

The Challenge of Inference in Interinstitutional Research on Mass Communication

Joseph Turow

Interinstitutional research in mass communication carries with it a chain of complex, interrelated problems regarding tactics, sampling, data reliability, and notions of causality. This article confronts a number of these difficulties and suggests ways to deal with them. In addition, it draws on notions of storytelling and cognitive aesthetics to broaden the criteria for judging research. The aim is to encourage scholarship that is ambitious in thought and act and at the same time self-reflective and open about the most daunting dilemmas that confront researchers in this important research area.

There is growing interest among people who study mass media industries in what can be called "interinstitutional research." The aim of interinstitutional research is to understand the way structures of power within institutions of society insinuate themselves into the work of elements of the mass media institution. Examples are studies of the interactions between the banking institution and the Hollywood studios (Wasko, 1982), between the medical system and producers of fictional programs about medicine (Turow, 1989), between advocacy groups claiming to represent various institutions and the television networks (Gitlin, 1979; Montgomery, 1989), between the sports institution and the television industry (Rader, 1984), and between celebrities from different walks of life and the mass media industries that create their images (Braudy, 1986). At their best, studies in this vein resonate with a wide spectrum of questions about the interrelationships of media and the larger society. They inquire into both the historical contexts and contemporary activities that set the stage for certain media representations and not others. They try to understand models of society that people share through the media; to follow the cultural argumentation that takes place throughout society as a result of the models; to track ways that organizations and individuals attempt to exert control over those depictions; and to extrapolate the implications that organizational processes, cultural models, and cultural argumentation hold for structures of dominance and reaction to dominance in society. These are important issues. Addressing them requires imaginative tacks on broad landscapes.

There is, however, an issue that interinstitutional research itself raises that is rarely discussed by its practitioners or readers. The research stream carries with it a chain of complex, interrelated dilemmas regarding research tactics, sampling, data reliability, and notions of causality. At base, the dilemmas center on the problem of making inferences about abstract, macrosociological forces from examinations of specific activities of individuals. The purpose of this essay is to confront a number of these dilemmas and suggest ways to deal with them. Typically, field researchers confronting criticisms of "subjectivity" and structural imprecision in their scholarly investigations try to sweep them away by pointing out that hidden strands of subjectivity and ideology weave through all research. Although not disagreeing with this position, this article adds a more positive one. The argument is that the way researchers deal with these concerns in a scholarly manner must ultimately be judged not merely by how close the whole comes to traditional scientific norms. Rather, it must be judged by the extent to which the project strikes an intellectually defensible balance between having systematically reproducible, theoretically grounded particulars, on the one hand, and achieving an aesthetically successful work, on the other.

Propositions Underlying the Research Approach

Before introducing specific dilemmas in interinstitutional research relating to mass communication, a brief sketch of the perspective guiding such work is in order. Although specific viewpoints of individual researchers in this area will vary ideologically and methodologically, it is possible to set forth a number of propositions that seem to be shared widely, though often implicitly. The first is that mass media organizations release materials that are important from a societal standpoint. The premise centers on the idea that mass media provide unique potential for large numbers of otherwise different and unrelated people to orient around similar depictions of the world, despite individual differences in interpreting the depictions. The second proposition, articulated by thinkers as different as Marx (see Murdock, 1982), Weber (1976), and Park (1922), is that mass communication's unique potential for the broad sharing of depictions comes not just from the technology involved. Rather, it comes from use of those

instruments by large-scale organizations as they apply standards of mass production to the creation and dissemination of a wide variety of portrayals.

Defining Mass Communication

These premises suggest the following definition: Mass communication is the industrialized (mass) production, reproduction, and multiple distribution of messages through technological devices. Messages are linguistic or pictorial representations that appear purposeful. The word *industrialized* means the process is carried out by mass media industries—that is, by conglomerations of organizations that interact in the process of producing and distributing messages. The statement that mass communication involves the creation and dissemination of messages implies, then, that the activity is part of the larger social process of creating meaning. The definition proposes, however, that unlike attempts to understand the creation of meaning among individuals and in small groups, research on the production and dissemination of mass media messages requires seeing organizations and industries as the creators of meaning.

