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Purposes of Mass Communications Research: A Transatlantic Perspective

U.S. researchers are urged to take initiative to bring researchers and media leaders closer together, thereby increasing impact of research on operations of media.

► Overviews of work in progress in some portion of our field are commonly triangular in perspective. They comment, first, on the state of theoretical debate in the reviewed area, singling out those conceptual differences that shape its intellectual controversies; secondly, on the methodologies that guide various strategies of data collection, bearing the freight of our technical improvement hopes; and thirdly, on the emerging body of substantive findings, fixing the shifting boundary line between what we suppose we know and what we know we do not yet know.

In this talk my point of departure is rather different. It is as if I would direct attention to the *table* on which the triangle rests, a focus that comes naturally into view when strikingly divergent mass communications research styles of different countries—or Continents in our case—are contemplated. Such a transatlantic per-

spective tends to provoke questions about the *purposes* of our enterprise. Why may we engage in mass communications research? What are its social purposes? What are the chief alternative forms that answers to this question can take? Are they bound to polarize into two quite antithetical and irreconcilable positions—with one camp radically critical of the prevailing mass communications order, while the other willingly or unwittingly upholds it, and each fails to address the predominant preoccupations of the other? Is there no viable middle course of research purpose falling between such extremes? If there is, how might it be defined, and to what clarification and redirection of our energies might its pursuit call us?

► Should you ever cull the bibliographies for answers to these questions, you would not find many entries under the heading, "Mass Communications Research, Pur-

► The author is research director of the Centre for Television Research at the University of Leeds. This is the text of the first Founders' Lecture sponsored by the Theory and Methodology Division and the International Communications Division at the Annual Conference of the Association for Education in Journalism, Madison, Wisconsin, August 1977. The Founders' Lectures were instituted to honor the memory of Chilton R. Bush and Ralph O. Nafziger.

poses of." But you *would* discover that a transatlantic contrast of scholarly approach prompted one of the few published confrontations over these matters, which was entered into in the early 1940s by Paul Lazarsfeld and Theodore Adorno, the former in an essay entitled, "Administrative and Critical Communications Research,"¹ the latter in an article entitled, "A Social Critique of Radio Music."² Both men had emigrated from Europe to the United States in the 1930s, Lazarsfeld eventually feeling very much at home here, Adorno never completely settling here. Both agreed that two models carved up the leading research purpose alternatives between them. Rare for individuals locked in quite fundamental dispute, they also agreed upon the essential features of these opposed models. Their discussion merits recall today, partly for its relevance to current developments in our field in Europe and the United States, partly for highlighting the seeds of polarization over the issues involved and partly for illustrating the difficulties of transcending the resulting differences.

According to Lazarsfeld and Adorno alike, the point of departure of *administrative research* was a perception of the mass media as neutral tools, capable of serving a wide range of purposes. Research in this so-called administrative vein takes as given the purposes of media users, or would-be users, and then collects information intended to promote the realization of those purposes. This might include studies of people's communication preferences, their exposure patterns and the various content forms made available to audiences, as well as studies of media impact under diverse conditions of presentation and reception. As Lazarsfeld defined this approach in a passage which is notable, perhaps, for the ambiguity it both contained and concealed:

Behind the idea of such research is the notion that modern media of communication are tools handled by people or agencies for given purposes. The purpose may be to sell goods, or to raise the intellectual standards of the population, or to secure an understanding of governmental policies, but in all cases, to someone

who uses a medium for something, it is the task of research to make the tool better known and thus to facilitate its use.

For its part, *critical communications research* is skeptical of the very project of taking a single purpose and studying the means of its realization in isolation from the total historical situation in which such planning and activity takes place. Modern media of communication do far more to people than even those who administer them mean to do, and, from drives in the surrounding social fabric, they acquire a momentum all their own, leaving administrative agencies much less choice for independent action than they believe they enjoy. That is why critical communications research calls for study of what Lazarsfeld termed "the general role of our media of communication in the present system," yielding two other features of its approach in turn. First, it develops a broad general theory of the prevailing social trends of our time, locating communication organizations and processes within them. Lazarsfeld illustrated this tendency via the idea that centralized capitalism, needing to sell the goods it produces, develops a promotional culture, which engulfs the mass communications system at all levels and exposes audience members to manipulative forces, pushing them around like pawns on a chess board and depriving them of the spontaneity and dignity of autonomous human beings. Thus, the second main element of the critical mode is introduced; a sense of basic human values, which are continually denied and violated by existing economic, social and communication arrangements.

Adorno's essay chiefly adds to this definition a passionate demonstration of how an adherent of the critical standpoint would react to the suggestion that research should show how radio could bring good music to as many listeners as possible. Over the span of only a few pages, a

¹ Paul F. Lazarsfeld, "Administrative and Critical Communications Research," *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science*, Vol. 9, 1941. All citations from Lazarsfeld below are taken from this article.

