

CHAPTER VIII

POLICY PLANNING—A FINNISH SOLUTION TO BROADCASTER/RESEARCHER CO-OPERATION

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WHAT ARE we broadcasters and researchers for? Is the purpose of the work of a broadcaster to fulfil professional journalistic standards (whatever they may be in a given group), to fill transmission time (the bigger the share, the larger the reward), to actualize his own creative forces (disregarding what the public may want or need), or what? Is the ultimate aim of the mass communication researcher to display brilliance in statistical methodology (competence in multivariate analysis as an indication of acceptability), to be productive in journal and conference papers and monographs (evaluated from a formal rather than from a substantive point of view), to participate actively in governmental committees, or what?

A popular image of the researcher among professional journalists is that of an esoteric speculator in an ivory tower, analyzing the process of mass communications but misinformed and far removed from true practical problems. On the other hand, a popular image of a broadcaster among researchers is that of an irrational blunderer, striving for creativity, the human touch, or journalistic values, but lacking systematic understanding of what he is doing. There are plenty of living examples of both of these stereotype figures; to a certain degree they are justified.

For instance, the dominant Anglo-Saxon tradition prevalent in the Western social sciences, called behaviourism, empiricism, positivism, etc., has turned the attention of communication researchers from real life problems to the means of measuring those problems, with the consequence that simple *thinking* is poorly represented in relation to all kinds of sophisticated *measurement*. This withdrawal of the researcher into his hyperscientific world is often called "premature academic theorizing" and the word "theory" has thus received a negative connotation among professionals. The professional broadcaster tradition, again, has encouraged an "instinct-mindedness" rather than an analytic attitude to mass communication. Such an anti-intellectual professional approach can be seen as just one aspect of the larger historical tradition which has guided Western broadcasting—the

use of broadcasting to support the social *status quo*; to passively reflect society and not to initiate mass cognition. Therefore professionals who accept an analytical research approach are easily classified as "political", "radical" etc.

If the antagonism between broadcaster and researcher is perceived to be based on such historical traditions, it is possible to change the thinking in both camps and to eliminate outdated stereotypes. In fact, what used to be a potential conflict may become a joint enterprise. At least this is true in Finland where broadcasters have exchanged the old passive and feeling-oriented approach for an active and analytical approach, while communication researchers have abandoned the hyperscientific tradition for an action-oriented and socially-concerned tradition. The meeting point for both groups is the policy of broadcasting, and especially programme policy. The broadcaster and the researcher have realized that they share a common purpose—their contribution is to reveal social reality and to make the world-view of the public more and more realistic.

An example of broadcaster/researcher co-operation recently carried out in Finland is a report for use in determining the future news policy of YLE. In passing it should be mentioned that according to the Programme Activity Regulations of the Finnish Broadcasting Company (YLE), the main general objective of broadcasting activity should be "to offer the public a view of the world based on correct information and facts, a view which changes as the world changes and as our knowledge of it increases, changes or becomes more perfect. This does not mean that radio and television should be contented only to reflect, in a passive way, social life and conditions. On the contrary, broadcasting ought to be a live and active factor in the community to which it belongs, consciously inspiring discussion. However, radio and television should not try to implant any particular theory of life in the mind of their audience, but should aim at making available the building blocks necessary for personal opinions and for the construction of a personal world-view". The assignment given by the Board of Directors to the Section for Long-Range Planning said, among other things:

"In general, the foundations of news activity should be considered, all the way from the way in which the news is chosen to the language used in news broadcasts. Only when the objectives of news activity have thus been made clear can we begin to plan the practical aspects of news and current affairs activities in a

meaningful way (increasing the number of editors, expanding the correspondent network, etc.)”.

The LRP Section set up a special working group to carry out the actual work; included in the group were four researcher-planners from the LRP Section and five practitioners from the radio and TV news services. Their work can best be characterized as a “dialectic” between practitioners and researchers. Here, as in other areas, meaningful dialogue and appropriate solutions to problems could only be achieved through systematic discussion and thinking, based on conceptual clarity, and taking care to avoid indefinitely vague or broad terms and concepts (e.g. “news value”). Such a clarification of meanings and goals does not necessarily imply esoteric speculation in an ivory tower. It should also be remembered that a theoretical emphasis by no means rules out the importance of accumulating empirical evidence concerning the operation in practice. Accordingly, in this case, the working group had at its disposal a large mass of research results describing the present state of affairs in news transmission, from the selection of news by the producers and the content of the newscasts, to the retention and evaluation of news information by the general public.

One important implication of such researcher and planner cooperation is that in such a setting research becomes less empirical and more theoretical: a researcher does more than gather and interpret *data*, he begins to evaluate the *meaning* and *consequences* of the *phenomena* he is studying. Finnish broadcasting researchers have come to the conclusion that empirical behavioural research is able to serve the development of broadcasting activity only on a limited scale. Accordingly, the Finnish approach can be called “empirically pessimistic”, unlike many other broadcasting research enterprises.

