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ABSTRACT

Addressed to the alleged state of arrested development in current mass communication research, this paper traces contradictions in research findings to possible flaws in the basic research paradigm. The author's purpose is to stimulate and provoke discussion of the methodological implications for mass communication research in terms of two opposing views of reality. Taking issue with the assumption of a non-problematic relationship between reality and theory testing, he analyzes the static-state view of reality in contrast to an in-flux reality view. He suggests that the explanation and understanding of events (in-flux) may be a more attainable goal than prediction and control (static state) in relation to determining the effects of mass media communication on the public. (LG)

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MASS COMMUNICATION AND RELATIVE REALITY:
A CONCEPTUAL PARADIGM

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MASS COMMUNICATION AND RELATIVE REALITY:
A CONCEPTUAL PARADIGM

Introduction

The present state of the art of mass communication study appears in a kind of arrested development, circa 1960. Both Maguire (1968) and Weiss (1968) assert the "findings" of an effect-less nature of mass communication, citing primarily the works of the 1940-to-early-1960 era. Klapper's (1960) observation is still ringing in our ears twelve years later:

. . . . we have provided evidence in partial support of every hue of every view. We have claimed, on the one hand, and on empirical grounds, that escapist material provides its audience with blinders and with an unrealistic view of life (e.g. Arnheim, 1944, and Herzog, 1944.) and on the other hand that it helps them meet life's real problems (e.g. Warner and Henry, 1948). We have hedged on the crime and violence question, typically saying, "Well, probably there is no causative relationship, but there just might be a triggering effect (Bogart, 1956)." In reference to persuasion, we have maintained that the media are after all not so terribly powerful (e.g. Lazarsfeld and Merton, 1948; Klapper, 1948), and yet we have reported their impressive successes in promoting such varied phenomena as religious intolerance (Klapper, 1949), the sale of war bonds (Merton, 1946), belief in the American Way (Klapper cites the records of the USIA), and disenchantment with Boy Scout activities (Kelly and Volkhart, 1952). It is surely no wonder that a bewildered public should regard with cynicism a research tradition which supplies, instead of definitive answers, a plethora of relevant but inconclusive and at times seemingly contradictory findings(p. 2-3).

That mass communication forms have effect is intuitive. An interesting question is thus raised: Why should reasonably clean, methodologically speaking, studies both support and deny such an "obvious" effect as the ability to persuade? The answer may lie in the basic paradigm of the research. It is to this issue that present paper is addressed.

The paper is a polemic. It is not the author's desire to assert the inviolable "truth" of the views contained herein; rather, the purpose is to provoke his own behaviorist bias. If issues are raised which generate discussion among the author's fellows, so much the better for the discipline.

The paper is brief in form and content. Three divisions have been utilized: Static-state vs. In-flux Views of Reality, Implications for Mass Communications Study, and a Summary.

Reality: Static or In-flux?

In science, reality is assumed to be a constant. The job of the scientist is to "test" successive approximations of that reality in the form of theory. With each test, modifications of the theory, the measurements, or the rules of correspondence are made and, upon infrequent occasions, the theories themselves are either replaced by new, "better," theories or subsumed under theories of larger scope.

The problem is that the separate ontological status of the reality against which theory is "tested" is implicitly assumed to be empirically non-problematic (Kirkpatrick, 1971, p. 3).

That is, we assume that the theory is a tentatively "true" and "objective" description of a fixed reality. Further, we assume that this objective relationship is descriptive of, rather than dependent upon the reality itself. The crux of the dilemma in the social sciences is this assumption of a fixed reality.

Standing opposed to this paradigm is one which views reality as "in-flux." Such a view places present science in the role, not so much as a method of inquiry, but, of an ideology with its roots in the social conditions which surround the human use of technology. The reality of the moment dictates a theory of the moment. Present science, with its assumption of a fixed state, projects a picture which is historically contingent. The image is rooted in the past and projected into the future with the assumption that the two are tied by the same bonds.

Note: for a further discussion of the "in-flux" paradigm, see Schutz (1967), Berger, (1971), Marcuse (1964), Slater (1970).

The "in-flux" view of reality dictates a reality of the present. The static view places quality in the past as a summation of achieved and ascribed statuses. The static view reveals a picture of reality wherein the future goals to be attained and the past history of achievement is the reality, and the present is transition. In contrast, the in-flux reality denies "objectivity" and argues for a "relative" understanding.

