

BEHAVIORISM, FUNCTIONALISM, AND MASS COMMUNICATIONS POLICY

BY HAROLD MENDELSON

This article compares the functionalist and behaviorist approaches to mass communications research and examines their respective policy-making implications and limitations.

The author, Chairman of the Department of Mass Communications, University of Denver, was President of the American Association for Public Opinion Research in 1973-74. This article was presented as the presidential address at the AAPOR annual conference in Bolton Landing, Lake George, New York, on June 1, 1974.

IN the March 25th, 1974 issue of *Newsweek*, writer Colman McCarthy solemnly proclaimed how, after banishing his TV set from his domicile, he belatedly discovered the passions of Beethoven, became a worshipper of the lowly dandelion, and avoided a costly trip to Masters' and Johnson's marital relations pleasure dome.

Reacting to Mr. McCarthy's somewhat self-congratulatory public confession some weeks later, a critical letter to the editor appeared in the same periodical. It read:

Thank goodness we have TV to save us from pointy-headed intellectuals like Mr. McCarthy. The world would be a bore if everything had to be "deep" and cultural. After working all day, people like to relax and not have to think.

And so the issue is joined once again. A contemporary footnote to the dialogue that began with Plato's recommendation to rid society of its diversionary poets, through Montaigne's plea for a more humane recognition of the organism's need for respite and diversion, right up to present-day discussions that separate acerbic media critics such as Dwight MacDonald, Ernst Van Den Haag, and Albert Bandura from more restrained mass communications observers such as Joseph T. Klapper, Herbert Gans, and Elihu Katz.

Since the debate about mass communications policy began, and to this very day, the discussion has been dominated by two principles. One is fundamentally normative in nature; the other comprises basic images of man. Clearly, one is a function of the other, with normative

proscriptions growing directly out of how the nature of man is perceived.

Persisting over time is the image of man as the malleable, reacting robot—Homo Mechanicus. Driven by “tiny time capsules” that never cease popping off within his soma as well as undergoing a never-ending “massage” by external stimuli, Homo Mechanicus can do very little else than to respond instantly and directly to everything he may encounter—very much like a combustion engine compelled to respond automatically each and every time the accelerator is depressed. In the deterministic image of man as Homo Mechanicus, he is perceived as essentially weak, and the media as essentially all-powerful.

Over time this perception has been abetted by the mechanistic Greek philosophers, such as Democritus; by the divine deterministic Hebraic and Christian theologies; by the mechanistic analogs suggested by early scientific explorers such as Kepler, Harvey, and Descartes; and by the more contemporary behavioristic models of Watson, Skinner, and Weiner.

From the start, mechanico-deterministic theories of man have not gone unchallenged. Ancient Hindu teaching stressed that the very essence of ego—that is, selfhood and its psychological attributes of cognition, motivation, and emotion—is primarily and most importantly a product of social contact and social interaction. In Confucianism, we find the proposition, “The heart of a man who observes no rules of society is the heart of a beast.” Aristotle not only proclaimed man to be essentially social in character, but further asserted that “without law and justice [and society] man would be the worst of animals.” And even Descartes exempted both God and soul from his mechanistic universe by humanistically declaring that the “trustworthiness of human perception follows from God’s veracity.”

Essentially, then, the vision of Homo Mechanicus has always been accompanied by equally convincing perceptions of the human organism as an initiating actor within a social milieu—man as Homo Sapiens, and importantly, man as Homo Volens.

The political and economic upheavals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries fostered a dualistic image of man and the media that is still with us. European sociologists of knowledge and mass society such as Marx, Tonnies, Simmel, Mannheim, Tarde, and Le Bon all asserted that society cannot exist without communication and that communication cannot exist without society. The undue stress on communications thus became two-edged. Although the role of mass communications was considered to be socially integrative for the most part, European sociologists who were abetted by primitive behavioristic psychological theories simultaneously asserted the dysfunctional poten-

tialities of the media in manipulating the masses against their wills. Here, mass man emerged as essentially atomized, governed by needs over which he had little control, and highly vulnerable to external manipulation by the media.

Unlike the Europeans, the American founding sociologists were not so much concerned with the seizure and control of political and economic power as they were with the establishment of consensual reciprocities between the governing and the governed. They saw public opinion as the fundamental guideline for democratic political authority. Rather than being disruptive, the potentialities of the media were considered to be primarily integrative. Thus, from the start, American sociologists were mainly concerned with the two-way flow of communications *between* the people and their leaders in the active reciprocal exchange of ideas, values, and beliefs. From such interactive exchanges of opinion between the individual citizens and their leaders, it was believed that consensus regarding the integration of society emerges.

