

Western-Type Communications Research in the Third World — A Critical Appraisal

John A Lent

RESPONDING to the complaint that a great deal of the communications research in the Third World is Western-biased, this article, using sources and examples from many parts of the world, looks at the past, present and future of social science research as applied to mass communications. Among complaints have been that the research grew up promoting business-industrial and military-psychological warfare aims (mainly of entities in the United States), and pushing for the status quo and homogenization of cultures. Much of the research was ethnocentric, myopic, culture- and timebound. To avoid some of these problems, cross-cultural and cross-national research should seek to determine equivalence levels (functional, conceptual, linguistic and metric); relevance and worth of the research, especially to the country being studied; and degree and type of methodology.

Introduction

An argument heard frequently is that mass communications research (and social science research more generally) has been narrow in its conceptualization and orientation, expounding the values and ideas of a few Western nations where it was conceived, to the exclusion of the achievements of Socialist and Third World researchers (Pomorski, 1978:5). In fact, to a number of writers, Western-oriented research really means United States-orientated, which according to Halloran (1980:11) is theoretically,



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conceptually, methodologically and socially inadequate.

Halloran, claiming that "it is difficult to detect, in what is a vast body of work, any conscious underlying philosophy or purpose, or still less an overriding social or political concern", called for more use of European-type critical research

Professor John A. Lent has written extensively on mass communications in the Third World — 27 books and monographs and over 200 articles. He was a Fulbright Scholar in the Philippines, the first coordinator of the pioneer mass communications programme in Malaysia, a student in Japan, Norway, India and Mexico and a researcher in numerous countries of Asia and the Caribbean.

(1980:4). Also called policy research, the latter type of investigation stems from a wide range of positions. It reflects different values and is less likely than conventional research to be encumbered by historical and institutional relationships with journalism and broadcasting. It is not as closely linked to markets, audiences and publics, thus being less likely to have a service, administrative or commercial character. Halloran argued that this alternative type of research looks at social issues of the time; deals with communication as a social process; studies media institutions not in isolation but together with other institutions, and conceptualizes research in terms of structure, organization, professionalization, socialization and participation.

What Has Been Done?

The genesis of what has been characterized as United States-orientated research has been traced to World War II efforts on the part of the United States to counter propaganda (Beltran, 1976). Beltran observed that the type of society that hosted these discoveries was not burdened by poverty, unhappiness, or afflicted by social conflict and instability. He and others pointed out that because communicators paid for the research in the United States, they themselves did not come in for much study.

Discussing development theory that was applied to the Third World, Kent revealed that the two most prevalent theories — Lerner's empathy and the diffusion of innovations — were started in the 1950s with huge amounts of government funding, guaranteeing their widespread use throughout the world and conferring a "status on the ideas not attained by other theoretical frameworks." (1980:38-42). In turn, the theories gave power to the United States AID and other government agencies, which saw the theories in East-West terms. Kent charged that another power factor involved in the use of these theories was the "consonance of interests between government funding agencies and United States private business, industrial and financial sectors" (1980:41). He criticized these private interests who wanted to bring about stable overseas regimes which were eager to do business with the United States.

Schiller concluded that U.S.-based research "mirrored the early needs, changing strength and the enlarged scale of operations of the American business system as it has pushed out of its continental limits into international markets and global participation" (1974:11). Schiller traces the development of mass communications research to the post World War II era when it was used to promote United States consumerism abroad and at home, and to make the "foreign policies of the United States, or for that matter, any nation utilizing such techniques, ... admired (or at least) accepted and tolerated" (1974:12, 16). Halloran (1980) concurred, arguing that, mass communications research was used to improve media to serve commercial aims. The result was that few questions were broached about power, control and organization.

Early mass communications research resulted from an effort to use the mass media and mass communications research to promote the *status quo* and homogenization of cultures. Because of these historical roots, the information known about mass communications is partial and unbalanced, with more being known about some parts of the world than others, about some topics than others (Halloran, 1980).