² T.W. Adorno, "A Social Critique of Radio Music," *Kennyon Review*, 7: 208-217 (Spring 1945). All citations from Adorno below are taken from this article except where otherwise noted.

litany of critical agony after agony is piled up. You cannot study the attitudes of listeners on their own, Adorno argues, without considering how they reflect broader social behavior patterns, indeed how they are conditioned by the structure of society as a whole. In today's "society of commodities," he goes on, music itself has assumed a "commodity character," which radically alters both it and the listening experience. It gives rise to commodity listening, involving, for example, a tendency to listen to Beethoven's Fifth as if it were a set of quotations from Beethoven's Fifth. It fosters an indiscriminate and uncomprehending form of popular enthusiasm that misses the entire point of the composition. It is so promoted that "the listener virtually has no choice. Products are forced upon him. His freedom has ceased to exist." And it is packaged, universally and without qualification, in a standardized form. Adorno's wholesale relegation of mediated popular culture to a standardized dustbin is tellingly reflected in this sentence of quite unrelieved and undifferentiated condemnation: "And there is, above all, that whole sphere of music, whose life-blood is standardization: popular music, jazz, be it hot, sweet, or hybrid."

Lazarsfeld, a man of broad sympathies and ecumenical temperament, actually hoped that these approaches might complement each other and even be cultivated collaboratively in joint ventures. Such cooperation never materialized, however, presumably due to confusions and stumbling blocks on both sides of this research purpose divide.

Lazarsfeld erred mainly in conflating two sorts of purposes, which he brought under the single umbrella of administrative research as if they were essentially alike. He apparently saw no fundamental difference between research designed to promote media administrators' present goals, whatever they might be—such as selling more goods—and research designed to serve some broader social purpose, to which administrators might not be

committed, and to which they would therefore have first to be called—such as disseminating good music, drama or mature political information to the masses. Consequently, he drew no clear distinction between research in the service of media institutions' current objectives and research aimed to modify those objectives.

In Adorno's case, the confusions were yet more profound. They typify in an extreme form weaknesses that can still be found, though not so nakedly, in present-day takers of a critical stance. One concerns the curiously elastic role that is assigned to empirical fact-gathering in the critical system. This is simultaneously suppressed and accepted. It is suppressed because those who are caught up in the affairs of the empirical world typically misunderstand their own place in it: they are therefore lousy witnesses! Of listeners, Adorno said, for example, "We must try to understand them better than they understand themselves." Presumably that is why he forcibly stated in another writing that, "No continuum exists between critical theorems and the empirical procedures of natural science."³ Yet he also acknowledged the legitimacy, even the necessity, for empirical enquiry. The paradox is soluble only by assigning to empirical work a firmly subordinate and guided role. The foundations of critical theory are rooted in self-evident truths about the nature of the social system and its connections with the communication system. The task of empirical enquiry, then, is largely to expose those links concretely and to show how the known social patterns impose themselves on, and operate within, the communication sphere in practice.

Another tension within the critical system stems from its Platonic, even Augustinian, outlook on the prevailing communication order. This severely limits its action implications, despite critical researchers' disdain for merely academic scholarship. On the one hand, there is an ideal world of social and communication relationships, in which man, if he inhabited it, could express and develop his humanity through cultural activity. But on

³T.W. Adorno, "Scientific Experiences of a European Scholar in America," in Donald Fleming and Bernard Bailyn (Eds.) *The Intellectual Migration* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1969).

the other hand, media institutions are so socially constrained as to be incapable of belonging in any way to that ideal domain. The arrangements in force are as if cast down in a sphere of illusion and chimera, irretrievably cut off from direct access to all genuine human values, and so are doomed—even damned you might say—to pursue their own corrupt course. Lazarsfeld himself seemed keenly aware of the characteristic Platonism of this point of view, as this passage shows:

In order to understand clearly the idea of critical research, one must realize that it is being urged by men, who have the idea ever present before them, that what we need most is to do and think what we consider true, and not to adjust ourselves to the seemingly inescapable.

► Many research paths have been blazed, modified, erased and reopened in the third of a century that has passed since the time of the Lazarsfeld-Adorno debate. How do the terms in which they couched their conflicting alternatives appear in the light of research tendencies now prevalent in Europe and North America, respectively?

