

Scientific Conferences and the Communication of Enlightenment

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ABSTRACT: As institutionalized practices for the efficient transmission of enlightenment, scientific conferences carry structural liabilities preventing them from maximizing the task performance for which they were constituted. An example is presented of an international conference, and Q methodology is employed to demonstrate the intellectual themes implicit among those in attendance. Examples are provided of the ways in which the results from the Q study could be used to facilitate the conference's intellectual mission by focusing on the already existing schemata of the participants.

One of the major vehicles for the dissemination of new ideas and information is the professional conference, such as that sponsored by the International Society for the Scientific Study of Subjectivity. These conferences, whether academic or otherwise, are elaborate social systems with histories and evolving structures that serve to resist rapid change (Griffith & Garvey, 1966). One author has recently concluded, for instance, that despite the challenge posed by the *postmodern conference*, it remains as complicit with hegemonic knowledge as the traditional conference it has sought to replace (Morton, 1987).

Part of the in-built conservatism of professional gatherings of this kind is due to the status hierarchies which it supports and which in turn support it (Edwards, 1982), and to the social functions which run in parallel, such as reuniting with school chums and visiting sites in the host city. Of the few studies which have examined these institutions,

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most have focused on these informal or non-work functions.¹ One such study in fact utilized Q methodology and demonstrated that some conference goers experienced the event as an opportunity to see old friends and converse with fellow professionals while others took opportunities to job-hunt; a third group was there for the intellectual enrichment (Arnold & Lee, 1974). What is often overlooked or given short shrift in studies of this sort is the work function itself, i.e., with the conference's intellectual content.

The Setting

An opportunity to contribute to the unnecessarily small number of studies along this line presented itself in 1977 when I was asked to join a small group assigned to make an internal appraisal of the 18th annual meeting of the International Studies Association (March 16-20, St. Louis). The program theme was "World-Wide Appraisal of Institutions: Toward Realizing Human Dignity," and it was preceded nine months earlier by a provocative article on "A Global Monitoring System: Appraising the Effects of Government on Human Dignity," by Richard C. Snyder, Charles F. Hermann, and Harold Lasswell (1976), three prominent figures in international relations, and which appeared in the prestigious *International Studies Quarterly* (June 1976), with responses to the initiative appearing in the following September and December issues.

In a nutshell, the idea behind the proposal for a Global Monitoring System (GMS) was to determine whether enlightenment could beat power at its own game. There are public and private organizations worldwide which are involved in intelligence gathering on one aspect or another of government functioning -- e.g., Amnesty International, World Bank, World Health Organization, World Wildlife Federation, etc. -- and the proposal involved creating a GMS that would coordinate and standardize appraisal of actual as contrasted with avowed performance of governments as these impact *human dignity*, defined as widespread participation in the creation, enjoyment, and sharing of a broad range of human values. The assumption was that governments

¹There is a surprisingly small literature on conferences, at least as determined by CD-ROM searches in a variety of databases. This situation can be expected to change inasmuch as conferences are increasingly subject to postmortems that permit of quantitative comparison.

whose actions were resulting in net value deprivations would be forced to mend their ways once their conduct relative to the family of nations became known.

The GMS proposal caused quite a stir at the ISA meeting,² and the meeting was structured in such a way as to both promote and channel lively debate. There was a slide show to clarify the historic role of appraisal, a mechanism for distributing a series of spontaneous "react notes" (a kind of on-going Hyde Park), theme panels designed to illuminate various features of the envisioned process, and plenary sessions for town-hall debate.

Transformation: From Phenomenon to Operant Factors

The mass of verbiage which this event occasioned is, of course, recognized in Q methodology as a concourse of communicability, and although of rarefied character -- participants were mainly academics and practitioners in the fields of international politics and law -- there were likely few words spoken or written that weren't immediately comprehensible by virtually all in attendance. Such is the nature of conscurring (Stephenson, 1980), of shared meaning, communicability, and understanding, which is not to imply harmony of perspective. Disagreement was vigorous, as can be inferred from a smattering of comment:

The GMS proposal offers something all too rare in policy science -- a multimethod blending of qualitative and quantitative indicators which recognizes both the need for standardized measures to facilitate analysis and the potentialities of forecasting methods.

