Why Sociology Abandoned Communication

Elihu Katz

Abstract This paper considers the possibility that early sociological interest in the integrative role of mass communication may have been undermined (1) by the short-run study of media "campaigns," and the declaration that such persuasive efforts have only "limited effect"; (2) by the wrangling over theories of "mass society"; and (3) by a quasi-journalistic emphasis on "media events." In spite of the theoretical basis for reconciling these traditions, the rift over the academic locus of communications research has not been repaired.

Communications research seems to be flourishing, as evident in the number of universities offering degrees in communication, number of students enrolled, number of journals, etc. The field is interdisciplinary, and embraces various combinations of former Schools of Journalism, Schools of Speech (Midwest for Rhetoric), and programs in sociology and political science. The field is linked to Law, to Schools of Business and Health, to Cinema Studies, and, increasingly, to humanistically-oriented programs of so-called Cultural Studies. All this, in spite of having been prematurely pronounced dead, or bankrupt, by some of its founders.

Sociologists once occupied a prominent place in the study of communication—both in pioneering departments of sociology and as founding members of the interdisciplinary teams that constituted Departments and Schools of Communication. In the intervening years, I daresay that communications has attracted rather little attention in mainstream sociology and, as for Departments of Communication, a generation of scholars brought up on interdisciplinarity has lost touch with the disciplines from which their teachers were recruited. More recently, I believe, this

E. Katz (✉)
University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, USA
e-mail: ekatz@asc.upann.edu

process is reversing, evidence for which is available in Keith Hampton's compendium of communications-oriented papers presented at recent ASA meetings.

The object of this and a companion paper (Pooley and Katz 2009) is to reflect on why mainstream sociology may be said to have abandoned communications research in spite of the centrality it occupied in the pioneering departments, and to consider whether and why we are witnessing a present-day revival. Both papers are largely speculative, for which we ask forgiveness—and help!

The Chicago School

For the first half of the last century, the Chicago School dominated American sociology, and it is at the University of Chicago that I would like to open and close my case. I rather doubt that there was any subdivision in Chicago sociology that declared itself specifically interested in communication, although the label "communication" appears frequently. Apart from the micro-level "symbolic interactionists," it is well known that the media of mass communication were a prominent concern. In his listing of "substantive areas of research at Chicago," Kurtz (1984) puts the study of "public opinion and communication" in second place. Interest in communication at Chicago was an integral part of the broad study of social organization and disorganization. Think of John Dewey's hope for a scientifically-based journalism that might serve a participatory democracy, and how sharing the news might substitute for the absence of shared tradition in pluralistic America (cited in Carey 1996, p. 32). Robert Park (1929) a former journalist, saw the immigrant press as an integral part of the struggle for internal power and external acceptance in the new society, following the path-breaking study of "The Polish Peasant in Europe and America," by Thomas and Znaniecki (1918). Park's dissertation (1904/1972), written under Georg Simmel, contrasts "crowd and public" as social forms of deliberation to which Blumer (1939) later added "audience," echoing his interest in the effect of movies on adolescents. Another student of crowds, and of rumors, was Tamotsu Shibutani (1966), two of whose graduate students, Kurt and Gladys Lang (1953), made the first-ever comparison of viewing an event on television and experiencing the same event in-person. After World War II, Morris Janowitz (1952/l967) revisited the community press, and Louis Wirth (1948)—in his presidential address to the ASA—equated the power of the mass media to save the world with the power of atomic weapons to destroy it.

There was another spurt of creativity in communications research in the late '50s when a Committee on Communication was established at Chicago as a loosely federated group of faculty mobilized, initially, by Douglas Waples, then Dean of the Library School, known for his research on reading. Kenneth Adler, later of the USIA, coordinated the group which was augmented by the arrival of David Riesman—who introduced the study of Leisure into the mix—reinforced by a coterie of newly-minted PhDs from Columbia. They included Rolf Meyersohn and Philip Ennis, who worked with Riesman, as well as James Coleman, who was marginally involved, and myself. Other Columbia novitiates also arrived in Chicago at the same time—notably Peter Rossi, who would soon head the NORC, and Peter Blau, but they were not part of the communications committee. Neither were the old-timers, as I recall, except perhaps for

Donald Horton, Nelson Foote and Reuell Denney. The Committee began publication of *Studies in Public Communication*, while Berelson and Janowitz (1950) produced the first of a number of editions of their classic, *Reader in Public Opinion and Communication*. Meanwhile, the Department was exporting brilliant graduate students elsewhere—inspired by Everett Hughes and Morris Janowitz. These included Erving Goffman, Howard Becker, Herbert Gans, and the Langs.

And then it all stopped, or so I believe. Not only at Chicago, even at Columbia. Sociology seemed to have lost interest in communications research, especially in the mass media. One wonders why.

