Social science, communication research and the Third World

James D. Halloran

The following article examines the appropriateness of social science research today, especially in the context of countries of the South. The author calls for 'systematic, disciplined, fruitful studies can be carried out within an eclectic framework'.

Teachers in the general field of media/communication studies are frequently asked by students if anything has really been achieved by our studies and research over the past thirty years. The question applies at two levels, namely intellectual development in terms of a better understanding of relevant social phenomena, and political impact, for example the use of research results by policy-makers and media practitioners.

It is possible, despite a lack of progress in more recent years, and notwithstanding the many different voices striving to make themselves heard, to state with some conviction that we are now in a better position to understand media operations and the communication process at all its levels, nationally and internationally, than we were a quarter of a century ago. But it is much more difficult - some would say impossible - to argue convincingly about the social/political impact of research and studies unless, of course, we confine our analysis to work which simply serves the system and preserves the status quo.

There are those who feel that this lack of what might be termed critical impact stems mainly from external obstacles deliberately erected or supported by policy-makers, media organisations, funding agencies and the like. There is certainly some truth in this but there are other, major reasons, and this external criticism should not prevent us from looking nearer home, namely at the very nature of social science, its shortcomings, limitations, discontinuities, internal differences and confusions. In fact, it is possible that these internal conditions facilitate the erection and maintenance of the external obstacles, for why should we be taken seriously when media practitioners and policy-makers know they can find a social scientist to attack or defend virtually any position?

Although it is recognised that social scientists are not the only ones with a contribution to make to the study of communications, the focus here is on communication research that would normally be regarded as falling under the heading of social science - that is the bulk of the research that is

carried out. Most researchers in the field regard their work as 'scientific' in some shape or form, and it is the validity of this that we shall examine, paying particular attention to the appropriateness for Third World countries of research theories, models and methods derived from research experience and conceptual frameworks in Western industrialised societies.

Acquiring verifiable knowledge

It has been said that there are as many definitions of social science as there are social scientists but, for our purposes, we shall select a fairly simple starting point; one which hopefully encompasses all the basic elements. Social science, which will be regarded as including psychology, sociology, anthropology, economics and political science, consists of the disciplined and systematic study of society and its institutions, and of how and why people behave as they do, both as individuals and in groups within society. At a minimum it would appear that 'scientific' entails a systematic and disciplined method of acquiring knowledge and, what is more, that knowledge must be verifiable knowledge. We need to ask if such a position is tenable in communication research.

We have a problem at the outset for it may be argued that society, its institutions and social relationships are not susceptible to scientific study. Consequently, the methods of the natural sciences should not be applied to social phenomena. That the 'social' and 'scientific' cannot stand easily together was apparently behind the decision of the British Government in the early 1980s when it changed the name of the body (which included mass communication research in its remit) from the Social Science Research Council to the Economic and Social Research Council. If it's social it can't be scientific!!

Several perspectives (for example critical, theoretical, empirical and humanistic) may be detected in social science.[1] Consequently, even amongst those who consider themselves social scientists we are likely to find many different approaches to the study of the media and communications. Some of these assert that we cannot 'objectively' know 'the world out there', and that objectivity is no more than inter-subjectivity. To them what matters is internal validity, not construct validity or reliability, and internal validity has its foundations in human perception, not rigorous methodology, i.e. 'mechanistic reactions to manipulative stimuli'.[2] Let the researched be the researchers.

The different approaches may range from those who strive to be scientific, adopting or adapting models from the natural sciences, to those on the other wing who, in studying the same subjects, rely more on imagination and insight, unfettered, as they see it, by scientific paraphernalia. Just to complicate matters, there are also those who attempt to blend the two approaches.

This is not the place to argue the pros and cons of the contending standpoints, and although there has been talk of convergence it is still possible to identify several different 'warring schools'

in the contemporary setting. The main point is that there are different approaches and that there is no homogeneity.

Clearly there must be values underlying the position adopted here, where it is held that the existence of a multi-disciplinary field calls for a holistic, contextual, societal, non-media centred approach. The general field is inhabited by scholars from different disciplines, with different values, aims and purposes, who seek to construct reality in their own ways. The complexity of the subject matter, and the embryonic stage of development of the subjects are amongst the factors that make this inevitable; in fact, ideally necessary. There may be problems, particularly with theory building and public credibility but, given existing conditions, complementary perspectives, preferably accompanied by a critical eclecticism, are required.