For Europe, the answer to such a question is more clear than what can be said about the American scene. Europe is undoubtedly providing a congenial proving ground for the development of much critically grounded mass communications inquiry at present. Not all European media scholars have adopted this model. Yet those who reject or look askance at it sometimes feel as if in a beleaguered and outmoded minority, while some of the most active and self-confident European academics belong to what is virtually, though with many internal distinctions and points of dispute of course, a critical research school.⁴

For summary purposes, four features of critically oriented European research deserve notice. First, macroscopic levels of enquiry are decidedly favoured. In his Inaugural Lecture of 1973, for example, Professor James Halloran, director of the Leicester University Centre for Mass Communication Research, argued the case for an extension of the field's research agenda in two directions, going beyond

what he regarded as its previously arid over-preoccupation with audience-level phenomena.⁵ One thrust was toward what he termed "the factors that govern or influence what the media make available" for public consumption. These are only a selection of what could be provided and are not just a matter of chance. Hence, researchers should be "asking questions about the development of media institutions, their organization and structure, their patterns of membership, control, resources and technology, as well as studying the professional values and day-to-day operations of those working in the media." A related thrust of inquiry was toward the social environment surrounding mass media functioning. In Halloran's words, "What is made available by the media, and consequently what helps to shape attitudes and values, will be influenced by a whole series of economic, legal, political, professional and technological considerations. So, to understand the part played by the media in our society, we must study the whole communication process [within] those appropriate contexts."

Secondly, in modern versions of critical thought, the relationship between ideological conviction and empirical research remains essentially as it stood in Adorno's framework, though in practice the originally quite slim empirical chink that he allowed for has been much widened. The key to this feature of today's critical outlook is the idea that the mass media function essentially as agencies of social legitimation—as forces, that is, which reaffirm those ultimate value standards and beliefs, which in turn uphold the social and political status quo. Thus, one writer argues that, economically, the mass media are "a crucial element in the legitimation of capitalist society."⁶ Others maintain that, socially, they encourage people to accept

⁴ A useful source of writings reflecting the diverse tendencies is James Curran, Michael Gurevitch and Janet Wollcott (Eds.), *Mass Communication and Society* (London: Edward Arnold, 1977).

⁵ James D. Halloran, "Mass Media and Society: The Challenge of Research," Inaugural Lecture, University of Leicester, October 1973. All citations from Halloran below are taken from this Lecture.

⁶ Ralph Miliband, *The State in Capitalist Society*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969).

gross inequalities as if they were natural, inevitable or socially functional.⁷ Yet another author contends that the mass media—and particularly broadcasting—support a certain form of political order, celebrating the virtues of pragmatism, compromise and moderated conflict, while giving favored access “to the accredited witnesses of society,” such as top party leaders, local councilors, respected experts, accepted interest group spokesmen etc.⁸ Many others maintain that in their coverage of a wide range of deviant phenomena—in portrayals, for example of family and sexual morality, pornography, drug-taking, rock music fans, political corruption and street demonstrations—the mass media convey a consensual impression of what society stands for in these fields, thereby acting primarily as agents of social control.⁹

Since so little of this fabric of interpretation is thought problematic, where exactly can its empirical chink be found? This is primarily focused on mediating mechanisms, on the interface between the social and political structure on the one side and characteristic media procedures and outputs on the other. As Murdock and Golding have explained, “It is not sufficient simply to assert that the mass media are part of the ideological apparatus of the state, it is also necessary to demonstrate how ideology is produced in concrete practice.”¹⁰ And as Peter Chibnall has added:

Marxist analysis only rarely operates at this level of concrete practice. It tends to ignore the kinds of routine operations, tacit assumptions, conceptual frameworks and occupational constraints which systematically shape the everyday production of knowledge.¹¹

⁷ Graham Murdock and Peter Golding, “Capitalism, Communication and Class Relations,” in Curran, Gurevitch and Wollacott, op. cit.

⁸ Stuart Hall, “Media Power: The Double Bind,” *Journal of Communication*, 24: 19-26, (Autumn 1974).

⁹ Stanley Cohen and Jock Young, *The Manufacture of News: Deviance, Social Problems and the Mass Media*. (London: Constable, 1973).

¹⁰ Murdock and Golding, op. cit.

¹¹ Peter Chibnall, *Law-and-Order News*. (London: Tavistock, 1977).

¹² John Westergaard, “Power, Class and the Media,” in Curran, Gurevitch and Wollacott, op. cit.

Consequently, in much of their current work, critical media sociologists strive to show, for example, how conventional news values, reporters’ working routines, and professional norms of objectivity, impartiality and balance, favor established interests, already familiar spokesmen and orthodox understandings of social problems.

Thirdly much of the European critical literature is probing sharply at certain Achilles heels of liberal-democratic press ideology. The assumption that the news media can promote civic enlightenment to any significant degree is challenged by an insistent diagnosis of the pressures that deflect them from this task. In short, liberal-democratic press philosophy is dismissed as if blatantly out of touch with reality.