The most important branch of research in this connection appears to be, more and more, a “radio-TV philosophical” and conceptual-analytic pondering of goals. To place one’s confidence and expectations mainly in traditional sociological and psychological research is to bypass in many respects the real problems, the Finnish researchers claim. The fact is that empirical research always implies a conceptualized starting point, whether one is aware of it or not. The choice of research objects and approach involves a non-empirical valuation. Likewise, a conceptual system is necessary in order to interpret the results and to put them into practice, a system into which the answers given by the empirical research will fit.

A commercial marketing researcher, for instance, uses all his observations and experiences for sales promotion, bearing in mind that he is studying his clients in order to find out how to attain maximum purchases of the product in question. In connection with non-commercial broadcasting activity, however, the conceptual reference system of the studies is much more complicated than in marketing. The principal goal is not the largest possible public; the aims are much more diversified—which unfortunately also means that they are often indistinctly formulated, in such a style as the promotion of “useful information” or “suitable entertainment”. Consequently, research—as well as programming—is frequently carried out without precise definition of the relation to the goals of broadcasting, in fact without any purpose other than “research for the sake of research” (in the case of programmes: “programmes to fill time”). This has not usually been the fault of the researchers (or programme-makers), but simply a consequence of the fact that there are no clear goals to follow—that an up-to-date and conceptually precise statement of programme policy is missing.

It should be pointed out that research can provide useful or interesting information only if the problems have been correctly and precisely stated. Modern social science, unlike the natural sciences, suffers from considerable confusion of concepts and lacks a basic conceptual apparatus; thus the usefulness of each separate study depends largely on how far the central concepts of the conditions studied in the work in question have been precisely defined. Again, the usefulness of programme policy research is completely dependent on how successfully the problems of programme policy have been stated and how well the concepts used have been defined. The emphasis in programme policy research is thus not on the collection of data, not even on processing and interpreting the material assembled, but on the *clarification of goal setting* in programme policy. This means that programme policy research in general should not be delegated to researchers working on their own; each study should be prepared, to a fairly great extent, together with professional broadcasters.

Thus, in the first place, when a research project is started, we ought to be aware of the aims and purposes of programme policy. Unfortunately this is usually not the case: when research is started in some programme sector and the researchers ask the programme people what subjects they want examined, how the results ought to be used, what things in these programmes are most important, what the programme work aims at, the typical answers are generally indefinite

and naïve—at least this was true in Finland when the present research was started. To be sure, researchers get appeals for help in some cases, but such appeals are often made as a kind of mental-hygienic luxury rather than with the intention of thoroughly discussing the nature of one's own work. It seems absurd that programme people in such a situation helplessly ask the researcher how, for instance, a children's programme should be made to be "good", or if it would be reasonable to have violence films in the broadcasts. These are typical valuation questions; they are *normative*, not *empirical* problems.

It might of course be imagined that the aim of research would be to create just that programme policy which is now lacking; things could be examined in order to call forth a discussion concerning the goals of programme policy, and in order to cause these goals to be outlined as minutely as possible. From this point of view, a more detailed definition of the setting of problems for research also necessitates a more detailed definition of programme policy. This state of affairs sometimes has a perverse effect, because the research is thus made to create something which really ought to exist already as the very starting point of the research in question. In reality, definition of the general setting of goals by means of empiric research is very uneconomical: rigorous thinking, which above all is needed here, will certainly be ten times cheaper than the maintenance of the research machinery.

The most doubtful aspect of a situation where research dominates programme policy is, however, the fact that the research methods and their weaknesses are too easily reflected in the definition of the aims: there is an avoidance of problems which are difficult to examine empirically and an inclination to see the problems of radio and TV communication in the light of theories which come from other fields of life. For instance, there is a tendency to consider the impact of a programme solely in the light of changes of attitudes or of the emotional satisfaction the receiver experiences, in spite of the fact that these form only a limited part of all the problems which the reception of the message involves (e.g. the cognitive comprehension of the programme). If research is carried on without a set of problems based on questions involved in programme policy, the researchers should at least be aware of the dangers which are implicit, in that the investigations—and their limitations—are thus beginning to direct programme policy.

Consequently, the importance of a research project depends on its relevance to the goals of programming. Thus, in Finland for instance,

the effect of television on people's habits turns out to be a rather peripheral subject, whereas content analysis of programmes as well as the cognitive world-view of the audience are brought into the focus of interest. Measuring the size and composition of the audience (rating studies) continues to be an important area of research, although not so central that this expensive form of research should go on uninterruptedly; since the precise figures of each individual programme are not essential for non-commercial broadcasting, and since people's listening and viewing habits have proved to be very stable, it has been considered sufficient to do only seasonal studies in this area.

