Why Communication Policies?

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One of the by now "classic" communication documents of Unesco from the early seventies underlines that "research should be problem and policy oriented." Another Unesco document notes the following:

"Policy-makers are increasingly aware that, in the allocation of natural and social resources, future-oriented policies can no longer afford to ignore the communication dimension. In 'productivity', we witness, especially in the highly industrialized nations, a shift of emphasis from the production and distribution of 'energy' to that of 'information'.... The returns to be gained from viewing a nation's diverse communication activities as a whole, and projecting them into the future against the needs of society and the individual, are worth the effort, vital and urgent."

In 1974 we may read in a progress report of the MIT Research Programme on Communications Policy that the so-called new communications technology "is flooding policy-makers with options
- which they do not understand,
- among which they must choose,
- and which will have profound effects upon society."

These quotations are enough to remind us that there exists such thing as "policy orientation" in the contemporary arena of communications—in the scholarly circles of communication research as well as among the so-called practitioners (be they journalists or system planners). At the same time, however, we should note that what
is at issue is not completely new:

"Communication policies exist in every society, though they may frequently be latent and disjointed, rather than clearly articulated and harmonized. What is proposed is therefore not something radically new, but rather an explicit statement and deliberately prospective formulation of practices already generally established in society... Communication policies are sets of principles and norms established to guide the behaviour of communication systems."[4]

This article does not have the ambition to define and describe the notion of communication policies. Rather we shall look at the roots of this phenomenon and ask where do communication policies—and the policy orientation in the current tradition of communication research—arise. A tentative analysis leads to four "reasons" or "explanations."

1. Political—the social impact and consequently the significance of the mass media have naturally brought more political attention to matters of communication. This is reflected in national politics mainly in debates on the performance of the media (from sex and violence to privacy and ideology) and in a general concern about the role of communication, particularly mass media, in society. The latter point is well exemplified by the report of a symposium organized by the Council of Europe in 1974 on "Role and management of telecommunications in a democratic society":

"If democracy cannot decide on how to use mass media, it risks falling prey to the uncontrolled interests of commerce and technology. A further danger is the irresponsible manipulation of the media by individuals or minorities. The use of the media by governments needs careful definition."[5]

But communication policies are also—and often more clearly—visible in international politics, mainly in relation to problems of informational-cultural sovereignty. This has been plainly stated by the President of my country: "Just as within Finland there is a situation in the press described as a bourgeois hegemony, in the international arena there is a state of affairs called communication imperialism."[6] An example how the latter has led to communication policies is seen in the case of Canada, where this question, among others, has been posed and tentatively answered at the governmental level: "What can be done to ensure that Canadian communications systems are and remain effectively in Canadian ownership or under Canadian control?"[7]

2. Technological—the technical boundaries of traditional media become more and more obscure with the development of new communication technology (and even some new media are emerging). The Finnish Government Committee on Communication Policy makes this point explicit by noting that "the idea of the State dividing its handling of communication questions into compartments (press policy, broadcasting policy, postal and telecommunication policy, etc.) is out of the question: integration in the communications arena makes a comprehensive policy vital."[8] Other governmental commissions—like that for the Development of the Telecommunication System for the Federal Republic of Germany—are recognizing the same technological pressures behind communication policies.

3. Economic—the financial problems of the media have gradually led to considerable public subventions to them, particularly the press. For example in Finland the State subsidies to the press amount to some 20–25% of the total economy of the press (the combined turnover of all newspapers and periodicals), and in the State budget it constitutes a sum that cannot help raising major political attention—and controversy. To be more specific, only a minor part (no more than a third) of the State subsidies are explicitly channelled for that purpose, either by selective or non-selective criteria: most of the public financing of a (mainly privately owned) press takes the form of an indirect support by means of reduced postal tariffs and tax exemptions. In fact, such a situation in the Finnish press—which in this respect may not be very dissimilar from other market economy cases—has been characterized as a school example of the so-called state-monopoly capitalism.
4. A more general kind of explanation of the rise of communication policies may be found in the fundamental socio-economic developments occurring in all industrialized countries—capitalist and socialist alike—which are described by notions like “information explosion”, “scientific and technological revolution” or “second industrial revolution”. As Edwin Parker puts it, “we are in the midst of a sometimes painful transition from an industrial society to an information society.”