Why? Limited Effects

I have been trying to find the answer for many years; my long-time consultant in this quest is Kurt Lang, and more recently, Jefferson Pooley. Lang and Lang (2006) speculate that Columbia's Bureau of Applied Social Research, under Paul Lazarsfeld, stole the limelight from Chicago, and did the field in. In effect, they are saying, "It's your fault," meaning that the series of empirical studies at Columbia regularly reported that the media had only "limited effects" (Klapper 1960). This finding, from Lazarsfeld's (1944; Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955) team studies of voting and of decision-making in other realms (consumer purchases, fashions, movie-going, public affairs) claimed that the influence of the media was itself mediated by interpersonal influence circulating in the small groups in which individuals were embedded.

Although he is well aware that the findings of "limited effects" derives from the study of media "campaigns," aimed at changing opinions, attitudes and actions in the very short run, Lang (personal correspondence 2007) considers the finding discouraging. He believes that other scholars turned away from media research for this reason. If true, this is ironic. First of all, for the reason that Lazarsfeld (1948) himself had a much broader map of media effects in mind, ranging from the influence of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* on the Civil War to the influence of soap opera on housewives (see Katz 2001). Ironically, Lazarsfeld seems to have been discouraged, or distracted, from the study of the media at more or less the same time.

A second response to Lang's critique stems from the fact that the Bureau's continued exploration of the reasons for limited effects led to the idea of audience "self-selection" in the process of communication, and to the role of opinion leaders and interpersonal influence. The power of these "intervening variables" re-directed media research to the study of what is now known as "reader reception" and "social networks." Specifically, the idea of "selectivity" coincided with so-called "gratifications research," in which the balance of power is partially transferred from medium to receiver, and from there to "reception." (Blumler and Katz 1974). In parallel, the so-called "two-step flow of communication" (Lazarsfeld et al. 1944; Katz 1957) led to a search for the links between mass media and interpersonal networks in the study of innovation diffusion (Coleman et al. 1957; Katz 1961). The frustration of limited effects, in other words, proved to be creative, but sociologists didn't seem to have the patience to wait. And hardly anybody at the time (but see Schudson 1986) seems to have remarked that campaigns were not the only place to look for media effects.

Why? Mass Society Theory

Stated otherwise, the irony of these explorations of process returned communications research to sociology, even if there were few takers. True, it was not a revival of the macro-sociology of national and community integration, but it was a return to the sociology of small groups, and thus to the social context of reception, as Eliot Freidson (1953) noted. In other words, these amendments to the study of mass communication shifted the theoretical frame away from the individualistic image of an alienated mass society (cf. Lubken 2008; Simonson 1986; Pooley 2006) to a communitarian theory more compatible with mainstream sociology. This shift is best symbolized, perhaps, in the change from a research design that focused on the immediate response of an atomized audience to a design that took account of time and of social relations, or in a word, to the problematics of diffusion research. With the study of how new drugs diffuse among physicians (Coleman et al. 1966) the Columbia "school" of communications research reconnected with the many branches of social science and the humanities that are interested in how things get from here to there (Katz et al. 1963). These traditions include archaeology, anthropology, folklore, the history of religion, medical epidemiology, etc. It also vindicates the sticktoitiveness of rural sociologists who, unlike communication researchers, had never given up on the pre-modern idea that farmers talk to other farmers, and that the diffusion of new farm practices is a function of the interaction among media, extension agents, and interpersonal influence (Rogers 1962).

So let us suggest that the association of communications research with mass society theory distanced others from the field. The question of how theories of group dynamics and social networks displaced mass-society theory at Columbia was much discussed in the recent 50th anniversary symposium on Personal Influence, especially in the paper by Pooley (2006)

Why? Event Analysis

Kurt Lang had another idea in more recent correspondence. He was responding to my query of whether it is true that sociologists avoid the symbolic analysis of events—a question that Ruth and Elihu Katz (2009) raise in their critique of Jeffrey Alexander's challenging paper (2009) on the diffusion of the concept, Holocaust. We found that historians far outnumber sociologists in trying to explain what happened in that traumatic event, but my impression is that sociologists are conspicuously absent in studies of 9/11, the Tsunami, the flooding of New Orleans, the Gulf War, or—to go back a little—the Eichmann trial or the Dreyfus case. Kurt Lang agrees that this is another example of the ostensible division of labor between sociology and communications research. Like anthropologists (Turner 1974, for example, or Handelman 1990), communications scholars are interested in the function of public events in the management of crisis, or for commemorative purposes, or to celebrate reconciliation. Only few sociologists have attended to such events, I believe, minus exceptions such as Calhoun (1984) on Tiananmen Square, Wagner-Pacifici (1986) on the Aldo Moro case, Vaughan (1996) on the Challenger disaster, Klinenberg (2002) on the disastrous heatwave in Chicago, Hunt (1997) on the Los Angeles Riots, or the

Langs (1983), Alexander (1988) and Schudson (1992) on Watergate. But these tend to be veterans who have at least one foot in the sociology of communication.