American sociology thus shifted focus from ideologies in broad political and economic contexts to a new social-psychological emphasis on individual values, beliefs, attitudes, and opinions—how they originate, how they are expressed, how they can be harnessed for the common good—all within a societal context. Ultimately, the functionalist orientation to mass communications grew out of the American tradition—an orientation that challenges the efficacy of searching out specific effects allegedly produced by specific mass communications signs without regard for the totalities of specific situational influences.

Despite the caveats regarding the human organism's capability to initiate action as well as to react, contemporary behavioristic theories applied to mass communications persist in perpetuating an optimistic image of the media as deterministic stimuli; a perception that is simultaneously accompanied by a hoary pessimistic image of man as primarily an automatic responder to such stimuli. Here, effect is *always* equated with simple exposure; and the more frequent the exposure, the more intense will be the effect. For illustration one need simply turn to the innumerable media critics of the contemporary exposure-to-evil-begets-evil school of mass communications thought.

It has become a cliché of the behavioristic critical orientation toward the study of media exposure to cite the bromide regarding the allegedly disproportionate time spent by children watching television vis-à-vis attending school. The basic assumption here is that frequent exposure to television must, by definition, be totally harmful to children, while frequent exposure to school—to any school, as long as it is labeled such—is, by definition, entirely beneficial to children. A short visit to any inner city red brick dungeon called a "school" should alter this

proposition drastically. Even dyed-in-the-wool behaviorists have occasionally admitted that repeated exposure may not necessarily lead to heightened effect; it might lead to surfeit and boredom instead.

Two major policy implications stem from the proposition that the media institutions are totally dysfunctional and the formal education institutions entirely functional: get rid of the media or turn them into formal schools so that children will spend all their waking hours acquiring very little else but formal knowledge. The latter course is vociferously prescribed by various reform-minded fraternities within education, social research, government, religion, and the lay citizenry.

In its simplest form, the behavioristic model as it has been applied to mass communications research has been little more than an extension of the most naive Pavlovian stimulus-response dynamic. Old-line mass communications behaviorists, generally unmindful of modern gestaltist psychological thought, have been plying their threadbare mass communications wares to unsuspecting publics who are turning more and more to unitary deterministic theories for guidance to the confounding perplexities of modern life: If you want to put an end to sex crimes, do away with pornography and obscenity in films; if you want to curb demonstrations in the streets, ban portrayals of violence on television; if you want to defend an incompetent and manifestly corrupt president, blame the press for conspiring against him and pressure reporters and newscasters to report only "the good news" about the Chief Executive and his administration.

No matter what guise they may take on, the major policy implications derived from behavioristic mass communication's research invariably converge at one ultimate point—censorship. Because censorship is so critical an issue in a democracy, the policy recommendations emanating from the behavioristic school can by no means be taken lightly. To avoid any possible misunderstanding, I am not denying that the media presently are subjected to all kinds of censorship at the hands of producers, editors, advertisers, publishers, trade codes, boards of censors, and the like. Neither am I proposing that criticism of the media is unwarranted or that it should be stopped. To the contrary, I endorse lively normative criticism of the media on philosophical, aesthetic, moral, and any other humanistic grounds. What concerns me is the increasing trend toward the utilization of social science research as a rationale for criticisms of the media, giving such criticisms and the policy recommendations accompanying them an aura of scientific validity and legitimacy they never before had.

We have been witness to an important growing emphasis on the need for systematic policy-making in the mass communications area. In a recent article in the *Journal of Communications*, Ithiel Pool noted

that technological innovations in the media act as a principal spur for the necessity to develop sound public policies regarding their ownership, control, accessibility, and regulation.¹ It might be observed, in addition, that as claims accumulate for the validity of social science data as evidence of mass communications effects, so-called scientific data are with increasing frequency being put to use in the formulation of media policies—especially policies pertaining to media content.

The nature of the evidence offered by behavioristic mass communications research becomes critical in examining its claim to legitimacy in the formulation of mass communications policy. First, it is derived basically from artificial laboratory experiments. Often lacking both adequate controls and adequate samples, these laboratory experiments generally contrive to simulate mass communications situations in which one factor, and only one factor—exposure—is manipulated. The determination to isolate just one experimental factor for investigation at precisely the time when various multi-factorial designs, manipulations, and analyses are readily available in the social sciences is an interesting curiosity in itself.

