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RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COMMUNICATION THEORY AND PRACTICE

by P.R.R. Sinha

Theoreticians and practitioners are often in a squabble. They find it hard to realise the importance of each other in fostering the cause of the discipline they belong to, and often, communication scholars and practitioners find themselves in the same situation. However, it is difficult to think of a theory without any practice and vice-versa. The noted psychologist, Kurt Lewin, once remarked: "There is nothing so practical as a good theory". But the practitioners' apathy and negative attitudes towards theory have emerged perhaps from their exposure to poor theories over a long period of time and a basic misunderstanding about the meaning and ramifications of theory. The test of good theory lies in its pragmatism. A theory which can serve the cause of communication best is endowed with all the practical attributes. Furthermore, merit of a theory has to be judged not on its applicability at the individual (personal) level alone, but at the society and community levels as well.

The academics, on the other hand, must realise their limitations in the absence of a strong practical base. Communication as a field of study has emerged from practical life situations. Seeds of the theory (theories) of communication are sown in the practice of communication. Had the practice of communication not encountered innumerable, complex problems, attempts would not have been made to dig deeper to find suitable answers and solutions. The cause and effect relationship between theory and practice, therefore, is comparable to a chicken-and-egg problem. Nevertheless, it is now recognised by all that both theory and practice are highly inter-dependent. They complement and supplement each other's role all the time, consciously or unconsciously.

As communication is relatively a young subject to study, scholars have their reservations about various theories. This is mainly because various social or behavioural science faculties, to suit their requirements, have been imparting knowledge of communication. It is understandable. Communication does not operate in a vacuum, but works in a society and a community which consists of individuals. In fact, communication provides the common ground for proper understanding of the economic, political, sociological, psychological, cultural, and religious aspects of individuals and society. Since all these social sciences grew and developed earlier than communication, they could not help but include communication as one of the topics for instruction. However, as the process of communication became more and more complex and its ramifications multiplied, communication gradually started to assume the status of a separate subject and science. This has led to the development of various theories and principles of communication.
Is Communication a Science?

Communication permeates all or most of the social sciences on the one hand and technology on the other. This is its distinguishing characteristic. Communication is, therefore, multi-disciplinary and possesses many facts and theories which cannot be claimed by other sciences. There continues to be a tendency not to treat communication as a science as it is young and does not have many theories, and, therefore, it is at most, a 'field of study'. It is 'scientific' but not a science. Let us examine this viewpoint in depth.

To the extent that communication presupposes the existence of desirable goals in the path of human happiness, a serious doubt is raised as to whether it can at all be labelled as a science. The tradition with all sciences has been not to comment upon what should be attained or what is desirable in a given context. This is not entirely true of communication. Most communications view progress in certain directions as desirable, and in others as undesirable. Since the element of desire is simultaneously an ethical and a subjective one, it is exceedingly difficult to introduce freedom from bias in such a situation. Who desires a goal too often determines what is desired. Do people deserve progress after all? Are people prepared to undertake the massive task of lifting themselves up and building such a utopia as communicators may conceive? Physicists built and helped build the atom bomb. But physics has not said whether atomic energy should be used for human benefit or for its destruction. Such an objective view of things gives physics the character of a science for the sake of science. In communication, however, we tend to take the view that science is for man and society, and this considerably biases our objectivity, which is basic to all sciences.

To circumvent this difficulty, let us look at some established sciences. Take, for example, administration. Students of administration say that administration is a science as well as an art. However, it would be a fallacy to assume that a professor of administration could successfully replace and improve upon the work of a successful business executive in action. All the same, the science of administration is concerned with what is likely to happen when the executive chooses a given course of action from the many that are available. The science of administration studies the path that a given decision tends to traverse during the course of its implementation. It studies the administrative process as a natural phenomenon capable of rigorous scientific investigation. On the other hand, the real-life executive is concerned with what decisions to take -- here and now. He is not interested in what generalisations have been established till now by the administration scientists. Instead, he is concerned with how he should act. This element of 'should' is destructive to the science of administration. We may therefore say that the knowledge of a particular phenomenon gained through the scientific method of enquiry makes up the 'science' component of a subject or discipline, and the application of this knowledge and individual experience and ingenuity in real life situations constitute the 'art' component of that subject.

Similarly, communication may be a science as well as an art. A professor of communication is engaged in the science when he is examining the process of communi-
cation upon the introduction of an idea in a given community but the communicator at
the operational level who may be directly concerned with the actual response on the part
of the people, is engaged in the art of communication. However, it is possible to practise
both aspects of the discipline simultaneously.