Why sociologists shirk this kind of work is not clear. As a guess, one might suggest that sociologists don't like exceptions; they study the rule, so to speak, and the extent of patterned adherence and patterned deviation. Perhaps disruptive events are too much associated with journalism. Such events border on the sociology of cultural production, and expose both antecedents and consequences (cf. Molotch and Lester 1976). More broadly, such events may be grouped in the generic category of media ceremonies, which Dayan and Katz (1992; also see Katz and Liebes 2007) have been grappling with for years. But where are the sociologists?

This abstinence seems less true of other genres of popular culture, from which much can be learned about social values. Fads and fashions, popular music and dance, sports and other leisure activities have occupied sociologists for a long time. And now, with the reemergence of so-called "cultural sociology" (Alexander 1988), we may be on the verge of a reassertion of real interest in the media as agents of representation and diffusion.

Why? Sociologists' View of Communication

There are, probably, other good explanations for why sociology abandoned communications research, but the three cited above provide some clues. They add up, I think, to the idea that sociology marginalized communication under the residual category of "collective behavior," somehow reminiscent of Steinberg's map of New York City in which communications is somewhere beyond 11th Avenue, a place to go on vacation. The view from Sociology is that communications is somehow amorphous; as if it were about process, but without structure. Ironically, this is what many communications scholars also seem to think.

But, of course, communications is not just about process, although it is surely an important ingredient. Consider the division of labor among disciplines and departments in the social and humanistic faculties. Some departments specialize in institutions—that is, in norms, roles, organizations, etc.—political science, for example. Others specialize in processes—psychology, for example. Others teach technologies—statistics, for example (though architecture, and certainly engineering, would be better examples). Still others, especially in the humanities, study content, that is literatures and the arts. Obviously, these disciplines are not so monolithic. Economics, for example, deals both with institutions and processes. Some also provide professional training.

Communications does all of these, but from the point of view of sociology, the greatest neglect in this conception is that there are powerful *institutions* to study— complete with norms, roles, organizations and the rest. Though they supposedly constitute the Fourth Estate, communications organizations are perceived—as did the Frankfurt School (Horkheimer and Adorno 1944/1972)—as branches of big business or government, and are very little studied, even while Rupert Murdoch buys out the *Wall Street Journal*. The truth is that communications research itself has not given a lot of attention to media institutions. Some exceptions include Michael Schudson's (1986) study of the advertising industry, Todd Gitlin's (2000) inquiry into film-making for TV in Hollywood, Tom Burns' (1972/1964) study of the BBC,

studies of the production of news by Gans (1979); Tuchman (1978); Roeh (19xx); Reich (2009), and others. But few have followed the model provided by DiMaggio (1982) of institutional analysis applied to the arts

Studies of the technologies of communication are not very popular either, although this seems to be changing now, James Carey (1981) notes that Harold Innis was influenced by Chicago, where mass-media technologies—the newspaper and broadcasting—were certainly incorporated into sociological thinking. Indeed, theories of the influence of media technologies closely parallel sociological theories of technological effects—Ogburn's (1964) for example—although they are less deterministic, perhaps. But only very few sociologists are involved.

Content and process are what sociologists see in communications. Content is viewed as part of a process of social control—as in overseas studies of modernization and media imperialism, and in the domestic reinforcement of values—but very few sociologists actually do content analysis, though, as noted, "cultural sociology" may be leading a revival

It is process, or flow, which seems to be of particular interest nowadays, inasmuch as it attracts students of networks and diffusion. Its emphasis is more micro than macro, connecting more obviously with interpersonal influence, but the challenge now—as it was then—is how to connect interpersonal relations with the media, both large and small.

The larger question is why sociology does not think of communications as an institution—like Education, or like Religion, or like Politics? Notice how much these three resemble communications in their institutional structures, technologies, content, and influence processes. Are these also lost to Sociology? The answer seems to be No and Yes. Religion is certainly still central to Sociology, though it also has its own community of scholars. Education falls somewhere between In and Out. And political science was lost, long ago, for no special reason.

Who Abandoned Whom?

There is room for one more question: Perhaps the impetus to these partings stems not from Sociology but from the other disciplines. Perhaps these are examples of breaking away rather than being thrown out, in the way—and for the reasons—that Psychology broke away from Philosophy, and Psychiatry broke away from Psychology, as Ben-David and Collins (1966) have shown. Jeff Pooley (in Pooley and Katz 2008)) places emphasis elsewhere—on the *organizational* history of communications research. After Chicago, he notes, the rise of communications research at Columbia's Bureau came largely from Rockefeller funds, then from Government. Later these funders retreated, says Pooley, and Sociology followed suit for these and other reasons. Meanwhile, Schools of Journalism and programs in rhetoric were moving in (Schramm 1997).

It is likely that these pioneers of communications research saw sociology as only one of the ingredients of an interdisciplinary enterprise; it is also possible that they perceived such an amalgamation becoming increasingly fashionable as modernity proceeded. Perhaps the sociologists among them just jumped ship. But that is another paper. And, in any case, they're returning, and being welcomed aboard.

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