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Social Research On Broadcasting: Some Proposals

By

Vincent Lowe
SOCIAL RESEARCH ON BROADCASTING
SOME PROPOSALS

Vincent Lowe

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My task in writing this paper is made easier by the operative sub-title "Some Proposals". This allows me to look ahead and to adopt a positive and futuristic outlook painting on a wide and clear canvas. A proposer is also someone who initiates the ideas. It is the responsibility of others to accept, or reject, qualify or modify the ideas suggested, and to follow through on some of the things that have been talked about. Having in this way lightened my own responsibility, let me now proceed by discussing some points on research in general. Within each of these main points, I will venture to suggest some specific research areas on broadcasting.

In this paper I will select three main issues (priorities, if you prefer) for discussion. First, the need for autonomous and policy relevant research, second, the need to achieve a balance between researching into broadcasting as a independent as well as dependent variable. Third, the priority to view broadcasting holistically - as a subsystem, within a communication/information context and as part of a larger society.

**Autonomous and Policy Relevant Broadcasting Research**

First off, we all will agree there is need for priority to be given to policy relevant research. This can mean several things. It can mean that research should be geared towards answering questions raised by policy makers. In this case the researcher provides data support for
choosing between different policy alternatives. In analysing data, the researcher will evaluate and point out the implications (and consequences) of different policy goals, different policy measures. It will also be part of the researchers' goals to raise alternative and new policy options suggested by the data. Another form such research may take is the evaluation of impact - comparing intended against real consequences - of policy measures. Such research may also be termed "applied" research, i.e. research tailored towards relevant applications. "Applied" research assumes that there already is a body of theory which can be chosen from "off the shelf". With this notion, research may consist largely of testing the "fit" and adaptation involved in the use of certain known theories.

The case for policy or "applied" research is made on several grounds. Our justification often used is based on the pressing need for such research in developing countries, so that policy making can be rational and fact-based. Another justification is based on a notion that universities which are expensive propositions in developing countries, should be concerned and involved with the problems of the society which sustains its existence. Another implied notion is there is in fact a dichotomy between types of research - between "applied" and "pure" research, also that it is somewhat a luxury to indulge in the latter form of research.
Having in this way, raised a straw man, please let me raise a few points on this subject for our further discussion. It is important to recognise that both these types of research are valid enterprises. In any long term or broad based research program, it is however equally important not to neglect or subsume the goals of autonomous research.

Autonomous research goals which are pertinent here are theory-building i.e. to derive higher order generalisations which have universal applicability in different contexts. Another such goal which may be discussed is to strive for inter-subjectivity in our research. This presumes a unity among the larger scientific community, not only within but outside communications where our findings can be subjected to the tests of objective validation. Autonomy may also refer to yet another implication of good policy research — that such research avoids policy advocacy. Such research does not only accept the framework provided by policy makers or decision makers. If this were the case, there would be little difference between administrative and policy research. Such research examines as well other policy frameworks as alternatives and subjects all these, to the same intense scientific scrutiny.

The danger of being bedazzled by given policy goals is greater because of several reasons. One, it may arise from the close nexus between power holders and communicators. Effective communication is not
only a pre-requisite but is essential for successful politics. The communication specialist is sought to provide legitimation and to increase the capacity to gain power (as in elections) and to govern in an era which has now recognised the crucial role of communication. Communication specialists are habitually needed to provide consultancy reports. I am not saying that communication researchers should not be political activists — indeed, this citizen’s role should not be denied them. All I am saying is first there should be a discriminating role differentiation between research and advocacy (or consultancy) and one kind of work should not pass off under the guise of the other.

This, I think, is a far more difficult problem in communications than perhaps in any other field. Few, if any research questions that we ask do not have or cannot be used to answer policy questions. Consider for instance studies on effects of crime and violence in broadcasting, or values in advertising content or cultural messages in imported programs.

