COMMUNICATION RESEARCH IN THE UNITED STATES:
A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

BY

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After completing a tour through twenty American university faculties representing communication research (mainly departments of journalism, speech or sociology, institutes for communication research etc.) plus a number of private bases for American broadcasting and advertising research, a European observer is both impressed and upset. He is inspired because of the huge and ever-growing amount of manpower and money devoted to communication research in the USA, and he is stimulated by the impressive variety of different methods in studying the communication phenomena in the USA.[1] At the same time, however, he is disconcerted in thinking about the resources for communication research in his own continent: there are relatively few European communication researchers and studies outside the routine audience research in broadcasting and advertising, and few are the European university programs with emphasis on the systematic analysis of human communication. Compared to the United States, Europe seems to be an underdeveloped country in the area of communication research; and compared to the rest of the world, the USA really proves to be 'greatest in the world'.

Nevertheless, the present author is tempted to think — after a year of thoroughly digesting his travel experiences and keeping up with recent literature in communication research[2] — that this 'greatness' of American communication research is rather superiority of *amount* than superiority of *quality.* Paradoxically enough, it was only after personal contact with that impressively abundant American communication research field that I began to understand Bernard Berelson's famous argument about the lack of new

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[1] An impressive example of the effectivity and extensiveness of American communication research is the collection of studies *The Kennedy Assassination and the American Public, Social Communication in Crisis,* edited by Bradley S. Greenberg and Edwin B. Parker (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966).

[2] The most recent inventory of the field of mass communication research is done by Percy H. Tannenbaum and Bradley S. Greenberg in *Annual Review of Psychology,* VoI. 19, 1968, pp. 351-86. Another though a bit older general view is presented by Alex S. Edelstein in *Perspectives in Mass Communication* (Copenhagen: Einar Harcks Forlag, 1966).

ideas and the 'withering away' of communication research[3]. Like most communication researchers, I do not agree with Berelson that communication research is a dying field; but unlike most communication researchers, I presently perceive the American communication research as a 'sick man'. Such a perspective from a European colleague might sound like a snobbish indication of a 'scientific inferiority complex', but strangely enough, the criticism is shared by several eminent American researchers. Only few of the following critical arguments are original, even if I mostly present them in my own version.

I am by no means arguing that the 'sickness' of American communication research is incurable, rather it is only latent and symptomatic. In fact, I could also have written with fairly good conscience an article laudatory of 'what everything American communication research today has to offer'. But I did not choose to because too many uncritical and naive accounts of American communication research have already been written. I thought it more useful to emphasize those symptoms in the field, which can be seen to be negative – both in spite of and because of the fact that they are so seldom discussed.

In short, my diagnosis of the patient is: 'Too much physical growth and too many toys to play with, too little intellectual growth and too few problems to think over'. Considering the total amount of research effort in the field of communications in the United States, it seems to me that simple *thinking* is poorly represented in relation to all kinds of sophisticated *measurement.* The field concentrates on being correct in the technical methods at the expense of being loose on the conceptual level: it is '*hyperscientific*' and therefore *quasiscientific.* The field *lacks theory*: a solid conceptual framework exact and broad enough to relate the empirical data to the body of accumulating knowledge. The field also *lacks ethical and ideological considerations*: thinking about the norms and goals guiding mass communication activity and its research. I shall discuss each of these 'weaknesses' in order, with statements of some American authorities as starting points.

Tendency to 'hyperscience'

Wilbur Schramm characterizes communication research as 'one of the great crossroads where many pass but few tarry. Scholars come into it from their own disciplines, bringing valuable tools and insights, and later go

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[3] Bernard Berelson, The State of Communication Research, *Public Opinion Quarterly,* VoI. 23, 1959, pp. 1−6; also reprinted in Lewis A. Dexter and David M. White (eds.), *People, Society and Mass Communications* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1964), pp. 501−9.

back, like Lasswell, to the more central concerns of their disciplines.[4] This was obviously true at the time of the 'great foundingfathers', but no longer in the present situation, which is dominated by scholars originally and definitely identifying themselves with communication research. There are more 'communication approaches' today than there are 'psychology, sociology, political science etc. approaches to communication'.

