

Research ideologies in conflict

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Communication research in Latin America has followed conceptual and methodological orientations established by researchers in Europe and the United States. The influence of the classical European orientation is most evident in historical and juridical research. The influence of a modern European orientation is particularly strong in the area of content analysis of picture-story fiction magazines, comic books, fan magazines and school textbooks (semiotic-structuralist).

The areas most directly influenced by a North American orientation are diffusion of agricultural innovations; structure and functions of print and electronic mass media; experiments with instructional television; special formats of radio education; and audiovisual education in group communication situations. The areas where both types of European, in addition to U.S. influence, seem to be present, although in separate cases, are: television programming content and effects, and news flow and extra-regional influences on the mass communication system of the region.

A seminar of experts on communication research in Latin America evaluated this activity and found it affected by the following principal limitations:

- (a) a lack of a conceptual framework of its own;
- (b) an uncritical adoption of extraregional methodologies (some of which proved inadequate and others obsolete) along with an absence of authentic national creation of appropriate methodologies;
- (c) a lack of an even minimal degree of systematization that would have facilitated use of the results in more than one country;
- (d) an exaggerated emphasis on descriptive and quantitative approaches;

and

(e) a preference for analyzing the communication phenomena out of the context of political, socioeconomic, and cultural variables

Analysts in Latin America have also begun to contest the U.S. model that has permeated much research in the region. A frontal critique from Armand Mattelart, formerly in Chile, can be summarized as follows (15, pp. 11-19):

- (a) U.S. Communication research is characterized by its preoccupation with effects of mass media messages on audiences perceived as potential markets.
- (b) This type of research displaced the center of gravity of the inquiry away from the media (the object) to the audience (the subject), given that their interest resides in detecting the people's motivations so as to render them amenable to commercial and political persuasion.
- (c) The methodology itself limits a critical comprehension of the social system in which communication research operates. Analysis of this methodology reveals its pro-status quo bias in that it never considers the alternative of the creation of a new system but rather presents "functional" adjustments to the old "What matters", adds Jonas (13). "is to facilitate the functioning of the existing system, without ever questioning its validity, however dangerous that system may be for the future of society and man's integrity "

Mattelart concludes "Mass communication sociology therefore becomes a tool to consolidate the principles upon which the social relationships are built. in this manner doing away with any possibility of investigating the place occupied by the sender of communications in the power structure. . Thus, empiricist sociology has become a so-called scientific instrument dedicated to strengthening the rationalized mechanism of social control" (15, p. 20)

Criticism is also starting to emerge from within the United States research community.

For example, Everett Rogers (22), who has conducted many studies in Latin America, concedes that many of the results of development communication research carried out in the underdeveloped countries may be misdirected and incomplete because of "the inappropriate use of culture bound research methods (largely developed in the United States) ."

Herman Felstehausen in agreement with Rogers, states, "Many false starts and disappointing (even misleading) results have been produced through scores of studies about practice adoption, information seeking, two-step flow, co-orientation, empathy and the like" (8, p 15)

Felstehausen, a researcher with ample experience in Latin America, questions several aspects of development communication theory and research. He challenges two major conceptual fallacies. The first is that resulting from the standard practice of choosing operational examples and analogies from experiences of developed, rather than underdeveloped, countries. He notes that this is particularly evident in a bias favoring technology (mainly that of the U.S.) as a correlate of communication

phenomena and as a solution to the problems of underdevelopment. Felstehaus argues against this misconception by presenting a review of empirical studies which demonstrate that the communication process and the adoption of new technology cannot be separated from the factors defining social, economic, and political systems.

The other fallacy examined by Felstehausen is the use of inappropriate and often untested theoretical models which cause distorted perceptions of the role of communication in relation to social and behavioral systems. The analyst feels that it's fruitless to speak of a separate "theory of communication" since communication should be viewed as a subsystem dependent upon the broader social system. Thus its study should fall within a theory of "social interaction" in which communication is treated as a process that unveils and transforms reality in the minds of both senders and receivers.

Another U.S. scholar with extensive experience in Latin American communication research, John McNelly, points to the excessive preoccupation with attitudes in U.S. communication research, rather than with information, the root of beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. He attributes this to the persuasion orientation of the research, observing that "much attitude research has tended to deal with relative trivial or shallow preferences in purchasing or voting... Little attention is given to deeper cognitive structure or to sociological antecedents" (18, p. 1).

McNelly (16) is among those who have pointed out the implicit elitist bias of some U.S. research paradigms such as the "two-step flow model" which has been applied in some cases in Latin America (e.g., 24, 25). The research carried out using this model discovered that, although it was evident that the masses have very little direct exposure to the mass media, they are indirectly reached by them through interpersonal contacts with "opinion leaders". McNelly and Molina (17) in Peru and Tichenor et al. (26) are among those beginning to demonstrate the fallacy of this "trickle-down" argument which, according to Rogers (23), is little more than an excuse to cover up the inaccessibility to mass media messages in which the majority of the population of underdeveloped countries is kept.

