<特別寄稿>

Why Communication Policies?

Kaarle Nordenstreng

University of Tampere, Finland

One of the by now "classic" communication documents of Unesco from the early seventies underlines that "research should be *problem and policy oriented.*"[1] 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."[2]

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."[3]

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 Dovelopment of the Telecommunication System for the Federal Republic of Germany—are necognizing 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 channeled 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 tarrifs 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 socalled 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* occuring 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."[9]

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 became 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...."[10]

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 "politization" 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."[11]

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."[12] By the latter Pool means such normative issues as "social versus private ownership" and "national sovereignty", i.e. major issues of sociopolitical 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 purposely is left unexamined at the outset, the facts that are forthcoming can, at best, only affect policy that leaves unchanged the prevailing structural arrangement."13)

Thus we are faced here with much of the same controversy which in the early forties was expressed by Paul Lazardsfeld 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.14)

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 schitzopherenic situation: on the one hand they are adapting a policy orientation in order to contribute to the reforms needed by the sytem, and on the other hand they have to questions the very foundations of their scientific injuiry—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."15)

Essentially similar kind of "methodological exercises" have become popular in Scandinavia and particularly in Finland during the past few years.16) Simptomatic 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 haphazardly."[17]

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 analysis 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 comprehensive 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 communication 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 indespensable relation to the fundamental theory of society.

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 ulimately 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 viewed 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 Research. Paris: Unesco (COM/MD/20, 1971), p. 6.
2) Report of the Meeting of Experts on Communication Policies and Planning (Paris, 17–28 July 1972). Paris: Unesco (COM/MD/24, 1972), p. 4.

3) First Half-year Report of the Research Program on Communications Policy. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT (1974), p. 1.

4) COM/MD/24, pp. 8–9.

5) *Role and Management of Telecommunications in a Democratic Society*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe (Doc. 3520), p. 9.

6) "The Free Flow of Information: Towards a Reconsideration of National and International Communication Polices", speech delivered by Dr. Urho Kekkonen, President of the Republic of Finland, at the Symposium on the International Flow of Television Programmes, University of Tampere, May 21, 1973. (Published e.g. in *Television Traffic—A One-way Street?* Paris: Unesco Reports and Papers on Mass Communication No. 70/1974.)

7) *Proposals for a Communications Policy for Canada: A Position Paper of the Government of Canada*. Ottawa: Information Canada (1973), p. 1.

8) *Parts III and V of the Report of the Government Committee on Communication Policy: Investigations and Recommendations Concerning Developments in Communication Technology (Abridged)*. Helsinki: Valtion painatuskeskus (Committee Reports 1974: 18 and 79, Abridged), pp. 35–36.

9) Edwin B. Parker: Social Implications of Computer/Telecommunications Systems (Paper presented at OECD in Paris, February 4–5, 1975). Stanford, Calif.: Program in Information Technology and Telecommunications: Center for Interdisciplinary Research (Report No. 16/1975), p. 5.

10) Herbert I. Schiller: The Appearance of National-communications Policies: A New Arena for Social Struggle. *Gazette*, 1975, No. 2, p. 90.

11) *Ibid.*, p. 82.

12) Ithiel de Sola Pool: The Rise of Communications Policy Research, *Journal of Communication*, 1974, Spring, p. 9.

13) Schiller, *op. cit.*, pp. 93–94. See also another article by Herbert I. Schiller: Waiting for Orders—Some Current Trends in Mass Communications Research in the United States. *Gazette*, 1974, No. 1, pp. 12–21. Another critical view on the policy orientation is provided by Oscar H. Gandy: The Economics and Structure or Bias in Mass Media Research, paper presented in the International Scientific Conference of IAMCR in Leipzig, September 17–19, 1974 (published in the proceedings of the Conference Der Anteil der Massenmedien bei der Herausbildung des Bewusstseins in der sich

wandelnden Welt; Leipzig: Sektion Journalistik der Karl-Marx-Universität, 1974, pp. 19–30).

14) COM/MD/20, pp. 5–6.

15) Elizabeth Fox de Cardona and Luis Ramiro Beltrán: Towards the Development of a Methodology to Diagnosis Public Communication Institutions. (Paper presented at the General Meeting of the International Broadcast Institute, Cologne, September 1–4, 1975), pp. 3–4.

16) See, for example, Kaarle Nordenstreng: From Mass Media to Mass Consciousness. George Gerbner (ed.), *MASS MEDIA Policies in Changing Cultures*, (New York: John Wiley, 1977), pp. 269–283.

17) Lothar Bisky: Mass Communication Research: State of the Art—Where We Are, and Where We Should Be Going. Paper presented at the IAMCR Conference in 1976, p. 3.

18) Veikko Pietilä: On the Scientific Status and Position of Communication Research. Tampere, Finland, Institute of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Tampere, *Reports* No. 35, 1977.

19) Kauko Pietilä: A Methodological Example in the Study of Social Consciousness. M. Berg, P. Hemanus, J. Ekecrantz, F. Mortensen, P. Sepstrup (eds.), *Current Theories in Scandinavian Mass Communication Research* (Grenaa, Denmark: GMT, 1977), pp. 198–229.

(Professor of Communications and Chairman, Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Tampere, Finland)