With respect to ISA's theme on "Realizing Human Dignity," the ironic fact is that there was a singular lack of recognition of women's struggles for human dignity and equality in world society. This is a serious

²The initiative was short-lived, mainly due to the premature death of Harold Lasswell, on whose intellectual shoulders the project mainly rested. The last published work emanating from the GMS proposal is by Hermann and Hermann (1980), to which the reader is referred for key concepts, especially the functional category of *enlightenment* found in the title of this paper. That the GMS proposal did not itself succeed in no way limits the points made below about scientific conferences generally.

internal inconsistency with which ISA must come to grips before it seeks to appraise dignity vis-a-vis other institutions worldwide.

If taken seriously, the promotion of human dignity could be politically subversive. We must ask ourselves if we are really prepared to accept the consequences or whether we are only covertly using the idea of a GMS as a facade for an ideological perpetration of one kind or another.

And so on in large volumes -- so large, in fact, that even the most discerning of observers would have had difficulty keeping tabs on the intellectual to-and-fro and determining the boundaries of the sides taken. Such is the transitive character of communicability. Yet we know from prior experience that the application of Q methodology will reveal the existence of those vectors of intellectual commitment that are flowing into the concourse and contributing to its character.

Elements from the concourse were drawn from all previously mentioned sources -- from the original *International Studies Quarterly* article (June 1976 issue) and subsequent commentary (September and December issues), from conference papers and theme react notes, and from formal and informal verbalizations, whether whispered asides, shouted remonstrations, or pontifications from behind lecterns. The statements divided easily into three comprehensive attitudinal categories: (a) those which expressed optimism about the GMS project and were supportive of it, (b) those which were more tentative and which took the form of questioning, modifying, and warning, and (c) those which were pessimistic and critical of the proposal. While dividing the statements into the above three categories, it became obvious that there were at least two issue subcategories within each: (d) statements having to do with the GMS itself, mainly concerned with technical and methodological issues, and (e) those concerning human dignity and related normative issues. The result was $3 \times 2 = 6$ factorial combinations (ad ae bd be cd ce); $m = 7$ replications of each produced a Q sample of size $N = 42$.

A major purpose of a P set is to approximate comprehensiveness on the responder side of the ledger (just as the Q sample endeavors to approximate comprehensiveness on the stimulus side). In this instance, a packet of materials (Q sample, score sheet, instructions, and return envelope) was sent to each of 100 individuals whose names appeared in the ISA program, 40 names drawn from theme-related panels and presentations, and 60 others drawn randomly from non-theme presenters. Ultimately, $n = 38$ completed Q sorts were returned (22 theme related, 16 non-theme related). Factor analysis (principal axes with

varimax rotation) indicated three perspectives at issue in reaction to the proposal for a Global Monitoring System.

Factor A: The GMS Advocates

Demographically, those 10 persons purely defining factor A included both males and females, both political scientists and non-political scientists (including a psychologist, historian, and chemist), and both U.S. and non-U.S. citizens, and the average age was 44.7 years (range 31 to 63). In a certain sense, therefore, the group was somewhat heterogeneous; attitudinally, however, they were less diverse. Respondents were asked to indicate along a continuum (from +5 to -5) their degree of support for the GMS proposal, and the average for this group was $M=3.67$, which was the highest level of support among the three factors. Of the 10 defining the factor, 7 were associated with theme-related panels, one a co-author of the original GMS article; several others had ties of one kind or another to the project or to persons associated with it. Factor A was therefore not a disinterested perspective, and it should consequently occasion no surprise that the following statements not only received the highest factor scores but also serve to distinguish A from factors B and C (scores in parentheses for factors A to C, respectively):