Obviously, organizations are made up of people. They are, to quote Aldrich (1979), "goal-directed, boundary maintaining activity systems" (p. 4). His characterization highlights the essential social nature of organizations, yet it also underscores that organizations are not merely the sum of the individuals that constitute them—their particular personalities and backgrounds. Rather, as he says, they are "products of, and constraints upon, social relations" (p. 4). The roles that people take on as members of one organization tilt them in directions that might well be different from the ones they take on in other contexts.

It is the industrial application of technology for the production and distribution of messages to various places that provides the potential for reaching large, separate, diverse groups of people that make up society. Note, however, that this definition avoids setting requirements about the number and nature of people attending to the messages. Whether and how the production process influences, or is influenced by, the size and characteristics of the audience should be (and has been) a matter of discussion and empirical examination.

Three Additional Propositions

Many other issues regarding the activity, content, and consequences of mass communication can flow directly from the definitions just presented. Yet a systematic mass communication *perspective* on media industries is most likely to emerge by formulating a view on the relationships between industrial process, message sharing, and the social fabric. Again, no single approach is likely to satisfy every thinker on the subject. What relationship exists between industrial process, message sharing, and the social fabric is a question that researchers have answered with a rather wide range of arguments about the connection between Western capitalist mass media and social power. Despite these disagreements, a few more propositions can be suggested from works in cultural anthropology (Geertz, 1973; Powdermaker, 1950; Turner, 1977), industrial sociology (Thuraine, 1977), and communication research (Adorno, 1954; Gerbner, 1969, 1974) that bind a broad spectrum of researchers. One is that the mass communication is a key vehicle through which the various actors (individuals and organizations) that make up society try to define themselves and others. Mass media (the technological devices used in mass communication) have the capacity to present cultural models—images of the forms and structures of life—to huge numbers of people in vivid form. Those models enact conduct by individuals along with the consequences of their conduct. Many accept the presentations as "common sense," or "the way it is"—for others, if not for them. But for some people the media images provoke discontent over the definitions society is sharing of itself. The media images lead them to want to place their version of individuals and institutions alongside the others in the media, to call attention to themselves, and to gain legitimacy for their beliefs.

Another proposition, related to the last one, is that the presentation of cultural models takes place through performance, most often through narrative performance. Telling stories about the social order is, in other words, the most important—and potentially most socially volatile—function of the sharing of messages. In Western society, a variety of storytelling forms have developed, with their own storytelling constraints and degrees of professionalization. Documentaries, newsmaker interviews, evening news spots, and other types of news performances, for example, are expected to follow certain rules of facticity that fictional presentations need not observe. The rhetoric of "truth claims," the professionalism that surrounds journalism, the aura of democratic importance news has within Western society, and the growth of journalism school faculties have all encouraged particular scholarly attention to the creation of news (for a review, see Ettema & Whitney, 1987; also see Ettema & Glasser, 1985). Some researchers argue, however, that other forms of societal storytelling have equal, and perhaps even more profound, implication for the assimilation of cultural models and argumentation over them. Movies,

songs, and sports presentations, for example, can let people in on certain ways of life, get them angry about certain values, make them feel good about their beliefs.

All this leads to a final proposition: The messages of mass media, as well as arguments about the messages, speak to issues of position and power in society. Who gets depicted, what about them gets depicted, why, with what consequences, at what time, and in what situation—these are questions creators of all cultural models answer in the course of their work. The answers may carry substantial emotional and intellectual significance for those who come into contact with them. That sometimes can be noticed by simply gauging whether viewers or readers react angrily or enthusiastically to the output. Often, however, many people might feel comfortable with the cultural models presented; for them, the materials may represent what Gerbner (1972) terms a celebration of conventional morality. Still others may see in the depictions norms that are accepted by the larger society, even if they disagree with them. They may exercise a public tolerance of shared models.

The Interinstitutional Struggle for Control

But even when there are few loud public complaints about particular media materials, the struggle to control arguments still takes place. A number of studies of Western media (Curran, 1982; Gitlin, 1979; Murdock, 1982; Schiller, 1969, 1989; Turow, 1984) have noted that dominant forces within a society have often managed to ensure that only ideologically compatible media organizations get hold of mainstream channels of communication. They have done it by ensuring that the basic legal and commercial terms through which industries are allowed to operate make it likely that only organizations with certain fundamental perspectives on the world could survive.

