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Of Mutual Interest

by Elihu Katz

*In which the author of the report
to the BBC reflects on the issues
raised by contributors to this colloquy.*

I will be forgiven, I hope, if I see the brighter side of things. “The BBC is already writing and talking in terms of the Katz concepts” writes Halloran. Carey comments on the persuasive impact of my proposals on the “oversupply of researchers chasing an undersupply of researchable notions.” That can’t all be bad.

Admittedly, I think the BBC’s groping toward an organizational framework appropriate to the implementation of the report would have been enriched by earlier discussions with British researchers, and I said so. But the time is still ripe. I also think—and said—that I hoped that my selection of proposals would invoke additional proposals, counterproposals and argument. They have.

Four issues stand out. First, I am criticized for forfeiting the researcher’s duty to formulate his own questions. The policy concerns of broadcasters, it is alleged, narrowed the scope of my thinking and there is danger that my proposals will likewise contaminate those who may wish to implement them. Policy research is here contrasted with what is called, very loosely, critical research. In reply, I shall try to argue that critical research is itself a kind of policy research.

A second, and related, issue has to do with the professionalism of broadcasting. I am criticised for naively assuming that an ethic of public service is implicit in the concept of professionalism or that the concept, so defined, applies at all to broadcasting, even public broadcasting. Professionalism, we are told, is a peer-oriented ethic, grounded in self-defense, and the public is very poorly served by it. Social science would do better to concentrate on exposing the workings of the professions rather than viewing them, anachronistically, as sharing some of its own commitments.

The question of theory in communications research is the third big issue. The Katz Report is theoretically eclectic, says one critic, and another says it is hopelessly atheoretical. Without a unifying theory, the various proposals are so many fragments which will not fit together, and which can only please those dark powers who prefer to keep things that way.

Finally, there is the question of the organizational framework in which these-or other—proposals might be carried out. What should be the broadcasters’ involvement in this framework? Can—or should—broadcasters and researchers try to work together, and if so, in what ways?

*The argument against policy research is
that true social scientists ought not
to let interested parties set their agendas.*

“Were Katz successful,” says Carey, “it would rob society of the one useful role scholars can perform: the statement of problems, issues and solutions in terms that are outside and opposed to the established centers of power and authority.” Halloran, in his best bedside manner, says that “some people see Katz as castrating critical research.” In a letter to me about the report, Hilde Himmelweit says, more generously, that both “its values and limitations stem from the fact that you were asked to look at the questions that broadcasters pose.

It is easy enough to agree that the report is selective: its proposals simply are projects which I think are of mutual interest, given the state of the art and the needs of policy. It is also easy to persuade most people that the BBC’s public expression of interest is worth having both for its own sake and for the discussions it triggered in broadcasting organizations around the world. But must we agree with these critics that the price of it all is the exclusion of the most interesting people and problems in the field? The answer is no.

Carey says that had I been truly free I would have permitted myself to ask, at least in fantasy, whether TV ought to be abolished or “cut back.” Halloran feels that I could not ask how communications structures might be re-tailored “to maximize the satisfaction of social needs in a pluralist society.” Both men are certain that I had to take the media as given, together with the institutional contexts in which they are embedded.

I firmly believe that had I wished to propose studies to consider the proposition that television be abolished, I could have done so. In fact, I did, if Carey means—as perhaps he does—that it is important to study whether television may be doing harm to the disciplined patterns of thought and speech or to the uses of leisure, which are basic to the functioning of democratic society. Curiously, the report will show that BBC people put such questions to me!

Similarly, for the relationship between broadcasting and other institutions, consider Proposal 1f, “The Interaction of Media and other Institutions,” “The Latent Structure of News and Public Affairs Programmes” (Proposal 4b), and “The Broadcasting of Conflict” (Proposal 4c).

Restructuring media to serve social needs? See Proposal 6d, “The Dilemma of Organizing Broadcasting to Serve Differentiation” and “The Comprehension of Broadcasting Information” (Proposal 4a). Indeed, if I now were choosing a label to describe the report, I would incline toward Halloran’s “to maximize the satisfaction of social needs in a pluralist society.”

Of course, these proposals and the problems to which they are addressed can be formulated in different ways. Mine are “safe” formulations, says Halloran, in another of his contraceptive metaphors. Perhaps they are safe, but I must insist on the recognition that they are not hiding or missing.

By the same token, the report does not contain proposals to study problems which I regard as conceptually uninteresting, despite their administrative relevance. Thus, I do not

propose the further study of the effects of televised violence, or the relative popularity of male vs. female news presenters.

