

THE COMPARATIVE STUDY OF
COMMUNICATION SYSTEMS.
OUTLINE OF A PROGRAM AND A PROJECT

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INTRODUCTION: The General Plan

The study of international mass communication has entered a phase of extremely rapid growth. During the past decade many dozens of studies have been completed, more are in progress, and still more are being planned. There has been no continuous development but rather a mushroom growth, for this research activity has consisted of discrete and disconnected efforts instead of sustained and cumulative inquiry. Consequently, this relatively new field already threatens to become a chaotic panorama of hit-or-miss insights and oversights.

Such a condition benefits neither knowledge nor policy. The policy implications of research on international communication have been frequently stressed and are widely recognized. Research can consistently contribute to policy, however, when it is planned and executed within a systematic framework of knowledge. The object of the study here proposed is to provide such a framework for future research. Taking the communication system that has developed in each country as a manifestation of its cultural web, a comparative study will clarify the common and special problems involved in the evaluation of a system of international communication.

The intention is descriptive, analytical, and programmatic. No fresh research is to be undertaken. The focus will be on ordering and evaluating the findings of extant researches. The result will be an elaboration of the categories used in this memorandum, expanded and refined as the data to be inventoried may require. Many of the extant studies are only preliminary "soundings," the significance of which can be assessed only by collation

with soundings by other techniques and in other places. The articulation of such empirical materials into a theoretical framework should clarify the relationship between what we know and what we need to know about international communication.

It is quite clear that information from a large variety of sources will be needed. A central source will be the comparative studies of mass media that have already been made, mainly by American scholars. Studies by scholars and research centers abroad should also be collated, ranging from the foreign audience surveys conducted by the BBC to the insightful studies of oral communication by Tardo. Anthropological studies provide needed information on the environment of communication, as do psychological studies of the interiorization mechanisms. Historical studies in the humanistic tradition, bearing on changing styles of opinion and changing criteria of judgment, will help to illuminate the comparative role of communication systems as mediators of reality in various contexts.

One problem deserves special attention. Quantitative material is not available on many points in the present program; even our own interviews abroad are not based on systematic sampling. Therefore, qualitative analysis will play a very great role in our study and we shall have to consider carefully the merits and dangers of isolated observations. Problems which confront the cultural anthropologist and the historian of opinion will also be ours. We shall need to face such problems squarely to make maximum use of relevant materials.

The greater number of extant studies can be classified into three groups: Those which treat communication (1) as a formal set of institutional channels (mass media), or (2) as an informal network of practices which transmit meanings largely in terms of a "covert culture" (oral traditions), or (3) as a behavioral process consisting of the interactive transmission and reception of information and opinion. These conceptions, naturally, are not mutually exclusive. It appears to be true in every society, for example, that its own communication system is taken more or less for granted and in that degree forms a part of the "covert culture." It is also true that communication, whether it occurs mainly through oral or technological channels, is a behavioral process that mediates the distribution of information and opinion.

The usefulness of these categories will be brought out in the discussion below. Here we wish to point out that such considerations reveal the need for a comparative study of communication systems. Since people tend to take their own communication system for granted, their ability to formulate explicit statements -- or even important questions -- about their own system is restricted. The important questions usually are elicited by comparing any one system with others. The value of comparative methods in reducing bias and increasing insight is too well known to require elaborate restatement here. What does merit notice is that such methods have only very recently been brought to bear on the design or international communication research. The proposed study aims to extend such comparative analyses by collating the available information on various communication systems in different countries and cultures.

We turn, then, to a somewhat fuller outline of the three main categories of extant materials on communication -- the mass media, the oral tradition, and the interaction of news and opinion.

PART I : The Mass Media

What sorts of information are most needed to clarify the role of mass media in international communication? We may briefly review a variety of pressing problems under the following rubrics:

1. Distribution of media

First of all, we need more quantitative data on the distribution of communications facilities, number of newspapers and radios, literacy rates, reception conditions, and other such statistical information. By and large, it can be assumed that such data are available and are kept up to date by the proper government agencies. Further analysis is often desirable. In Turkey, for instance, radio ownership is practically restricted to metropolitan areas. As a result, radio listening is frequent among the national minorities in Turkey which are concentrated in these areas. However, in Turkey the national minorities seem to be less influential than the Moslem population. We thus have a situation where radio propaganda is more likely to reach some groups which are of less political importance. Various practical consequences could be inferred from such information. But the very fact obviously cannot be overlooked.