Secondly, behavioristic mass communications research is solely dependent on the assumption that content can be equated with stimulus. That is to say, behaviorists conducting research on mass communications confound the fundamental principle of learning: before a sign can be learned it must first be transformed into a stimulus by the recipient. To put it another way, what the communicator puts into a message is not necessarily what the recipient ultimately gets out of it. Still, the literature is replete with examples of battered-head and bloodied-nose counts, solemnly offered as evidence of “violence” in the media. Most often, neither verbalized nor non-verbalized conspiracies, threats, and insults are counted or accounted for in these analyses, because such incidents fall out of the rubric of so-called overt expressions of aggressive behavior.

It might be added that content analyses of so-called violence are customarily reported in absolute terms, rather than as proportions of totalities that include neutral and non-violent signs as well. It is not surprising to find much violence in television content when that is all that is being sought. It is not a matter of hyperbole, then, to expect behavioristic-oriented content analysts, for example, to codify scenes of Adolph Hitler doing his famous little jig beside the French surrender railroad car at Compiègne as non-violent media content, or perhaps even as a manifestation of pro-social behavior. Hitler as a

¹ Ithiel de Sola Pool, “The Rise of Communications Policy Research,” *Journal of Communications*, Vol. 24, no. 2, pp. 43-51.

patron of the performing arts. At the same time, it would not be far-fetched for the same content analysts to codify a scene depicting a freckle-faced young scholar sticking out his tongue behind his teacher's back as an "overt expression of aggressive behavior."

In essence, all content analysis—whether formal or informal, qualitative or quantitative—must be normative. Without accompanying data on how the signs reported in these content analyses are transformed into actual stimuli by audiences, analyses of content alone have the same value for media policy formation as do any other speculative data. This fact notwithstanding, the mass media are constantly subjected to pressures to censor themselves or to be censored solely on the basis of the number of expletives uttered, the kind and amount of anatomy exposed, the number of physical blows struck, or the number of remarks ranging from favorable to unfavorable made about a presidential candidate or a minority group.

The third perplexity stemming from behavioristic research in mass communications focuses on the problem of extrapolating experimental data derived from highly selected miniscule samples first to large populations and then to society as a whole. Ever since Carl Hovland's attempt to reconcile differences between results derived from laboratory experiments with those derived from field studies, it has become customary to explain away such differences as mere consequences of variations in research design and research methods.²

In essence, it is tautological to attempt to explain why laboratory-derived effects data cannot be generalized on the basis of how the data are gathered. We know that such differences are indeed due in part to differences in method. But, perhaps more importantly, they are fundamentally due to differences in the basic images of man and the media which dictate choice of method in the first instance. In normative terms, behavioristic experimentation in mass communications research necessarily begins with a dysfunctional image of man as peculiarly susceptible to powerful mass mediated signs. This percept is bound to contaminate everything that flows from it.

Two additional factors enter into the failure of experimental data as candidates for extrapolation. The one is inherent in the way typical behavioristic experiments in mass communications research are set up. Here, Ernest Nagel's "law of the hammer" seems to apply most appropriately. Nagel's law posits the simple thesis that when an individual is given a hammer to hold, he will sooner or later strike something

² Carl Hovland, "Reconciling Conflicting Results Derived from Experimental and Survey Studies of Attitude Change," *The American Psychologist*, Vol. 14, no. 1, 1959, pp. 8-17.

with it. Often, behavioristic mass communications experimenters not only provide the hammer, but, for good measure, also conscientiously scatter about the nails and boards as well. Albert Bandura's much publicized "Bobo-doll" experiment is just one outstanding case in point.³

The other factor serving to constrain extrapolation relates to the subjects on whom experiments on mass communications research are most frequently conducted. Hovland and his Yale colleagues early noted that mass-mediated messages are most effective in influencing the brightest, the most aware, the most interested, the most open-minded, and the most highly motivated subsets of given audiences. This finding has been confirmed in a variety of studies conducted both in the laboratory and in the field over the past several decades.

Experiments on the alleged effects of mediated communications conducted solely on subjects who are college students or the children of university professors are almost certain to manifest changes as a direct consequence of exposure. These population subsets are literally trained to react to abstractions and to be receptive to innovative ideas. But the population as a whole is made up of both sophisticates and provincials, professors and functional illiterates, those with flexible receptivity to ideas and those whose positions are literally immutable (even under the most intense bombardments of symbols inviting them to change).