- (+4 +2 0) 21. The ability of a GMS to provide balanced appraisals will depend on the involvement of professionals from the largest possible number of countries. Such involvement is required not only to insure diversity of perspectives, but also to prevent domination by any one nationality or group of nations.
- (+4 -3 +2) 24. "Human dignity" can perhaps capture the common yearning in all humankind if we view it as providing every individual with a meaningful degree of participation in the shaping and sharing of certain basic human values.
- (+4 -1 +1) 29. We cannot make guarantee of success a prerequisite to our efforts. The give and take inherent in the analytic process spawns victories as well as defeats. All we can ask, therefore, is that initial efforts to develop a GMS be characterized by caution, creativity, and cooperation.
- (+4 -2 +2) 35. In general, we need to foster a culture of civic appr-

aisal; the immediate task, therefore, is to promote a favorable disposition among publics everywhere toward systematic appraisal and to demonstrate its application whenever possible. More specifically, the distinctive task of the social and policy scientist is the further development, application, and dissemination of the techniques of systematic appraisal.

Due in large part to the rich character of the issues in controversy, many of the Q-sample statements are of unusual length and complexity; it is nonetheless apparent that these GMS Advocates have their shirtsleeves rolled up and are prepared to get on with the task, but they are not misty-eyed optimists: As the above statements assert, there are no guarantees of success (no. 29), we can expect defeats as well as victories (29), much will depend on the involvement of professionals (21), we can therefore only urge caution, creativity, and cooperation (29), and the development of methods of appraisal (35). Elsewhere in the factor array, there are indications that the Advocates' realism extends to issues of measurement and that their social agenda includes challenging the near monopoly that states have over appraisal of their own performance:

(+2 0 -1) 25. In innovating measurements and social indicators for the appraisal of institutional impacts on human dignity, we should be careful to avoid placing too much emphasis on technical refinements. We cannot be more precise and objective than the subject matter will permit.

(+3 -3 +1) 41. An important spin-off of the GMS would be an improvement in current self-appraisals by governments and a weakening of the near monopoly of control of appraisal data and facilities now in the hands of public institutions.

The Advocates, in sum, are prepared to move forward toward and to contribute to a culture of civic appraisal (Lasswell, 1975), while mindful of methodological, conceptual, and philosophical difficulties. Other features of this perspective will become clear as it is contrasted with the other two positions.

Factor B: The Methodological Critics

Factor B's concern is primarily methodological, and for the moment we will allow this characterization to hang by the following slim reed (scores for factors A to C, respectively):

(-3 +1 -3) 7. The idea of a GMS is laudable, even noble, but it

poses unresolvable methodological difficulties.

Factor B's response is a faint +1, but it stands out like a sore thumb next to the strong rejection of this view by A and C. An enterprise such as the GMS would pose significant methodological challenges, to be sure, and A and C recognize this, but they apparently view the problems as surmountable. We must therefore surmise that factor B either lacks A and C's knowledge about how to solve these methodological problems or perhaps sees problems which the other two groups do not see.

Before going into the details of this factor, however, it is worth examining some of the interesting demographic features of the nine persons whose Q sorts are defining. First, they were all male: There weren't many female respondents to begin with (6 of 38), but none was significantly associated with factor B. Second, they were all from the U.S.: Again, there were few non-U.S. participants to begin with (4 of 38), but as will be seen there may be good reasons why none sided with the Critics. Third, they were relatively young: 29.8 years on the average as compared with 44.7 and 45.8 for factors A and C; moreover, they were relatively homogeneous in age: $S=3.6$ as opposed to 12.5 and 13.4 for A and C. Finally, three of the nine were from the same department of political science, which was known then and continues to be known for its empirically hard-nosed approach to the study of international politics, and this turns out to be a key for understanding the Critics' viewpoint. The fact that a physicist also joined this factor (the remainder are political scientists) adds to the interpretation. Factor B rates the GMS project lowest: $M=-2.5$ on a +5/-5 scale.