What are the implications of a "relative reality?"

Practically, it creates an immediate problem for researchers intent upon discovery of the "truth" and poses obstacles of a rather formidable nature to the traditional goals of prediction and control. In a universe where every thing has its place (in the fixed sense), prediction and control are theoretically obtainable goals. All that needs be done is describe accurately and objectively everything and its place, and, like a jigsaw puzzle build a whole picture from the sum of its parts.

The universe in flux is a different matter. Efforts at prediction and control become not only more difficult and complex, but perhaps even impossible. The question becomes not what are the variables which when summed yield a reality transmittable to the future, but what is the totality of the situation now. A reality in flux may be greater or lesser than the sum of its parts depending upon the relative demands of the moment and the objects available within the universe of issue. Consequently, any given set of variables making up the totality of the moment may be expected to be different the second time they are examined regardless of the attempts to control such change.

The view of a reality in-flux does not deny the applicability of quantitative methodology entirely. Quantification for description of the reality-in-flux of human behavior is applicable to the moment of description. Such a view may preclude data generalization and prediction altogether. These are issues with which

the present author is not prepared to deal within the limits of this paper. The point of the matter is that from this paradigm we should not be surprised at the "non-replicability" of many studies and the failure of some theories to meet the test of "disproveability."

These notions are presented in no way to impugn past or present research techniques; nor should any implication be read to the effect that there are no commonalities of human behavior or motivation. What is being raised is the possibility of alternative explanations based on a concept of a reality in flux as opposed to a fixed nature reality. With no attempt at exhausting the supply, the following examples are offered.

Attitudes. Assuming they exist at all, attitudes are functionally related to the reality-in-flux of the individual. They are "coping" mechanisms. They may well be "learned". They are predispositional and tied to an "appropriate" behavior-of-the-moment.

Attitude Change. Consequent to the functional nature of attitudes, techniques which effect attitude change at one time may not succeed with either the same or similar individuals at a different time even under the most exacting of conditions. The only exact condition is the original.

Attitude vs. Behavior. The changing nature of a reality in flux dictates a relationship between these two only on the basis of the demands of the moment. We should expect, as research to date has shown, an inconclusive result from efforts of an "either-or" nature.

Interpersonal Relationships, Group Phenomena and Alienation. Persons attuned to a "now" reality environment tend to accept one another with less emphasis upon past performance and less need for structure than do persons oriented toward the static state notion. Hierarchical structures of authority, artifacts of a static state reality view, frustrate free flow

of information, inhibit interaction, and are essentially anti-productive. As noted earlier, the static or fixed reality concept is characterized by a preoccupation with the past as a concrete line to the future with the present a mere link in time. Oriented to such a notion, an individual would stand a predictable chance of violating one of the primary "involvement obligations" outlined by Goffman (1967), to wit: he may be expected to evidence a preoccupation with matters external to the present interaction event and thereby alienate himself.

The implications of an in-flux reality applied to mass communications are of particular interest to this author. The following section has been set aside for that discussion.

Implications for Mass Communications

The myth of objectivity. There are individuals, who may or may not be representative of certain segments of the society, who continue to assert that the news media have somehow "lost" their objectivity. Such an assertion implies that the news media at some point in time possessed it. By "objective reporting" this author has deduced the following conceptual meaning from the usual context of usage: value-free communication regarding an event, written or spoken by an individual with the ability to separate his values from his capacity to observe, such ability having been exercised in the creation and execution of the communication act/product. Several questions are raised by such a definition: How does one acquire such an ability? Is he born with it or can one learn it? If one can learn it, why isn't it taught? From the viewpoint of a reality in flux, the answers are subsumed under one parsimonious response - there is no objectivity.

The only conceivable way an individual could achieve such a state would be through the suspension of his perceptual frame of reference. While the phenomenon

of sleep perhaps qualifies, it becomes rather difficult to explain how knowledge of the event becomes possessed by the reporter. The point here is that only in a fixed state reality can one discuss the nature of "objectivity."

Objectivity implies a kind of separation from reality -- that somehow it is possible to remove one's self from the life processes going on around him, withdraw to a vantage point separate from the reality and view the processes through a frame of reference separate from reality. Assuming this could be accomplished, what legitimacy would there be for the necessary assumption that such a procedure is non-problematic with regard to the production (or reproduction) of an image of the real event? The distortion potential of such a procedure appears obvious.

