

The history of mass communications research media essay



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The field of mass communications is relatively new and is both multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary in nature. It is therefore not surprising that the approach to mass communications research will be mixed.

This essay attempts to look at the issues which gave rise to research theories and distinguish between the terms 'administrative' or 'conventional' and 'critical' research. It will discuss and contrast the similarities of both types of research while evaluating the usefulness and relevance of both approaches and what it meant for the development of the media. Finally, it will look at the different traditions of media research and explain how they manifest either 'conventional' or 'critical' characteristics.

The history of mass communications research is a short one. In the 1940s, when communication and media studies came about in the United States of America (USA), research focused on the needs of an expanding society, including the positioning of 'political and economic interests which was based on the critical pragmatism and sociology of the Chicago School' (Hardt, 1992, p. 9).

However, Wilbur Schramm suggested that communications research was 'quantitative, rather than speculative' and argued that its practitioners such as Lazarsfeld, Lewin, Laswell and Hovland (who were identified as the founding fathers of communications research in the USA) were deeply interested in theory, but in the theory they can test. His view ignored the history of concerns about communication and culture that had characterized the Chicago School. Schramm insisted that they were 'behavioural researchers' and as such interests in the wider social and cultural aspects of

media and communication were left unaddressed. His interest was journalist rather than scientific and communications research in the USA served the system at the time instead of challenging it because of the influence by media and commercial interests.

Hardt (1992) concluded that in the USA:

Mainstream communication and media research had failed to address critical developments from within and without its boundaries. It had remained within specific categories of interests, reflected in an academic specialization in the study of communication that was interdisciplinary by its commitment to a behavioural science orientation, but without any significant or successful attempt to break out of its modicum circle (p. 19).

In Great Britain, media research did not begin until the early 1960s. Halloran noted that a more critical, holistic approach emerged where the approach to research was more disciplined and systematic and focused on media as institutions and communication as a social process.

The first review of the field was conducted in Great Britain and published in 1963 (Halloran 1963) and referred to few research exercises which concentrated on media effects which looked at the impact of media on attitudes and behaviour of individuals. ' Even though a number of studies have been conducted in the field of mass communications, researchers have not been able to gather enough information because of the way research has been defined, initiated, supported and organized,' (Halloran, 1981, p. 9). He adds that in addition to having limited information, it is also unfair and biased.

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He emphasized:

Research is not initiated, organized, executed or applied in a social/political vacuum. Appreciation of the nature of research and its application calls for an understanding of the historical, economic, political, organizational, disciplinary, professional and personal factors which impinge on the research process in so many ways (p. 33).

An enormous amount of research has been aimed at media by both its exploiters and its critics. Advertisers, media owners, and their managers are greatly concerned about the numbers of people they reach, about what kinds of messages move people to act the way they want, and about the inclination of those they reach to return to the same media source. Because of the presumed motives of those who commission it, this type of research is often termed 'conventional' or 'administrative research' and is conceptually based on the transmission model of communication - a message is aimed at a specific target through a given medium with some kind of effect. A variant of this is Lasswell's (1948) formula of who says what to whom and to what effect. This conceptualization is results orientated and sees communication as producing effects.

Although administrative research constituted the vast bulk of media research because of the resources of business, government, and other large organizations who commanded the media, there was a developing body of research growing from an entirely different set of concerns. These were the fears and grievances of those out of the "power loop" of media control and the desires of social critics and intellectuals to understand the meaning and

significance of media among individuals, societies and cultures. The interest here was in discovering what kind of mentality was encouraged by the daily ritual of being exposed to mass media, with emphasis on television, the most powerful and pervasive of the mass media in the industrialised world. Much of the pioneering work in this type of research was done by members of the Frankfurt School of Social Research which was known for critical theory. The great variety of this work is distinguished from the administrative by calling it critical research - which emerged to challenge administrative research.

Halloran (1981) defined conventional research as having 'value-free, positivistic, empiricist, behaviouristic, psychological emphasis' (p. 34). He noted that earlier media research conformed to the dominant paradigm at the time and responded to the requirements of modern, industrial, urban society for empirical, quantitative, policy related information about its operations. Research was basically carried out to improve the effectiveness of the media and assist media entities in achieving its aims and objectives. 'This type of research used quantitative methods such as surveys, and field experiments' (Boyd-Barret, 1995, p. 69) while critical media research was concerned with obtaining data that could easily reproduced (reliable data) through scientific testing as opposed to data that was valid. It was more holistic in approach and was viewed as being service orientated.

