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Elihu Katz

University of Pennsylvania, [ekatz@asc.upenn.edu](mailto:ekatz@asc.upenn.edu)

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# Communication Research and the Image of Society Convergence of Two Traditions

**Abstract**

Research on mass communications and on the acceptance of new farm practices may be characterized as an interest in campaigns to gain a acceptance of change. Despite their shared problems, these two fields have shown no interest in each other. However, very recently, as the student of mass communications began to revise his image of an atomized mass society, there have been signs of growing convergence. The attempt to take systematic account of interpersonal relations as relevant to the flow of mass communications has directed the attention of students of urban communication to rural sociology.

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**Disciplines**

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## COMMUNICATION RESEARCH AND THE IMAGE OF SOCIETY CONVERGENCE OF TWO TRADITIONS<sup>1</sup>

ELIHU KATZ

### ABSTRACT

Research on mass communications and on the acceptance of new farm practices may be characterized as an interest in campaigns to gain acceptance of change. Despite their shared problems, these two fields have shown no interest in each other. However, very recently, as the student of mass communications began to revise his image of an atomized mass society, there have been signs of growing convergence. The attempt to take systematic account of interpersonal relations as relevant to the flow of mass communications has directed the attention of students of urban communication to rural sociology.

Research on mass communications has concentrated on persuasion, that is, on the ability of the mass media to influence, usually to change, opinions, attitudes, and actions in a given direction. This emphasis has led to the study of campaigns—election campaigns, marketing campaigns, campaigns to reduce racial prejudice, and the like. Although it has been traditional to treat audience studies, content analysis, and effect studies as separate areas, there is good reason to believe that all three have been motivated primarily by a concern with the effective influencing of thought and behavior in the short run.<sup>2</sup>

Other fields of social research have also

focused on the effectiveness of campaigns, a prominent example being the twenty-year-old tradition of research by rural sociologists on the acceptance of new farm practices. Yet, despite this shared concern, the two traditions of research for many years were hardly aware of each other's existence or of their possible relevance for each other. Indeed, even now, when there is already a certain amount of interchange between them, it is not easy to conceive of two traditions that, ostensibly, seem more unrelated. Rural sociology suggests the study of traditional values, of kinship, primary relations, *Gemeinschaft*; research on mass communications, on the other hand, is almost a symbol of urban society.

The recognition that these two traditions of research have now begun to accord each other is, in large measure, the product of a revision of the image of society implicit in research on mass communications. Thus, al-

<sup>1</sup> This is a revision of a paper prepared for the Fourth World Congress of Sociology, 1959, and is part of a larger inventory of research on social and psychological factors affecting the diffusion of innovation supported by the Social Science Research Committee of the University of Chicago and the Foundation for Research on Human Behavior. Thanks are due to Martin L. Levin, who has assisted with this project, and to Professors C. Arnold Anderson and Everett M. Rogers for helpful criticism.

<sup>2</sup> This point is elaborated in Elihu Katz and Paul F. Lazarsfeld, *Personal Influence: The Part Played by People in the Flow of Mass Communication* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1955).

though the convergence now taking place has surely proceeded from both directions, this paper attempts to present the story from one side only.<sup>3</sup>

#### COMMUNICATION RESEARCH AND THE IMAGE OF SOCIETY

Until very recently, the image of society in the minds of most students of communication was of atomized individuals, connected with the mass media but not with one another.<sup>4</sup> Society—the “audience”—was conceived of as aggregates of age, sex, social class, and the like, but little thought was given to the relationships implied thereby or to more informal relationships. The point is not that the student of mass communications was unaware that members of the audience have families and friends but that he did not believe that they might affect the outcome of a campaign; informal interpersonal relations, thus, were considered irrelevant to the institutions of modern society.