That the field of mass communication is multi-disciplinary is one of the main problems, and this is exacerbated by the fact that not only are there differences between the various 'disciplines' within the field, but that there are also differences and discontinuities within any given 'discipline'. There are even those who question whether it is appropriate to use the word 'discipline' with regard to any of the social sciences. Consensus is certainly not the norm, so if consensus is regarded as a sign of maturity, then social science is far from being mature.

But at this stage in the development of the field perhaps we might ask if we should strive after consensus. It was suggested earlier that social science might entail a disciplined and systematic study of society from the standpoints of the contributing disciplines. Fine, but what is the appropriate blend? Social reality - real life - is multi-faceted.

Although not universally accepted, its adequate study requires various theories and approaches applied together, and no single approach is capable of providing more than the partial picture of social reality permitted by its own narrow perspectives and conceptual limitations. In this sense we should welcome eclecticism, not apologise for it. But, at the same time, we must recognise the implications of these conditions, and be prepared for the reactions of media practitioners, policy-makers and the general public to what they see as confusion and uncertainty.

Despite the unquestioning borrowings from the natural and physical sciences by the 'value free' claiming positivists and behaviourists, we need to emphasise that social science is fundamentally different from the natural and physical sciences, amongst other things because of the differences, discontinuities and lack of consensus already mentioned. There are differences in the natural sciences, but they are not of the type which render constructive dialogue well nigh impossible. Moreover, these differences and conflicts cannot be explained independently of the cultures in which the various models and concepts have been conceived, formulated and applied. This is what leads to confusion, a lack of certainty and low credibility, but it is no good pretending that things are otherwise. This is the nature of the beast.3

In passing, it might be mentioned that the lack of agreement within the social sciences has far reaching implications for research, for funds made available, for the questions raised, for the methods employed and for the application of results. Peer review (i.e. the referring of research proposals and the commenting on and reviewing of publications) is valued in academic circles, but in the circumstances the disciplinary orientation and associations of the referees is crucial. This general principle can also be applied to external examinations, and the awarding of higher degrees. Gatekeepers are important in deciding what is 'good' social science, what are the right questions to ask, and the 'best' methods to use in attempting to answer the questions. There are many different gatekeepers, with different keys, at different gates, all with their own ideas of the right questions, and who should be let in or kept out.

This condition of social science, with what appears to be the inevitable contestability of its theories and methods, becomes even more problematic when we consider geographical and stage-of-development components. There are many examples from international comparative research and media development studies which show that cultural, regional and national differences profoundly influence the research process at all stages and levels.4 (There are, of course, those who suggest that we should stop pursuing the impossible - drop the 'scientific' tag and settle for 'social studies'.)

For example, as far as communications and development in the Third World was concerned, implicit in the research approaches of such as Schramm and Lerner, as well as in much UNESCO-related research in the 1950s and 60s was the idea that development in the Third World should be measured in terms of the adoption and assimilation of Western technology and culture. The main emphasis of the work was on increasing efficiency within an accepted and unquestioned value framework. In general, most of the research and projects at that time (deficient in theories, models, concepts and methods) tended to legitimise and reinforce the existing system and the established order, and in the Third World tended to strengthen economic and cultural dependence rather than promote independence. This whole process - the relationship of social science to global structures - may be seen as an integral part of the knowledge industry.5

Addressing fundamental issues

Irrespective of methodological rigour, important though this is, the basic problems focus on the apparent inability of so many researchers to ask the right questions in their research. If the right questions are not asked in the first place, then no matter how sophisticated the methodology employed, the answers obtained will not be valid and, therefore, of no use to us.

It is interesting to note that Michael Kunczik6 in his reference to Alex Edelstein's comments7 draws attention to some of the categories to which various types of the earlier development communication researchers have been consigned. The 'data exporter', 'safari scholar', 'theory builder', 'penny collaborator', 'professional overseas researcher' and the 'instant expert' have all occupied the field, exploiting and reinforcing the myths at some time or other. But what needs to

be emphasised is that all these could be removed and replaced by well-intentioned idealists without the overall situation being radically changed, unless the more fundamental issues about the nature and scope of social science are successfully addressed.

As far as the Third World is concerned, we need to expand the points previously made and ask other questions. For example, what are we exporting from the so-called developed world? How suitable are the exported models for the conditions it is intended they should address? Are political, commercial, cultural and media imperialisms being followed by a research imperialism? What forms of indigenisation (native developments) are required, and to what degree should they be applied? These questions should be asked, both directly in relation to mass communication research, and more widely with regard to the fundamental principle of universality and relativity in the social sciences.