Such, for example, is the fate of the liberal stress on the *autonomy* of the news media and their freedom from influences emanating from other power centres. The *appearance* of such independence is preserved, it is said, only by respecting certain limits beyond which journalistic enquiry does not normally stray. But in any case, the ties binding media institutions to other power sources are patently obvious once they are mentioned. In some instances, partisan interests control newspapers. In many others, a market orientation severely limits the amount and kind of attention the press can pay to social issues. Even the vaunted impartiality of broadcasting is exercised in practice with a keen regard for the prevailing contours of established economic and political power.¹²

Another vital ingredient of liberal communication theory, which has attracted much critical fire, is its emphasis on a *diversity* of press output and viewpoint. Since no single philosophy, set of interests or body of decision-takers can be assumed to have a monopoly of wisdom on any question, liberalism expects the news media to give voice to those diverse ways of looking at social issues that a pluralistic society will generate. This will help the citizen in turn to make up his own mind on current problems by bringing to his attention rival ways of regarding and

tackling them. Yet more often than not, critical media sociologists insist, journalism in the Western world projects a near-uniform impression of a given issue domain, its conditioning circumstances and its likely solutions, rather than a variegated one. At election time, for example, few differences can be found among the issue priorities projected by the various newspapers and network news programs. In the sphere of industrial relations, according to a recent British study, "the different newspapers are generally reporting the same stories on each day in much the same way" and "trade unions are portrayed largely as organizations involved in conflict."¹³ Hartmann and Husband have contended that most British news reports about race relations concentrate on stories of crime, actual or feared conflicts of ethnic interest, and tales of the overflow of colored immigration into the country.¹⁴ In reporting crime news and other deviant behavior, several recently published works maintain, only a limited range of explanations—such as personal inadequacy, the agitation of trouble-makers or poor parental control—are disseminated at the expense of attention to more plausible but more socially challenging causative agents—poverty, slum conditions, a poor education and despair over a hopeless future.¹⁵

Fourthly, European critical researchers seem to be caught up in a double bind of their own making over the ultimate social purposes of their work. On the one hand, they do not want to be confined to ivory-tower academic quarters. Nordenstreng has cited "a tendency towards *policy orientation*" as one of two "global trends" affecting European mass communications research at present.¹⁶ In his Inaugural Lecture Professor Halloran also affirmed that, "Our main interest is to contribute to an important debate—to add to a public body of information," though, he added, "with no strings attached," since the researcher's policy contributions must spring from what he termed "an independent critical stance." On the other hand, he and his colleagues find existing media institutions to be so comprehensively comprised by, and locked into, the prevailing

power structure that they cannot plausibly hold out any hope for their improvement from within. Halloran manifests this tendency in the profound skepticism he directs at both professional ideologies and mass media policy and planning practices. Of the former, he asks, "Is it not time that the media were demystified, and that we began to question the restrictions and the possible tyranny of professionalism?" Of the latter, he notes that on more than one occasion, "media planning and policy . . . have stemmed more from ignorance, prejudice and narrow vested interests than from knowledge, reason and concern about the public interest." Yet none of this is the fault of individuals. As Halloran concludes: "Deliberate lies, distortion, falsification or direct slanting are not the main issues. It is the unwitting bias inherent in the system as it currently operates that is important."

The response of the Annan Committee (established in 1974 to investigate the future of British broadcasting) to the testimony submitted to it by many critically minded researchers, sheds further light on these policy dilemmas. Its report describes how one researcher told it that the less edifying traits of journalistic news values were a "product of professional, historical, organizational, economic and political factors." Faced with such a cumulation to constraints, it would have been natural to conclude that, short of a social revolution, the electronic media could perform no differently, certainly no better than they do at present. Since few of the researchers drew that conclusion (or any other for that matter) from their testimony, the Annan Committee, in evident bafflement over what the researchers were exactly saying, had to draw out the possible policy implications for itself in this fascinating passage:

¹³ Denis McQuail, *Analysis of Newspaper Content Research Series 4*, Royal Commission on the Press. (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1977).

¹⁴ Paul Hartmann and Charles Husband, *Racism and the Mass Media* (London: Davis Poynter, 1974).

¹⁵ Cohen and Young, *op. cit.*; Chibnall, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ Kaarle Nordenstreng, "Recent Developments in European Communications Theory," in Heinz-Dietrich Fischer and John C. Merrill (Eds.), *International and Intercultural Communication* (New York: Hastings House, 1976).