Admittedly, there is a kind of critical research which is so far removed from “the established centres of power and authority” that it is absent here. A classic example would be the Frankfurt School’s insistence that mass communication and mechanical reproduction have transformed the arts into products, and connoisseurship into consumption. But most critical research is of a “middle range” which betrays an interest in affecting policy and, as such, definitely belongs on my research agenda. Thus, the academic search for a latent theory of the news—though it aims at the very heart of the Liberal theory of the press—belongs here, as does research on the hypothesis that certain groups are unwittingly victimized in television entertainment. So do analyses of the latent message of the news : legitimation, reassurance, parliamentarism, mystification, status conferral, racialism, and the like. Research findings from studies of this kind are negotiable, I think, within extant broadcasting institutions. In Britain, at least, I would venture that the broadcasting organization is the right place to begin, even if such things have not always ended well.

Critical research, by definition, is engaged; it is not to be confused with basic research.

It is applied as administrative research even when differing in its conception of who is to be served and what must be changed. Rightly, it regards the object needing change as an unlikely sponsor. And yet, government ministries and public service organizations in a democracy may sponsor research “unwillingly” because they are constrained to do so under the rules of accountability. Ministries of Education which have opted for programs of racial and ethnic integration are not always eager to have hard facts about whether the policy is succeeding, just as broadcasting organizations may not be eager to learn that “reality” is a social construction or that treatment of a certain issue may be biased. But, sometimes they “have” to want to know. And sometimes, as I found, they may even “want” to want to know. The report explains why.

I am arguing, then, that critical research is a form of policy research. Carey may be right that, in the crunch, the more critical projects will be less likely to find support. But if support is sought and obtained, it need not be carried out at the BBC television center under the supervision of a member of middle management. Not at all! I tried to classify types of research in terms of their needed proximity” to the production process and duly announced that “critical research”—in the language of the report—should be “far” from the organization rather than “near.”

I am also arguing that policy research is interesting and contains, I think, some of the sorts of puzzles which might attract Carey. For example, if the audience is non-selective in its viewing behavior, why does a gratifications model fit so much of the attitudinal data? Or, if a majority of the audience is exposed daily to information on political issues, why is so little retained or understood? Why do politicians and advertisers act as if the media were more effective than they are? How does one explain the apparent appetite for repetition, not only of fairy tales? The answers to each of these have immediate policy implications, not alone for the broadcaster but “to maximize the satisfaction of social needs.”

Nevertheless, I would not want to persuade anyone that research is best done “inside.” Nor would I disagree, in principle, that there is often a struggle over research agendas in policy research, and that the researcher may often lose, knowingly or not. Nor would I want to do policy research for an organization of whose goals I disapproved. But more of this under the heading of “professionalism”.

Tuchman rightly notes that I have attempted to apply to public broadcasting that aspect of the model of professionalism which asserts that the client is its prime beneficiary.

She berates me for being out of touch with the sociology of the professions where peers have long since replaced clients as the reference group to be satisfied, and where peer judgments have tended to supply only consensual validation rather than effective mutual criticism. Far from serving the public, she argues, the public is deprived of the service it requires.

What is true of medicine, she proposes, is true of journalism: professional practice is designed to establish the legitimacy of the profession by brandishing the elementary methodology of objectivity and impartiality. The result is that no one is held accountable for social problems, and that the pros and cons of any story are presented from well within the establishment. The overall effect, she argues, is to reify the status quo.

In his recent book on the BBC, Tom Burns takes a related stance. He considers professionalism a retreat from public service into a private world. Professionalism is peer-oriented and autistic; it has little interest in the audience. Halloran, too, calls for liberation from the monopoly of professional broadcasters.

These authors fail to distinguish, I feel, between institutional goals and practices. The norms of professionalism speak of public service. To the extent that journalism is striving toward professionalization, the notion of orientation toward clients becomes more salient, whether in the gatekeeper stance or the advocacy stance. The problem in journalism as in medicine is that there are also institutionalized departures from the norms. But the norms are there, and they make a difference. Indeed, they are what make it possible, in my opinion, for social scientists and (public) broadcasters to share so many concerns.

In my interviews at the BBC, I repeatedly heard affirmations of the norm of public service, not just at the managerial level, but at the producer level as well. If the norms are there, the aim of research is to point out the disparity between doctrine and practice and to reason why. Only if the norms have changed, or were never there, would Tuchman be right in asserting that the aim of research on news-making should not be to help strengthen journalism as a profession but rather to debunk it.

I am criticized for naively believing broadcasters’ pronouncements about public service, accountability, and interest in research. I agree that this ostensible change of heart remains to be tested. But it is quite different, I repeat, if one is dealing with an organization which is committed to public service—even if it wanders away from its commitment. It is just as Halloran says: the goals which society invests in an institution, the institution’s own formulation of its goals, and the actual behavior of the members may all be quite different. But it is a lot more scientific, as a start, to study the constraints which cause individuals or

groups to depart from their own norms than to brand them as lackeys touting the legitimacy of the capitalist industrial order.