When we examine social science research within the international context over the past thirty years, and take into account exports and imports of textbooks, articles and journals; citations, references and footnotes; employment of experts and the funding, planning and execution of research, then it becomes clear that we have yet another example of a dependency situation. This situation was characterised by a one-way flow of values, ideas, models, methods and resources from north to south. It may even be seen more specifically as a flow from the Anglo-Saxon language community to the rest of the world and, perhaps even more specifically still within the aforementioned parameters, as an instance of a one-way traffic system which enabled USA-dominated social science of the conventional nature to penetrate cultures in many parts of the world which were quite different from the culture in the USA. It has been argued that, as the USA emerged as a superpower in social science, like it did in other spheres, even what little input was available from other sources tended to be excluded. What is clear is that what was exported did not serve to increase our understanding of the Third World and its communication requirements, nor did it facilitate development.8

This takes us back to the questions already raised about the very nature, potential and universal applicability of social science, no matter how free it may be from the aforementioned conditioning. We have recognised several intrinsic problems, but we must now ask how can we possibly deal with the increasing diversification within communication research which inevitably stems from its extension to cultures outside the cultures within which most of its ideas and tools were conceived, developed and articulated?

Abandoning ideological shackles

The cry for the indigenisation of mass communication research which is often offered as the answer to this question9 cannot easily be dismissed, but it needs to be treated with reserve in certain areas, particularly in relation to some of the ways in which it has already been applied. We may readily accept the need for emerging nations and regions to determine their own research policies, priorities and strategies, rather than having them externally imposed, as was the case so often in the past. Moreover, the need for home-based institutions, housing native staff capable of

carrying out the necessary research in their own countries also appears to be generally acceptable. But one might ask a question here. The expectation seems to be that the situation would improve to the benefit of Third World countries if only the nationals of those countries could be given the opportunity, and the resources, to enable them to carry out the research. But this is far too simplistic, for many of these nationals have been trained as conventional researchers, mostly in the West, and seem unable perhaps unwilling - to free themselves from the ideological shackles of their educational and professional mentors. In this way they may even exacerbate the situation by giving the 'alien import' a national seal of approval.

This seems to be much more so in Asia and the Far East than in Latin America, where several scholars have developed a more independent thrust. Recently, when addressing an international conference, in drawing attention to the points just mentioned I was more than a little surprised to find an unquestioning acceptance of the universality of social science and its potential for international application, even from Asians whom one might regard as critical scholars. They had, of course, studied in conventional institutions in the USA. Certain aspects of positivism die hard !

One can hardly refer to Latin America in this journal without also referring to Media Development, 1/1997, which reported on the 1996 Stirling Conference, and where we may read, inter alia, an article by Enrique Bustamante in which certain comparisons are made between Latin American and European communication research.10 Whilst totally agreeing with Bustamante in his call for constructive dialogue and the pursuit of new models, I am left with the feeling that his summary analysis represents an illustration of the problem I outline in these pages, rather than a possible solution to it. To write about 'European communication research' in the context of my presentation makes little sense, for there is no homogeneous entity, no consensus. All the discontinuities and differences to which I refer are represented in 'European research'. Moreover, some of the features he seems to regard as distinguishing Latin American research from European research (e.g. non-media centredness, and there are others) have been a characteristic of our branch of European research for over a quarter of a century.

The essence of this particular problem of indigenisation, particularly as far as international comparative research is concerned, is at the level of language, conceptualisation, models, paradigms, theories and methods, which means that it is central to the more fundamental problems of social science with regard to universalism and relativism and as to whether we should be pursuing consensus (in part or in whole), or accepting the inevitability of dissensus. There is no panacea and there are no easy answers to these questions. In fact, the questionings and explorations are only just beginning, and there will be much more to address and explore in the years ahead before we can be sure of asking the right questions in research.

However, we know enough from recent experience to point us in the right direction and put us on our guard against those who come with new, all embracing solutions. Having rightly rejected the absolutism of positivism and all its universalistic implications for research, as well as opposing ideological hijacking, we must be careful not to jump out of the frying pan into the fire. In rejecting a position there is no logical necessity wholeheartedly to adopt its mirror opposite. Yet some, particularly on the politically correct, post-modernist wing of cultural studies, have done this. The danger in this unthinking, knee-jerk reaction is that knowledge is reduced to mere perspectivalism - a riot of subjective visions - and a form of anarchy prevails. There are many examples today,

inside and outside our particular field, which demonstrate the tyranny and the absolutism of non-absolutism, where anything goes and where systematic, disciplined research is dismissed. Useful research cannot thrive in such conditions, which are also conducive to political and educational paralysis.