Most of these men of 'communication approach' work in the academic spheres of journalism, broadcasting or speech and usually publish their studies in Journalism Quarterly, Public Opinion Quarterly, Journal of Communication or Audio-Visual Communication Review. Some of them have started as practical professionals, others again have directly entered the schools of communication a professional career in their mind. In the beginning, their main orientation took the line of professionalism or liberal arts. However, the academic schooling with its emphasis on communication *science* reoriented them towards behavioral science. Men who earlier used to be expressive, literal and speculative gradually became critical, scientific and empirical. Professionals turned into 'communicologists'. I do not want to criticise these men for their scientific devotion; the reorientation from naive professionalism to sophisticated communicology was, of course, a necessary step towards the science of human communication. But I do have the naughty feeling that much of communicology has in practice been trivial factualization — a reorientation from naive professionalism to naive research. Much of this feeling has been elicited by the following statements of two Americans, Bernard Berelson who has already left the field of communication research (he works presently for Population Council, Inc.) and believes the field will die, and Malcolm S. MacLean Jr. who is still active (dean of the School of Journalism at the University of Iowa) and firmly believes in the future of the field.

This is what Berelson says in an improvized personal discussion:

When all those fellows do their hard science and you look back at their work, does it really come to something, does one learn much? People consider me anti-theoretical. I think that there has been too much premature theorizing in the part of the social sciences that I know something about, sociology and the like. I really don't know what communication theory would look like if I ran up against it this afternoon. And more than that: I think that many of the people who talk like that don't know either really what they want — they are grabbing something, theory is a very prestigious word. My feeling is that you approach communication theory in the way you approach happiness. You don't start out: 'I'm going to be happy today'. Your happiness is an indirect consequence of your adjustment to your wife, your family, your job, your health and so forth. I think a communication theory will emerge, if it's going to, if we get a solid body of important empirical propositions documented on commu-

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[4] Willbur Schramm, Comments on Berelson's article, Public Opinion Quarterly, Vol. 23, 1959, pp. 6–9; also reprinted in Dexter and White, op.cit., pp. 509–12.

nication behavior. When you put those together and so to speak add them up, that's it —
instead of coming out the other way. That's why I'm a findings-man; in the inventory of the
human behavior we deal with findings, propositions, generalizations. These fellows can play
hard science, I don't arrogate it, except I want to know after you have been with it for a
while, what are the propositions…

When I left the field I thought — and I feel it very strongly today — that if the field was
going to rescue itself, it would have turned into a policy direction from an academic, theo-
retical, methodological direction. I would have turned myself towards the broad public
policy questions of what a communication system ought to be. In the term I use now, more
professional social research.[5]

In another connection, Berelson gives a more general formulation to his
critical opinion:

The wrong way to go about sociology in action tends to concentrate on contributing to the
theory or the techniques of the discipline. The right way concentrates on contributing to the
solution or amelioration of the problem.

The former is ready to work on any problem, since any problem is, at least in principle,
equally applicable to theoretical or methodological interest. The latter prefers to work on
problems that have important social consequences.[6]

MacLean's opinion has been extracted from his paper presented at a con-
vention of American journalism institutes:

I think that most of the research we have done has been done at too advanced a stage of
precision -as though we presumed much more theory than we have… Recognizing a prob-
lem when you see one seems like the easiest of jobs. Yet, if we recognize a problem clearly,
it means that our theory is quite advanced and so our problem is well on its way to solution.
What we usually do recognize are some symptoms of things not going very well…

Many of the problems we work with in communication research remain barely recognized
and poorly defined. We researchers find that many practitioners cannot define their prob-
lems in terms that make sense to us. And when they do we are prone to dismiss them be-
cause they don't fit the research tools we like to use…

As it is now, we seem to act as though there were some magic about analysis of variance
which can take the place of exploration, thinking and theory…[7]

Interesting enough, as much as these two opinions seem to disagree — for
instance one asking for less theory and the other asking for more theory —
there is one common point in them: both are worried about the dominance
of an esoteric and methodologically oriented communicology over a fresh
and problem-oriented approach, i.e. tendency to 'hyperscience'. Berelson

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[5] Bernard Berelson, personal communication, April 1967.

[6] Bernard Berelson, Sociology in Action: In Population and in General, in Arthur B.
Shostak (ed.), *Sociology in Action, Case Studies in Social Problems and Directed Social
Change* (Homewood, Ill.: The Dorsey Press, 1966), pp. 15–21.

[7] Malcolm S. MacLean Jr, Frontiers of Communication Research, a paper presented at
the 1966 convention of journalism institutes, University of Wisconsin (mimeo).

wants more propositions related to reallife; MacLean wants simply more thinking. In fact, I suspect that basically both of them want much of the same thing — they just might use different expressions and give different meanings to the word 'theory' (cf. below).