As a summary of various tendencies towards policy orientation we may note that communication phenomena in society have become too complex and significant to be considered without a particular approach of social policy. As communication has gradually occupied an ever more vital role in society it has simply become a necessity to adopt a policy orientation in this field—just as similar development has caused policy orientation towards several other aspects of the socio-economic system. It is not a consequence of some kind of occasional shift of interest—such as the subjective will of some politically influential circles—but rather an objective need stemming from the socio-economic system itself. Herbert Schiller’s observations within the American context no doubt may be generalized for the whole industrialized West:

“Inside the United States, communications issues of access, regulation, utilization of new technology, and financial support are seen best within the framework of an advanced and crisis-riddled state capitalist order. The issues in the communication field take on increasing significance in the larger struggle to maintain or to change the total system. Information and the entire communication process have become key elements in the business of social control. Accordingly, national communications policy-making may be regarded as a battleground of the contending forces in the social stage…”

However, there is an important “subjective” aspect in this development as well—not perhaps an explanation of it but an important corollary to it: an increased public control or “politicization” of this particular field of social activity. Communication policies mean that planning and management of communication systems (both mass media and those of more private communication like PTT) becomes more explicit and public, and this may be seen to contribute to the so-called democratic control of social planning, i.e. to guarantee that long-range planning and decision-making in the field of communication will take place under the eyes and political influence of the general public—and not over the heads of it. Another way to put it might be, in the words of Schiller, that “class conflict has now moved into the communications-cultural sphere in an explicit way.”

It is important to note the conflict and compromise natures of communication policies and consequently also the policy orientation of communication research, if one wants to achieve a correct analysis of the situation and also make an appropriate definitions of research problems and choices of methodology. Already at this stage, just a couple of years after the break-through of the policy orientation in Western communication research, a formation of different camps may be discovered, e.g. in writings of such American scholars as Schiller and Ithiel de Sola Pool. While Pool wants researchers to “enter into the fundamental decisions about what the communications systems should be” he is careful to point out that the task of researchers is to approach “issues in concrete analytic detail and not become engaged in old-fashioned verbal slogans.” By the latter Pool means such normative issues as “social versus private ownership” and “national sovereignty”, i.e. major issues of socio-political concern which he wants to isolate from the business of “objective research”. Schiller has a fundamentally different approach:

“The excluded sectors (working people, minorities, women) are moving toward making the process of information generation and transmission more open and available to public scrutiny, and, most of all, on serving their needs. The advertisers, the corporations they serve, and a powerful sector of the governmental bureaucracy are moved by a different vision. For
them, the issue of policy formulation and research is to be approached carefully and narrowly. The assumptions underlying the communication system itself are not regarded as legitimate areas of inquiry. Attention to policy-making, from this perspective, is focused on the technical details of systemic efficiency—making things work better without changing the basic structure. . . . When the political-philosophical context purposefully is left unexamined at the outset, the facts that are forthcoming can, at best, only affect policy that leaves unchanged the prevailing structural arrangement.”

Thus we are faced here with much of the same controversy which in the early forties was expressed by Paul Lazarsfeld in terms of “administrative” and “critical” orientations in communication research (the latter then referred to the Frankfurt School). But even more fundamental issues of research philosophy are involved in the current reorientation—particularly those related to what might be called the crisis of positivism in the social sciences. The Unesco documents refer to these aspects by speaking of “the individualistic, atomistic approaches of the past” with “discrete piles of unintegrated data which litter the communication research field” and by asking for “research that studies the media and the communication process in general within the wider social, political and economic setting”—within an overall context of communication policies.

From the point of view of scientific traditions, accordingly, it may be seen that a policy orientation in communications research has not only resulted from the object pressures of the socio-economic system in later capitalist societies, i.e. “from outside” the school of science, but also “from within” the particular scientific tradition which has been (and still is) in a dominant position in the Western hemisphere. A central philosophical assumption of the positivistic how things are (“is” analysis) is carefully kept from how they should be (“ought” analysis). A policy orientation has seriously challenged this assumption thus contributing to the general erosion of positivism that is gradually taking place anyway.