Other social scientists have agreed that what gets studied and where, often flows from the "spirit of the times" and where the funding agencies are willing to place their money. Lonner (1979a) reported that in cross cultural psychology, the countries receiving the most attention are the United States, India, Japan, Israel, Canada and Australia. Sechrest, believing that sometimes there is no rationale for what gets studied, said that in many instances, the "cultures studied were 'targets of opportunity,' with problems and procedures being chosen to fit, more or less, the travel plans of the investigator or the happenstance of availability of some particular respondent group" (1977:75-76). The same can be said of mass communications research. When funding was not forthcoming, some of the mass communications research done abroad resulted from short vacations or study tours of United States professors, some of whom produced one-shot pieces of research unconnected to a body of theory or to cultural factors.

How Has It Been Done?

The answer to the question, concerning how past research has been done, is that the research exported to the Third World has been bad research (Halloran, 1980:1-2). It has been culture-bound or ethnocentric, just as much of the mass communications (and social science for that matter) research in the United States has been. Lowry (1978), who studied seven key mass communications journals in the United States for 1970-76, found the research was myopic (too much emphasis on exclusively United States studies and citing exclusively United States literature) and suffered from tunnel vision.* He found that 88 percent of the studies were carried out in the United States alone, 9 percent in one other country and 2 percent jointly in the United States and one or more other countries. Seventy four percent cited only United States literature, and citations that were foreign were in English published in Great Britain. Brown and Gilmartin (1969) found similar trends in their analysis of two main sociology journals. Topics such as social change were studied least. Also, parochialism in the literature cited, and overuse of some and underuse of other research methods, were questioned. They found that in 85 percent of the studies, only one time period was studied — the present. They concluded that the purpose of research is shifting from exploration and fact-finding to the testing of hypotheses in what they termed culture-bound and time-bound sociological research.

Other social science and mass communications scholars have labelled the research as being culture-bound. Drake (1973), indicating that techniques of survey research are Western culture-bound, did not think the answer lay in minor tinkering to see if techniques are to be useful in structurally-different societies. Instead, he believed a major examination and overhaul of techniques is necessary. Inayatullah (1976), van den Berghe (1973) and Cook (1978) agreed that the research must be purged of its ethnocentrism.

A clear categorization of the problems facing researchers, especially comparativists, using Western models in other cultures was given by Lonner (1979a). He said the researcher must determine whether to use an etic (universally-

recognized) or emic (totally-unique) construct or concept.

In another paper, Lonner (1979b) cautioned that the use of generalized models may not be appropriate for time periods or societies "which do not share the same functional characteristics that existed when the theoretical model was first formulated". Davidson (1977) added the further rider that it is not defensible to assume that emic measures developed in the West are etc.

Determining equivalence

In an effort to minimize the above problems, Lonner (1979a) argued that levels of equivalence (functional, conceptual, linguistic and metric) must be established in cross-cultural research. Lonner observed that different cultures have different mores. As an example he cited how a belch in one society can be a compliment, in another, an insult. Conceptual equivalence, according to Lonner, focuses on the presence or absence of meanings that individuals attach to certain stimuli, such as test items, certain words or the nature of the contrived social psychological experiment. Pedersen (1979:83), calling this "differences in psychology," claimed that in Western psychology, rational, intellectual, logical method is used, while in non-West societies, a more subjective access to knowledge prevails. In non-Western societies, he said, access to knowledge is by close communion between the knower and known or through intuition. Thus, he added and Cook (1978) concurred, it is difficult to do research in terms of Western models in those societies, because the concepts of self, group affiliation or maturity are not adequately accounted for in terms of conventional scientific methods.