Regardless of the objections we may raise, there are some unique features of
communication which are not encountered in any other single discipline. As a social
science, communication cuts across many disciplines at the same time. For a long time
now, many questions have been raised and answered with regard to the unique features
and differentiating characteristics of particular social sciences. Unlike other social sciences,
communication owes its genesis to practical life situations. One salient feature of com­
munication is that it is not in opposition to other related social sciences, although we
hold that many realistic attempts are not being made to unify the area of social science.
Communication, being chiefly concerned with real-life situations of a society or a nation
is not concerned with what is a problem for psychologists or economists, but whether
psychology or sociology or economics, or political science can contribute anything to a
clearer understanding of its dimensions or scope. Thus, at times, communication may
benefit from psychology whereas at another time, economics may be more useful; and at
still another time, both may have something to offer.

Journalism, Mass Communication and Communication

At the risk of over-simplification, let me reiterate that journalism, communi­
cation(s), and mass communication do not always denote the same meanings even if they
are similar. Journalism is that part of mass communication which is concerned with the
function of gathering, preparing and distributing timely information (news and news
interpretation) and current opinion. Psychologists refer to 'communication' as a process
for transmitting messages. According to the U.S. social scientists 'communications' stand
for communication system - medium or media through which the process of communica­
tion is extended to reach a small or large number of people. Communications, therefore,
may be synonymous with mass media. Mass communication is the process of communi­
cation as carried on by specialised institutions and agencies, employing various technolo­
gies - print, film, broadcasting, etc., for the purpose of reaching large, heterogeneous and
widely dispersed audiences. Some scholars, however, rightly include interpersonal com­
munication within mass communication. In the context of historical data, it is safe
to conclude that journalism evolved and developed into mass communication as a science
and a subject.

Communication Theories

Various communication theories can be broadly classified (depending on their
relative applications) into human communication; mass communication; and human and
mass communication. Wendel Johnson's theory of schematic stage by stage process of
communication; Mathematical theory indicating Sources-Encoder-Signal-Decoder-Destina­
tion; and Theodore Newcomb's Interactional theory may be put in the category of
'Human communication theory'. Mass communication theories, on the other hand, comprise the noted Four Theories of the Press namely, Authoritarian, Libertarian, Communist and Social Responsibility theories.

Theories that would fit well in the combined category of 'Human and Mass communication theories' consist of one way process transmission belt; two way process; one step flow; two step flow; multi-step flow; Lasswell’s theories, etc.

It may be out of place to discuss at length each of these theories. Nevertheless, each theory bears testimony to the inseparable relationships with the practice of communication. In order to get at a clearer picture of this relationship, let us take up the theory of Harold Lasswell. Lasswell has described an act of communication as:

WHO
says WHAT
in WHICH channel
to WHOM
WITH WHAT effect?

This is also called Five W's model. The relationship between theory and practice vis-a-vis the five W's can be explained also in terms of control analysis, content analysis, media analysis, audience analysis, and effect analysis.

WHO

It refers to the communicator or the source of information or a message. This 'who' refers to all those engaged in act(s) of communication day in and day out. The effectiveness of a media practitioner, an extension worker, a local leader and others as communicators depends on a number of factors. There are enough research evidences to indicate that communicator's effectiveness depends on an interaction of such factors: his cultural compatibility, language compatibility, command over the message, credibility as communicator as perceived by the people, his attitude(s) towards the message, skill in handling the channel, and so on. Researches have even found out the relative importance of these factors in a given situation. A prior knowledge of this relative importance of factors has been used by many institutions and organisations in developing successful strategy for selection of communicators and also for improving their skills and techniques in communication before they are put on the job. The researchers, on the other hand, get the reactions of the communication practitioners to their findings which in turn, help them in undertaking more meaningful studies in future.

WHAT

This is the fulcrum of the act of communication. This 'what' is central to all that goes on in the process of communication. Communicators in general and mass media practitioners in particular, are said to be elite-oriented, perhaps mainly because the bulk of their message caters to a handful of the total population. This concern is echoed mostly in the Third World countries due to wide chasms between the rich and the poor,
due to denial or concentration of benefit to people based on personal, communal or ethnic differences. But whether it is elite or non-elite oriented, the message to be communicated has to be compatible and the language used has to be understood well by the people concerned apart from the content being timely and profitable either financially and/or psychologically. Besides, it should be simple and need not call for too many changes on the part of the people to start with. This again highlights the vital relationship between theory and practice of communication; while the theory provides a clue as to the points to be remembered for successful transmission of message(s) in a system, the practice supplies feedback for refinement and careful selection of message(s) for effective communication.

WHICH CHANNEL

Various channels of communication such as mass communication (radio, TV, film, print) and interpersonal (change agents, friends, neighbours, leaders and others) are used for transmission of message(s) from source to receiver and vice-versa. Mass media especially radio and TV, because of the speed with which they can cover the length and breadth of a country and cut across cultures, have been playing a significant role in creating awareness and interests among its audience. But the interpersonal communication channels are more effective in convincing and ultimately leading one to act upon a message. Research findings have consistently brought to the fore the relative strengths and weaknesses of each channel. Consequently, there have been some attempts in recent years to discuss and decide on a communication strategy indicating inter-relationship between different channels, to achieve the objective of desirable response on the part of the clientele, culminating in their own development as well as that of the society and country they belong to. But the researchers also need to be aware of seeking practitioners' viewpoints on relative merits and demerits of different communication media and the problems encountered in field situations. This would be of great help to them in their efforts in designing and conducting utility-oriented research.