A considerable number of innovation diffusion studies were conducted in Latin America during the 1960s. The model for these studies (carried out in rural Mexico, Brazil, Colombia and Costa Rica) has recently been confronted with serious objections by both U.S. and Latin American analysts. The central criticism is that the model ignores the decisive influence of the social structure on the individual decisions involved in adopting or rejecting the innovations.

Eugene Havens, a U.S. sociologist with considerable experience in Latin America, was probably the first to observe this limitation. A U.S. communication specialist with a similar background (7) conducted research which led him to agree with Haven's observation. Diffusion studies have found that certain variables are consistently and positively related to the adoption rate for agricultural innovation: for example, size of farm, income level, educational level, social prestige, and exposure to mass media, which at the same time correlate positively with or

another. However, according to the critical analysts, these studies have failed to perceive these variables as parts of a broader and more crucial factor: society's power structure. It is this structure, Cuellar and Gutierrez (2) note, that determines the behavioral characteristics of the other adopter categories (ranging from "innovators" to "laggards") identified by this research. Thus, notes Diaz Bordenave (5), gone is "...the illusion that a farmer is an individual who has access to information and makes his own decisions." He adds:

"Today we are aware that our countries, their economies and their people – and above all the farmers – are dependent upon decisions made for them by international forces and that, within our countries, the rural areas occupy the lower level in a pyramid of vertical domination and often exploitation."

There are several studies showing that farmers owning land are clearly more innovative than sharecroppers (see, for instance, Echevarria (6)). Other studies have shown that farmers with an autonomous decision-making capacity and high levels of education and of access to mass media adopt innovations more readily than do landless, uneducated peasants with little access to communication media. Among others see Parra (20), Grunig (11), Diaz Bordenave (4), Fonseca (9), and Herzog et al. (12). Researchers such as Quesada (21) in Brazil and Mejia (19) in Peru have demonstrated that peasants dominated by a "patron" (a feudal-type large land-owner) are negatively affected in their innovation adoption behavior by such a structural situation.

The classic diffusion model was based on an ideological framework that contradicts the reality of this region.

The diffusion model of research has often used such concepts as "leadership", "cosmopolitanism", and "reference group". Cuellar and Gutierrez (2) contend that "leadership" hides "elite of oligarchy," that "cosmopolitanism" disguises the connection of interests between the rural and urban power holders, and that "reference group" serves to dilute the reality of the "internal domination" suffered by the rural population.

In his caustic appraisal of extension-type rural development communication, Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire (10) argues that information for "technification" (communication for adoption of innovations in agriculture) can lead peasants to genuine and emancipatory development only if it is accompanied by information for "conscientization" (communication to foster free and creative awareness of the physical and sociocultural reality and of one's own potentialities to alter it in the direction of overall human enhancement and social justice). Most research, however, appears to have dealt only with communication understood as an aseptic urban-biased transmission of new skills, tools, and materials to improve agriculture, regardless of whether the structural situation of the intended audience makes development possible or impossible for the majority. In this regard, Felstehausen (8) concludes: "Communication effectiveness therefore, has to be evaluated not

just on the basis of whether new information influences the behavior of individuals, but whether it influences behavior in such ways as to change the norms and functions of the institutions where those individuals interact.”

Studies such as those of Diaz Bordenave (4) and Fonseca (9) have suggested that insignificant psychological-individual variables may be. Rogers (23) attributes the emphasis research has placed so far on individual variables to the fact that many early communication researchers come from backgrounds in psychology. Therefore they tended to define the social problems studied in terms of “person-blame” rather than “system-blame” 1)

The fact that much communication research has been conducted under the influence of conservative biases is by now rather easily demonstrable. On the other hand, some of the new breed of communication researchers clearly committed to social change in the region may be perpetuating a similar error by regarding their analyses as scientific even when they may actually be political essays with a revolutionary orientation.

Eliseo Veron, a leading Argentinian semiologist, whose works reveal no conservative leaning, has recently criticized some of the work of Mattelart and collaborators. Regarding the problem of method as central to a semiological theory of ideology, Veron (27) deplors the fact that the work of Mattelart appears not to have gone beyond the traditional and elementary intuitive practice of an ideological reading of texts (“a fragment of text plus general commentary”). Veron observes that “it is a perfectly legitimate choice to opt for political engagement and to abandon the requirements for production of knowledge. But then why stick to the whole ‘rhetorical apparatus’ of scientific language? ... In my judgement it is evident that scientific jargon does no more than hide a decision which, in fact, has taken place

Acknowledging the fact that in a dependent country an objective contradiction normally exists between the conditions of political engagement and the conditions for the production of knowledge, Veron adds that once action is chosen it must be made explicit rather than disguised. Latin American communication researchers must face the dilemma of having to choose between ideologically conservative and methodologically rigorous research on one hand and unrigorous radicalism on the other.

1) For discussion of these two explanatory approaches, see Kaplan and Nelson (14), Copp and Dervin (3).

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