What research on mass communications has learned in its three decades is that the mass media are far less potent than had been expected. A variety of studies—with the possible exception of studies of marketing campaigns—indicates that people are not easily persuaded to change their opinions and behavior.<sup>5</sup> The search for the sources of resistance to change, as well as for the effective sources of influence when changes *do* occur, led to the discovery of the role of interpersonal relations.<sup>6</sup> The shared values in groups of family, friends, and co-workers

<sup>3</sup> It would be interesting if a rural sociologist would tell it from his point of view. In any case, this meeting of traditions is timely, in view of the pessimism expressed by C. Arnold Anderson's “Trends in Rural Sociology,” in Robert K. Merton *et al.* (eds.), *Sociology Today* (New York: Basic Books, 1959), p. 361. Anderson regards research on diffusion as the most sophisticated branch of rural sociology.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. similar conclusions of Eliot Freidson, “Communications Research and the Concept of the Mass,” in Wilbur Schramm (ed.), *The Process and Effects of Mass Communication* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1954), pp. 380–88, and Joseph B. Ford, “The Primary Group in Mass Communication,” *Sociology and Social Research*, XXXVIII (1954), 152–58.

and the networks of communication which are their structure, the decision of their influential members to accept or resist a new idea—all these are interpersonal processes which “intervene” between the campaign in the mass media and the individual who is the ultimate target. These recent discoveries, of course, upset the traditional image of the individuated audience upon which the discipline has been based. Moreover, there is good reason to believe that the image of society in the minds of students of popular culture needs revision in other dimensions as well.<sup>7</sup> But these remarks are concerned only with the discovery that the mass audience is not so atomized and disconnected as had been thought.

#### INTERPERSONAL RELATIONS AND MASS COMMUNICATIONS

Given the need to modify the image of the audience so as to take account of the role of interpersonal relations in the process of mass communications, researchers seem to have proceeded in three directions. First of all, studies were designed so as to characterize individuals not only by their individual attributes but also by their relationship to others. At the Bureau of Applied Social Research of Columbia University, where much of this work has gone on, a series of

<sup>5</sup> For a review of such studies see Joseph T. Klapper, *The Effects of the Mass Media* (New York: Bureau of Applied Social Research, 1949); relevant excerpts from this document appear in Schramm (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 289–320. G. D. Wiebe suggests reasons why marketing campaigns fare better than others, in “Merchandising Commodities and Citizenship on Television,” *Public Opinion Quarterly*, XV (1951–52), 679–91. See also Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Robert K. Merton, “Mass Communication, Popular Taste and Organized Social Action,” in Wilbur Schramm, (ed.), *Mass Communications* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1949), 459–80.

<sup>6</sup> This parallels the discovery of the relevance of interpersonal relations in other modern institutions, especially in mass production.

<sup>7</sup> See Edward A. Shils, “Mass Society and Its Culture” (paper presented at the Daedalus-Tamiment Institute Seminar, June, 1959), for a critique of the common tendency among students of communication to conceive of mass society as disorganized and anomic.

successive studies examined the ways in which influences from the mass media are intercepted by interpersonal networks of communication and made more or less effective thereby. These were studies of decisions of voters, of housewives to try a new kind of food, of doctors to adopt a new drug, and so on.<sup>8</sup> Elsewhere, studies have focused on the relevance of such variables as relative integration among peers or membership in one kind of group rather than another.<sup>9</sup> These studies are rapidly multiplying.

A second strategy is the study of small groups; indeed, a number of links have been forged between macroscopic research on the mass media and the microscopic study of interpersonal communication.<sup>10</sup>

But, while research on small groups can provide many clues to a better understanding of the role of interpersonal relations in the process of mass communications, it focuses almost exclusively on what goes on *within* a group. The third strategy of research, then, was to seek leads from research concerned with the introduction of change from *outside* a social system. Here the work of the rural sociologists is of major importance.<sup>11</sup> For the last two decades the latter have been inquiring into the effectiveness of campaigns to gain acceptance of new farm practices in rural communities while taking

<sup>8</sup> For a review of these studies see Elihu Katz, "The Two-Step Flow of Communication: An Up-to-Date Report on an Hypothesis," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, XXI, (1957), 61-78.

<sup>9</sup> For a recent systematic exposition of a number of these studies see John W. Riley, Jr., and Matilda W. Riley, "Mass Communication and the Social System," in Merton *et al.* (eds.), *op cit.*, pp. 537-78, and Joseph T. Klapper, "What We Know about the Effects of Mass Communication: The Brink of Hope," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, XXI (1957-58), 453-74.

<sup>10</sup> E.g., Carl I. Hovland, Irving L. Janis, and Harold H. Kelley, *Communication and Persuasion* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1953), chap. v, "Group Membership and Resistance to Influence," and John W. C. Johnstone and Elihu Katz, "Youth Culture and Popular Music," *American Journal of Sociology*, LXII (1957), 563-68. For a review of the implications of research on the small group for the design of research on mass communication see Katz and Lazarsfeld, *op. cit.*, Part I.

explicit account of the relevant channels of communication both outside and inside the community.<sup>12</sup> Yet, despite the obvious parallel between rural and urban campaigns, it was not until after the "discovery" of interpersonal relations that the student of mass communications had occasion to "discover" rural sociology.