Lonner's third category, linguistic (translation), has received the most attention of the four tests. Fisher spent considerable time on this problem, stating: "Linguistic distinctions in meanings of words, in syntactical contexts, and in the requirements of languages add to translation distortion" (1973:59). Problems are also

*Too much emphasis on cross-sectional designs, the individual as the level of analysis, sample surveys and judgment tasks, 'soft' subjective types of behavior, self-administered paper and pencil behavior and single, rather than multiple, measures of behavior.

caused by variations in phonology, pronunciation, semiotics, kinesics and proxemics. Awa (1978), noting translation problems in cross-cultural research, wrote that, "language may place emphasis on some things because they are commonly found in a culture and ignore others because they do not fall into a category which corresponds to that culture's everyday experience. Thus, Americans have many words for automobiles and the Laplander names many varieties of snow (see Brown, 1958). Esayas (1976), believing language is the paramount problem of mass communications research in Africa, gave the example of the Ibo who has four inflections for the word *akwa*, which gives it the meanings of bed, egg, cry and cloth. Gunaratne (1975) discussed problems of language in Sri Lanka, stating that the differences between written and spoken Sinhalese make the task difficult. He suggested that "wording and content of questions should be such that they would not offend the educated by being too obvious and simple, while at the same time not being too hard on the illiterate." Drake (1973) and Hoffman (1963) agreed that language is an hindrance to good research in some cultures, Hoffman indicating resignation rather than optimism concerning the problem.

Of his fourth test of equivalence — metric, Lonner said scales used to test people must be functionally equivalent. For example, Cook (1978) had difficulty scoring in his Papua, New Guinea work because Melanesian pidgin tends to equate "hand" with "arm," "wood" with "tree," and "fire" with "firewood." Because the people tend to use generic terms. Cook found it was hard to determine if the subjects really saw the stimulus. He said a person could have a perfect recognition score by calling a fire "firewood," a cow a "pig" and a tree a "leaf."

Determining relevance and worth

As suggested, a great deal of United States mass communications research in the Third World has been "safari research," to use Szecsko's (1973) term, the research being tacked onto someone's Fulbright or vacation trip (Sechrest, 1977). Lonner (1979a: 34) called it airport research that pushes guildish knowledge, "either too obtruse, too controversial or irrelevant." He said the researcher should ask,

"is any person or group I've studied going to benefit anywhere near as much as I?" Jahoda (in Lonner, 1979a) did not believe the researcher should be made to squirm guiltily, because maybe there is not much he can do in a world of problems. Still other discussed the worthiness and relevance of research. Lowrey (1978) wrote that so much of mass communications research does not contribute to basic theory nor is it helpful in solving practical problems, and Tafoya (1980:65) showed that there is a "negative view of members of various cultures who may regard researchers as exploiting cultures for their own professional, if not financial, gain while producing few results of benefit to the culture studied." Along the same lines, Berrien (1972:332) wrote, "On the ethical side, there can be no justification for returning home with a locked box of data 'mined' from a distant culture without permitting indigenous people to share in the information drawn figuratively from beneath their noses." Others such as Drenth (1979), Lonner (1979a), Tapp (1974), Pelto and Pelto (1978), and Hamnett (1980) took similar positions, saying research done by outsiders to mine cultures for data is intellectual colonialism, that relevant social information should be fed back to the population studied, and that the question must be asked, whose society will benefit from the research? Pelto and Pelto (1978:250) offered solutions such as choosing research orientations that produce socially-useful information, developing modes of communication that make results understandable and involving the people in the research process.

Because some of the research is not relevant or of much use to the peoples of some countries, plus because of political and other sensitivities, Third World governments have become involved, making it difficult for foreigners to get research visas and sometimes hindering indigenous researchers. Papua New Guinea insists that research be of local benefit, and countries such as Malaysia require that research be shared with local scholars and the government. Some Western writers are critical, saying these pressures result from local scholars who resent the greater resources of foreign scholars (Hamnett, 1980).

Determining degree and type of methodology.