TO WHOM

Communicators are the first victims of any failure in communication. They tend to ask themselves what has gone wrong in the event of ineffective communication. Hence, it is good to subject oneself to introspection and self-evaluation. However, how often do we consider the possibility that a slight increase in attentiveness of the audience in reading, listening or viewing can go a long way in increasing communication effectiveness? This is all the more important because we have to get away from the oft-repeated concept of 'how well have we communicated?' to 'how well is the response?' In development communication, this knowledge is absolutely essential. It is through research findings that we know that no two individuals behave in the same fashion despite their similarity in age, experience, socio-economic background, etc. This has helped us to realise that differences in the knowledge and attitude of the people coupled with their faith in the communicator and channel, compatibility and profitability of the message, availability of resources, and so on, have a direct bearing on the nature and quality of
response. Conversely, practitioners' fund of knowledge about the people's needs, aspirations, values, etc., based on practical experience have greatly helped researchers in respect of selecting pertinent aspects for investigation in their studies.

WITH WHAT EFFECT

The acid test of an act of communication is in the nature and quality of response by the receiver and the nature and intensity of satisfaction by the communicator. This effectiveness, however, is the result of an interplay of all the components of communication, namely, who, what, which channel and whom. Mere acquisition of information may mean effectiveness for some communicators while for others actual change in the thinking and doing would mean effectiveness. This again depends on the parameters of effectiveness set forth either by the communicators or the organisations they represent. In this context, it may be appropriate to mention that the theories of Two-Way Process, Two-Step and Multi-step Flow of Information, Multiplier Effect, Communication as Facilitator and Smoother of Change, Selectivity of Perception, Retention and Response which are the results of the efforts put in by researchers. Adequate information about these theories has no doubt assisted the communication practitioners in drawing up their communication strategies more realistically. Today more than ever before, we have to know 'who talks back?', 'who responds and why?', 'how to make two-way process meaningful?', 'how to pitch the message to the level of understanding of the receiver?' and so on. Empirical evidence on these aspects of communication is of utmost importance to the practitioners for their effectiveness.

CONCLUSION

In short, the relationship between theory and practice of communication is so intimate that it is hard to think of one without the other. It is just possible that some or most of these observations made above are known to communication practitioners and scholars. But how many of us, objectively speaking, are aware of the fact that both the practitioners and scholars have been in constant interaction with each other, consciously or unconsciously, as evidenced by a vast body of knowledge accumulated over a relatively shorter period of time?

As communication practitioners, however, we are constantly engaged in the 'flow of information' process in all directions. The success of this flow of information (achieving the objectives of information, education and entertainment) compels us to come to grips with the realities of the relationships between theory and practice of communication. The need for development is so demanding and exacting especially in the developing countries that there has to be a near perfect balance between theory and practice of communication. It follows therefore that development communication must achieve this balance sooner than later, so that it will be efficient and effective.
SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION

Discussion leader: P.R.R. Sinha

The participants felt that there has been an obvious lack of interaction and dialogue between the theorists or scholars and the mass communication practitioners. Except in academic circles where researchers could be readily understood, the very idea of profiting from theories and research findings has remained a somewhat alien concept. One of the reasons why mass communication practitioners tend to disregard communication theories is because they feel that scholars could be talking about situations years ago, whereas the mass communication scene changes constantly, at a very rapid pace.

It was strongly felt that there was need for continued research -- research that was more action-oriented. Or else, as in the case of the Four Theories of the Press, communication theories and research could either be outdated or become meaningless and may fail to convince practitioners who in fact base their action on well-reasoned guidelines. At the same time, it is often the lack of opportunities for the practitioners to be exposed to communication theories and findings that make them disregard theorists.

One of the possible remedies is to bring communication scholars and practitioners together not only through formal gatherings but through an exchange of information between the two. There is also a need to remove the barrier of jargons which shroud the findings of communication research and make them available in a comprehensible form not only to communication practitioners but to administrators as well.

Just as theory is perfected by practice and practice is perfected by theory, there needs to be a marrying of interests between communication scholars and practitioners to make the process of communication more effective. For example, a newspaper may continue to feed information without stopping to find out how well the information is received by its readers or it may continue to churn out stories without knowing their impact on the society. Scholars and researchers could help the practitioners to assess both their problems and their potential as communicators.

One of the reasons why mass media in many developing countries have sometimes become somewhat irrelevant is because they have not been conscious of the needs, aspirations and the mood of the people. In simple terms, there has been no proper feedback from the people and the mass media have carried on regardless.

There has been almost a total lack of interaction between communicators and their clientele. Although communication is a two-way process, it has been, in most instances, a top-to-bottom process.

In communication science, feedback is an important process that helps to assess how receptive the audience has been. Often, the establishment of a feedback system is left to researchers alone.