The Sociologist Looks at Communications

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Notes & Comment

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My comments this morning will focus on the structure of communications. I am afraid that my presentation will do little more than create problems but this is significant in itself and should provide material for more fruitful discussion later on. I am assuming that by communication here we mean "the transmission of information, ideas, emotions, skills etc., by the use of symbols—words, pictures, graphs etc." Secondly, I realize our main concern in this meeting is with the mass media and that these generally include newspapers, magazines, books, films, radio and television. Generally, these media communicate through a mechanical device such as print or the TV screen and they make for an impersonal relationship between communicator and audience. While the focus of this gathering is on the mass media of communication, I would not want to overlook other forms of communication in which there is direct contact between communicator and audience. Here I am thinking of such things as preaching, catechizing, even personal conversation. The problem raised in discussing the mass media apply to some extent also to more direct forms of communication.

THE PROBLEM

The first problem, as I see it, in the study of mass communication is the development of a wider perspective than has heretofore prevailed in the field.

Most of the sociological research on communication has taken place in the United States. European social scientists have for the most part concerned themselves with the Sociology of Knowledge. The sociology of knowledge has to date been concerned with digging up the social roots of knowledge, of searching out the ways in which

* Talk delivered at the second annual meeting of the Jesuits engaged in Communications in East Asia, held in Manila, May 18-25, 1965.

knowledge and thought are affected by the environing social structure. The chief focus here has been on the shaping of intellectual perspectives by society. Research in mass communications, on the other hand, has focused on the sociological study of popular belief. It focuses on opinion rather than knowledge, and concerns itself with such things as public opinion, mass beliefs and with what has come to be known as popular culture. Both ' fields, the sociology of knowledge and of mass communication, are closely related though they have remained apart. European sociologists have to date been interested in systems of doctrine, while American sociologists have been interested in gathering discrete tidbits of information on the success or failure of particular media or programs. The European has been interested in the logical interrelationship of ideas, the Americans in empirical relationships. Thus while the European has remained largely theoretical, the American has remained largely practical and factual. Yet, future progress in both fields, it would seem, will depend on their cross-fertilization. The theoretical categories developed in the sociology of knowledge are needed by the social scientist who is working in mass communications while the empirical techniques of the mass communications researcher will be of great help to the sociologist interested in the field of knowledge. In brief, we can say that while the perspective of one must be broadened that of the other must be pinned down.[1]

The second problem closely related to the above is one which is of more concern to us. It is the problem of cross or trans-cultural communication. Back in September, a meeting was held here in Manila which brought together a group of catechetical experts from the various Jesuit provinces and missions of East Asia. The purpose of the meeting was to consider the establishment of a Center for missionary catechetics. In the course of the meeting it became quite clear from the statements of those present that the Church in Asia has not been making much impact on the cultures of the area. In the modern world when new nations are seeking to affirm their identity in terms of their own traditional cultures, the Church will appear more and more alien if it continues to affirm in its catechetics and liturgy that its western garb is somehow native to it. "The most fundamental problem facing the Church in Asia today is that of the practical aptitude of the Church to encounter the cultures of this area in a profound manner. As things stand at present if we want something authentic from the cultural point of view, in the majority of cases we have to look for it outside the Christian community."[2]

[1] Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1957), p. 439-456 *passim*.
[2] "Asian and African Laymen Discuss the Council" *Cross Currents*, Vol. XII. No. 2 (Spring 1962), p. 247.

'It is interesting that at the last Eucharistic Congress in Munich in 1960, a great success was scored in the beautiful and valid performance of Indian dances which celebrated the Blessed Sacrament. Yet, to execute this suggestion of a missionary, it was necessary to get the nelp of a non-Christian choreographer. The Christian ideas had to be explained to her, and then she knew how to give them an authentic Indian expression. A Catholic found it very difficult to find the right note, to discern what could and could not be transposed from Hinduism to Christianity, without shocking the Hindus and distorting the Christian faith. The fact is that national culture and Christian faith are not integrated in the lives of Asian Catholics."[3] This is true here in the Philippines as well as in other countries of Asia. Fr. Bulatao uses the challenging phrase "split-level Christianity" to describe what exists here.[4] In all of our studies, this split-level phenomenon has been found and it indicates a lack of cross-cultural communication. It is a fact that ways of life, rituals, garb, etc. which are meaningful, let us say in the West, many only serve to retard the integration of the Church into a non-Western culture. Colonialism is a thing of the past and so is the colonial method of proselytizing and convert-making. If the Church is to succeed in Asia, it must become Asian. If we wish to speak meaningfully of the fatherhood of God or the brotherhood of man or the sacrifice of the Mass, then we had better not assume that the images of "the father," "the brother," or of "sacrifice" are the same in the cultures of Asia as they are in the West. If we are to insist effectively on celibacy for the clergy then we had better find out what value a given culture places on the celibate life. Other interesting questions also arise here... How, for example, can we communicate a knowledge of salvation history to people who have little sense of history; or talk about a future life to people who are immersed in the present; or about guilt to a people who feel mostly shame; or about the Church as the people of God, to those who feel little or no loyalty beyond their immediate family or kinship groups? We must do so; the question is, how?