On a daily basis, organizations representing a broad gamut routinely try to guide portrayals toward their interests by placing pressures on creators and distributors. Many writers on mass media industries have argued that the steps organized actors take toward the media likely relate to larger agendas they have with respect to their society as a whole. These points apply to a wide variety of entities, from the Moral Majority to Action For Children's Television to the Ku Klux Klan.

From a broader standpoint, they also apply to institutions. Institutions are loosely knit sets of organizations (hospitals, bar associations, teacher unions, television networks) that hold authority over fundamental aspects of social life. Theorists often speak of the medical institution, the legal institution, the educational institution. They speak less frequently of the mass media in that way. Yet, as the foregoing sketch has suggested, mass media organizations can be said to collectively constitute an institution. The mass media's creation of cultural models for the society as a whole is not merely subservient to the interests of other institutions, a transmission belt with little autonomous power. To the contrary, mass media organizations compose a self-aware sector of power in society, with their own economic and organizational needs that continually place them in potential conflict with institutions they depict. Recognizing this, organizations from those institutions often approach mass media organizations with concern about their industrially produced and distributed images. They try to guide, reinforce, or change depictions of themselves and the professionals (doctors, lawyers, teachers) who lead them.

To what extent do these forces succeed? What happens when still other forces championing different models try to stop them? How do these interorganizational interactions influence the menus of materials that certain organizations within the mass media institution release on a regular basis? These questions form the basis of work in the interinstitutional research stream.

Problems of Concept and Method

For researchers who believe that the most important questions about mass communication are those that speak to issues of position and power in society, the interinstitutional approach holds major attractions. It rejects the claim by many mass communication researchers that the individual unit of analysis—that of the single audience member—is the most appropriate vehicle for understanding. It posits, rather, the existence of aggregates of individuals who share certain depictions of power. And based on this premise about the societal importance of the mass communication process, it proceeds to argue the importance of understanding the organizations, industries, and institutions that create and distribute those models for them.

An obvious place for critics of the interinstitutional approach to find fault is in the assumption about the sharing of messages that serves implicitly as a justification for all work on the creation and distribution of mass media materials. In recent years, many mass communication researchers have played down collective understanding and discussion of media materials to emphasize a very different aspect of the audience—the ability of individuals to use and interpret media "texts" in virtually any way they want. This stress on individual interpretation does not, it should be noted, speak directly against the concepts and methods of institutional research itself; it strikes, instead, at

the justification for this kind of work. Nevertheless, two responses can be offered here. One is that over the decades researchers as varied as Chaffee (1981), Noelle-Neumann (1981), and Gerbner (1972; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1986) have pointed out that it is perfectly compatible with an emphasis on message sharing to realize that everyone in the audience may not accept media presentations in the same way. The second is that people who conduct interinstitutional research should not have to wait for a conducive environment among researchers who study audiences to proceed with their work. As has been argued elsewhere (Turow, 1989), research on mass media industries raises questions of media consequences at levels of analysis that would probably not even be asked by people who study individuals' responses to the media. Interinstitutional researchers should not be seen as going off "half-cocked" with presumptions about media effects that have not been supported. To the contrary, it can be argued that their work raises issues and assumptions about media consequences that historically have found intellectual support but that deserve a lot more empirical attention.

Conceptual Dilemmas

But although the assumptions on which interinstitutional research is predicated will not be considered problematic here, a number of concepts and methods that lie at the heart of the work do demand attention. Problems of sampling, access to individuals, interview techniques, reliance on subject memory, and the difficulty of just how much individuals know about their organizations-these are a few of the methodological issues that come up in every foray into research on mass media industries. Towering above all of them is a central quandary that relates directly to the aim of the endeavor. The logjam is one typical of macrosociological research. Large-scale social forces, such as "society," "institutions," and even organizations," are necessarily intellectual constructs-that is, concepts generated and agreed upon by scholars. Even after they are defined, they cannot be seen directly. Instead, their presence must be induced or inferred by examining smaller social units that are felt to be components of those larger systems.

By the nature of this sort of research, however, a number of major inferences are required to tie the observed units back to the macrosocial level at which the original questions were asked. These major inferences are essentially leaps of faith dictated by ideology and other aspects of academic tradition. As a result, no matter how solid is the empirical research that forms the basis of the investigation, it must be admitted that the investigator's conclusions about the society, institutions, and organizations are always inferred, not seen. More than that, it must be acknowledged that those conclusions are always constructions of reality, rooted not in what the researcher saw but in the intellectual constructions that take place when the investigator tries to link the observed social units with concepts that served as the basis for the research project.