My guess about the *reasons* for the development towards 'hyperscience' is that we have to look for them outside the camp of American communication researchers, from the *general behavioristic tradition.*[8] American communication research has grown up in an atmosphere of behaviorism and operationalism, which has made it correct in technical methodology but poor in conceptual productivity. The ultimate goal has been exactness of measurement rather than excellence of ideas. Very broadly speaking, it looks like most of the concepts with which communication research today operates were imported to the field by those 'passing visitors' whom Schramm speaks about and whom Berelson has no longer seen in the field; the original communication researchers are busy only technically testing and repeating their thoughts.[9] The field is full of technicians, but the engineers and idea-men are not numerous. Of course, this is not to say that 'technicians go away'; it is only a tentative comment on the overrepresentation of *doing* over *thinking* in research — very common to the orthodox behavioral approach.

Obviously it was just the barren level of ideas to which Berelson paid his attention when he 'buried communication research'. And his point makes a good deal of sense, if only one overlooks the flourishing level of research operations. Naturally it is important to be exact and objective, but the communicologists may after all make too much fuss about proving their young field definitely 'scientific' by following the technical requirements of doing science when they at the same time forget about the conceptual and intellectual requirements — thinking about what they are doing and why. Those few — for instance Schramm — who still keep on devoting their main interest in more 'philosophical' communication research are easily laughed at by most 'scientific' communicologists for being 'speculators'.

It should be remembered that the tendency to 'hyperscience' is by no means the monopoly of communication research, even if it is rather clearly to be noted there. Behaviorism and operationalism have introduced the same kind of sterility of ideas to almost all fields in the behavioral sciences.

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[8] For this point as well as for the general criticism of the social sciences I am very much indebted to my colleague Dr. Yrjö Ahmavaara, who presently works with a larger critical treatment of the methodology in social sciences.

[9] I am purposively a little bit unspecific here, because I do not want to blame anybody by presenting some bad examples. However, it can be noted for instance in the contents of Dexter's and White's *op.cit.* how much fresh ideas are imported in the field as soon as others than communicologists themselves do communication research.

'Liberation from subjective speculation' has lead to the 'objective American tradition', which happily rid itself of the 'philosophical European mysticism' but unfortunately — it was not logically necessary — at the same time was burdened by reluctance to think. The following anecdote expresses this dilemma quite nicely: American (behavioral) scientists know what they are speaking about but they are not interesting; European colleagues do not know what they are speaking about but they are interesting.

Lack of theoretical precision

A more or less common misconception about theory among 'hyperscientists' is that anyting that goes beyond the empirical or statistical evidence is 'subjective speculation' and not 'exact science'. This has lead to gathering of data without precisely defined meaning, which can be called 'hyperfactualization'[10]; for instance, survey research with its quite invalid measurements very often represents this kind of ostensible 'scientific precision' or quasi-exactness. Exactness is not, after all, maintained by only correct technical research operations but rather by logically sound and differentiated conceptual analysis of the problem. A research project can hardly be better and more exact than its conceptual starting point has been.

In this instance I verbatim agree with MacLean (see above). Berelson seems to have a different opinion with his criticism of 'premature theorizing'. However, I think Berelson would heartily agree with the necessity for a precise conceptual analysis of a problem before data collection. In a way, a thorough preliminary conceptual analysis is a good guarantee *against* esoteric and methodologically oriented 'hypertheorizing'. A careful and logically sound conceptual analysis is also a safeguard against McLuhan - type of wild speculation, which hides some inevitably clever points into an illogical conceptual mess. It is the conceptual looseness that makes theorizing premature rather than thinking itself. Theory in this sense of conceptual precision is by no means something opposite to professionalism and application. But it is true that theorizing as it is usually conducted in 'hyperscientific' communicology can too often with good reasons be criticised by professionals — and Berelson — for being irrelevant to reality.

To sum up, it seems to me that the 'hyperscientific approach' resulting from extreme behavioral tradition explains both the tendency to fruitless empirism and esoteric theorizing — as opposite as these two 'weaknesses' at first sight appear to be. The key to the dilemma is an attentive — if needed also courageous — conceptual analysis of the problem, not guided

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[10]   The term 'hyperfactualization' is used here in the same meaning as by Maurice Duverger in his *Introduction to the Social Sciences* (New York: F. A. Praeger, 1964).

by primarily methodological and 'hypertheoretical' considerations but by phenomena-directed propositions and their logical relationships. It is encouraging that a few researchers can already be noted who seem to have realized the urgent need for a brave but at the same time conceptually precise theory.[11]