2. Accessibility of media

The latter example can be generalized to a second major problem: the relation between social structure and the accessibility of mass media. In rural areas, especially, where only a few radios are available, it might make quite a difference who the person is that owns the one radio in the village. If it is a government official or a landlord whom the community distrusts, the situation would be quite different than if it were the teacher or the priest who has the confidence of the population. Our study of a Turkish village reveals how different a radio audience this village (Bolgat) would be if ownership of the only radio set passed from the village chief, who now rigidly controls Bolgat's radio exposure in conformity with his restricted personal interests, to the village grocer, the chief's main rival for the important role of "opinion leader" in the community. The village shepherd was astounded when asked if he had heard the radio, and could reply only: "How can I go to the (Chief's) guest room? It is not for us."

In regard to movies, the price of the ticket often exercises decisive influence over access. In the United States, even the low-income groups can afford movie attendance in the cheaper neighborhood houses. In many European countries a visit to the movies might be too expensive for a considerable proportion of the population. A poor urban Turk says: "I go whenever I have the money. I usually go during the summer months when there is a movie in the open air. That one is cheap."

3. Innovations in media

Restricted accessibility in various countries leads to forms of mass communications which are not common in this country. Several examples may be mentioned. One is radio listening in public places like coffee-houses and village squares. Another is the use of mobile movie units. A third is the development of wired radio which was used by the Nazis and is now very frequent in Russia. A fourth example is the practice of reading newspapers aloud to small groups by one of the few literate people in Balkan villages and small towns. Each of these "systems" of communication has evolved from the special needs of the society which uses them. To grasp the problems they present for international communication we need a comparative study of the ways they serve these needs and the ways they might be integrated into more familiar channels.

4. Prestige of media

Differences in the accessibility of mass media also lead to variations in the general attitudes which people have toward the media. In the United States, for instance, radio is the most widely accessible medium. In Greece radio is relatively inaccessible, owing to the price of sets and electrification. As a result, radio probably has more prestige there. Other factors, too, can influence the status of media. In Arabic countries with very orthodox Islamic background, such as Saudi Arabia, the question whether the secular use of radio does not violate certain precepts of the Koran is still an issue. In western European countries, typical attitudes toward newspapers are probably quite different than in the United States. A western European

takes it for granted that most newspapers are the organs of a political party, while the political affiliation of a paper plays a minor role with American readers. It would deserve considerable further study, however, to find out how this difference alters the actual effectiveness of newspapers with regard to the formation of opinion.

5. Tastes and preferences

This leads to the question of differences in expectations and tastes as between audiences in various countries. The political character of European newspapers is exhibited by the fact that editorials appear on the front page. Since few American newspapers are published abroad, this is of limited practical importance, although it is reported that newspapers published by Americans in liberated and occupied territories during World War II met with considerable "resistance" on just such points of style and taste. With regard to radio, the matter becomes more urgent. The American radio listener is accustomed to certain types of programs, such as sensational news commentaries in the manner of Winchell and Pearson or interviewing programs of the Breakfast Table, Professor Quiz and straight interview type. It can by no means be assumed that such programs would be equally popular in other countries, which are not conditioned to such fare or which have different notions of privacy. In both Turkey and Jordan, the poorer classes (who are also the poorer educated) are not receptive to the "star" and "feature" style of broadcasting. They have no interest, for example, in knowing the name of radio performers.