The provincials, the functionally illiterate, and the immutable traditionalists rarely show up in the laboratory. Yet their distribution in the population far outweighs that of the types on which mass communications experiments are typically conducted. Their resistance to changes of any sort is monumental. Small wonder, then, that the effects noted in much of behavioristic mass communications experimental research manifest themselves *in naturo* only on occasion, if at all.

For the functionalist, both exposure and effect are equally controlled by disposition and utility. Here, the image of man is powerful; the media are weak. It is an image in which the human organism actively chooses from among the manifold signs that beckon to him. He avoids most of them, ignores many more of them, and transforms only minute numbers of them into stimuli in accordance with his own personal situation, background, experience, needs, wants, and expectations. In this process, the signs that first appear as overt content may or may not remain congruent with what was originally intended by the communicator or with what a third-party observer thinks he sees. For example, it is equally possible to conclude that a youngster viewing

³ A. Bandura, D. Ross, and S. A. Ross, "Imitation of Film-Mediated Aggressive Models," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, Vol. 67, 1963, pp. 575-582.

a scene of a sheriff shooting an outlaw will infer from it that "crime doesn't pay" as it is to suggest that he or she is being schooled in the notion that violence is an acceptable mode for resolving conflicts.

One cannot help but wonder how the generation of young viewers who were supposedly weaned on television violence became so active a force in bringing a conclusion to our violent involvement in Viet Nam. The behavioristic paradigm would have us expect a contrary outcome.

The possibility that all media signs may not stimulate all audiences to react immediately, directly, and equally is nothing less than an imprecation for many adherents of the behavioristic mode. In some instances, the resistance to functionalist interpretations of mass communications effects is strong enough to bring forth *ad hominem* attacks on the very integrity of the scholars who are daring enough to posit such outlandish alternatives. To take an example, the bitter assaults by certain behaviorist critics on the very motives of the functionalist-oriented individuals who served on the Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior are not only outrageous exercises in calumny and bad taste, but, most dangerously, they pose a serious threat to the free pursuit of scientific investigation in general. If we slip into the habit of publicly questioning the motives and integrity of fellow scientists who happen to disagree with us and conjure up participation in mythical conspiracies as explanations for differences in their approaches and interpretations, we shall quickly plunge into an abyss of ignorance from which it will take generations to ascend.

I have digressed not only to remind these particular critics—some of whom, unhappily, are colleagues in AAPOR—of the serious and unwarranted mischief they are perpetrating, but also to make them aware of their responsibilities as proper scientific critics. Perhaps Sidney Hook put it best when he wrote in *The New Leader*:

Criticism should be directed just to policies, and against persons only when they are responsible for policies and against their motives and purposes only when there is some independent evidence of their character.

From the perspective of behaviorism in mass communications research, policy recommendations consistently hide behind the veil of normatively proscribed "needs." For the humanist, primary needs are essentially aesthetic in nature; for the cleric, they are moral; for the educator, mainly cognitive.

In general, behavioristically inclined researchers seek to assess the effects of media from the perspective of what *a priori* they consider to be discrepancies between human deficiencies and what the media

offer. Curiously, mass communications behaviorists rarely bother to find out the relevancy of what they, as observers, subjectively consider to be needs and what audiences themselves actually experience as such. Because audiences are viewed basically as automaton receptacles, incompetent to make meaningful judgments in their own behalf, it is recommended that external standards be set by various regulatory elitist bodies outside the domain of audiences. As previously stated, such external standards ultimately involve some form of media censorship. Rather than reflecting realistic needs of audiences, externally applied standards reflect the needs of the elitists who seek to impose them on individuals, communities, and society for various self-serving personal, ideological, or political reasons.

The functionalists are not free from normative proscriptions, particularly as they apply to needs, either. Predisposing needs often are referred to as explanations for a wide variety of observed media behavior. Newspaper readership may be explained, for instance, in terms of needs for linking community and society. Assiduous viewing of televised football games ventilates repressed hostility. Going to the movies is a vehicle for courtship and romance.

