

The Domain of Inquiry for Media Management Researchers

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DEBUT PAPER

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## The Domain of Inquiry for Media Management Researchers

At the April 1990 annual meeting of the Sales and Management division of the Broadcast Education Association, James Webster responded to a group of papers on media management with a probing question: How does the study of media management differ from research done by departments of economics or by schools of business administration? Webster stated that there probably was no separate domain for the study of media management. A lively discussion ensued, without much consensus among the participants.

Just as scholars in the "interpersonal and public communication" field have wrestled with the questions of domain of inquiry, so too have mass communication researchers. The problem of staking out a separate domain for a specialty area such as media management presents an even greater struggle. This paper is a first step toward a conceptual domain for the study of media management.

Every field of exploration has three components: a set of scholars, a domain of inquiry, and a methodology (Reinharz, 1982). This paper focuses on the second component: What is it that makes media management research distinct from the domains of inquiry found in other academic units, such as economics and business administration? What is it that media management researchers do?

This task is marked with difficulty. Capella (1987) has warned:

Attempts to define whole domains of inquiry are usually doomed to be inaccurate or incomplete. No sooner has the pen been lifted from paper but an uncooperative researcher will have published a new line of inquiry that seems not to fit the newly penned definition. (p. 185)

He allowed that the definition of domains of inquiry functions as both detecting trends and making trends.

#### Communication Analogy

Defining the domain of media management is analogous to the larger problem of separating the study of communication into a separate domain of inquiry. As for almost any specialty area of media research, part of the difficulty for communication in particular lies in the relative youth of the field. Wilbur Schramm noted a generation ago that communication was not a discipline like mathematics, but "an academic crossroad where many have passed, but few have tarried" (1963, p. 2). Since then, however, communication has acquired "the trappings of a discipline" (Berger & Chaffee, 1987, p. 15). As the study of the communication has grown--most noticeably in its diversity of journals and institutions--the domain has widened considerably. Qualitative methodologies first developed in Europe are probably responsible for the broadening of the communication discipline (Merton, 1957; Brown, 1970; Gerbner, 1983; Tan, 1986).

Assuming that defining communication is possible, such an activity has been the most common first-step toward delineating its domain of inquiry. Krippendorf (1969) defined communication as "a process of transmission of structure among the parts of a system which are identifiable in time and space" (p. 107). This accounts for a wide range of emphases: communication as messages, communication as process, communication as technical facilities. Krippendorf was concerned with what distinguishes inquiries into processes of communication from other fields. He rejected the usual disciplinary differentiations: unique method, specific subject, narrow purpose. Instead, he emphasized "the theoretical commitment" to the objects observed. (p. 111).

Definitions are somewhat less complex for a field such as interpersonal communication or mass communication. For one thing, the scope is limited to human communication. Capella (1987) stated that the essential feature of interpersonal communication "is that persons influence one another's behavior over and above that attributed to normal baselines of actions" (p. 228). Mass communication is similar, but with the additional filter of the gatekeeper (Westley & MacLean, 1957; White, 1950). More than any area of mass communication theory, the idea of the gatekeeper is best-suited to research on media managers.

Some writers have indicated that the quest for a domain of inquiry for communication research is independent of a given definition of communication. Sayre (1948) asserted that communication is not definable. B. Aubrey Fisher (1978) guessed that if one visited any ICA or SCA convention, tripped ten members at random in the hall, and asked for a definition of communication--there would be ten differing answers. Fisher summarized a diverse range of definitions, including the transmission of symbols model (Shannon & Weaver, 1949) and the idea of "shared meaning" (Gode, 1959). The common property is that communication is a process based on social integration. He concluded that defining communication is "incredibly simple . . . . But understanding communication is considerably more complex" (p. 10). Hence, a definition of communication ensues from the perspective employed to understand it--not the other way around.