Critical research was criticised because it was viewed as alternative research which did not support the status quo at the time as most media entities supported administrative research. It challenged the long held values of media establishments and provided the first real challenge to media entities.

In this regard, most media organisations viewed critical research as being not scientific, qualitative and having a political agenda.

Halloran (1981) points to three main characteristics that differentiate critical research from conventional research and which would have been ignored by the latter. Firstly, he said communication is treated as a social process. While administrative research was described as being ‘ media centric and pro - media’ critical research looked at the institution behind media and those affected by the media. This suggested that administrative research was more occupied by the efficient and effective operation of the media at the expense of other issues such as refining concepts, development of theories and the whole notion of social change.

In contrast, critical research is what Halloran called society centric and to this end it addressed issues of public concern and focused on how media addressed these societal or public concerns. ‘ One of the striking features is that it looks at the media’s role in promoting the democratic process and social reproduction’ (Boyd-Barret, 1995, p. 188). It also examines the inverse effect of the communications process i. e how social factors affect communication and media operations. One such example is the research of Racism and Mass Media (Hartmann and Husband, 1974) which examined the role of media with regard to racial prejudice. ‘ Another good example that amply demonstrates both the weaknesses of the administrative approach and the broader, more realistic perspectives of the sociological or critical approach, is to be found in research which has attempted to deal with the alleged media/violence relationship’ (Halloran, 1995, p. 26).

Secondly, media institutions are studied in relation to other institutions and within the wider social context. Critical research examines the whole system rather than just mere individuals which was the focus of administrative research, its unit of measure was society as opposed to the individual and research was not conducted in a vacuum. Critical researchers look at issues of ownership, control and technology. By contrast, administrative research focused on fine tuning media methods to facilitate specific institutional aims and goals. In so doing, it ignored certain factors that affected the communications process as well as what the media produced.

The third characteristic, as described by Halloran, is that critical research addressed issues associated with structure, organization, professionalism and participation. It's more independent of institutions, policy and problem orientated and research enquiries are conducted externally with the aim of forming policies. Unlike administrative research, critical research is less likely to be of a social or administrative character and does not stroke the egos of media managers and owners by researching their issues or by accepting their definitions of media problems. Critical research challenged their (administrative) ideologies and attempted to provide alternative research forms to the field.

Critical research and its researchers became very unpopular and were viewed with suspicion because it was hoped at the time, that research would support the status quo and the system. The dominant paradigm at the time would have viewed critical theorists as rude and not supporting the status quo.

Additionally, critical research was starved for funding while administrative research was financed by the institutions that commissioned the research and as such the results were predetermined. In attempt to make mass communications research scientific, administrative researchers pushed the study of mass communications into positivism and empiricism.

Earlier, the entire study of mass communication assumed that mass media have a total and immediate effect and thought audiences to be passive. Early effects studies were preoccupied by persuasion and studies were grounded in psychology, more specifically referred to psychoanalysis or behaviourism and stimulus response and emerged primarily in the USA (Newbold, 1995).

The development of the media effects tradition started in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when many social upheavals were being experienced by many countries and the media was viewed to be engaged in social control by ' moulding behaviour in line with the will of those who controlled the media' (Newbold, 1995, p. 7).

Then, the content of media was viewed as having ' direct effects' on individuals who relied on the mass media as their only source of information about the world. Newbold (1995) notes that this gave rise to the ' hypodermic needle theory' or " magic bullet theory" which implied that mass media had a direct, immediate and powerful effect on their audiences. The Payne Studies of 1928 were the first major empirical studies to establish effects. The studies were carried out in the USA and focused on the impact of motion pictures on children. The findings of the studies indicated that while

films provided “blue prints for living” the effects of these films were not anti-social.

The term “hypodermic needle” is meant to give a mental image of the direct, strategic, and planned infusion of a message into an individual. However, as research methodology became more developed, it was apparent that the media had selective influences on people. The most famous incident often cited as an example for the hypodermic needle model was the 1938 broadcast of War of the Worlds and the subsequent reaction of widespread panic among its audiences in the USA. This event sparked the research movement, led by Lazarsfeld and Herzog that would contradict the magic bullet theory, as Hadley Cantril managed to show that reactions to the broadcast were diverse and largely determined by situational and attitudinal attributes of listeners. Newbold (1995) stated that Cantril’s study was among the first to question the magic bullet model and involve social and cultural factors in its analysis.