The conceptual dilemmas of interinstitutional research may seem particularly dispiriting when joined with the many smaller, yet still difficult, problems that field investigations of this sort pose. A feel for a few of the complexities involved can be gotten by considering the following question: How do interactions of production organizations such as a newspaper firm or a Hollywood movie studio with other organizations relevant to their work affect the production firms' creative activities and output? Though basic, the question is a crucial one for researchers on mass media industries and can be asked on many levels. One might wonder, for example, about the extent to which, and the way in which, contemporary needs in the advertising industry end up affecting the particular activities of news personnel at a newspaper. Or one might ask about the extent to which, and the way in which, historical relationships between the medical institution and the television system have influenced prime-time portrayals of health care.

One approach to this problem lies in Pfeffer and Salancik's (1978) argument that the arrangement of key organizational activities represents attempts by the organization's leaders to cope with risks they perceive in exchanging their products for environmental resources such as supplies, personnel, and favorable government regulations. Phrased in the language of industrial sociology, the task in both cases is to explore how "structural constraint and discretionary decision making interface" at different levels of resource exchange (Glasberg & Schwartz, 1983, p. 326). Pfeffer and Salancik (1978, p. 229) diagram "the mechanisms by which organizational environments may affect organizations" in terms of a hierarchy of linkages from the environment to organizational actions (see Figure 1).

A way to understand this process in the context of the present discussion is to conceive of the relationships between a mass media production firm and organizations in its environment as communication systems that involve leaders of the production firms and members of the other organizations constituting the media industry. The purpose of such a system for each organization in the relationship can be specified by referring to Aldrich's proposition that "major goals of organizational leaders are avoiding dependence on other [organizations for resources] and making others dependent on one's own organization" (1979, p. 5). The communication system allows production firm leaders and their employees to keep in touch with changing environmental circumstances, so that they can make

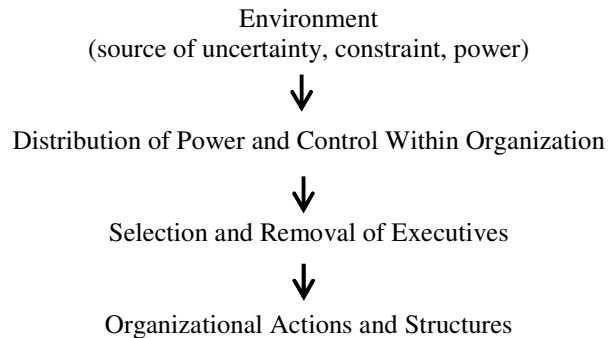


Figure 1: Pfeffer and Salancik's (1978) hierarchy of linkages.

adjustments in creative policy, personnel, and organizational structure that meet those exigencies. Executives whose creative expertise relates to those areas of the environment that organizational leaders have chosen to exploit would potentially have much power within the organization. If those executives did not succeed in convincing top management and the owners that their approaches to creative activities are the most profitable (monetarily or politically), they would be removed. Other executives with other approaches to creative activities would then take the helm.

Methodological Dilemmas

Although this scenario may seem straightforward, even reasonable, trying to find support for it through systematic investigation presents a multitude of difficulties. Consider an investigation into the nature and consequences of the medical institutions' relationships with organizations that have created prime-time television programs centering on physicians ("doctor shows") over the past four decades. The "environment" in this case consists of the organizational forces impinging upon the firms producing doctor shows—forces from both within the TV industry (networks, advertisers) and from the medical system (doctors' associations, hospital associations). More particular theoretical concerns will be bypassed for the purposes of this discussion. One primary interest, however, might be to inquire into any symbiotic relationships that developed over time between key organizational representatives of the medical system and the television system that shaped prime-time portrayals of health care and the power of physicians with respect to health care. Here are just a few of the conceptual and methodological difficulties to be faced:

1. In order to formulate the problem cogently and to be able to place organizational activities in a broader societal context, the researcher must become grounded in the history and contemporary nature of both the U.S. medical system and the prime-time TV system. In addition, the researcher must achieve an understanding of the historical relationship between the two systems. The formulas and other approaches currently involved in creating media images about medicine embody perspectives—sometimes conflicting perspectives—about institutional legitimacy and power that developed over a number of decades. It is important to know how those perspectives developed, particularly the role that direct interinstitutional interactions played in that development. In other words, the need is to understand TV's relationship with medicine both synchronically and diachronically.