The reluctance on the part of the researcher to make interpretive "leaps" into policy areas is often not shared by the public or policy makers themselves. The fine calibrations of research statements are often lost to the laymen or policy maker who choses to use such results. Policy questions are normative in nature. They set priorities among goals and values. The continuing question to ask of policy research is how such research can in fact be value-free in its methods, in the questions it asks, and in the
interpretations offered. What the MacBride Commission Report had to say on an "appropriate" research orientation bears emphasis at this point.

"Current and future research should broaden its focus in order to deal with the truly fundamental problems of our time. It should not be content to serve to implement a given communications policy, or just to "support" the media establishment, in order to make an existing system or various parts thereof more effective, regardless of its validity or of the possible need to rethink certain dominant values or to suggest alternative means or ends. Research, instead of dealing with value-free micro-questions, must therefore endeavour to apply independent critical criteria and to explore the potential of new forms and new structures".

The research norm advocated here is that policy goals should be subjected to the same analytical rigor that would be focussed on any other research subject. The use of adjectives such as "development" and "development-support" for communications should in no way reduce our iconoclastic or critical scrutiny. In any evaluation, differentiation should be made between regime and system goals. Politicians have developed the art par excellence to disguise regime goals as system goals. One such disguise often adopted is to claim "development" as an overarching ideology to defuse criticism from and reflect glory upon, themselves.
The goals of theory-building as well as the need to control for the influences of policy makers, can be met somewhat if the projects are:

(a) done on a comparative basis, so ideographic and ideological influences can be studied from a larger perspective.

(b) if the projects are designed to evaluate the suggested policy goals themselves.

Some project topics forming an illustrative, not a comprehensive list which may be suggested using these guidelines are as follows:

Comparative Studies of

(a) The Social History of Broadcasting Systems.

(b) Structures of Broadcasting System

- Economic (including comparative studies of financial support systems, e.g. advertising licensing). Broadcasting as part of Communication Investment Strategies.
- Political.
- Institutional.

Regulatory Frameworks for Broadcasting Systems.
Public Accountability Structures and Principles for Broadcasting Issues, such as Public Access/Participatory Mechanisms, etc.
Balancing Studies of Broadcasting as a dependent as well as an Independent variable.

The second point, I feel is to achieve a balance between studying broadcasting as an independent (cause) as well as a dependent (effect) variable. Traditionally, most "administrative" research have concentrated on broadcasting as an independent variable, with questions designed, (based on micro level studies), to resolve public controversies. The tendency has been to look on broadcasting as a socialising medium with questions tailored towards studying narrow themes.

Here, if one may be permitted some gross generalisations, a few significant differences can be commented on between the "Third" World and the "First" World view of broadcasting as a research topic. Research in Western developed countries have tended towards analysis of effects of message systems, especially those for specific programming audiences such as children. Research results and practices in these countries reflect a bifurcated view of media effects. The efficiency of the media for advertising is almost an article of faith in free enterprise systems. Outside of advertising, media effects studies either by their (research) design, criteria of proof etc. show little or no effect.
The view however, in Third World countries is of broadcasting as a technology with the promise of and potential for helping to solve large-order goals such as nation-building, based on large-scale socialisation efforts. Among policy-makers in these countries, implicitly, if not explicitly, there is an assumption made that the broadcast media can (or may, but must not be allowed to) bring about wide-ranging effects. This is a view not disabused or confirmed in the Third World context, simply because systematic research has not been conducted. Could this be because of the difficulty of operationalising large-order goals and purposes? This fear often of political effects has made Third World countries rely on censorship laws and practices. Policies are designed for media content to be geared towards goals such as language learning, character building etc.

This view presumes certain relationships between the broadcasting media and governments. Where in the United States, for instance, the news media is seen as co-equal to other branches of the government, in developing countries, broadcast media is seen as a sub-system subservient to and serving rather than questioning system (or disguised regime) goals.

It follows from these orientations that the broadcast media is the target or result/consequence of various political, social and cultural pulls or influences within the society. What I am suggesting is a...
re-orientation, an inversion of the usual way with which we look at the media. At one level, this can be illustrated by a reversal of the usual research titles which one finds occurring most frequently in the extant literature. Instead of studying "The Broadcasting of Politics", should we not (or shouldn't we also) research "The Politics of Broadcasting"?