#### The Narrow Focus on Media Management

This distinction between knowledge and understanding is important to the domain of media management. Researchers in other disciplines have studied media management as both the dependent variable and the independent variable, usually the latter. But media management itself has not been their focus for very long. Sociologists and organization communication researchers are more interested in how people behave in groups or cultures. Psychologists study

individual behavior. Researchers in business schools seek to understand the managerial process. To do this, some develop models that define the process. Others compile lists of functions that describe the process. The most dedicated find ways to explain the process.

Because of the recent institutionalizing of electronic media study, some researchers feel ill at ease borrowing from economics and business. However, they may be falsely basing the precedence of other fields on ivy-covered buildings. Just as the philosophy of science precedes discipline-specific discussions of theory and methodology, the broader study of communication precedes other fields of human science (Thayer, 1968; Schramm, 1971). Does historical precedence give a given social field "squatter's rights" to a domain of inquiry? Rather than a media management researcher being concerned with "doing" economics, the economist might just as well be worried about "doing" media management.

This "doing" is the essence of any specialty area's domain of inquiry. The underlying assumption that particular problems must be unique to a field is not new. Gluckman and Devons proposed that researchers have a duty to follow "a rule of disciplined refusal to trespass on the field of others" (1964, p. 168). However, strict adherence to the rule would have prevented Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson (1967) from crossing over from the psychology department

into the domain of communication with their pragmatic perspective and modified general systems theory.

Unique theory and a corresponding set of problems present one way of delineating a unique domain for communication research. Despite the withering of effects-oriented domains like cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1962) and persuasion (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953), there are several enduring theoretical perspectives under which mass communication researchers labor. The uses and gratifications paradigm (Blumler & Katz, 1974), the agenda-setting function of the media (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), and knowledge gap studies (Tichenor, Donohue, & Olien, 1970) are three examples of domains of inquiry unique to mass communication research.

Media scholars should not suffer the criticisms of older fields of science, such as economics and business. The media industries are too ubiquitous to be unimportant. Neither should researchers in the social science disciplines envy scholars in the hard sciences. Chemistry squandered centuries of research on alchemy. Medicine was practiced by barbers not so long ago. Even today, physicists cannot decide whether light is a particle or a wave. Indeed, light is a wave and a particle, depending on the type of experiment and methodology.

Krippendorf (1969) has said, "problems are the sole motivation for inquiries" (p. 112). Regardless of the inquiry, methods are only

tools to solve problems. Maslow (1946) argued against means-centering, believing that it leads to a hierarchy of sciences and a reification of methodology. The kinds of problems--the domain of inquiry--changes over the years, but the development of theory and explanations is constant. Capella (1987) could just as well have been speaking of mass media management when he summed it up this way:

The most accurate and least explicit definition of interpersonal communication as a field of study would be what researchers do and what they allow other researchers to publish under the title of interpersonal communications. On this view, a definition of interpersonal communication will always be incapable of capturing the history and dynamic current affairs that characterize an active and lively scholarly community bridging several disciplines. (p. 185)

#### What Makes Media Industries Different?

The first step is staking out a specialty area such as media management is to enumerate ways in which that area is "special" to media studies. Lavine and Wackman (1988) identified five factors that differentiate media industries from most manufacturing concerns: (1) the "perishable commodity" nature of the product, (2) the type of employees (e.g., being highly creative and perceiving themselves as members of a profession), (3) the type of organization structure



("flexible, horizontal structure"), (4) the societal role of the media (e.g., high visibility and large influence), and (5) the blurring of lines among the traditional media (p. 14-21). The first and third factors are probably the least useful distinctions, because other non-media businesses deal in perishable commodities and operate with a horizontal structure.

Based on a careful reading of the few media management textbooks which address theoretical issues, the following list suggests how media industries are different from other kinds of industries.