The dominance of programme policy over broadcasting research means that the studies will gradually begin to follow a more or less uniform pattern, providing the conceptual framework for the programme policy. In the long run, this can be regarded as a limitation placed on the scope of research—as always, policy research can be blamed by calling it "directed". In the opinion of Finnish researchers, however, applied research which starts from and ends with a uniform formulation of the goals of the activity to be studied seems more justified than applied research which starts with a number of incompatible, more or less loosely-defined problems and ends with a mass of fragmentary data, embodying little more than some curious details. The latter type of research may even be more "dangerous" than systematic policy research, because as soon as research is done without a precise conceptual framework and a clear set of goals, the results can easily be interpreted to prove almost anything. Furthermore—at least in Finland—there is quite abundant university research to supplement the broadcasting company's own policy-oriented research.

According to the new organization system of YLE, the company's long-range planning and development work will fall particularly on to the members of a working sub-section of the Board of Directors, or on to what is called the central management. They will be assisted by a special Section for Long-Range Planning, directly responsible to the Director-General. The function of this Section thus is to act as a kind of working arm of the central management. The work of the LRP will be to provide information for decision-making, based on scientific research, extensive expert knowledge and careful development prognosis, and to co-ordinate and tentatively shape long-range component plans and investment proposals drawn up by the various sections. The LRP Section has also been built up in such a way that its composition and operation clearly reflect an awareness that the main

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duty of public broadcasting is to produce programmes and nothing else. This means, for instance, that the most important, if not the only, task of the LRP Section will be the planning of programme policy and the supervision of its successful implementation.

Typical of the Finnish research approach, thus, is that there is no separate research department, but the research staff is an integral part of the LRP Section. The researchers not only study what has been regarded as worth studying, but are also involved in developing and adjusting radio and television activity according to the programme policy adopted on the basis of the background information provided by research. Research is institutionalized, not as an independent body, liable to the risk of isolation, but as part of a complete planning organ, representing various areas of broadcasting activity (programming, engineering and economics). In the present year there are two leading researchers working in the LRP Section who, at the same time, are permanent members of the planning group and, in addition, three other researchers together with the necessary personnel for computation and administrative services.

The research staff of the LRP Section will remain fairly small, since most of the actual research operations will be carried out outside YLE—as they have been from the beginning—in university institutions and to some extent by commercial research companies. In 1969, YLE invested about \$90,000 in programme policy research, which is less than 0.3% of the total expenses of the company.

The picture of almost idyllic broadcaster/researcher co-operation which emerged from the description of the Finnish experiment was seen by some as being too good to be true. Consequently, the discussion which followed was characterized by scepticism towards “this Finnish Paradise”, as well as by the usual “does it apply in other countries and under different circumstances”.

The critics and sceptics had a fairly easy time because as the experiment was still in its very early stages there was little in the way of concrete illustration or evidence that could be produced in its support. However, as was pointed out several times, even if for some reason or other the experiment didn't work, the whole idea was a fascinating one and certainly worth careful consideration.

The discussion was opened by a Finnish producer who had taken part in the experiment. He took up a point made earlier in the Seminar by Mr. Charles Curran, and accepted that the main purpose of broadcasting institutions was to make good programmes, but added that research was essential for this. For him, research was part of the process of production, in which the lessons derived from research were fed into the production process. Though he accepted that the results of this kind of co-operation were often intangible, and the experiment was as yet too new to be properly evaluated, his feeling was that it was well worthwhile.

It is not without significance that the first note of scepticism came from an audience researcher who could not see the need for such close relationship between producers and researchers. He wondered why we couldn't accept the divisions and stick to our own specializations. The Finnish system demanded that “the researcher has to have considerable knowledge of the production process, while the producer has to be knowledgeable in the researcher's trade”. This he considered to be impossible so let the researcher get on with information-gathering about numbers and attitudes, even if it is not accompanied by interpretations and policy recommendations.

Throughout the Seminar it had been clear that researchers were not a homogeneous group. They could in fact be divided in several ways, but in this session the gap between the conventional audience researcher working in a media institution, and the rest, became more marked than ever.

In reply to the audience researcher who claimed that information was obtained about attitudes to programmes, appreciation indices etc.

as well as audience numbers, it was argued that although better than sheer head-counting, such data could be counter-productive, since it provides an illusory measure of broadcasting success, defining it purely along the single dimension of declared audience appreciation. There are some exceptions but generally this approach evidently does not take into account problems of comprehension, perception, interpretation and so on. Neither are the data set within the appropriate social contexts. It was claimed that the whole exercise tends to be linked to the producer's image of the audience, and to the myths that producers entertain with regard to the reception of their work.