#### INTERPERSONAL RELATIONS AND RURAL COMMUNICATION

If the assumption that interpersonal relations were irrelevant was central to the research worker on mass communications, the opposite was true of the student of rural campaigns. And the reasons are quite apparent: rural sociologists never assumed, as students of mass communications had, that their respondents did not talk to each other. How could one overlook the possible relevance of farmers' contacts with one another to their response to a new and recommended farm practice? The structure of interpersonal relations, it was assumed, was no less important for channeling the flow of influence than the farm journal or the county agent.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Relevant also is the anthropological study of underdeveloped areas where social structure may sometimes be taken into account along with culture in explaining the acceptance of change (e.g., Benjamin D. Paul [ed.], *Health, Culture and Community: Case Studies of Public Reactions to Health Programs* [New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1955]).

<sup>12</sup> For reviews of research in this field see Subcommittee on the Diffusion and Adoption of New Farm Practices of the Rural Sociological Society, *Sociological Research on the Diffusion and Adoption of New Farm Practices* (Lexington: Kentucky Agricultural Experiment Station, 1952), and Eugene A. Wilkening, "The Communication of Information on Innovations in Agriculture," in the forthcoming volume by Wilbur Schramm (ed.), *Communicating Behavioral Science Information* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press). A recent bibliography on *Social Factors in the Adoption of Farm Practices* was prepared by the North Central Rural Sociology Subcommittee on Diffusion (Ames: Iowa State College, 1959).

<sup>13</sup> Yet rural sociologists have justifiably berated their colleagues for not taking more *systematic* account of interpersonal structures (e.g., Herbert F. Lionberger, "The Diffusion of Farm and Home

Why did relationships among members of the audience figure so much more prominently in research on new farm practices than in research on marketing campaigns, campaigns to reduce prejudice, and the like? Consider the following explanations.

It is obvious, in the first place, that rural sociologists define their arena of research, at least in part, by contrast with the allegedly impersonal, atomized, anomic life of the city. If urban relationships are "secondary," rural life must be somewhere near the other end of the continuum. Hence primary, interpersonal relations—their location, their sizes and shapes, and their consequences—are of central concern.<sup>14</sup>

Second, research on mass communications, linked as it is to research on opinions and attitudes, is derived more directly from individual psychology than sociology. Students of rural change, on the other hand, have a sociological heritage and a continuing tradition of tracing the relations of cliques, the boundaries of neighborhoods, the web of kinship and the like.<sup>15</sup> Only recently has sociological theory begun to have a cumulative impact upon research on mass communications.

Rural sociologists, moreover, who study the adoption of new farm practices are, typically, in the employ of colleges of agriculture, which, in turn, are associated with state colleges and universities. The locale of operations is somewhat more circumscribed, as a result, than it is in the case of the student of urban mass media. The student of

the adoption of new farm practices is not interested in, say, a representative national sample. Sometimes, therefore, he will interview all the farmers in a given county or a very large proportion of them, and this makes it possible to collect data on the relations among individual respondents, which, obviously, is impossible in random cross-sectional sampling where respondents are selected as "far apart" from each other as possible. By the same token, the investigator of rural communication is more a part of the situation he is studying; it is more difficult for him to overlook interpersonal influence as a variable.

Finally, a fact, related in part to the previous one, is that the rural sociologist has been primarily interested in the efficacy of the local agricultural agency's program, and, while the local agent employs the mass media as well as personal visits, demonstrations, and other techniques, his influence is plainly disproportionately effective among the more educated and those enjoying prestige in the community and considerably less so among others. Research workers soon were able to suggest, however, that the county agent's effectiveness for a majority of the population may be indirect, for the people he influences may influence others. This idea of a "two-step" flow of communication also suggested itself as a promotional idea to magazines and other vehicles of mass communications, but it was not actually studied—perhaps because it was more difficult to define operationally—until rather recently.<sup>16</sup>

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Information as an Area of Sociological Research," *Rural Sociology*, XVII [1952], 132-44).