Many other examples can be cited: in Scandinavia, where radio is regarded as an instrument of adult education, quite different standards of seriousness might prevail than in the United States. In this country, national magazines are probably the main reading material with which the masses of the population have any contact. In Germany, which is certainly a literate country, national magazines play a much smaller role. The problem of expectation and taste is most acute with the movies. It is only too well known that "Hollywood movies" are not an unmixed blessing when they are shown abroad. Our preliminary studies have shown that many people in the Balkans make very clear distinctions between films produced in the various major countries and that preferences vary considerably. One educated Turk even says: "I wish to make a distinction between the New York and Hollywood American films. The New York films, as I call them, have a tendency to bear commercial attitudes -- as compared with the Hollywood system of overdoing and overemphasizing what to the average continental man is simple everyday life."

A good way to get such "taste material" is by the use of comparative questions. The reasons given to justify preferences for one station or another, BBC as compared to the Voice of America, for instance has proved to be a fruitful topic for discussion. Such comparisons can be made also as between specific programs (by comparative "program analyzer" tests), or as between specific features of style and content common to many programs.

6. Standards of performance

It might be useful to know which groups in a population are concerned with the performance standards of which mass media. We know that in this country

Catholic groups are mainly concerned with the morality of movies and educators with the use of radio. In France literary-artistic circles appear to be especially concerned with the cultural standards of radio. There seems to be, in France, a great tendency for political parties to organize their own listener groups, to ensure through listener pressure that their political beliefs are properly represented by the radio system. In England, at this moment, the public is especially concerned with the standards of performances of the daily press -- an outcome of the conflict between the labor government and the owners of the major newspapers. It is quite evident that in Moslem countries the religious authorities are considerably concerned with the mass media. In several countries of the Far East, the development of a genuine national production of movies is of great concern to the intellectuals. All these factors are likely to have an influence on the acceptance of American-produced material.

7. Building audiences

With regard to radio, attention should be given to a special point which also plays a large role in the American scene. A week's radio programs are of very great diversity and therefore much is left to individual choice and selection. This creates the problem of audience building. Any broadcaster will need to know: From what sources do people find out what will be on the air the next morning? In what way can they be influenced in their selection? At what time are different groups of the population most likely to listen? It would be a mistake to believe that the size of an audience depends only upon the merits of a program. There can be little doubt that of

at least equal weight are the efforts which have been made to acquaint people with the existence of the program and to interest them in advance to listen to it.

8. The social context

It might be possible at some point to relate the communications structure of a country to other features of its social system. It is a matter of frequent discussion that American radio has been influenced by the general axioms of free enterprise thinking. In other countries certain basic ideas on the role of government might equally have influenced the organization of the mass media. As has been mentioned before, religious beliefs undoubtedly affect the role of the mass media in certain Moslem areas and in the Far East. But these "functional relationships" do not need to end here. What is the relationship between the development of schools and the organization of the mass media? In countries where a number of ethnic groups maintain the political balance, the question of fair access to the mass media plays a considerable role and leads to unexpected forms of organization. In other countries, political preference for one rather than another of the Great Powers may lead to rather mechanical imitation of a system which cannot be easily integrated into local conditions. This is among the points on which the least amount of thinking and information are available. On such matters, even future work can only dimly be visualized.

PART II : The Oral Tradition

Mass media in the American sense do not exist in large areas of the world. This does not mean, however, that international communication can neglect the study of a population which has no radios; nor can a specialist concerned with the printed media overlook the illiterate people. There are many ways in which the content of mass media is transmitted to people who are not directly exposed. Because word-of-mouth transmission plays a large role in such situations, we have organized pertinent problems relating to the oral tradition. The following pages specify a number of illustrative topics which will need careful investigation. Some of these points probably overlap with matters previously mentioned, but take on another aspect in this new context.

9. Opinion leaders

Most important, probably, is the question of opinion leadership. In each group certain people exert special influence over the social environment in which they live. To what extent is this a matter of their personality and to what extent a result of their "ascribed status?" It is important not to confuse important positions with personal influence which, in some countries, is exercised by persons of apparently low station. Opinion leadership is clearly affected by the value and status systems within a society. For example, many Greeks respect mainly erudition, whereas Moslem peoples greatly admire piety. To the Bedouin, religion may be less important than age in ascribing status to leaders of opinion in his community.

Opinion leadership varies greatly from one society to another and requires careful description and analysis.