Validity and values

So, in our explorations, we have to navigate between Scylla and Charybdis in the hope of eventually reaching a safe port, although an added difficulty is that, as yet, we haven't quite decided on our destination, or the port we wish to reach! The very nature of social science impinges once more - but choices have to be made and, in the end, we can't dodge the issues of validity or values.

In our research - particularly as far as international research is concerned - we need to start with an acceptance of differences at all levels. But it is quite legitimate - in fact necessary - to proceed from this base and attempt to identify, establish, articulate and combine what, if anything, is common. As Paul Hirst[11] argues, different ways of life may be related by ties of symmetric reciprocity, and we may eventually find common denominators or universals which reflect the nature and needs of every culture and sub-culture. At least this possibility should not be ruled out, but it has to be established in our research, not simply assumed, taken for granted, or dogmatically asserted.

Although, as we have seen, the lack of consensus brings problems and confusion, it is not such an unusual state of affairs and need not be the occasion for alarm. It certainly should not be used as an excuse for dismissing research. In a way, the differences are, at least in part, a reflection of more fundamental and long-standing divisions in social thought between the Aristotelian hermeneutic approaches with their critical orientation on the one hand, and the Galilean positivistic approaches which have characterised so much conventional communication research on the other. What we have is really a 'natural' unavoidable situation. Granted the circumstances, we would have more cause for surprise and concern - perhaps even for alarm - should it be claimed that there was complete homogeneity and one hundred per cent agreement or, worse still, if someone claimed to know all the answers. As we have seen, there are enough problems as things stand because of the very nature of social science, without seeking refuge in ideology or anarchy.

The main message then is not pessimistic or defeatist. It is realistic, conscious of both the limitations and the potential of a research approach which, if pursued along disciplined but at present eclectic lines is still, despite the shortcomings, the most effective mode of enquiry at our disposal. There are still many obstacles to overcome, but systematic, disciplined, fruitful studies can be carried out within an eclectic framework, and assessed accordingly. This is not an escape from rigour, but an acceptance of an approach (albeit as yet by no means a fully developed approach) which, with its complementary perspectives, is capable of doing justice to the complex set of relationships, structures and processes which characterise our field of study. It is a

prerequisite for further progress.

References

1 Inkeles, A. ed (1966) Readings on Modern Sociology, Prentice Hall.

2 Servaes, J. & Arnst, R. (1994) 'Does it Make Sense? Validity and Evaluation in Quantitative, Qualitative and Participatory Approaches to (Communication) Research'. Paper presented at IAMCR conference, Seoul, Korea.

3 Halloran, J.D. (1991) Mass Communication Research - Obstacles to Progress, InterMedia, IIC., Vol 19, Nos 4-5.

4 Halloran, J.D. (1990) A Quarter of a Century of Prix Jeunesse Research, Stiftung Prix Jeunesse, Munich.

5 Gareau, F.H. (1987) Expansion and Increasing Diversification of the Universe of Social Science, in International Social Science Journal, No. 114.

6 Kunczik, M. (1984) Communication and Social Change, FriedrichEbert-Stiftung.

7 Edelstein, A. (1982) Comparative Communication Research, Beverley Hills.

8 Gareau, F.H. op.cit.

9 Riggs, F.W. (1987) Indigenous Concepts - A Problem for Social and Information Science, International Social Science Journal, No. 114.

10 Bustamante, E. (1997) Limits in Latin American Communication Studies, Media Development, Vol XLIV, 1/1997.

11 Hirst, P. (1993) An Answer to Relativism, in Squires, J. ed, Principled Positions, Lawrence and Wishart, London.

James D. Halloran was Director of the Centre for Mass Communication Research of the University of Leicester 1966-91, and President of the International Association for Mass Communications Research (IAMCR) 1972-90. He has been a consultant to the MacBride Commission, to the Annan Committee, to UNESCO and the Council of Europe. In 1991 he was given the McLuhan Teleglobe Canada Award, the most prestigious award in international communication studies. He is currently Research Professor at the University of Leicester, United Kingdom.