A key controversy seems to revolve around how systematic Third World research has to be. Pelto and Pelto, discussing this issue, said social scientists lately have been criticized because their "abstract theoretical concerns and preoccupation with methodological niceties have diverted (them) from the 'goal of helping society move toward humanity and justice' " (1978:230-231). But, they argued, the freedom of the researcher to inquire into what excites his interest or curiosity must be preserved, saying that events in physical sciences have shown that seemingly inconsequential discoveries are often essential ingredients of later technical development of the utmost relevance. Sechrest (1978), Cook (1978) and Tafoya (1980) were critical of methodologists for their inflexibility. Pausewang concurred, stating that objective science frequently overlooks the key aspects of the quality of indicators. "Its methodology is concerned with *how exact* something can be counted, rather than with *what* is counted," he said. One of his suggestions was that "It is better the researcher allows the society he investigates to force on him another methodological procedure than he had intended to use, instead of forcing his method upon the society" (1973:173). Gudykunst (1980) and Lassey (1968) suggested more research on the appropriateness of methodology used in various cultures.

From his experiences in Africa, Cohen (1973) generalized that qualitative research stems from the humanities and a wish to understand the total human condition as it is experienced in a particular setting. He added that quantitative research stems from the humanities and a wish to understand the total human condition as it is experienced in a particular setting. He added that quantification barely scratches the surface of such a broadly-focussed inquiry, recommending that if one chooses to do a quantitative study, he must adopt some definitions of what he is studying that will apply in an African context, and must create measures that take into account systematic biases and errors resulting from difficulties in the concept, and its application to a particular culture. Discussing Southeast Asian mass communications research, Feliciano

(1976) said that qualitative measures of media growth may be more valid or appropriate than the numerical yardsticks. Pausewang (1973) concluded that under specific social conditions persisting in the Third World, a survey using standard questionnaires will always be less reliable, more expensive and more difficult, more complex, often less valid, less relevant and bound to produce dangerous side effects than a survey in an industrialized society. Isomah (1973) argued that the utility of quantitative analysis depends upon the reliability, validity and general appropriateness of inputs, and that problems of quantitative research in Africa are cumulative, with distortion at one level magnifying problems at subsequent levels. Van den Berghe (1973) said that the cardinal principle of research should be that methodology is ancillary, that the research problem and setting determine the methodology, while Halloran (1980:16) said optimistically (at the same time adding a warning) that:

The issues deemed worthy of investigation have tended to be those which could be measured by available techniques. It is encouraging to see the newer approaches to mass communication research favouring a more flexible, imaginative, insightful, adventurous, less hidebound approach to the study of media influence than we have had in the past. But to support this change is not to support sloppy, impressionistic, unsystematic options that have appeared in recent years.

Sampling problems

Obviously, there are no easy textbook answers to sampling some cultures. Eapen (1979), in discussing the problem, raised interesting questions based on research in India: Does a 12-year-old mother come under the "teenager" category? What is household? (He pointed out villages are not amenable to simple stratification.) How does one sample audiences that are "floating"? Others have said sampling is difficult in many countries because of incomplete, outdated census data, transportation difficulties and inaccurate maps (Chu, 1964; Grenfell, 1974), because houses do not have numbers and are not lined up on streets (Pausewang, 1973), because of suspicion on the part of respondents who cannot understand why someone comes great distances to ask

questions (Pausewang, 1973; Gunaratne, 1975). In his work in Papua New Guinea, Cook (1978) explained that random sampling would have been offensive to local cultures; for example, women would not participate unless the interviewer was a woman. Cook also thought group solidarity is so prevalent among traditional peoples that it is not necessary to randomize subject selection; they all say the same thing, he claimed, Esayas (1976) and Drake (1973) said that most African countries are not amenable to sophisticated sampling procedures, and Gunaratne (1975), from his research in Sri Lanka, said locating respondents is difficult when house numbers are changed from one election to the next, when several people bear the same name, when men and women work in the fields all day and are not available and when people are too shy or modest to answer.