As a matter of fact, Tuchman and her colleagues have gone some distance in showing how the rules of procedure in the gathering and editing of TV news may contribute to an affirmation of the status quo and lull the “consciousness” of the viewer. But it is no less interesting that these procedures are probably unwitting. The methods of programming reality by means of the reporting of discrete events culled from a limited number of established beats and presented with the voice of authority and the picture of authenticity all conspire to mystify, say Tuchman and others.

*The production and consumption of news are
one of the central foci of my report.*

I insist on the confrontation of the latent-message analysis with the question of what gets through to the viewer. Even if the message that all is very well is being sent and received, it does not mean that broadcast journalism is part of a conspiracy. Indeed, to the extent that journalism is a profession—in my sense it will be occupied with what is getting through to the audience. And the appropriateness of the alliance with academic research will become more apparent as the theories underlying the gathering and production of news become better established. But not every latent function—not even the latent function of legitimation—is automatically evil or a betrayal of the public trust. Thus, if journalists’ treatment of Watergate revealed that the system of checks and balances—Congress, the courts, and the press—was in working order, despite the high crime, what is inaccurate about that? Making this latent function manifest does not yet prove that the media are “serving as the cultural arms of the industrial order.”

Social science has good reason to support journalism. Ultimately, it is the set of academic disciplines in which journalism ought to be grounded. The problem of how to observe society, and from what vantage points, is no less that of social science than of journalism. The anguish over the concept of objectivity is as great—even if it takes a different form—in social science as in journalism. Nor is social science exempt from some of the very charges-paradigmatic perceptions, latent ideological functions—that have been levelled against journalism. Let us look to our own problems as well, while studying other people’s.

There is yet another—and more important—reason to support the professionalization of journalism and broadcasting through alliance with social science research. However much the governors and controllers of broadcasting organizations can protect their producers and editors against external pressures, the ultimate source of countervailing power must come from the organization of journalism as a profession and the internalization of professional ethics by its members. It is therefore in the common interest to strengthen the profession in its classical sense and to bolster the primacy of society as the client. I cannot foresee the day in which broadcasting will be removed from the hands of professionals and redistributed among the people. I cannot foresee the displacement of the broadcast media by the telephone and conversation, although I fear the displacement of the latter by the former. Access will be

mediated by professionals, as far as I can see, and community television will probably not be much more popular than home movies.

*As to the question of theory, the
object of my report was obviously not to
propose a grand theory of communications to the BBC.*

If I knew one to which I could subscribe, I might have found a way to use it. I do not have such a theory. Neither has Halloran, I dare say. Many of the proposals are informed by theoretical perspectives, however, albeit of several different kinds, as Carey notes. Halloran finds no trace of theory.

I made no effort to label the theoretical orientations which guide the report. Considering the audience to whom the report was addressed, there would have been little point in writing in the multi-disciplinary argot of the trade. I think it is obvious, nevertheless, that a functional perspective pervades the report. Its starting point, as noted earlier, is with the social and psychological needs of audiences, not with the needs of broadcasters. It accepts parliamentary democracy, social stratification, sex and age differentiation, etc., as both given and problematic, and asks about the ways in which broadcasting is affected by, and influential for, the needs arising from these social arrangements. It pays particular attention to the role of the media in promoting participation in the role of citizen, and the barriers of access to this role. It contrasts the conventional and emergent bases of identity in modern society, and proposes inquiry into the relative importance of these identities and the extent to which the media support them.

Two of the areas may be said to be more media-centered—one sociological, the other psychological. Thus, one set of problems considers the management of creativity and seeks to explore the conditions under which broadcasting—or, indeed, other creative organizations—can maximize creative potential. The other deals with the experience itself—the aesthetics of listening and viewing.

Although no grand theory underlies the proposals—and Carey is right that such a theory would help hold the pieces together—there is implicit an “accounting scheme” which calls for study of (1) external constraints on what the media say; (2) the process of production and the values implicit therein; (3) the manifest and latent messages as encoded; (4) audience behavior in decoding, absorbing, and applying these messages; and (5) the process of feedback to other institutions.

If Halloran finds this familiar, it is because there is broad agreement on this research agenda, not only in Britain and in Europe (which, alas, is seriously under-represented in my report) but even in America. Perhaps the bulk of American research is as unchanged as Halloran asserts, but that surely excludes the present contributors and all of those with whom I talked. For some ten years now, the frontiers of communications research everywhere have focused on patterns of ownership and control; media transformations of reality; journalists’ routines and values; media agendas and public agendas; gaps of knowledge and understanding, and their implications for identity and consciousness; latent messages about the legitimacy of the social order and the rules of decorum; witting and unwitting bias in

matters of race, sex, political minorities, trade unions; cognitive processing of the media; and so on.