The methodological concerns of these respondents appear to arise from the assumption that measurement implies universality -- How can we meaningfully appraise human dignity if the term is connotatively elastic? -- and this need for measurement universality they see as at odds with a plural and relativistic reality in which one person's conception of human dignity might not square with another's. Hence the responses to the following statements (scores for factors A to C, respectively):

- (+2 +4 -2) 2. Given the enormous diversity of human problems and pursued preferences, can we meaningfully speak of improving human dignity in a way that will pertain to everyone? This is an important consideration since, with a concept like human dignity, we must be certain that we

are not advancing terms that are empty shells -- words which are so elastic that they are stretched innumerable ways to encompass directly opposing ideas.

- (+1 +4 -2) 14. The important question is, Can we agree on what is more important in terms of the enhancement of human dignity: The opportunity to vote in competitive elections, or the opportunity to participate directly in the decision-making process of one's workplace, or some other particular behavior? Living in a world of ideological pluralism I am not sure we can agree on the nature, equivalence, and significance of different forms of "democratic" behavior.
- (-1 +4 -1) 33. Not only may individuals of the same small group rank-order values differently, they may view particular combinations as mutually exclusive or zero-sum. The issue, then, is not one of human dignity, but one of whose human dignity. When the context is broadened to include different cultures, economic groups, ideological orientations, and political systems, the definition of human dignity and who will possess it may become as effective a stimulus to fights, games, and debates as territory, oil, or religion.
- (+3 -4 +2) 18. "Human dignity" need not be treated as a divine or utopian state. It can be given operational meaning and applied as a durable standard against which to appraise our real world.

There are other measurement-related problems that bother factor B, which notes, for instance, that "the Soviet Union would never permit the independent assessment of its government, and Idi Amin would take the GMS reporter and cook him" (+3). These individuals are also critical of GMS proponents for failing to take into account similar initiatives already in operation, and they also express concern about the bias of a worldwide appraisal proposal sponsored mainly by U.S. academics, which is ironic given that only U.S. study participants shared the factor B viewpoint. This critical perspective on the GMS proposal was eloquently summed up in a comment offered by the person with the highest loading on factor B: "Jesus, that sure is pretentious."

Factor C: The Philosophers

Factor C also supports the GMS proposal ($M=2.7$ on the $+5/-5$ scale), but the fact that this level of support is below factor A's 3.7 betrays a certain ambivalence, which, it seems, turns mainly on a normative axis (normative, that is, in a philosophical as opposed to statistical sense). Explanations for this are not immediately obvious from the demographic features of the seven individuals defining the factor, which includes females as well as males, non-U.S. as well as U.S. participants, and individuals with training outside as well as inside political science. (One of the seven, a European male political scientist, stood alone in defining the negative pole of the factor.) As noted previously, the age range was wide (32 to 63, $M=45.8$).

The only thing which these factor C individuals seem to share is a common attitude, and one that mainly concerns normative issues. First, there is the issue of value relativism, which implicates those values which could be built into appraisal devices (such as the proposed GMS) and that might run afoul of other values dear to those being appraised. In this regard, note factor C's relative sensitivity to values and value differences (scores in parentheses for factors A, B, and C, respectively):

- (-2 +3 +4) 17. In many contexts, some of the value categories proposed are simply irrelevant. To someone who must scramble to eat once every three days, values other than narrowly defined "wealth" or "well-being" are abstract and irrelevant. It is not likely that a person would regard a free press as more important to this or her human dignity than eating, nor is it clear that the proposed GMS would result in that person's being less hungry.
- (-3 -1 +4) 6. With respect to ISA's theme on "Realizing Human Dignity," the ironic fact is that there was a singular lack of recognition of women's struggles for human dignity and equality in world society. This is a serious internal inconsistency with which ISA must come to grips before it seeks to appraise dignity vis-a-vis other institutions worldwide.
- (-1 +2 +4) 19. Appraisal in terms of one set of categories, if fully implemented, may ensure condemnation of institutions attempting to protect or express alternative or new

values.