10. Opinion and power

Recent American studies have highlighted the relation between opinion leadership and communications habits. There is reason to look for a two-step flow of communications. On all strata the opinion leaders expose themselves more to the mass media than do the primary groups by which they are surrounded. It also appears that the opinion leader consciously or unconsciously uses his greater exposure to fortify his leadership position in the general network of communications. The only radio in Bolgat is owned by the Village Chief, who controls the timing, content, and audience of all radio communication in to this Turkish village to enhance his personal power and prestige. In both Turkey and Greece, the illiterate coffee-house owner often controls the radio-listening opportunities and habits of many persons. Data which can shed light on this rather complex matter will make a desirable contribution.

11. Occupations

Special attention should be given in this connection to occupations which are likely to be carriers of news. The grocer, in Bolgat, is the principal rival to the village chief's opinion leadership because his occupation leads him to make trips to Ankara, whence he returns with news and views of the Big City. A similar role is played in Jordan by those whose occupation takes them to the city. In certain underdeveloped areas, where there are far-flung autobus systems, the bus drivers may play the role of dissemination agents.

as they in fact do in parts of rural Greece. Wherever ambulant health services are introduced, they should be investigated from the present point of view. In Moslem countries, news is given emphasis by the Friday preachers in the mosques -- but Western scholars know little about the style, content, or influence of these sermons.

12. The family

Special attention should be given to the family. In most countries, women are excluded from public places like coffee-houses. But when the man comes home, doesn't he tell his wife what he has heard? And how much is he influenced by her reaction? To what extent are children exposed to political discussions at home? How much public opinion is formed at an early stage in the bosom of the family? What role does public communication play in focussing the conflict between generations? A study of the movies in Lebanon, for example, has shown that younger women and girls derive many arguments from Hollywood films to support their side of the conflict over female "emancipation" in that country. This conflict appears to be increasingly important on many levels, from family quarrels over leisure activity to public controversy over habits of dress and decoration. In Jordan, there appears to be a hierarchy of opinion leadership from the young girls, who are supposed to have (or at least to offer) no opinions, up to the older males whose "word is law." It is important to investigate how such traditional patterns of authority over opinion actually work out in current practice.

13. Special groups

Certain population groups are of special interest as, for instance, returning soldiers and migratory workers. They spend part of their time in one environment and then return to their regular place of abode. What new information do they bring back from their temporary life "abroad?" What do they notice and remember? What are they asked when they come back? What kinds of news stories find the most avid listenership? If it adds to their prestige for them to have certain types of news which the hometown usually does not have, then they are likely to be rather attentive to such matters during their absence. The "commercial traveler" is an important figure, too, in this sort of dissemination process. Other types of special groups would be, for example, the refugees in Jordan, unemployed intellectuals in Egypt, pro-Communists in Iran. Such groups are studied for various reasons -- because they are news carriers, because they are strategically located within the society, because they hold or seek power.

14. Special channels

An interesting development in recent decades is that more and more governments are setting up propaganda machinery to inform and persuade their people in regard to government policy. The Turkish government, for instance, developed, under Ataturk, a far-flung system of People's Houses which were used simultaneously for both adult education and political propaganda. In these People's Houses a great many speeches are given and local discussions are conducted. Anyone who has worked in adult education knows that the need for material in

such situations is very great. This prompts us to inquire how diverse materials are insinuated into these networks of oral communication.

15. Social style

In a country which relies on the oral tradition, other kinds of news material are likely to have high currency than in countries well covered by the mass media. We know that in America the "inside deposer" is valued. Since the mass media provide the population quickly with most of the daily facts, having the "news behind the news" is what makes a man interesting. Within a system of oral communication the situation seems to be quite different. Not even the daily facts are easily available; and many of them, when they become known, are patently out-of-date. Certain types of information probably are assigned a more enduring value, so that they are regarded as still worth learning even weeks after the events have occurred. Certain aspects in the life of national leaders, or natural catastrophes, or events related to larger problems of war and peace, are probably more desired than what we call daily news.