Research technique problems

Numerous researchers have delineated pitfalls of using certain research techniques developed outside the Third World. Coming in for criticism most often are questionnaires and interviews, whose frequency in such criticism may relate to their wider use throughout the Third World, because more researchers are trained to do survey research.

Among problems in the use of questionnaires and interviews is the courtesy bias. Difficulties result when respondents are preoccupied with trying to please others and with not saying anything that might offend a conversation partner (Guthrie, 1979; Cook, 1978; Jones, 1963 and Wuelker, 1963). The lack of anonymity of respondents is a problem in Africa (Cohen, 1973), and Wilson (1958) found that researchers do get access to interviewees. He emphasized that the information obtained does not always reflect the true opinion of the respondent. Sometimes respondents feel their families or societies are on trial or that their integrity is threatened if they do not answer questions "properly" (Guthrie, 1975). Isomah (1973) said African respondents often are careless about the accuracy of the data they provide, simply supplying what comes to mind.

Still other difficulties are that attitudes expressed in interviews and on questionnaires have very little relationship to behavior, and the

interviews and questionnaires themselves "do not improve our understanding of the role of cultural factors in behavior because questionnaire data yield no understanding of the processes by which cultural differences alter the relationship between stimuli and responses" (Guthrie, 1975:361). Additionally, certain concepts do not evoke the expected responses in some cultures. Chu (1964), using the example of the fear-arousing experiments of Janis and Feshbach, said the questionnaire item on ugly or discolored teeth did not work because these features were not feared in some cultures. Fisher (1973), agreeing that people react differently in different social contexts, stated that in Kenya, a young person would become guarded if an elder entered the room, whereas in Nigeria, best results in research were obtained from group arguments.

The time allotted to conducting survey research creates problems in some cultures not accustomed to Western haste. Fisher (1973) said various cultures approach a reply in different ways — one perhaps by analogy or a story, another by a quantitative reply and a third by a philosophical reply. For example, European interviewees reacted negatively to pre-coded questions, saying they do not allow for nuance and personal positions, while in some cultures, multiple choice questions do not function well because examinations of this type are not given in the schools. Feliciano and Lozare (1976) said estimating time and costs of surveys according to Western standards, is frustrating in Asia where time must be allowed for refreshments, meals, gifts and hospitality.

Trouble results in some areas when attempts are made to conduct interviews in private. Pausewang (1973) said in Ethiopia it is impossible to interview in private, while Hoffman (1973) generalized that in Africa, it is virtually impossible to conduct individual interviews, as the community conscience is very strong. However, he contended that group results are reliable. Cook (1978) also felt this lack of privacy need not contaminate studies. He wrote that if people who watch an interview are not accustomed to being rewarded for superior test performance, the concept of cheating may have much less strength than in Western cultures. However, Gunaratne (1975) disagreed, citing the example of a Sri Lanka bachelor, who in the

presence of his brother's large family, said he was against family planning, but once outside ear range of them, admitted he was for it but did not want to embarrass his brother.

The contention of purists that respondents should be asked the same questions, uniformly worded, is not workable in some cultures. Gunaratne (1975) gave the example of a woman who was asked if she believed that "man" had landed on the moon. Her reply was, "How can that be? My man died several years ago. He couldn't have gone to the moon." Because provincially-isolated respondents often do not know terms or concepts they are asked about, flexibility must be built into the interview schedule. Wilson and Armstrong (1963) showed how Indians did not know who Nehru was when he led the nation; Gunaratne said when he asked about superpowers, Sri Lankans answered, "in addition to Sri Lanka?" Halloran (1980:7) emphatically stated that to assume that one can give a carbon copy of an interview schedule in different cultures is "patently absurd," as methods of collection of data differ because of language and culture.

