or wrong, the mass media researcher will find the theorists of popular culture laden with potentially testable hypotheses and the student of popular culture, in turn, will find the mass media researcher not only an hypothesis-tester but a clarifier of concepts (the concept of "escape", much in need of clarification, will profit considerably from being operationalized and will be shown to include several very different things).

On a Possible Future for this Journal

I do not mean to under-value the various other approaches that have been recommended to mass media researchers of the future. It simply seems to me that the "uses" approach is one that we are well-equipped to handle methodologically as well as theoretically. It may also be the key, I suspect, to a more advanced understanding of mass media effects (both short-run and long-run) seen as side-effects of "uses" and "gratifications".

Assuming that interest in this approach continues to accelerate, I am wondering whether there might not be merit to continuation of this journal—which is scheduled, tentatively, to expire with the present issue—as a kind of informal forum for such studies.¹⁷ Its pages could be opened both to students of popular culture and to social and psychological theorists who have researchable ideas about popular culture, on the one hand, and to empirical researchers just returned from the field, on the other. It seems to me that such a forum might contribute substantially to the convergence of the several traditions of research implicated here.

NOTES

1. "The State of Communication Research", Volume 23, pages 1-6.
2. "Comments on 'The State of Communication Research'" by Wilbur Schramm, by David Riesman, and by Raymond A. Bauer, *ibid.*, pages 6-17.
3. See Berelson's list of "typical propositions" from the schools of Lasswell, Lazarsfeld, Lewin, and Hovland, *ibid.*, page 3. The propositions attributed to Lasswell do not fit directly into the interpretation I am proposing, but Lasswell's classic concern with "Who says what to whom under what conditions with what effect" has surely been the key formulation in the field.
4. This point is developed in Elihu Katz and Paul F. Lazarsfeld, Personal Influence, Glencoe: The Free Press, 1956.
5. I think Mr. Berelson is mistaken—or at least my analysis of Berelson's analysis implies this—in including the Lewinian tradition. This tradition, merged with several others, constitutes the field of small-group research which is surely one of the most active fields in contemporary social science as well as one of the best arenas for the study of the effects of (interpersonal) communication. I am confining my own remarks, at any rate, to the study of mass communications. Among the other pioneers cited by Berelson, Carl Hovland has certainly continued with an ex-

PLICIT interest despite (!) the strict theoretical framework he employs.

6. McPhee's point is documented in his unpublished memorandum, New Strategies for Research on the Mass Media, New York: Bureau of Applied Social Research, Columbia University, 1953.

7. Social critics like Orwell, Huxley, Wertham, and others would presumably maintain otherwise. The disparity between the negative findings of the mass media researcher and the continued fear of the media as brainwashers, hidden persuaders, etc., calls for considerable reflection. One must specify, first of all, the conditions under which the media are more or less likely to be persuasive; thus we think we know why totalitarian regimes communicate more "effectively". Secondly, it is important to distinguish between short-run and long-run effects; empirical mass media research has made almost no contribution to the understanding of long-run effects of the mass media on society. Finally, we must continually remain receptive to the possibility that we have missed some subtle something which the social critics have been able to spot.

8. For a creative summary, within a theoretical framework, of what has been learned from studies of the effects of the mass media—as well as for a more optimistic view of this matter than Mr. Berelson's—see Joseph T. Klapper, "What We Know About the Effects of the Mass Media: The Brink of Hope", Public Opinion Quarterly, Volume 21, Winter 1958-59, pages 453-474.

9. Herzog, Berelson, and Waples are excerpted in Wilbur Schramm, editor, The Process and Effects of Mass Communication, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1954; Warner and Henry, "The Radio Daytime Serial: A Symbolic Analysis", Genetic Psychology Monographs, Volume 37, 1948, pages 7-69; Lowenthal, "Biographies in Popular Magazines", in Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Frank N. Stanton, editors, Radio Research 1942-43, New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1943, pages 507-548.

10. Many others have already done so in passing. They include Wilbur Schramm, Dallas W. Smythe, Joseph T. Klapper, David Riesman, William McPhee, James S. Coleman (who helped with some of the ideas in the present paper), and John and Matilda Riley. For the most sophisticated recent statement of a sociological approach to the study of mass communications, see John W. Riley Jr., and Matilda White Riley, "Mass Communications and the Social System", in R. K. Merton, et al., editors, Sociology Today, pages 537-578.

11. Matilda W. Riley and John W. Riley, Jr., "A Sociological Approach to Communications Research", Public Opinion Quarterly, Volume 15, 1951, pages 444-460.

12. Eliot Freidson, "The Relation of the Social Situation of Contact to the Media in Mass Communication", Public Opinion Quarterly, Volume 17, 1953, pages 230-238. Also see the article by Riley and Riley in Sociology Today, *op. cit.*, pages 550-551, and the forthcoming doctoral dissertation by John W. C. Johnstone at the University of Chicago, Social Structure and Patterns of Mass Media Consumption.

13. For a review of opinion-leader studies, see Elihu Katz, "The Two-Step Flow of Communication: An Up-to-Date Report on an Hypothesis", Public Opinion Quarterly, Volume 21, 1957, pages 61-78.

14. "Motivation research", generally speaking, has not yet reached this stage. The showmanship of motivation researchers notwithstanding, there is at least potentially a real parallel in "motivation research" to the "uses" approach advocated here.

15. The recent "reader" by Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White, editors, Mass Culture, Glencoe: The Free Press, 1958, makes an important start in the direction of confronting these traditions with each other.

16. Most of the articles in Mass Culture, *op. cit.*, contain suggestive hypotheses.

17. Herbert Gans suggests the need for a journal of this kind in his "Informal Sociology: A Proposal for a New Publication", American Sociological Review, Volume 23, 1958, pages 441-442. The present proposal, however, is for a considerably more circumscribed effort as far as content is concerned.