The problems outlined are problems of communication from a missionary perspective. But they are problems for which we do need solutions. Solutions which can only come from many disciplines working together and attacking the problems from different perspectives. Too often research on the mass media has been aimed at evaluating the effect of a given program on an audience. I televise a catechism lesson, for example, and then test the children to see how much of it they grasped and compare the results with those of a control group not exposed to television. If the children who took the televised lessons did better, other things being equal, I conclude television is a better medium for instruction. So far so good but has the message penetrated

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[3] *Ibid.*
[4] Jaime Bulatao, "A Socio-Psychological View of the Philippine Church" in *What's New in the Old Church* (Manila: Ateneo de Manila, 1965), (Mimeographed).

any more deeply due to exposure to television? Has it been made any more relevant for life or is it simply a more effective way of ensuring memory performance? These I think are the type of questions to which the social scientist can help provide answers.

Communications research to date, however, indicates that the mass media have been singularly ineffective in dealing with the type of problem I have described. "Mass communications have proved effective only in producing a shift on unfamiliar, lightly felt, peripheral issues—those that do not matter much to the audience or are not tied to the audience's predispositions. On other issues it is effective in reinforcing opinions but only infrequently changes them."[5] Again, if we look at the range of situations in which mass media have been conspicuously effective, it appears that they have been effective to the extent that they have capitalized on existing attitudes and, explicitly or implicitly, have fed in "facts which have suggested an easily available course of action which served those attitudes or values."[6]

The confirmation of existing attitudes, however, cannot deal with the problems I have posed earlier of cross-cultural communications. For as Fr. Bulatao has indicated, we may well be confirming nothing more than the formal, surface level of the personality.

For the breakthrough I envision it is necessary for the communications experts to go beyond the techniques of competent production and to get together with the social scientists to help design basic research proposals on the social and psychological determinants of knowledge in different cultures.

The special contribution of the sociologist will be in the area of reference group theory and in helping to isolate the sociological determinants of the learning process.

Research in mass communications to date indicate that an individual's perceptions and responses to the mass communicated message are not based on the value of the message but rather on the pattern of interaction and on the expectations of the groups to which the individual belongs. Unless we understand the impact of the group on the individual, his status within different groups, his reaction to conflicting group pressures, we can never understand the impact of mass communications. From the sociological view point, the "split-level" personality may well be the result of response to conflicting reference group demands.

Study of the learning process must pay attention to the structure of the group in which learning takes place. Fundamental attitudes are

[5] Bernard Berelson and Gary A. Steiner, *Human Behavior, An Inventory of Scientific Findings* (New York: Harcourt Brace and World Inc., 1964), p. 543.
[6] *Ibid.*

learned in group experiences and they are a basic part of the structure of the individual personality. The most important aspects of learning are not verbal. It is learning by doing, or better perhaps, learning by living the attitudes learned in terms of common activities. This learning is often reinforced by verbal communication as well, but mere verbal communication without this deeper stratum of learning by living will be of little practical effect.

It is therefore important to know how to analyze the situation we would like to influence in terms of its strategic elements and this is where the social sciences can be of help to the communications experts. Possibly, we priests tend to overestimate the importance of verbal communication. Our own education has been highly verbal and this tends to make us over-intellectualize and see things too much in terms of abstract categories. This can lead us to failure to comprehend the real attitudes of people and to overestimate the manifest content of verbal communication.[7]

Too often programs introduced with what seem to be good verbal reasons may work in concrete situations to elicit quite unintended responses unless there is a real understanding of the variables involved in the concrete situations.

Perhaps I have said enough already to indicate what I feel are the challenges facing all of us who are interested in communications in this area of the world. Basically, it is going beyond the surface level in which we tend to reinforce old attitudes. To go deeper, however, those engaged in the field of communications and the social scientists must work hand in hand in figuring out ways of building successful learning situations into the programs of the various media.

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The History of Acquisition: Foundation for Misunderstanding

In democratic nations the attitudes of the masses weigh heavily in the councils of statesmen. Many of these attitudes have their origin in the classrooms of public and private educational institutions, from grammar to graduate school. These attitudes and opinions can eventually sway the course of a nation. It is imperative to find the source of these attitudes if one is to fathom the reasons behind current and future American policy concerning the Philippines, or for

[7] Thomas O'Dea, "Changing Attitudes Toward Economic Cooperation," (New York: Fordham University, Mission Institute, 1959) p. 15 (Mimeograhed).