While we research the effects of broadcasting techniques on Folk Media, should we also not study how cultural forms and systems e.g. as in Folk Drama/Art or Dance, affect broadcast presentation styles? A recent study illustrates this reorientation by focusing on how foreign export markets affected production styles of U.S. television programs. One context amenable to such a reorientation is to consider how spillover broadcast programs in a particular region affect national broadcasting policies (as in programming or in the choice of imported programs.)

Yet another topic which may have special application to ASEAN is how regional harmonisation in other fields affects broadcasting policies as in news coverage, program exchanges etc.

Studies should at the same time continue to be conducted on the medium looking at it as an independent variable. Here the main point which may be advocated is in the choice of high salience topics. In the analysis of message systems for instance, its content should be analyzed not only for its content on its own, but against other (or outside) norms, such as other media's portrayal of the same themes or subjects. Content should also studied in terms of audience perceptions and feedback. Much has been
written of the refraction of messages and events by the broadcast media - little however has come out of systematic research which follows for instance, the lines suggested by the Langs. Some high salience topics which may be profitably studied in developing societies are the depictions or portrayals of race, ethnic issues, sex, class or occupational stereotypes.

Broadcasting in an Information/Communication and Societal Context

The third priority, I feel, is to research into broadcasting in its context. One such line to take is to study broadcasting as a part of a communication/information mix. One area which has not figured prominently is the exploration of relationships between broadcasting and other channels. One finds in the literature comments on the strengths and weaknesses of each medium. Seldom however do these statements come out of systematic research either on the campaign evaluation or larger communication level. The efficacy/efficiency of media mixes for different purposes has not been a subject of thorough research. What is the degree/level of reinforcement what can be provided by one medium for another medium? What level of use is appropriate (by what criteria?) for broadcasting in total communication campaign(s) for different purposes? What, for instance, are the interacting influences between broadcast media and interpersonal channels. To what extent do inter-system (or intra-system) relationships affect co-ordination or rivalry?
In Malaysia, as an example, no study of communications mix used can ignore the communication needs of a political legitimacy formula designed to accommodate the different needs and feelings of its ethnically-mixed populations -- the racial components of its mass communication audience. In a recent paper I wrote, I asserted that mass communication if used indiscriminately in propagandising the country's development effects to redistribute wealth among and between its racial groups may in fact be counterproductive for two reasons:--

a) present development strategies will initially accentuate rather than reduce imbalances;

b) uncalibrated and discriminate coverage of government efforts may raise expectations / create a strong dependency syndrome among one group, while encouraging envy and scape-goating on the part of the others.

The similarity between communications in ethnically mixed societies and in international relations has been commented on. This topic is worth researching since Asian countries by and large are "plural" along several dimensions.

Broadcasting may also be included in various comparative studies of "official" as opposed to "unofficial" information for different purposes. "Official" information has not been subjected to as much systematic...
scrutiny as has information generated by mass market and commercial organisations. There is reason to believe that because of different perceptions of authority and officialdom in developing countries, the usual credibility factors suggested largely on the basis of laboratory studies of college students in Western countries may in fact be contravened. There is just as much reason, I maintain, for anyone who has had any experience with official bureaucracies or government departments, to think that there are severe limits to "official" information. Whatever the reasons for this - if such limitations do in fact exist - they certainly do need researching into.

As a final note, please let me comment briefly on some organisational aspects of the aetiology of good research. Here there may be some lessons we can learn from successful research enterprises in the West. Longer-term research programs geared towards redressing the poverty of (more-meaningful) concepts are needed for Asian institutions. A planned program of research can go a long way towards overcoming some of the so-called weaknesses of social science research in the communications field. I refer to the need for the additive and cumulative build-up of knowledge (or theories) in our fields. I refer also to the need to try out new research methods and to evolve their methodologies. The wide gap, for instance between one-shot quasi-sectional recall-type studies and the unfocussed longitudinal case-type studies can be bridged, for instance by controlled field surveys - a method used in advertising mainly but with somewhat limited research could well