Many of these arguments seemed to us unconvincing. They posited a state of affairs where every reporter is assumed to be a disembodied seraph free from any political influences within the State or within society. Or they seemed to suggest that broadcasters, as in totalitarian countries, should consistently disseminate some particular message or some political and social philosophy. Or that broadcasters should eschew the parliamentary democracy on which the country is based. We reject such notions.¹⁷

► But how shall we characterize the output of much American journalism research in light of the available models of academic purpose that have so far been presented? In preparation for this Lecture, I searched in vain through a number of recent issues of *JOURNALISM QUARTERLY* for materials to answer this question. Despite the tendency for many European critics of American research (Jeremy Tunstall is the latest example)¹⁸ to depict it as faithfully following the administrative path first delineated by Lazarsfeld, the particular journal numbers I consulted had published very little work that I could classify as clearly administrative in intention. Admittedly, an occasional piece concluded on this type of note:

This life-style-related approach offers new insights for a 1) describing its present readers, 2) determining what content appeals to present readers and 3) identifying what content would appeal to groups not now in the newspaper's audience who might be attracted.¹⁹

But such administrative guidance was far more often the exception than the rule. It was even more difficult to find examples of research in the critical style, similar to what is proliferating in Europe at present, though I daresay I might have detected more specimens had the target of my search been the *Journal of Communications*.

¹⁷ *Report of the Committee on the Future of Broadcasting* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1977).

¹⁸ Jeremy Tunstall, *The Media are American. Anglo-American Media in the World*, (London: Constable, 1977).

¹⁹ Barbara E. Bryant, Frederick P. Currier and Andrew J. Morrison, "Relating Life Style Factors of Person to His Choice of a Newspaper," *JOURNALISM QUARTERLY*, 53: 74-79, (Spring, 1976).

²⁰ Morris Janowitz, "Professional Models in Journalism: the Gatekeeper and the Advocate," *JOURNALISM QUARTERLY*, 52: 618-626, 662, (Winter, 1975).

It is true that I identified two strands of work which stood out as more overtly normative than the rest. Yet even here I wondered whether I, the would-be classifier, was imposing normative intentions on authors who were themselves largely innocent of any such purposes. At any rate, one batch of research seemed to reflect an application of the characteristic American value of equality of opportunity to the communication sphere—opportunity to use the media for one's own purposes, as well as opportunity to be presented fairly and without undue distortion to others through media portrayals of one's group. In this camp I would place work on knowledge gaps, studies of the communication needs and habits of deprived minorities, such as the urban poor and the elderly, and content analyses of how the media portray such historically subordinate groups as women, blacks, other ethnic minorities, and even children. Yet another set of writings seemed to reflect expectations of mature journalistic performance, using conventional liberal-democratic standards as touchstones when examining media content, reporter ethics and even audience comprehension. In this camp, I would place much of what is published about election campaign communication, analyses of the amount, accuracy and other characteristics of press coverage of such domains as environmental news and social problems, as well as articles about the purposes, organization and content of the community press, and Janowitz' discussion of gatekeeper and advocate paradigms of journalists' professional roles.²⁰

Otherwise--and particularly when contrasted with the current European thrust much American material seemed virtually unclassifiable in such purposive terms: its social commitments and anchorages were not clearly manifest. Unfairly, perhaps, the image formed in my mind of a huge, in many respects impressive, but nevertheless rather rambling, exposed and vulnerable giant. Yet even if this image is extreme, its plausibility should sound a salutary warning. It is, after all, a common theme of much for-

eign comment on American research that, as one author has recently put it, it is:

....ad hoc, piecemeal and ineffective.... totall, lacking [in] any theoretical framework about the media and [their] relations to the wider society or about society itself.... it [tends] to analyse only one sort of effect, that on the individual, while other foci, such as effects on groups and social institutions are omitted... and it is heedless of their crucial inter-linkage with other social institutions.²¹

Sweeping charges, but has anybody troubled to arm the giant with cudgels to wield in his defense against them? Has too little spadework been invested in clarifying the purposes of journalism research in this country? Does much American work, despite its unrivaled theoretical precision, methodological rigor, technical imagination and sophisticated data-handling, rest insecurely on rather untended and therefore shaky philosophical underpinnings?

If so, this source of weakness may be associated with several others. Let me briefly mention a few that struck me during my tour of the pages of *JOURNALISM QUARTERLY*. First, there is a curious hesitation to address in any sustained way those larger themes and controversies from which the real world of mass communications cannot be isolated. Is the modern mass communications system most appropriately regarded as a plural set of media outlets, serving the differential needs of a pluralist society, for example, or as a set of conformist institutions, more or less uniformly churning out the ingredients of a socially conservative consensus? How are the media functions of social control and social change promoted and intertwined? To what news-gathering and news-processing activities, if any, does the image of the media operating as merely to mirror an external social reality (fondly held by many media executives and professionals) correspond? How can such a passive image be squared with that more active agenda-setting perspective, which stands out as one of the most productive sources of journalism research to emerge from American academics in recent years?²² It would be inaccurate to imply that such issues are

entirely neglected on this side of the Atlantic. Nevertheless, many published writings do convey the impression that their authors have been socialized to keep their eyes firmly down to the ground, and to subordinate references to such larger issues to the nuts-and-bolts tasks of specifying hypotheses, operationalizing variables, laying out quantification procedures and sifting the complexities of typically dusty empirical data.