One of the problem areas where promising development towards sound conceptual analysis and not trivial communicology can presently be found is research on information seeking.[12] On the other hand, there are plenty of problems which are continuously approached with an ill-defined conceptual framework but with a handy and respectable methodology which has begun to dominate so much that careful thinking on the phenomenon itself has been neglected; for instance, readability with Cloze procedure, and attitudes, images and meaning with the semantic differential or Q-methodology. There is nothing wrong with employing these methods themselves, but by using them to support a conceptually loose construction is to prostitute them.[13]

The need for a unified theory in communication research is also expressed in a statement of 'one of the great four', Harold Lasswell, who said in a personal discussion:

The most obvious fact about communication research is that there has been very little integration of these investigations with a fundamental theory of the social process. The people who have been working on communication research have for the most part been interested in inventing techniques and improving particular techniques. They have been very much less interested in and competent in making the theoretical analysis of the role of communication in the social process. Consequently, there is no body of theory of what I call 'shaping and sharing of enlightenment' which is comparable with the theories about the 'shaping and sharing of wealth' which the economists have developed, or even the theories about the

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[11] Such promising symptoms are for instance Charles R. Wright's and George Gerbner's contributions to Dexter's and White's *op.cit.* (pp. 91–109 and 476–500); the collection *Communication: Concepts and Perspectives* edited by Lee Thayer (Washington D.C.: Spartan Books, 1967); discussions on communication theory in *Journal of Communication* and in the sessions of the National Society for the Study of Communication and Theory and Methodology Division of the Association for Education in Journalism; Richard F. Carter's recent work (Communication and Affective Relations, *Journalism Quarterly,* Vol. 42, 1965, pp. 203–12; and On Defining 'Communication', a paper delivered at a session on 'Human Communication Theory Building' by the National Society for the Study of Communication, 1966); and William J. Paisley's ideas on Building and Testing Communication Theory presented in the before-mentioned session on 'Human Communication Theory Building'.

[12] See for instance Tannenbaum and Greenberg, *op.cit.,* pp. 365–7; another good account is given by Peter Clarke, Selective Media Exposure: A Review of Current Findings, Communication Research Center, University of Washington, 1966 (mimeo).

[13] An example of the latter, according to my judgement, is William Stephenson's *The PlayTheory of Mass Communication* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

'shaping and sharing of power' which a good many of the political scientists have been developing. Now then, my forecast is that this period of concern with the development of the procedures by which data can be gathered is likely to be followed by theorizing of more effective kind about the role of communication in all of the different institutional processes of society, developed and underdeveloped countries around the globe…

One implication, too, I believe, is that there will be by far more systematic efforts made to plan, to study the future. The pIan to investigate the emerging, the changes - not only the networks of communication, the messages of communication and the responses to communication and the characteristics of those who are engaged in the initiation and reception of messages — but there will be far more comprehensive concern for setting up theories about probable courses of future development…

I guess that there will be techniques of a more active and less passive kind. What I have in mind is that there will be more concern for anticipating the consequences of the interventions that are made in the future social process. By this I mean forecasting the probable response of various audiences to various contents under various circumstances and relating the results as they emerge to the communication theory itself. This is the way that a usable theory will, I think, be developed. So that this anticipatory mode of thought will mean that unless one's theory is able to forecast who will respond how to how much change of the environment one doesn't yet have a theory.[14]

The same prophecy of an increasing interest in theoretical questions in the field of communication research is shared by Schramm, who believes that we are quite close to a unified theory of communication.[15] There is really a good chance that the patient will soon begin to recover from the disease of 'hyperscience'.

Lack of ethical and ideological considerations

Both Lasswell and Berelson referred above to the responsibility of communication research to participate in solving social problems and in developing future communication systems. My argument is that this important responsibility has also been neglected among the 'hyperscientists' as a consequence of the tendency to keep away from 'speculation'. Too many communicologists have chosen the convenient role of an indifferent observator in relation to the ethics and ideology of communication; and this has been made for the sake of 'objectivity of science' in the hope of remaining absolutely neutral. In practice, however, this kind of attitude turns out to be very easily ideological quasi-neutrality: it is hardly possible for a scientist to simply withdraw from responsibility, because even saying nothing is an ideological position.[16]

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[14] Harold D. Lasswell, personal communication, April 1967.

[15] Wilbur Schramm, personal communication, February 1967. See also Perspectives by Tannenbaum and Greenberg, *op. cit.,* p. 353.