Much criticism of ‘effects’ studies focused on the ‘media centric’ approach of researchers and the individualistic approach of the research, thereby being administrative in nature. Researchers were viewed as taking an approach which was ‘purely interested in the direct relationship between the medium and its audience, failing to take into account the social and cultural influences of audiences which might also help shape their views’ (Newbold, 1995, p. 12). In this regard, social and audience interpretations were seldom taken into account.

The People's Choice Study, conducted by Lazarsfeld et al and which sought to reveal the importance of interpersonal ties in the mass communications process (two step flow) was heavily criticised by Mills (1959) who described the approach taken in the study as 'abstracted empiricism' because it was viewed as a study of voting in American politics and not necessarily the substance of 'opinion' or dynamics.

Newbold (1995) explained that:

By 'abstracted empiricism', Mills is referring to the prevailing high value ascribed to statistical data derived from sampling procedures and interviews - data upon which assumptions are made, and the relations between them established. He argued that quantification was pursued for its own sake, and at the expense of other major important issues for which quantifiable data might be difficult to obtain (p. 18).

This in itself meant that the research displayed administrative characteristics which was 'media centric' in nature and conducted in a vacuum without any social considerations. Newbold (1995) adds that while 'abstracted empiricism' still appears to be a characteristic of this style of research, the two-step flow is still one of the most important developments in 'effects tradition' because of its sociological orientation and shifting focus from the individual to the 'primary group' thereby making the social context difficult to ignore.

Following on from media effects, another tradition in mass communications research which is similar in focus but opposed to its perspectives is the political economy tradition. The political economy tradition searches for <https://assignbuster.com/the-history-of-mass-communications-research-media-essay/>

answers to the question of power of the media in the analysis of their structures of ownership and control.

Mosco (2004) offered two definitions of political economy. Firstly, he described political economy as the study of the social relations, particularly the power relations that mutually constitute the production, distribution and consumption of resources, including communication resources. This definition he explained focuses on how the communication business operates. A more general and ambitious definition of political economy is the study of control and survival in social life. By these definitions, Mosco points to the fact that media institutions are both economic and political in nature.

Adopting a fundamentalist Marxist approach, studies of this tradition have been based on the assumption that the dynamics of culture producing industries can be understood primarily in terms of their economic determination (Murdock and Golding, 1977), thus the contents of the media and the meaning carried by their messages are determined by the economic base of the organization in which they are produced. ' Political economy is also characterized by an interest in examining the social whole or the totality of social relations that make up the economic, political, social and cultural areas of life' (Mosco, 1995, p. 6) which included moral implications with an interest in social intervention to change society.

Mosco (2004) indicates:

Traditionally, the political economy of communication studied the major business firms responsible for producing and distributing mass media and

the government agencies responsible for regulating and making
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communication policy. It focused on the power of media companies, demonstrated in the trend towards media concentration, and on how they use this power to influence media content (p. 28).

With the aim to broaden the perspective in political economy, recent work addressed major processes such as commodification, spatialization and structuration. These process looked at making communications a market commodity; addressing the growth and spread of media institutions (especially the simplification by governments to do this by developing pro business regulation and policies; media production and access influenced by social, class, gender and race (Mosco, 2004).

The precise mechanisms and processes whereby ownership of the media or control of their economics is translated into the message are complex and often problematic. The workings of the control are not easy to demonstrate or easy to explain empirically. The evidence is often circumstantial and is derived from the ideology implicit in the message and the interests of those in control.

Mosco added that cultural studies and policy science are disciplines on the boundaries of political economy. The broad based intellectual movement of the cultural studies approach which focuses on the constitution of meaning in texts and defined broadly to include all forms of social communication (Storey, 2003) can contribute to the process of renewing political economy in several ways.

Mosco highlighted how cultural studies contributed to a broad based critique of positivism and has defended a more open philosophical approach that <https://assignbuster.com/the-history-of-mass-communications-research-media-essay/>

concentrates on subjectivity or on how people interpret their world, as well as the social creation of knowledge. However, political economy can also contribute to rethinking cultural studies since ' it insists on epistemology that maintains the value of historical research, of thinking in terms of social totalities, with a well grounded moral philosophy and a commitment to overcome the distinction between social research and social practice' (Mosco, 2004, p. 26).

Cultural studies was born of a deeply political project based in an intellectually critical and Marxist heritage. It is very broad and not all of its concerns have related directly to the media. Cultural studies seeks to explain and describe the wide totality of media artefacts, practices, ideas, representations and socio-cultural practices including media and communications and their relationship to social and power relations in society. Two key components of cultural studies is that it recognises that all forms of culture, including media culture, can be meaningful to their consumers and rejects the idea that media content has ' fixed meanings' and does not see its effects on audiences as ' measurable'. Cultural studies insist on focusing on the cultural moment and examining production, circulation and consumption conditions (Gough-Yates, 2007).