At such points the study of folk literature might be helpful. It is claimed, for instance, that in Yugoslavia there are two ethnic groups, of which one has rather bloodthirsty folk tales while the other tells stories more concerned with peaceful pursuits. Such clues are useful to the researcher who wishes to determine the prevailing interests and tastes in an area to be reached by international communication. The tradition of national minorities or special occupation groups should not be overlooked in this connection. To

what extent are the people in Turkestan still interested in Turkish affairs? To what extent do there exist among tradesmen international traditions, similar to those among mediieval guilds, which determine what information is most prized and hence most useful to remember and pass on?

16. Variety of needs

It might be mentioned, in concluding, that this whole problem of an oral tradition has to be studied on a variety of levels. We may begin with reports from "participant observers" who have lived in villages and small towns within areas not easily accessible to the metropolitan centers. The latter is important because there is often so little contact between different parts of a country with undeveloped communication facilities. Even in a country like Norway, it was found that there existed among the peasantry strong religious-political currents of which neither the Norwegian intelligentsia in Oslo nor the fairly alert American embassy personnel were aware. This is even more likely to be the case in the vast areas outside the Western industrial orbit. Once the general picture has been sketched, then more detailed studies would be in order. Suppose, for instance, one were to make sample inventories of how much information on daily events people in a Middle Eastern country have who live 100 miles away from the capital, 200 miles away, and so on. How long does news take to travel by oral transmission? In many areas it would be useful to ask a sample of people in what way they learned about the most recent news item they can remember. Finally, there will be need for studying such special groups as, for instance, the nomads in the Near East or the untouchables in India.

PART III : News, Views, and Opinion

It is not enough to know how news is disseminated in various countries, either by formal mass media or by oral transmission. The very nature of opinion, and the way opinions are influenced by the circulation of news, is certainly different in different parts of the world. Such differences cannot be adequately known and evaluated without special empirical study. It is quite likely -- and this should be part of the present program -- that anthropological literature can help us to understand some of the pertinent problems. But the need for definite information is now much greater than it was before and therefore special studies will have to be conducted on this aspect of the present discussion.

17. Social variants

Opinion in western industrialized countries, as compared to other cultures, has a rather distinct social role. Here, having opinions on public affairs is considered part of the "rights and duties" of a fully developed personality. In countries which are closer to their own medieval past, opinions are likely to be much more a matter of loyalties. People may quite consciously accept the attitudes of their leaders, or of the groups in which they live, as something they feel they should adhere to. Even in the United States, there still are many women who feel that to hold opinions on public affairs is not becoming to a member of their sex. Among the Bedouins, opinions on matters outside the tribe are the concern of the tribal chieftain, and the opinion he forms on such matters usually becomes the basis for tribal consensus.

18. Religious-philosophical variants

But the feudal perspective on opinions is not the only variation that exists. There are religious variations, and very likely there are others of which we would not even think prior to actual investigation. In Moslem countries, for instance, the fatalistic element of thinking is still very strong. This might be reflected in the narrow range of topics on which it is considered appropriate to have opinions. If there are many matters about which nothing can be done, it is not likely that the western notion of opinion as a directive for action could develop. The Anatolian peasant, for example, traditionally has not been expected to have opinions, nor has he expected his opinions to make any difference, on very many issues and policies of public life. The changes brought about in this perspective, symbolized by the surprising election results of 1950, need to be investigated as part of the "communications revolution" initiated by Ataturk in 1924. In certain Far Eastern countries, inner-directed contemplation plays a very great role. A large number of daily events which are important to us might not seem worthy of opinion formation. Sharp caste differences might exclude whole sectors of the population from an interest in public affairs.

19. Images of the world

Every government information service tries to lead people in foreign countries to take positions on international affairs. This raises the question as to how people in other cultures visualize the world outside their own experience. The preliminary studies made by Columbia University indicate that many people in undeveloped areas have great difficulty in understanding what they are told about the rest of the world. An illustrative case is the Turkish respondent who lives in a one-room dwelling with two other families and suffers from the continuous quarreling among all of them. He is horrified

when he sees the movie of a New York skyscraper where a thousand families live. He visualizes all the fights and tragedies which develop among these families who have to "live together." There can be little doubt, too, that the Russian-American struggle is experienced in the most distorted form by millions of people all over the world. The concepts and phrases in which American writers and speakers discuss such matters might be most inappropriate in many places, because the typical images of the external world are different from those taken for granted among Americans.