[16] More general aspects of the responsibility of social scientists are presented by Noam Chomsky in his essay The Responsibility of Intellectuals, published in The *New York Re-*

Communicology is really missing an active consideration of the values which are communicated. This position has been also taken by another 'one of the great four', Paul Lazarsfeld, who in his forecast asks for more studies about the working of television industry and about values of mass culture:

What is so badly needed is various kinds of studies of the industry, such as detailed biographies of programs: Take a successful TV program; through what steps did it go from the moment when the idea was first conceived? Who had influence and in what direction did he exercise it? It would be equally interesting to take a number of unsuccessful programs and attempt a similar biography…
Producers in recent years have talked about 'mature' Westerns, and the term has been the object of some unjustified ridicule. Missing is a detailed content analysis on precisely the difference between a mature and a primitive Western so that programming decisions could be made on the basis of explicit content criteria.
Another good object of study would be mystery and detective stories. In the European version of this genre, the crimes are highly varied: stolen documents, unexplained embezzlements, temporary disappearances of people, and so on. The American version concentrates much more on just one crime: 'murder'. Is suspense really heightened by the injection of murder, or could the range of topics be enlarged, and violence be reduced, if script writers tried themselves on such other topics?[17]

In the current research tradition, normative considerations have been too much masked by factual documentation; thinking about the *goals* of communication in various situations has been too often replaced by experimentation with different *means* of communication. The conscious tendency is to avoid normative statements; anyhow, no justification is seen to change the present conditions — for instance, reducing violence from television programs[18] — if the omnipotent research results do not unanimously 'prove the change to be right'. Such behavior by a scientist who avoids ethical and ideological positions is nothing but good old conservatism. Counting on research results of 'neutral hyperscientists' is usually a safe guarantee against any change. As long as social scientists are ideologically naive it is possible to take advantage of them without their being conscious about it.

Concluding remarks

It is to be hoped that along with the rise of interest in theory of communication there will also be a growing intererest in philosophy of communication in the United States — not only among some specialists but among

view of Books, 1967; see also Social Science Yogis and Military Commissars by Irving L. Horowitz, *Trans-Action,* Vol. 5, Number 6, pp. 29–38, which stresses the Funding commitments of social research.

[17] Paul F. Lazarsfeld, Unfinished Business of Communications Research, *Grassroots Editor,* Vol. 8, Number 2, pp. 3-6.

[18] Cf. Tannenbaum and Greenberg, *op.cit.* p. 373.

all communicologists and particularly 'hyperscientists'. Such a development would also inevitably reduce the well known and still very common *antagonism between professoinal communicators* (especially journalists) *and communication researchers*. It is possible — because of the vital importance of value problems to professional communicators — that much of the potential conflict between the 'pros and egg-heads' is contributed to the unpopularity of ethical and ideological interests among the 'hyperscientific' communicologists.

It is also to be hoped that there will be a happy resolution to the same kind of conflict between professional approach and communicology approach within the area of *joumalism education,* which presently is more or less divided into two camps depending on the dominance of either one of the two approaches.[19] Each of these training traditions, when taken alone, seems to lead to a somewhat limited perspective: professionalism to competence in describing life to other people but not necessarily to insight in the very process of communication, and communicology to readiness to analyze the process of communication but not necessarily to insight in perceiving the flow of life. On the other hand, taken together these two approaches may lead to intellectually highly stimulating as well as professionally effective combination.[20]

In fact, problems with the approaches of journalism education and problems with the approaches of communication research are essentially the same. Both in education and research it is important to be objective and scientific, but it may be fatal to exclude constant subjective and normative thinking from the curriculum. If it so happens, 'the baby may be thrown out with the bath' — the ideas may be lost while processing them.

It has been my argument that there really is such a 'pathological' tendency in current American communication research — and consequently also in current European communication research, which is very much following the American patterns. If my diagnosis, as a European, is considered too condemning, it is only due to the fact that self-criticism easily produces more bitterness than criticism of others.

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[19] Malcolm S. MacLean Jr., Thomas Danbury and John T. McNelly, AEJ Members and Their Attitudes on Journalism Education Issues, *Joumalism Q.uarterly,* VoI. 42, 1965, pp. 98–107.

[20] A most interesting outline for a new program in journalism education has been made by Malcolm S. MacLean and Richard W. Budd in the University of Iowa; see Budd and MacLean, Applying Communication Principles to Communication Education, in Lee Thayer (ed.), *Communication-Spectrum* '7: *Proceedings of the I5th Annual Conference of the National Society for the Study of Communication* (Lawrence, Kans.: Allen Press, 1968), pp. 137–53.