British cultural studies arose in the late 1950s and early 1960s with the Marxist informed work of Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart and Edward Thompson who were all interested in political questions of class culture, democracy and socialism as it related to working class cultures in the UK.

Williams' work in particular was the most influential in the development of cultural studies as he attempted ' the study of relationships between
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elements in a whole way of life' (Williams, 1965, p. 334). In 1964, Hoggart together with Stuart Hall established the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) which analysed mass media and popular culture and while many researchers did not share Hoggart's view of 'mass culture' and cultural decline they did adopt some 'culturalist' methodologies studying cultural texts and practices including media texts and practices (Gough-Yates, 2007).

'Structuralist methods allowed cultural studies to explore the rules and practices of culture, including media culture, and to ask how culture might generate the missing' (Gough-Yates, 2007, p. 33). Ferdinand de Saussure and Roland Barthes while credited with making significant contributions to structuralism were also criticised for the structuralist assumption that signs 'can have stable, denotive meanings.'

Althusser's concepts have also contributed to the development of cultural studies by pushing cultural studies to more analysis of popular culture and its role in fixing and containing identities away from the Frankfurt school style focus of the media. The Althusserian approach, because of its view of media products as 'closed' texts that 'imprison' their audiences and denies them any agency in their lives was challenged (Gough-Yates, 2007).

Gramsci's model of hegemony argued that 'the consumption of popular and media culture can be empowering as a refusal of subordination or form of resistance to dominant ways of being and doing' (Gough-Yates, 2007, p. 32) and it helped scholars to address some of the criticisms of the Althusserian's perspectives.

' Poststructuralists' approaches also informed cultural studies and drew more attention to audiences rather than ' texts' because of its approaches to cultural construction of meaning and their power relationships as it related to society and the domination of groups (based on gender, class, sexuality etc). As such, cultural studies shared some of its political interests with feminism and was challenged by feminists' theory and politics which argued that cultural studies marginalized feminist issues and concerns (Schiach, 1994). This was evidenced in the CCCS Women's Studies Group (1978) publication *Women Take Issue* ' where feminist researchers encountered considerable difficulties in working around definitions of culture and theoretical perspectives that excluded and marginalized women', (Gough-Yates, 2007, p. 28). Post modern theory which has engaged cultural studies since the 1980s has broken down the traditional boundaries between culture and art, high and low culture, and art and the commercial which reflects the cultural, economic and technological change of society. ' Cultural studies especially ' new audience research' offers the study of mass communications a means of researching through qualitative research, the cultures and discourses of media use in a new way' (Gough-Yates, 2007, p. 33).

The sudden increase in qualitative audience studies in mass communications research is sometimes know as the ' ethnographic turn' (or new audience research) because key studies involved are inspired by particular traditions of anthropological research called interpretive ethnography (Hermes, 2005). Despite being a type of research, new audience research differs from various others traditions that use similar research methods.

New audience research practitioners prefer the use of qualitative methods rather than quantitative which allows them to study more social contexts in which the media is used; its focus is more culture and cultural backgrounds that are sometimes marginalized by mainstream research traditions and its research objective is often popular culture. Interactive research methods such as interviews are used and it often has a feminist agenda.

One prime example of New Audience Research is Len Ang's study of watching Dallas, the American prime time soap opera (Ang, 1985) in which Len Ang was able to assess, through qualitative methods, audience pleasure in viewing the show.

Ethnographic turn was born of three traditions including British or European cultural studies; American cultural studies and qualitative mass communications research and 'ethnographic' refers to four characteristics including the study of the media in a broader social context rather than in isolation as done in the James Lull research of the role of television in the dynamics of family life. The meanings of media practices are of much more interest than media practices in new audience research and stands for a more political investment as the practices of media are mostly researched for specific institutional goals. 'Finally, its aim is to develop theoretical understandings of the practices that were observed through lengthy, open interviewing' (Hermes, 2005, p. 28). The lack of methodology and its 'revisionist' politics has been the most popular criticisms of New Audience Research.

Livingstone (1993) argues that much of mass communications research now is neither administrative nor critical and proceeds as if no debates had been held and advises that all research projects should consider text, audience and context. She adds ' both research processes and its subject matter can be questioned since much research from either tradition can be, and often is, used to support or critique the status quo.'