Secondly, to European ears at least, the spirit of scholarly debate, especially between rival traditions, seems curiously muted. Of course it animates some book reviews and overview essays, but otherwise it is as if a stultifying spirit of live and let live encourages each scholar to plough his own furrow. He will report how his findings diverge from those of his fellows, and he will expect a searching scrutiny of the technical merits of his effort. But on the whole he is sheltered from any philosophically directed probing of his presuppositions. There are undoubtedly many exceptions to this generalization—for example in the way that certain political communication scholars in the late 1960s and early 1970s questioned the credentials of the limited effects model of mass media impact. Yet such attention to the underlying assumptions of diverse research tendencies is mainly reserved for critical turning-point moments in the discipline's development, instead of playing a continuing part in the process of knowing what one is doing and where one stands in response to fundamental challenges that can be leveled against it.

Thirdly, I noticed some imbalances of research attention that seemed difficult to justify. It is remarkable, for example, that so little heed is given to *broadcast news and current affairs* in a publication called *JOURNALISM QUARTERLY*. Large areas of the structure and workings of the broadcasting industry have seemingly

²¹ Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi, "Television and its Effects: A Reconstruction of the Ditchley Conference," *Communications and Development* 1: 8-10, (Spring, 1977).

²² For an update of research in this tradition, see Donald L. Shaw and Maxwell E. McCombs, *The Emergence of American Political Issues: The Agenda-Setting Function of the Press* (St. Paul: West Publishing Co., 1977).

escaped all but the cursory academic notice—how individual stations function as journalistic enterprises, the struggles for position within the system between the stations, networks and outside producers, the news programmes of the Public Broadcasting System, the impact on the industry of the pressures of numerous citizen groups, the attempted regulatory activity of the FCC, and relevant judicial doctrines. Although such topics occasionally surface in the literature—most frequently in the form of articles on communication law—on the whole, research into broadcast journalism is slighter and more irregular than its inherent importance warrants.²³

In addition, there was little material that attempted to explore the interface between media organization and forces operative in the surrounding social system. Except for the impressively cumulative community-level research of Tichenor et al.,²⁴ the links between media institutions and extra-media influences appear to have been little examined. We barely know even how to conceptualize them. So, precisely where European critical research is most self-confident—in exposing (admittedly one-sidedly) the societal constraints that circumscribe the news functions of the mass media in practice—its American counterpart is largely silent.

If such a lack exists, it may be connected, fourthly, with certain ideological dilemmas, which Americans engaged in journalism research have not yet managed to resolve. How, for example, can we remain true to liberal-democratic press values without romanticizing and falsifying the reality of press operations? Most of us probably accept as a valid ideal the notion of an editorially independent press, capable of exercising reportorial scrutiny over public affairs without undue sub-

servience to major power interests. But how can this belief be reconciled with the dependence of working journalists on a structured hierarchy of news sources for the bulk of the stories that eventually appear in the print and electronic media? Westley and MacLean's model of the inter-relations of sources (or advocates), media channel intermediaries, and audiences, so incisively productive in other respects, is surely misleading when applied to this particular problem.²⁵ Would-be advocate sources differ among themselves, not only in the potential audience-appeal of their messages (as the Westley-Maclean analysis implies) but also in sheer power, visibility and prestige. What is more, they arm themselves with public relations officials and strategies designed to exert pressure on media intermediaries to accept their material. What is still more, they enter into highly patterned, that is to say institutionalized and entrenched, inter-relationships with media personnel, which can have the effect of downgrading audience needs to a quite shadowy and tenuous, rather than a controlling, influence on the process as a whole. It is true that the independence ideal can be sustained in the face of such considerations by regarding instances of source-reporter accommodation as essentially unprofessional deviations—lapses into an atypical coziness that should be resisted by reaffirmation of the autonomy principle. Yet the forces responsible for much source-media accommodation appear to have too much sociological validity and staying power to make such a dismissive response entirely convincing. And if that is so, where exactly does the independence ideal of press status and functioning stand?

To pose another unresolved issue: How can we remain true to liberal-democratic press values without tamely accepting all that the press says and does in their name? The dilemma implied by this question springs from those features of press ideology which induce a supreme respect for First Amendment values and for the risks attendant on any authoritative intervention into press affairs. Consequently,

²³ Richard M. Perloff, "Journalism Research: A 20-Year Perspective," *JOURNALISM QUARTERLY*, 53:123-126 (Spring, 1976).