In an in-flux reality there can be no "objectivity" in the current sense except with regard to the future, since it is of unknown quantity and quality. The goal of the news media representative in this context is the communication of an accurate account of the total situation as it is, including all impinging variables to the extent he has access to an awareness of them.

The difference between a fixed reality view and that of an in-flux view is, perhaps, more easily demonstrated in traditional "J" school terms, to wit: A fixed state reality recognizes only who, what, where, when and how much; the reality in flux requires recognition of these plus at least equal import to the why and how of an event. A reality in flux would recognize bias but not "non-objectivity." Control for bias exists in an awareness of its existence, a development of which is quite within the realm of at least some instructors. Control for non-objectivity becomes impossible without eliminating the process and mechanisms included in perception.

The Social Role of Mass Communication. The notion of a reality in flux puts mass media into the same kind of functional framework as that of "attitude." The media become objects within the individual's reality which may or

may not be drawn upon as another tool for coping with his momentarily real world.

Hence, mass media can be seen both as a reinforcer of existing social norms and as a definer of the limits of acceptable behavior. Information can be seen to both generate as well as decrease entropically related anxiety.

Newsmen in America have traditionally defined as "news" that which is "unusual" by normative standards, we might even say deviant. The communication of an unusual, or deviant, event may occur under conditions wherein the audience has no referent for the "why". In such an instance, the communication may be expected to generate anxiety. The information environment has become, relatively, entropic. The receiver may call upon his defensive attitudes to deny the deviancy, or he may seek additional information depending upon the demands of the reality of the moment. Regardless of his behavioral reaction as the reality-in-flux moves on the deviant event has been encompassed within an information-communication environment. As discussion of the event continues within the media, it begins to lose its unusual nature and may establish itself as redundant. Normative standards at that point have been expanded to encompass the event.

Entertainment implies redundancy. John Cage's music falls short of entertainment for most people. It is information, it is news as was Stravinsky's music or Beethoven's during an earlier time. Television soap-operas are redundant. They contain no information and are primarily reinforcing in nature.

Market surveys and polling. Market surveys and political polling sometimes yield results which are contradicted by future behavior of the subjects. Ford Motor company's Edsel fiasco serves as an example. The problems are explainable in terms of a reality-in-flux: The survey may not be in error, it may instead by anticipating a static state be incapable of accounting for change within a subjective reality in which individuals may or may not be highly involved.

On the other hand, the early evening predictions of who won the election

before the polls have closed are also explainable in terms of the reality in flux. We must recall that reality, in the present framework, is subjective. While there may be activity going on outside the subjective frame, it is regarded as insignificant relative to the reality of the moment. There may be some predictability within such an "insignificant reality," but as the reality-in-flux moves to encompass it, for whatever reason, it begins to lose its predictability.

The Medium As Message. Disregarding the academic arguments surrounding McLuhan (1964), his views and methods, the concept of the medium as message appears valid within the reality-in-flux. Messages, in the traditional sense of the term, are objects within an individual's reality frame. They are functional as are other objects. That an object, such as a TV set or a collection of objects such as all electronic media, has meaning separate from the content it carries is quite consistent with the in-flux reality view, while it is rather inconsistent with a static state view.

Within the fixed reality notion, electronic media are just that — media, carrying information, which are electronic in structure and function. They are, essentially, representatives of past experiences which attempt to link past and future together. Content is of primary importance.

The reality-in-flux view regards media as objects within an immediate environment. Their very existence take on a notion of immediacy. Both content and form become important to any analysis of effect.

Summary

This paper has examined briefly and conceptually the implications for mass communication of a paradigm which takes issue with the assumption of science of a non-problematic relationship between reality and theory testing. A discussion of two views of reality was presented in which a static-state view was contrasted with a notion of reality "in-flux."

An in-flux reality denies the existence of "objectivity" in its scientific sense and in the sense usually applied to news media representatives. Mass media are both reinforcers of existing social norms as well as definers of the limits of acceptable behavior.

Methodological implications were discussed briefly suggesting that explanation and understanding of events may be a more attainable goal than prediction and control, and that prediction and control within an "in-flux" reality may be impossible.

The paper was offered as a polemic with the purpose of provoking discussion.

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