To do that, the researcher needs to operationalize the terms *medical institution*, *prime-time television system*, and *doctor show*, so that the organizations and individuals relevant to this study can be identified. What is known of the histories of those organizations as they relate, broadly, to the topic at hand, must be explored in libraries and archives prior to interviews. Archives and libraries are also crucial for locating doctor shows, or (as a second choice) their scripts must be located to aid the researcher in interviews with program creators as well as to track changes and continuities in the programs over the years.

Even these basic activities are formidable. There are clearly many ways to define the medical institution, the prime-time TV system, and doctor shows. Each conceptualization holds assumptions about the past and the

present-and about the sample of organizations involved-that makes using it controversial. Moreover, certain aspects of the written history of medicine are unclear or conflicted in areas relevant to this project; the case is the same for the history of television. Added to these problems is the logistical difficulty of tracking down all the programs that reference books suggest fall under the definition of a prime-time doctor show. Some are in archives on the East Coast, some on the West Coast. Some can be viewed on broadcast or cable television. Others must be viewed in production firms that own them or in the homes of individuals. A number cannot be located at all.

2. After these basic conceptualizations have been completed, ways must be found to track interinstitutional lines of influence historically and contemporaneously. In practice, this means tracking the influence that key organizations within the medical system and TV system have had on one another with respect to doctor shows over the decades as well as at present. The researcher can gain insight into the way certain approaches to medicine become embodied in contemporary TV storytelling by participant-observation. That involves getting permission to follow the gamut of activities involved in creating a TV project, from script ideas to discussions with network and medical representatives to casting to filming. Assuming permission is granted, obvious difficulties here include the impossibility of being at more than one place at one time, of not being able to hear private conversations, of trying to make sure that the activities observed are, in fact, representative of the typical dynamics of activities.

When tracing the history of interinstitutional relationships, observation must give way to interviews. A critical step in conducting this investigation is to choose a starting point-a period and cultural product that begins the doctor-show stream for the purposes of the project. The starting point need not be a TV doctor show. The history of the doctor-show formula may well be rooted in radio, movies, magazine, or book stories that precede the home tube. Finding this *Ur*-tale cannot be done without first becoming immersed in the history of the form and the large periodical literature (magazine and newspaper articles, medical journal pieces, TV trade magazine writings) on the subject. Again the logistical problem of locating and retrieving this material comes to the fore. Some articles may never be known; others will never be found.

3. Once the programs and the organizations that created them are identified, the researcher must contact individuals who help to shape the materials. Reference books and trade paper reviews provide names of some network executives, writers, directors, producers, actors, and medical consultants to track down. Others can be discovered through the mention of relevant individuals in interviews. Representatives from a number of medical organizations who, existing literature notes, had dealings with program producers must also be contacted. More of these can also be found through interviews.

The problems of sampling here will be obvious. The total universe of relevant individuals to contact can never be known. Moreover, there is attrition even among those key figures who are known. A handful have died, a handful cannot be found, a few refuse to be interviewed. Among those who do agree to help, all the problems of interview research in the service of history must be confronted—the simple difficulty of recalling day-to-day activities from years past that did not seem important at the time, the tendency many people have to overstate their importance in the scheme of things, the influence of specific questions and of the interviewer on questions.

Particularly important to consider is the possibility that although the interviewees might be critical as informants about particular organizational struggles about media creation, they may not know about links of their activities to large-scale trends in the medical or media institutions, or in the society as a whole. A related problem is that many of the ideas about portrayals of medicine may have become so much a part of everyday writing and producing activities by a certain time that the people involved may have thought of them as merely obvious or logical storytelling tactics. Lines of influence between the medical organizations and TV may not, in other words, be understood or even perceived by the participants.