From a strictly scientific viewpoint the conceptualization of prior needs as motivating forces for media usage and gratification is not only legitimate but may very well serve to upgrade the entire human needs construct as well. However, the matter becomes troublesome when the formulation of broad mass communications policy is involved. Here, it is quite possible to resort to "needs" as *post hoc* rationalizations for submitting content of questionable merit and quality to audiences. Consequently, "gossip" columns can flourish under the pretense of meeting the public's "need to know"; explicit sex films can be purveyed under the guise of "public health education"; and blatant one-sided propaganda can proliferate as responses to the public's need for "information."

It is precisely because numerous publics with varied social and psychological attributes, interests, motivations, expectations, and tastes come away from the media with differing experiences that it would be unrealistic to formulate media policies from any given catalogue of presumed audience needs. Policy recommendations flowing from subjectively determined audience needs are generally one-sided, undemocratic, and insensitive to the real expectations and behaviors of media audiences.

In functionalism, varied dispositions and uses are seen as producing varied effects. Thus, the uses to which individuals put the media and the gratifications they derive from them vary as do their dispositions, needs, wants, and expectations. Functionalists should generally address

themselves to the discrepancy between what audiences may actually expect or want and what the media actually deliver. This is by no means a simple task; perhaps, it ultimately defies the empirical research process. Yet, in practice, all policies regarding mass media content are promulgated on the premise of audience wants, expectations, uses, and gratifications—a fact most disturbing to the behavioristic critics of the media. Such a policy orientation serves simply to maintain the *status quo*, they argue.

The assertion that use-gratifications guidelines for media policy merely re-enforce the status quo does not stand up before even the most casual examination of media content over the years. Thus, motion picture films, television programs, newspapers, popular novels, magazines, and radio programs produced in 1974 bear little resemblance to similar materials available in 1964 or 1954. What, then, can possibly be meant when critics of the use-gratification model refer to the “status quo.” Status quo as of when—1974, 1954, or 1844? Changes in media content, style, and format occur neither randomly nor arbitrarily. To the contrary, they reflect changing technology and social processes as well as changes in the composition, needs, wants, expectations, and tastes of audiences. It seems peculiarly naive on the part of media behaviorists to assume that the uses to which audiences put the media and the gratifications they derive from them are monotonic, simplistic, static, and immutable, while all other aspects of human behavior are considered multi-faceted, complex, and dynamic.

Because behavioristic research in mass communications can only point to dysfunctions, it cannot offer constructive policy recommendations that will result in more functional mass communications efforts other than suggesting censorship. In other words, behavioristically anchored policy recommendations invariably involve the replacement of content considered to be “harmful” to audiences with content that, *a priori*, has been judged “beneficial.” Simple-minded policy recommendations such as more uplift, more educational stuff, less sex, and less violence are the standard suggestions for media policy changes here. On the other hand, reliance on simple audience head-counts to maintain policy postures frequently cited by self-styled functionalists to bolster claims of meeting audience needs will not do either.

Given the state of the art, current social research on the policy aspects of mass communications can, at best, point to specific wants and expectations of particular audiences that the mass media have either overlooked or neglected, such as women, pre-school children, Chicanos, blue-collar workers, and the elderly. Working with mass communications practitioners, functionally minded social researchers can be extremely useful in generating new, exciting, and functional

mass communications modes. One outstanding example is the Children's Television Workshop enterprise; another is CBS' "Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids" series; a third is the Satellite Technology Demonstration project of the Federation of Rocky Mountain States.

Beyond serving middle-range functions in specific policy areas, it is premature to expect either behavioristic or functionalistic social research to act as reliable bases for formulating large-scale societal mass communications policy at the present time. Before social research can serve to undergird over-all mass communication policy a considerably greater functionally oriented research effort is required. For example, we need much more data than are now available on two major variables. On the micro level, we need a far better understanding of precisely what roles the media play in the full process of socialization. On the macro level, we need far more insight into the integrative-distintegrative functions of the media in relation to groups and communities.

Perhaps a more enlightened behaviorism holds some future promise here. Perhaps, we can still look ahead to the time envisioned by Carl Hovland some twenty-five years ago when he expressed the hope that someday "we may develop a social psychology of communication with the conceptual breadth provided by correlational study of process with the rigorous but more delimited methodology of the experiment."⁴ Perhaps.

⁴ Hovland, Carl, *op. cit.*, p. 17

ERRATUM

In Peter L. Wright's, "Analyzing Media Effects on Advertising Responses" (Summer 1974), "*the former*" should be substituted for "*the latter*" so that the sentence reads correctly as follows (p. 206): "Print and broadcast media have been treated here, both theoretically and operationally according to the typical situation in which the former afford the greater response opportunity."