20. "Boomerang effects"

This leads to the well-known notion of boomerang effects in propaganda. Very often, we tell stories with one intention, but the effect is quite the opposite. It is reported that the Russians had a propaganda film which intended to demonstrate the misery of American workers by showing some Pittsburgh slum districts in which underwear was hung out on clotheslines in the middle of the street. The unexpected reaction of the Russian audience was reported to have been envy that the American workers had so much clothes. Inversely, of course, there are propaganda windfalls. It seems, for instance, that in certain Asiatic parts of Turkey there is still a vivid recollection of the centuries-old struggle with the Russians. Children are brought to quiet by threatening them that the Muscovites will come and get them. Such tendencies should be known even if it is decided finally not to take advantage of them propagandistically. Indeed, such "social perceptions" are important information even if their relevance for propaganda purposes is not immediately obvious. The Greeks, for example, remember the ancient Ottoman practice of kidnapping Christian children to serve as janissaries, incidentally

converting them through Ibsen education. This memory survives vividly in the Greek consciousness and, though the practice has not been widespread for a century or more, it still affects Greek attitudes toward current issues. Among the accusations against Balkan Communists, the stealing (and "conversion" of children plays a great role, in Greece, whereas no such element appears in the anti-Communist western world.

21. News capacity

What has to be studied, then, is the amount and kind of information which people in various parts of the world can absorb about foreign countries. One special element has often been discussed. Are people especially interested in new things or do they want to hear all over again what they already know? The truth probably lies in the middle. They want to hear something new if it is sufficiently related to their own experience to facilitate integration of the strange with the familiar. The most important and difficult skill in communication is exactly this kind of integration. It will be very different for countries and even for different social and educational groups within the same country. In the last analysis only careful program tests can give specific answers. But general studies can give some guidance as to what people are concerned with and how new themes and situations can be related to their traditional interests. It is relevant, in this connection, that studies of Russian and American propaganda content to Germany have shown how differently the two systems solve such problems. The Russians spend most of their time talking to the Germans about their own political affairs. The American programs strive mainly to make the Germans understand and become interested in American events and points of view -- the well-known "projection

of the United States." Which is the better procedure or, rather, which would be the best combination, remains to be investigated.

22. "Propaganditis"

One special aspect of this problem is the popular attitude towards propaganda. There are indications that the countries which were defeated during the last war are very distrustful of all communications from abroad; they have the kind of "propaganditis" which was prevalent in certain parts of this country as an aftermath of the First World War. Neutral countries like Sweden and Switzerland, on the other hand, seem to look at international propaganda more as a source of useful information. They became accustomed, during the last war, to get both sides of the news; and they have maintained the desire to get both sides and to form their own picture of events. We would like to know to what extent the nationalistic awakening among former colonial peoples in the East has led to a general distrust of anything which comes from the "imperialist" West.

23. Images of America

This brings us finally to the image which people in various countries have of America. The actual situation probably runs a wide and varied gamut, from the French intellectual who looks at Americans as a bunch of barbarians to the South Sea Islander who, according to the "New Yorker" magazine, worships before a wooden image of an American G.I. In some countries, whatever the image is, it may have been created by personal contact with Americans or by exposure to movies and other media. In others, it might be the result of

rumors passed on by word of mouth; in still other countries, it might be created by Russian agents. In any case, it is important to know what people know and think about the United States and where they got their ideas from. In many parts of the world it is quite likely that political attitudes and general images are closely connected. As a matter of fact, anyone who has investigated the strong anti-Communist feelings in this country knows that the image of the Russian in big boots and a fierce beard certainly plays a role in our idea of the dangerous Bolshevik. How much greater, surely, is the role such elements of imagery play in less literate countries? Correcting such imagistic perspectives may, in some cases, be a precondition for political reasoning. And certainly, without rather careful study, Americans would be the least likely to guess correctly what images other peoples have of them.