The Challenge of a "Cognitive Aesthetic" Solution

The reader who has not carried out this sort of research might be overwhelmed by the difficulties involved. Still, any researcher with some experience would undoubtedly be able to suggest ways to handle each one of the problems presented in the past few pages. In some cases, the experience of those who have done this sort of work before can be of great value. Books have been written, for example, about the best ways to construct and analyze interviews for the purposes of organizational and historical research. When the literature offers no solutions, logic and trial-and-error are often useful tools. Tenacity, good telephone skills, and a detective's mind are often useful in making sure that the known sample of archival materials and living subjects can be reached. As for the difficulties with interviewing, here, too, determination, experience, and care can ensure the systematic, reliable nature of the findings. For example, asking the same questions of people who worked in the same organizations allows the investigator to note whether answers converge in directions that confirm the facts of particular incidents.

Readers undoubtedly also recognize that beyond the hard work that yields systematic and replicable information, the credibility of interorganizational research can be heightened by careful operationalization of key terms along with an explicit strategy of mining the findings for facts relevant to the terms. Doing this is often fascinating and complicated. It involves confronting terms such as *environment*, *power*, *history*, *organizations*, and *causality* that are often taken for granted. The meanings adopted for these terms must relate from the start to the questions asked, the hypotheses generated, and the research strategies chosen. In the research discussed here the suggested "lines of influence" from an organization's environment to its everyday activities (Figure 1) could be tested only if historical materials and interviews were approached with clear conceptions of the ways these influences could be inferred.

Trying to understand the workings of interinstitutional power both synchronically and diachronically means coming to terms with conceptions of causality at the appropriate level of analysis. A key point to be made in this regard is that the researcher should be sensitive to the idea that causal relationships need not be one-way. The relationship between a media industry and sectors of an institution in its environment may be very much a reciprocal one. For instance, within the context of American society's general approach to health care, movie and television images may reflect the creators' perceptions of, and dealings with, organized medicine, whereas organized medicine itself may be influenced as a result of media activities. The job of the researcher is to notice the reciprocal nature of this dynamic system through the archival materials and the interviews. As an example, creators' understanding of medical portrayals and the roots of those portrayals often must be teased out through lengthy questioning of creators that invite them to tell stories about their experiences on those programs. The stories must later be examined carefully and compared with those of different respondents (about the same or other programs), so that a broad mosaic of interactions and their implications for interinstitutional power can be constructed.

Other suggestions can be offered for minimizing methodological sloppiness in the areas discussed and encouraging careful evaluation of the findings. It must be acknowledged, however, that for every solution offered, another potential problem can be identified in the research procedures or in the operationalization of key terms. Field research is not a neat, fully controllable activity. In many ways it involves a battle against intellectual and material entropy: The scholar's sociological demand for patterns is arrayed against the messiness of everyday life.

The Sociological Construction of Reality

The realization that observed patterns are necessarily constructions of reality on the part of the researcher recalls the central quandary about inference that was raised earlier in this article. The use of interviews with individuals and archival materials by individuals to infer macrosociological activity patterns (denoted by such terms as *society*, *institution*, and *organization*) is a construction of reality that cannot be made less "artificial" through any research tack. Moreover, the issue of social construction does not appear at the final stages of the project but, rather, permeates the research from the start. It is implicit in the very operationalization of terms that, it was noted earlier, are crucial to conducting systematic work.

The point can be pushed further. The inherent impossibility of making direct, concrete links between the subjects studied and the concepts they represent means that the investigator's activity of inference actually proceeds by analogy, in which the specific objects of study *stand in for* the abstractions that are guiding the research perspective and hypotheses. This task of "operationalizing the variables" is typically described as a challenge to retain the essence of the research problem—and the "validity" of inference—while narrowing the project to make it more amenable to systematic, reliable observation. From the viewpoint presented here, however, what is going on in the operationalization process is the implementation of a figurative language in which tropes—words used with a decided change or extension of their literal meaning—are used to probe a certain reality. The major activity is metaphorical. In a metaphor a word that in ordinary usage signifies one kind of thing is applied to another. When 20 people signify an organization, when several "organizations" (or interviewed individuals) signify an institution, when people and documents stand in for concepts such as environment and society, the metaphorical use of language is operating no less than in famous phrases of poetry.