One participant, while wholeheartedly supporting the researchers' claim that their skills are not fully utilized by broadcasting institutions, still doubted whether "the highly skilled, integrated Renaissance Man (producer or researcher) envisaged in the Finnish experiment" did in fact exist. He too felt that there was a need for specialization, and claimed that any producer worthy of the name would consider the Finnish style of co-operation as constituting an intrusion into his own special area of competence. At the most he accepted the possibility that programme policy groups should have the research position made clear to them and should be supplied with the appropriate data, but he disagreed with the notion that programmes should be a joint producer/researcher enterprise—"We fight hard to defend our territory".

An audience-researcher objected to the Finnish experiment from a "researcher-inside-the-organization" point of view. Even if it worked in Finland, it wouldn't necessarily apply in other countries, where broadcasting institutions are much larger. His argument started out from a view of the power relationships in such organizations and, according to him, the larger the organization the more difficult it is for the researcher to locate the decision-maker or to catch his ear. Consequently, he regarded the intrusion of the researcher into decision-making areas as an undesirable transformation of the researcher's role. "You cannot have the same person playing both the researcher and the decision-maker roles", he argued.

It was also suggested that the Finnish idea could never be adopted in the USA or in any commercially dominated system, for such a system precluded the discussion and serious consideration of non-commercial goals. The American participants were not at one on this matter.

A social scientist described the Finnish exercise as "exciting". He saw in it a way out of the characteristic situation in broadcasting

institutions where "certain kinds of audience demands interact with certain kinds of broadcaster's reactions" to result in the undemanding fare which is commonly provided by television. The attempt to reconstruct the goals of broadcasting by challenging the conventional, the habitual, and the stereotyped was, to him, the most promising aspect of the Finnish experiment. Nevertheless he confessed that he was somewhat bewildered at the role which research would have to play in this. Apparently he was willing for researchers to play their part in any possible reconstruction of the goals of broadcasting, but he did not wish this function to be regarded as the essence of research.

He also saw an inherent contradiction in the Finnish approach: the Finnish study of the audience for news broadcasts "paints a very depressing picture of that audience, describing the vast majority as following news broadcasts in a ritualistic, passive, habit-following way, unmotivated by any informational concerns". If that is indeed the picture, how can one expect any transformation of broadcasting goals to touch this audience? The answer to this was that "we feel that the audience has been manipulated by the educational system of the media into this state of alienation from any real concern with what is happening, and we try to get them out of it".

The case for the researcher's contribution to policy-making was not entirely without support. It was argued that while one cannot claim that the researcher's participation in decision-making is indispensable, the Finnish solution should not be seen as an "historical accident", in which certain research people also happened to be policy-oriented, while the policy makers were sophisticated enough to be receptive to the researcher's ideas. "Research which is not closely connected with policy considerations gets lost, or alienated, and seems to produce trivial or useless data—data which can even be considered dangerous, if it is used for all sorts of purposes over which the researcher has no control. The danger for the researcher, moreover, is that thereby he loses the connection between empirical reality and the theoretical groundings of his work."

In answer to some of the critics it was made clear that co-operation did not mean interference in the daily production process. The co-operation could be based on the "institutionalization of contacts between broadcasters and researchers, in which production problems are seen not only from the producer's point of view, but also take into account research considerations". The academic researchers were agreed that there was a need to go beyond the conventional role assigned by broadcasters to researchers (as assistants in achieving

greater broadcasting "efficiency") to an area where the researcher is more central and plays a less detached, more subjective, policy-oriented role than has been the custom in the past. This was a new idea to many broadcasters and many of them expressed their apprehension.

The question put before in the Seminar "Who makes the critical decisions?" was put again. The Finnish producer explained, in reply, that there was no fear of researcher take-over. On the whole, ideas came from producers, heads of departments and so on, but the situation was much more flexible, and one of greater give-and-take than many producers at the Seminar seemed to appreciate.

In a way, the discussion was handicapped by the lack of any illustrations and the experiment was too new to be assessed in a meaningful way. One point which had emerged, however, was that very often the producers themselves were not fully aware of their aims or of the nature of their operations. The researcher had helped clarify the situation. This was surely worthwhile.

At this point one researcher felt compelled to warn against an unwarranted stretching of the notion of research "to include some kind of a process whereby researchers and broadcasters might be transformed into multi-skilled Renaissance Men", as they have been described earlier in this discussion. What the Finnish prospect opens up, he claimed, is what could be described as a second-level learning process for the broadcasting system. Until now broadcasters had looked to researchers (if they looked at all) to provide them with information as to the attractiveness or effectiveness of their programmes. It was now being suggested that we should approach the larger problem of whether or not the overall direction of programme-planning and broadcasting policy is correct. This, he thought, would call for a completely new orientation and redefinition of roles but, as one participant remarked "Why not?".

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