²⁴ P.J. Tichenor, A.I. Nnaemeka, C.N. Olien and G.A. Donohue, "Community Pluralism and Perceptions of Television Content," *JOURNALISM QUARTERLY*, 54: 254-261, (Summer, 1977).

²⁵ Bruce N. Westley and Malcolm S. MacLean, Jr., "A Conceptual Model for Communications Research," *JOURNALISM QUARTERLY*, 34:31-38, (Spring, 1957).

we find it difficult to do other than accept Judge Gurfein's judgement: "A cantankerous press, an obstinate press, a ubiquitous press must be suffered by those in authority in order to preserve the even greater values of freedom of expression and the right of the people to know."²⁶ Yet a political philosophy equivalent of this version of press philosophy could surely be found only in something like the doctrine of the divine right of kings. Media power is not supposed to be shared: That's an infringement of editorial autonomy. It is not supposed to be controlled: That's censorship. It's not even supposed to be influenced: That's news management! But why should media personnel be exempt from Lord Acton's dictum that all power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely? And if they are not exempt, who exactly is best fitted to guard the press guardians, as it were? It is difficult to evade the responsibility, which this line of thought seems to devolve on academic scholars, to undertake a judicious but penetrating analysis of press performance. Of course, effective criticism can emanate from other than academic circles. But the uninformed criticism of many sectors of public opinion can be too readily dismissed as narrowly "interested" and self-serving. In a sense only in which the mass media have to operate, while some of the more informed sources of criticism (e.g. politicians) can be too readily dismissed as narrowly "interested" and self-serving. In a sense only academic investigators can legitimately hold the press to account for how it is organized, how its relations to sources are conducted, how it covers vital news topics, how it interprets audience needs and how in practice it serves its readers, viewers and listeners.

► How shall we draw the far-flung threads of this discussion into a concluding focus? Can anything be done about the numerous dilemmas, gaps and areas of weak definition that I have claimed to notice in the record of American journalism research? If not, then the field of research models will probably be left, more or less by default, to a *professional-*

expert orientation—according to which no exterior social purpose is postulated, and the function of scholarship is conceived largely in terms of the generation of theories, investigation techniques and findings which can be deployed in the service of a very wide range of purposes according to researcher taste, opportunity and the availability of funds. Such a model should not automatically be condemned. It has an integrity of its own. Its adherents will suffer fewer of those confused overlaps of scientific and civic role that can bedevil their more normatively minded colleagues. But it may also bias research output towards that which is most do-able, most able to attract financial support, most likely to yield publishable findings and most likely to advance investigators' careers.

If, however, the social purposes of journalism research are to be revitalized along different lines; if the field of press criticism is not to be abdicated to academics lacking any firm commitment to liberal-democratic principles; and if the ideological needs and doubts of our more thoughtful students are to be met; - then we should try to develop yet another research model, one that would stand between the old categories of administrative and critical research. Neither thoroughly pragmatic, nor fiercely Platonic, it would be Aristotelian in spirit, meliorative in aim, and diagnostic and formative in approach. Imbued with a keen sense of the gap between the promise of press performance and its actuality, it would strive to produce findings enabling its extent to be gauged and encouraging policy makers to close it. Although it would not treat the needs of press institutions for market survival and prosperity as paramount, it would assume, until the lessons of experience dictated otherwise, that their personnel could be moved by more public-spirited goals. In Britain, such goals would be expressed in the language of "public service." In America, they might be derived instead from "the social responsibility theory of

²⁶United States v. New York Times Co., 328 F. Supp. 324, 331 (S.D.N.Y. 1971), *aff'd*. 403 U.S. 713 (1971).

the press." It is salutary to recall in this connection that Theodore Peterson first proclaimed that "pure libertarian press theory is obsolescent," and a need for its replacement by social responsibility theory, as long as 20 years ago.²⁷ Yet we still lack a corresponding *social responsibility model* of the purposes of journalism research.

This is not the place to elaborate such a model in detail, but in order to give it qualities of coherence, realism and an institutional cutting edge, respectively, those interested in developing it might need to proceed along three priority paths.

For the sake of *coherence*, an attempt might at some stage have to be made to translate the meliorative research model into a broad-ranging program of proposed investigations. Although such a step might seem daunting and unlikely when contemplated in the abstract, what can be accomplished in this spirit has been impressively demonstrated by Elihu Katz' recent report for the BBC, *Social Research in Broadcasting: Proposals for Further Development*.²⁸ This outlined six areas of policy-relevant proposals, including the social impact of broadcasting; the nature of the audience, how it chooses, uses and processes programs; the management of creativity inside broadcasting organizations; and research into three forms of programming— for understanding reality, for entertainment and to uphold sub-group identities. Of course these categories reflect a unique fusion of the British cultural setting and Katz' personal priorities. But his work has confirmed the practicality of approaching an inter-connected set of research problems from a meliorative policy standpoint.