In this context it becomes well understandable why researchers who associate themselves in a schizophasic situation: on the one hand they are adapting a policy orientation in order to contribute to the reforms needed by the system, and on the other hand they have to question the very foundations of their scientific inquiry—which typically leads to such “selective” application of a policy orientation as illustrated by Pool. This, at the same time, offers an explanation of the popularity of materialistic approaches in contemporary Western social sciences in general and communication research in particular: there are few other alternatives to positivism. From this point of view of alternative research approaches it is symptomatic what we may read in a recent paper describing “an exercise in Venezuela as a part of the formulation of general policy for the public services of radio and television”:

“This methodological exercise departs from the conviction that among factors that compose the totality of a specific society, the role of the State and hence the policy-making apparatus, is determined by the economic structure, and in particular, the way the different classes are organized and their degree of conflict during a given phase of social development . . . . Any intent to establish a communications policy within this framework basically stems from the need to rationalize the present system. The State acts simultaneously as referee and representative of the dominant social forces within the framework of a predominantly capitalist economy.”

Essentially similar kind of “methodological exercises” have become popular in Scandinavia and particularly in Finland during the past few years. Symptomatic enough, such a new orientation in communication research is closely related to a newly recognized need to question the nature and essence of the science of (mass) communication. As Lothar Bisky put it at the world congress of mass communication research in 1976:

“Research at present is like a universal reservoir into which arbitrary points of view, and in fact anything which has any
relevance to the mass media, flow frequently and haphazard-
ly.”

The new orientation has obviously brought some welcome order
into this amorphous reservoir, mainly in the form of a more holistic
theoretical perspective. However, we should not overestimate the
“power” of the new orientation: it has not been practiced by all and
even its advocates are often just superficially innovative, burdened
by an eclectic and theoretically loose approach. Serious theoretical
work is therefore needed in order to adequately meet the challenge
of not only communication policies but also of raising the scientific
state of the art.

An example of attempts towards this aim has been recently made
at the University of the present author, in the form of a “research
policy program” prepared for the Department of Journalism and
Mass Communication in fall 1976. This program does no more
invite to study various communication phenomena, taken more or
less for granted, within a societal, etc. perspective but is asking
for an understanding of the nature and essence of communication
phenomena as integral parts or moments of society, leading to the
fundamentals of a general social science (sociology in its widest
sense). Thus the areas of basic research or science proper are not
defined by starting from the everyday phenomena—such as social
problems (violence in TV, etc.) or policy considerations (state
subsidies to the press, etc.)—but by starting from a scientific anal-
ysis of man and society and leading to view (mass) communications
ultimately as a moment in the process of production: a contributory
factor to both the productive forces and the relations of production
(class relations).18)

It is in such a perspective that it has become customary among
Finnish scholars to define (mass) communication in terms of the
circulation of ideal (as contrasted to material) within the socio-
economic formation.19 This is not far from what the dialectical
and historical materialism is standing for: an adequate and com-
prehensive description and understanding reality as totality.

Such an approach will give a natural answer to the question
whether or not communication research should be understood as an
independent science: as the communication phenomena belong to
the realm of ideal processes in society their study constitutes a
particular moment of the general social science. In this sense com-
munication research or science is an equally independent discipline
as for example political science or the study of literature. On the
other hand, no one of these particular sciences should be viewed as
isolated areas of inquiry: they are only relatively independent and
always in indispensable relation to the fundamental theory of so-
ciety.

This approach is also supposed to help to integrate such emerging
areas of interest as communication policies into the communication
research proper. Such topical issues as computer/telecommunication
policies and in general information economy occupy a natural and
central place on the agenda of communication research, as defined
by the above-mentioned research policy program. However, they
are not viewed as something related to the rest of communication
phenomena by their apparently “communicative nature” but ul-
timately by the production process itself: communication policies
are seen as a particular aspect of the productive forces under the
conditions of the so-called scientific and technological revolution.
Similarly, problems of so-called ideological struggle are being
brought within an unified framework—or even more. They are view-
ed as integral moments of the overall social process, extending from
“material” aspects of the productive forces to “ideal” aspects of
controlling mass consciousness.

NOTES

1) Proposals for an International Programme of Communication Re-

2) Report of the Meeting of Experts on Communication Policies and
4) COM/MD/24, pp. 8-9.
11) Ibid., p. 82.
14) COM/MD/20, pp. 5-6.

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