Controversies surrounding the ideological implications of research-based constructions have dogged the social sciences for a long time. In the mass communication area, field investigations have particularly been subjects of these discussions, although in recent years experimental and survey work has also ignited arguments. A standard retort that is used when interinstitutional research is posed as problematic because it is a construction of reality is to point out that all research fits this description, whether it is highly quantitative experimental work, highly qualitative field observation; or somewhere in the middle. Although certainly accurate, this reply is not satisfying because its posture is essentially defensive, an acknowledgment that a work is flawed—but so is everything else. A more fruitful way to deal with the sociological construction of reality along with its attended dilemmas of inference is to

see it for what is: a type of *storytelling* that holds the scientific model as its dominant organizing principle. The model places a high value on norms of reliability, systemacy, and cautiousness as they relate to matters of evidence and inference. It places a premium on traditional paradigms and methods while encouraging (mostly) dialectical challenges to those traditions.

Alternatives for Evaluating Research

Generally, evaluations of particular social research projects are made only from within the scientific model. Academics judge studies by the extent to which they follow norms of reliability, systemacy, cautiousness, and, sometimes, predictability. Such evaluations are necessary to allow comparisons with other research and to help people decide whether they want to act on the studies' conclusions. Yet by placing high value on time-tested terminologies and operationalizations, the evaluative process tends to encourage qualitative field researchers, who feel particularly burdened by an inability to adhere to these norms, in two unfortunate directions. Some concern themselves with narrow, easily operationalizable projects that can be granted hypothesis-testing legitimacy. Others—and this group includes most interinstitutional mass communication researchers—go off on more daring projects but, in the process, devote rather little discussion to method and concepts. They leave it to readers to take on faith that the researchers have done the best job possible on some of these key issues. The first tack is unsatisfactory because it is inhibited from taking chances, the second because it evacuates the reflection on concepts and methods that is crucial to scholarship.

Brown (1976), a sociologist, points to a way for resolving this problem. He argues that artistic-metaphoric thinking lies at the root of the logic of discovery in every field, quantitative or qualitative. He suggests that the fullest evaluation of research should involve an assessment of the extent to which the final product reasonably balances traditional concerns for a systematically reproducible, theoretically grounded work, on one hand, and concern for the extent to which the work fulfills the aesthetic implications of such criteria as originality, scope, congruence with the "reality" being studied, and form. Brown (1976) calls this approach "cognitive aesthetics" and argues that it has four principle advantages in evaluating research:

First, it permits us to move beyond copy theories of truth in both art and in science. Second, it provides a framework within which the pioneering artist and the pioneering scientist are both seen as involved in essentially the same activity: making paradigms through which experience becomes intelligible. These two advantages give birth to a third and fourth; for if art and science are seen to have essential affinity, then the possibility is opened for a fusion of the two principal ideals of sociological knowledge: the scientific or positivist one, stressing logical deductions and controlled research, and the artistic or intuitive one, stressing insights and subjective understanding. Finally, insofar as such a fusion is possible, cognitive aesthetics provides a source of metacategories for assessing sociological theory from any methodological perspective.

One implication of such an aesthetic view is that no given symbol system—whether it be astrology, baroque iconography, or quantum physics has ontological priority over any other. All are equally "real." Given this, our choice of symbol systems, in some ultimate sense, becomes a matter of taste However, it does not become "merely" a matter of taste. Instead, we can discern *canons* of aesthetic judgment that may be used as criteria of adequacy for theories or representation from any symbol system. (p. 2)

From the standpoint of interinstitutional mass communication research, the idea of a cognitive aesthetic dovetails nicely with the storytelling perspective on research that has been sketched. Taken together, the approaches allow the inherent limitations of social research to be seen not as an embarrassing burden to be shielded from view but as a challenge. The challenge is to balance as creatively as possible the need to follow the scientific model while pushing its boundaries to emerge with a project whose originality, scope, form, and apparent congruence with a particular reality give rise to an aesthetically pleasing sense of completion and understanding. It will be up to other scholars to decide whether the balance that has been struck is, in fact, the most pleasing possible from both cognitive and aesthetic standpoints.

Conclusion

Of course, nothing in this approach excuses poor planning, sloppy operationalization, and bad interview techniques. High value must still be placed on the ability of the interinstitutional researcher to make inferences that are sensible

and warranted by the methods and concepts. At the same time, explicit attention by the community of researchers to the aim of balancing conceptual and methodological dilemmas with aesthetic innovativeness can be of great benefit. It might spur scholarship that is daring in thought and act and at the same time open and careful in discussing the ideas and methods that drove the investigations. Interinstitutional research—all research—will be the better for that.

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