<sup>14</sup> See the propositions concerning the systems of social interaction in rural, as contrasted with urban, society in Pitirim Sorokin and Carle C. Zimmerman, *Principles of Rural-Urban Sociology* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1929), pp. 48-58.

<sup>15</sup> The work of Charles P. Loomis is outstanding in this connection; on his approach to the relationship between interpersonal structures and the introduction of change see Loomis and J. Allan Beegle, *Rural Sociology: The Strategy of Change* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1957). Sociometry has played an important role in this development.

#### SOME CONSEQUENCES OF CONVERGENCE

That research on mass communications and on the diffusion and acceptance of new farm practices have "discovered" each other is increasingly evident from the references and citations in recent papers in both

<sup>16</sup> For mention of the claims of communicators that members of their audiences are influential for others see one of the earliest pieces of research on opinion leaders: Frank A. Stewart, "A Sociometric Study of Influence in Southtown," *Sociometry*, X (1947), 11-31.

fields.<sup>17</sup> The realization of the shared interest in the problem of campaigns—or, more accurately now, in the shared problems of diffusion—has evidently overcome academic insulation. From the point of view of students of mass communications, it took a change in the image of the audience to reveal that the two traditions were studying almost exactly the same problem.

Now that the convergence has been accomplished, however, what consequences are likely to follow? First of all, the two will be very likely to affect each other's design of research. The problem of how to take account of interpersonal relations and still preserve the representativeness of a sample is paramount in studies of mass communications, while that of rural sociologists is how to generalize from studies of neighborhoods, communities, and counties. What is more, despite their persistent concern with interpersonal relations, students of rural diffusion have never mapped the spread of a particular innovation against the sociometric structure of an entire community; paradoxically, a recent study deriving from the tradition of research on mass communications has attempted it.<sup>18</sup> Clearly, both fields can contribute to the refinement of research design, and their contributions, moreover, would have implications not only for each other but for a growing number of substantive fields which are interested in tracing the spread of specific innovations through social structures. This includes the work of students of technical assistance programs, of health campaigns, of marketing behavior, of fads and fashions, and the like.

Second, the convergence has already revealed a list of parallel findings which strengthen theory in both. Several findings

<sup>17</sup> E.g., Everett M. Rogers and George M. Beal, "The Importance of Personal Influence in the Adoption of Technological Changes," *Social Forces*, XXXVI (1958), 329–35, and Herbert Menzel and Elihu Katz, "Social Relations and Innovation in the Medical Profession," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, XIX (1955–56), 337–53. More important, perhaps, is the "official" recognition of the relevance of research on mass communications in the 1959 bibliography of the North Central Rural Sociology Subcommittee, *op. cit.*

that seem most central are:

1. In both urban and rural settings personal influence appears to be more effective in gaining acceptance for change than are the mass media or other types of influence. A number of studies—but by no means all—have found that there is a tendency for adopters of an innovation to credit "other people" with having influenced their decisions.<sup>19</sup> What is of interest, however, is not the precise ranking of the various sources of influence but the undeniable fact that interpersonal communication plays a major role in social and technical change both in the city and on the farm.

<sup>18</sup> See James S. Coleman, Elihu Katz, and Herbert Menzel, "The Diffusion of an Innovation among Physicians," *Sociometry*, XX (1957), 253–70. See also the reports of "Project Revere," e.g., Stuart C. Dodd, "Formulas for Spreading Opinions," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, XXII (1958–59), 537–54, and Melvin L. DeFleur and Otto N. Larsen, *The Flow of Information* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1958). Extensive work on informal cliques as facilitators and barriers to interpersonal communication in rural communities has been reported by Herbert F. Lionberger and C. Milton Coughenor, *Social Structure and the Diffusion of Farm Information* (Columbia: University of Missouri Agricultural Experiment Station, 1957).

<sup>19</sup> Typically, the respondent is asked to recall the sources influencing him, arrange them chronologically, and then select the one which was "most influential." The shortcomings of this are obvious. There are many exceptions, but a sizable number of studies have reported that the influence of "other people" is more influential than other sources. See, e.g., Herbert F. Lionberger, *Information-seeking Habits and Characteristics of Farm Operators* (Missouri Agricultural Experiment Station Research Bull. 581 [Columbia, 1955]); E. A. Wilkening, *Adoption of Improved Farm Practices as Related to Family Factors* (Wisconsin Agricultural Experiment Station Research Bull. 183 [Madison, 1953]); Marvin A. Anderson, "Acceptance and Use of Fertilizer in Iowa," *CropLife*, II (1955); George Fisk, "Media Influence Reconsidered," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, XXIII (1959), 83–91; and Katz and Lazarsfeld, *op. cit.*, Part II. The more important question, however, is under what conditions certain sources of influence are more or less likely to be influential. Different innovations, different social structures, and different phases of the process of decision and of diffusion have been shown to be associated with variations in the role of the media. The latter two factors are treated below.