1. Media industries are often larger than life. On the surface, studying media industries is merely analyzing business and finance. Some would argue that one business is much the same as another, with minor differences. Yet, Irving Berlin would have had us believe that "there's no business like show business" (Annie Get Your Gun, 1947). Is this necessarily an exaggeration? Is there another area of management and finance connected to as much "larger than life" excitement than that of media industries?

2. Media industries operate in a fishbowl. Marcus (1986) postulated an "ego variable" among media managers that is unmatched in other industries. Most certainly, the decisions (and subsequent successes and failures) of media managers frequently receive greater attention than other types of business, with the possible exception of sports franchises. Media managers are very

closely identified with a highly-visible industry, such that they often become a public extension of that industry. Because the media are continually visible, almost by definition, their managers are closely linked to the media by a wide segment of the public. It is not unusual for the manager of a broadcast station, for example, to "take personal" any criticism of station policy. In essence, such managers "become" their own stations.

3. Media industries lack "unique expertise" in the eyes of consumers. Few ordinary citizens pretend to know much about banking, manufacturing, or providing complex services. Yet, many who own a television set or read a magazine seem to be experts on the media. This is the price the media pays for being ubiquitous. There is no shortage of people who think they understand the intricacies of the media and, therefore, wonder why media managers are sometimes ineffectual. Unless there is a 265-million-barrel oil spill off the coast of Alaska, there are few who would dare to question the management of a company like Exxon. Nevertheless, almost anyone can offer an opinion on the running of mass entertainment companies, such as television networks and motion picture studios.

4. Media industries manage creativity. With rare exceptions, mass media managers deal with an unusually free-spirited band of practitioners. Of course, the intangible qualities of a business can haunt managers in any area of endeavor. It is in the mass media

industries, however, that nearly all of the employees are producing an intangible product held loosely together by something as nebulous as human creativity. As sales people, for example, mass media managers are selling the sizzle more often than the steak. Ettema and Whitney (1982) provided many directions for studying the role of creativity in mass media organizations.

5. Media industries are webs of gatekeeping. Although the concept of gatekeeping originally described the activities of wire copy editors in the newspaper industry (White, 1950), high-level media managers today are frequently involved with news decisions. Moreover, it is no exaggeration that the media act as a giant filter for all public discourse. Some would argue (e.g., Postman, 1986) that the media even prevent public discourse. As gatekeepers, the media industries are responsible for "agenda-managing" the public's access to information. Dimmick and Coit (1982) suggested that media decisions are made on many levels, such that the organization itself acts as a gatekeeper. Whitney (1982) summarized studies in which gatekeeping itself varied with the different levels of analysis, from individual to institutional.

Such an approach to gatekeeping suggests many research questions for those who would claim the domain of media industry studies. If media systems are hierarchical, then who are the real gatekeepers? How often do the media managers, from the top level,

exert control on the free flow of information?

This list is far from comprehensive. A few points are certainly debatable. At the very least, most of these alleged differences make interesting research questions. At the most, however, they may point to a theoretical framework for media management.

#### Areas for Further Research

Starting with the idea of gatekeeping, there is a need for a comprehensive model of media management. Such a conceptual framework should embody one or more of the "differences" exhibited by media industries, as listed above. Webster (personal communication, November 29, 1990) has suggested such a framework should include "managing creativity on one hand and managing the audience's consumption of that creative output on the other."

The call to theoretical commitment by Krippendorf (1969) suggests that research into media management should spend more effort on building theory. For example, there is a need for an examination of the exact role of the media manager, beyond that of a gatekeeper. Does the influence of management operate at different levels (e.g., economic, political, social) of the organization?

Future studies of media industries could focus on more critical, and less administrative, aspects of sales and management. Webster (1989) mapped the study of media management under the realm of administrative studies, but called for a commitment to disciplined

pluralism of both realms. A robust investigation of the forces at work in media ownership may serve to enhance understanding of media management. Students of media studies would benefit from more attention to broader issues, though not necessarily at the expense of a practical education.

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