For the sake of *realism*, we need to undertake more studies of the interaction of communication sources with media

²⁷ Frederick S. Siebert, Theodore Peterson and Wilbur Schramm, *Four Theories of the Press*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1956).

²⁸ Elihu Katz, *Social Research on Broadcasting: Proposals for Further Development*, (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1977).

²⁹ Jay G. Blumler, Michael Gurevitch and Julian Ives, *The Challenge of Election Broadcasting* (Leeds: Centre for Television Research, 1977), mimeo

personnel in a variety of news reporting areas, hopefully in this way giving research more to say about forces acting on the society-to-media interface. My own confidence in the value of such a task was recently much strengthened by the outcome of a study I completed, with colleagues, of interaction between political party publicists and news and current affairs broadcasters during the two British General Elections of 1974.²⁹ Analytically, the study was enhanced by an opportunity to ascertain how the same process—the creation and dissemination of campaign messages— was approached by both kinds of communicators (as well as how they took account of each other in their calculations). In addition, our policy task of recommending some options for change in future election broadcasting arrangements was enriched by this two-sided perspective, since, as the enquiry proceeded, it became increasingly clear that we had to propose different forms of party-broadcaster interaction for past ways of meshing their contributions together, which over the years had acquired the force of entrenched precedents.

This experience has also suggested that we need to learn how to apply a pluralistic power model to analysis of source-media interaction in a variety of spheres. Such a project could involve many exciting steps. First, there would be analysis of the mainsprings of the different forms of power over each other that the two kinds of communicators can wield, and how each sort of communicator takes account of this. Yet a pluralist power model is not necessarily a *naked* power model. For on both sides, the available power will tend to be exercised in line with certain expectations about how it *should* be used, and the sources and character of those expectations will need to be charted in some detail. These would include expectations emanating from a given communicator's own peer group, from patterned inter-relationships he has entered into with the other sort of communicator and from perceptions of societal expectations of communication service as well. It is precisely into this complex

that an input of research-based expectations can occasionally be fed by skillful policy-minded investigators. Next, we could consider the consequences of the prevailing power and expectation networks for message content and, ultimately, for the satisfaction or frustration of audience needs. Finally, we could consider how these structures of communicator power, guided by certain expectations, vary and shift across time, across news topic domains, across media and even across cultures.

For Americans, however, the most problematic of the three paths to tread is the one I labeled, "*institutional cutting edge*." Meliorative research can thrive only in a setting where policy makers and researchers can talk together, learn to understand one another and come to influence each other.³⁰ The researcher must become sufficiently familiar with how the media operate to be able to frame proposals which are relevant to prevailing circumstances. But he must also have confidence that the media institutions are staffed by individuals who are open in some way to a public service appeal. In Britain the would-be policy researcher's problems of this sort are eased by the relatively definite institutionalization of public service expectations—in, for example, the Charter and Governors of the BBC, the Independent Broadcasting Act and the Members of the IBA, the Press Council and in those reviews of broadcasting and the press that are periodically conducted by officially appointed but in-

dependent committees, of which the Annan Committee was the most recent example.

What precisely are their American counterparts? Although they do exist, in comparison they seem more diffuse, less powerful and less strategically situated. Citizens' groups, local media councils, public broadcasting stations, the service ethic of professionally trained journalists, and the FCC itself—all play a part in media betterment; yet taken together, they still convey the impression of a set of rather thin reeds—not broken but not exactly sturdy either.

On this front an outsider is ill-placed to advise. It might help, however, if research could more often be directed at some of these institutions themselves, providing case studies of their philosophies, methods of operation, sources of power, records of achievement and failure and patterns of strengths and limitations—partly in order to judge how their influence on media standards might be enhanced in the future. In addition, policy-minded researchers might look out for chances to contribute to any reviews of the workings of these bodies that may be initiated from time to time. From this standpoint, the current hearings into the Federal Communication Act of 1934, being held by the House of Representative Subcommittee on Communications, presents a rare opportunity that more researchers in this country should be seizing.

³⁰ Elihu Katz and Michael Gurevitch, *The Secularisation of Leisure*. (London: Faber and Faber, 1976).

Mellett Fund Establishes Award for Media Monitoring

► The establishment of an annual award for outstanding work in the growing field of media monitoring and press performance evaluation has been announced by the Mellett Fund for a Free and Responsible Press. The award, which is being established with the aid of a grant from the Philip L. Graham Fund, will be given for work done or culminating in the preceding calendar year.

H. Eugene Goodwin, president of the Mellett Fund and professor of journalism at Penn State, said the award is intended to recognize such things as the work of media ombudsmen, media reviews, press councils, media watchdog columns or broadcasts, books, broadcast programs, research studies and theses.