*The search for powerful effects
implicit here is still on.*

In the report, I suggest that the anxiety over this quest is an important component of theory-making in communications. If effects are as limited as they seem, why go on? One answer is that the study of mass communications is interesting and important as a sociology and aesthetics of popular art. Humanists and linguists of many ilks have joined the quest. Another answer is evident in the examination of new types of effects, and thus, implicitly, that the powerful effects of the media have yet to be uncovered. Hence agenda setting, knowledge gap, legitimation, false consciousness, mild arousal, spiral of silence, and others. The difference between these functions and effects and those of 30 years ago is that theory has taken the lead over method, and that some progress has been made in devising methods appropriate to the study of these concepts.

But, parenthetically, it is a mistake to disparage the value of the negative findings of the forties and fifties.

There may be the germs of a grand theory in all of this which may win over skeptics like Herbert Gans and myself to a new sociology of mass communications, or, if Carey is right, to a historically-situated theory. The theory draws liberally on Marxism, functionalism, mass society theory, and organization theory. It appears to argue that (1) the message of the media is highly homogeneous, because of (2) the interlocking directorates which control them, and/or because of (3) the professional huddling together of communicators, which produces (4) an agreed-on view of reality, legitimating an elite and a system of stratification (5) before the eyes of the ubiquitous audience, (6) looking to the media as the monolithic reference group. Note the disappearance of the primary group and other membership and reference groups, i.e., all the institutions which were thought to mediate between the individual and the media; the qualitative difference assigned to television as compared with other media; and the consolidation of communicators through ownership and professionalization. This is a theory of mass society, not just of powerful media.

To reiterate: while the report does not pretend to derive from grand theory, it does attempt to call attention to theoretical developments, past and present. Indeed, some of its proposals permit testing of propositions associated with different—often opposing—viewpoints,

Clearly, the need for theory development continues to be acute, and there is no reason at all to be complacent about the development noted above. It has a long way to go to prove itself, and it would be well to encourage competing formulations. Is this the theory that has come to substitute for the classical conception of the relationship between government and public opinion, where government initiates, the press diffuses, the cafes and salons buzz with conversation, opinion is formed and segmented, and fed back to government? Probably not. In any case, it is clear that we have only the vaguest idea about the connection between mass communication and democratic participation. It is also clear that to do this—and other

things—the net must be widened to include representatives of disciplines not much concerned, these days, with communications research.

The BBC wished to set up a Trust (foundation) financed by broadcasters and others to promote initiative in this area.

The Trust would act as matchmaker and chaperone to broadcasters and researchers, respecting the need of critical research for independence and smoothing the way for evaluative, formative, etc., research. The Trust would also seek to make possible access to broadcasting organizations, to tape recordings, etc.

Halloran rightly emphasizes that the security and independence of broadcasting research cannot be vested exclusively in *ad hoc* funding, certainly not the kind over which broadcasters have direct or indirect control. One false or unpopular move, and an entire research organization may become *non grata*. He insists—as do I, in the report—that the first requisite of communications research in Britain is in the sustained endowment of university research centers and groups. For this reason it is also important—as Hilde Himmelweit emphasizes—that a Broadcasting Research Trust, if established, not draw off money from foundations already supporting such research, nor presume to act as go between in the relations of researchers and foundations.

I also argue strongly for the strengthening and re-orientation of audience research within the broadcasting organizations themselves. Most of the energies of audience research go into ratings and it often distracts attention from the other research projects. The BBC, for example, has a major resource in its Daily Survey of Listening and Viewing which it should itself exploit for secondary analysis of audience behavior and for other survey research. Its status within the organization as gatekeepers of the ratings and as colleagues make for innumerable opportunities for cooperative research with producers and managers.

Thus, my proposals are not monolithic. First of all, I see four different kinds of support: endowed centers strong enough to carry on even when project support is absent; foundation supported projects; Broadcasting Trust projects; and audience research departments. Secondly, even within the Trust, I urge the orchestration of different kinds of broadcaster-researcher relations.

Thus, on a “distance” scale, formative research—such as “Sesame Street”— must be an integral part of the production process; evaluative research needs to be ‘near’; critical research needs distance.

It is ironic, in the light of this discussion, that I see “nearness”—that is, active collaboration with broadcasters—as less likely of fruition than critical research at a distance. The report strongly advocates experimentation with closer alliances between broadcasters and researchers, on the assumption that the shared values of public broadcasting and social science may find creative and public-serving expression in collaborative effort. But those are the things we have been arguing about.