2. When decision-making is broken down into phases (e.g., becoming aware of an innovation, becoming interested in it, evaluating it, deciding to try it, etc), the mass media appear relatively more influential in the early informational phases, whereas personal influences are more effective in the later phases of deliberation and decision. The tendency in both traditions is no longer to look at the media as competitive but, rather, as complementary by virtue of their function in various phases of an individual's decision.<sup>20</sup>

3. The earliest to accept an innovation are more likely than those who accept later to have been influenced by agricultural agencies, mass media, and other formal and/or impersonal sources, whereas the latter are more likely to be influenced by personal sources (presumably, by the former).<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, the personal sources to which early adopters respond are likely to be outside their own communities, or at a greater distance, than are the personal sources in-

<sup>20</sup> Cf. James S. Coleman, Elihu Katz, and Herbert Menzel, *Doctors and New Drugs* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1960), with such recent rural studies as Rogers and Beal, *op. cit.*; James H. Copp, Maurice L. Sill, and Emory J. Brown, "The Function of Information Sources in the Farm Practice Adoption Process," *Rural Sociology*, XXIII (1958), 146-57; and Eugene A. Wilkening, "Roles of Communicating Agents in Technological Change in Agriculture," *Social Forces*, XXXIV (1956), 361-67. Earlier formulations tended to *infer* the psychological stages of decision-making from the typical sequence of the media reported by respondents, but more recent formulations define the phases of decisions and the media employed in each phase independently. The studies cited above representing the most advanced approach to this problem are also considering the consequences of the use of media "appropriate" or "inappropriate" to a given stage of decision.

<sup>21</sup> This, of course, is the "two-step" flow of communication, a conception which finds support in the studies reviewed by Katz, *op. cit.*; Rogers and Beal, *op. cit.*; Lionberger, *op. cit.*; and F. E. Emery and O. A. Oeser, *Information, Decision and Action: Psychological Determinants of Changes in Farming Techniques* (Melbourne, Australia: University of Melbourne Press, 1958).

fluencing later adopters.<sup>22</sup> The orientation of early adopters—"cosmopolitan," "secular," "urbanized," "scientific" (to choose from among the terms that have been employed)—also reveals an openness to the rational evaluation of a proposed change and a willingness for contact with the world outside their communities.<sup>23</sup> Many of the studies support the notion of a "two-step" flow of communication in which innovators are influenced from outside and in which they, in turn, influence others with whom they have personal contact.

This is not to claim that there are no differences between communication in urban and rural society or that the direction of the difference between the two kinds of communities may not be essentially as originally perceived by social theorists. Nor is it claimed that all research findings are mutually compatible. Instead, the purpose of this paper is to call attention to the image of society implicit in two fields of research on communication, pointing to the influence of such images on the design of research and on "interdisciplinary" contacts, and to call attention to a few remarkably similar findings in these heretofore unrelated fields, suggesting that the study of communication will surely profit from their increasing interchange.

UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Coleman, Katz, and Menzel, *op. cit.*, with E. A. Wilkening, *Acceptance of Improved Farm Practices in Three Coastal Plain Counties* (North Carolina Agricultural Experiment Station Technical Bull. 98 [Chapel Hill, 1952]), and James Copp, *Personal and Social Factors Associated with the Adoption of Recommended Farm Practices* (Kansas State College, Agricultural Experiment Station Research Bull. [Manhattan, 1956]).

<sup>23</sup> See Bryce Ryan and Neal Gross, *Acceptance and Diffusion of Hybrid Seed Corn in Two Iowa Communities* (Iowa State College, Agricultural Experiment Station Bull. 372 [Ames, 1950]), and Emery and Oeser, *op. cit.* The latter, however, suggest that, under certain conditions, personal contact may be more important for early adopters even though they, in turn, are primary sources of influence for those who follow their lead.