Among other problems of doing survey research include the use of ideographic writing systems in some cultures, with various nuances and classical allusions, severe political restrictions (Appleton, 1976), the fact subjects are often unaware that they have views since they may be incapable of articulating them, and women believed their opinions were less significant than those of their husbands (Rudolph and Rudolph, 1958). Feliciano and Lozare (1976) pointed to a number of problems of conducting Western-type surveys in Southeast Asia, including inappropriate questionnaire or interview language, weaknesses in the questionnaires themselves, the urban orientation of interviewers, inadequacies of respondents and the involvement of village leaders in the conducting of the survey.

Perhaps Frey (1970) summarized the difficulties facing interviewers by listing three snares set by respondents: (1) the respondents' tendency to react to questions "en bloc" and in terms of some irrelevant fixed orientation; (2) the acquiescence to "set" or "courtesy" bias in which the respondent says what he thinks the interviewer wants, and (3) respondents' reactions to please some reference group.

Similar problems face researchers using other methods designed outside the Third World. Observational techniques, Feliciano and Lozare (1976:83) said, have more pronounced problems in areas such as Southeast Asia than in the West, because of the high premium placed on "smooth, interpersonal relations" by rural Asians, hastening the assimilation of the participant-observer into the local culture, at the same time making the collection, analysis and writing of the research more subjective. Experimental techniques suffer because of the lack of homogeneous groups for field experiments, and content analysis techniques used in the West are not always transferable to other cultures, partly because of difficulties of measuring content in some ideographic languages, subtle nuances of different languages and because different category systems must be developed for some societies.

What is To Be Done?

There have been a few encouraging signs. Ten years ago, very few people recognized (or dared admit) that something was amiss in how research was applied in the Third World. That books and articles on the topic are written and conferences are held to study the problem is progress, however limited. The topic of research has played roles of varying degrees of interest at many intergovernmental conferences on communications policies, and at least two meetings have been devoted exclusively to it — one in Hong Kong in 1976 and the Policy Workshop on Communication Research, held in The Hague in 1980 (see AMIC, 1974, 1975; Media Asia, 1976).

Participants at the meeting in The Hague, many of whom were Third World researchers, made a number of suggestions such as:

Communications research should therefore be the responsibility of interdisciplinary groups guided by a coordinated programme in each country, who will define problems within the social context, design appropriate methodologies and models with which to explore such problems, explore feasible alternatives within the social systems, and propose adequate policies for implementation (Institute of Social Studies, 1980:12).

Further, the report of the conference called for "pertinent research" with characteristics of:

macro approaches of an holistic nature; critical, and materialist-dialectic epistemology; interdisciplinarity; ability to diagnose the role of communications in society; ability to explain the interaction between economic, political and ideological levels of communications; ability to translate the diagnosis into concrete policy; maximum autonomy for research work; a global strategy towards democratic change, i.e., the researchers practise a political strategy vis-a-vis other social actors (Institute of Social Studies, 1980:27).

Most of what emanated from the meeting in The Hague was laudatory. However, it is hoped that future meetings will proceed to the next stage — the carrying out of systematic, research-based approaches to the topic of research itself. The literature and dialogue on Third World research, with an exception or two, are devoid of empirical data. Therefore, attempts should be made to systematically identify and inventory research designs and paradigms, to explore their effects upon cultures, to determine what is being criticized, and to see how the literature has promoted existing paradigms. It would seem that there is also a need to subject various Western-originated research techniques to rigorous testing in the Third World, to determine empirically their relative strengths and weaknesses and their adaptability and relevance. This is a difficult, time-consuming task, but an essential one.

Finally, as the old research paradigms, especially those on development and communication, meet increasing, unfavourable reactions, let's hope that certain researchers do not seize the opportunity to establish or re-establish their reputations by creating new paradigms for universal acceptance. This may be happening already, which is unfortunate, because, as indicated above, a great deal remains to be done concerning the problems of research in individual cultures. To introduce another universal model would sidetrack these efforts until the new (or old in new guises) paradigm also meets disfavour.

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