- (+1 0 +4) 27. We must accept "human dignity" as a universal while, paradoxically, recognizing individual political and social differences in its practice and realization. It is a dialectical problem.

Factor C is hyperaware of value differences and is sensitive to the spectre of value imposition, i.e., of one group standing in judgment over another from an ideological perspective that might not be shared. There is an apparent apprehension that the GMS project, as well as the International Studies Association as a potential sponsor, might lead to a Western (or at least U.S.) value hegemony -- i.e., that GMS, rather than alleviating the situation, might simply turn out to be one more illustration of Western imperialism. Factor C is therefore caught in a bind: On the one hand, its members support the emphasis on values and the importance given values in the GMS proposal; on the other, they are concerned that values not be politicized in the sense of being used as a weapon for the ideological domination of one group by another.

Implications

As someone firmly in the factor A camp (although I did not take the Q sort myself), I would venture that factor B's and to a lesser extent C's opposition to the GMS proposal was due in part to lack of familiarity with the conceptual framework of which the proposal was an extension. Many of the foundation ideas of the so-called Lasswell-McDougal approach to "policy-oriented jurisprudence" are to be found in law journals with which political scientists are generally unfamiliar (see, for example, Tipson, 1974), and so opponents might be forgiven for posing *theoretical* objections about a *metatheoretical* conceptual framework. Factor C therefore misses the point when asserting as a theoretical matter that "appraisal in terms of one set of categories, if fully implemented, may ensure condemnation of institutions attempting to protect or express alternative or new values" (statement 19 above); rather, the metatheoretical point is that any system of appraisal that aspires to comprehensiveness will be incomplete that does not touch base with a representative range of values of the kind recommended by Lasswell and McDougal (i.e., power, enlightenment, wealth, well-being, skill, affection, respect, rectitude), a point made by Stephenson (1973) as well.

We are of course familiar with the hazards which conceptual misunderstandings pose for the communication of ideas; our more immediate concern is somewhat different, however -- namely, the navigational hazards to the flow of enlightenment which arise from the nature of the academic conference itself, and how these hazards might be moderated.

Anyone who has ever attended a major scientific conference needs no reminders about the controlled chaos which gatherings of this sort embody -- of ferreting out potentially interesting panels from the overwhelming mass of uninteresting ones, of obtaining manuscripts, of chance encounters with old acquaintances (and skilled avoidance of others), of unpredictable sides-taking during panel discussions, of aimless browsing through the publishers' bookstalls, of impulsively chucking a panel and moving venue to a more promising arena, and so forth. It is difficult within this morass of both social and intellectual meandering to detect the main channels of epistemic hunger that contribute to the direction of activity, and it is to the credit of Q methodology that it can provide clarity in this regard by revealing those vectors of *intentionality* (Stephenson, 1993) that are implicated in much of what transpires. The task, however, is not simply to reveal factor structures, but to suggest how they might be used in achieving the goals toward which the factors point, i.e., how they might be employed to leverage advances in enlightenment by avoiding the bogs of pseudo problems.

Conventional ways of constituting panels include falling back on friendship circles or selecting participants in terms of their reputations, training, or membership in some more abstract category such as empiricist and humanist (see, for example, Potter, 1988). One immediate way in which Q-method results could be used for practical purposes in this regard would be to compose panels based on the factor analytic results. Consider, as an illustration, the factor loadings for the following six participants associated with factors A, B, and C of the GMS study (loadings in bold are significant):

| | | | |
|-----|------|------|------------------------|
| .91 | .02 | .06 | 1. psychologist |
| .84 | -.12 | .20 | 2. political scientist |
| .09 | .80 | .02 | 3. political scientist |
| .20 | .69 | -.01 | 4. physicist |
| .14 | .07 | .60 | 5. political scientist |
| .09 | .14 | .56 | 6. sociologist |

Hence respondents 1 and 2 are among the GMS Advocates (factor A),

3 and 4 are among the Methodological Critics (B), and 5 and 6 are among the Philosophers (C) who had normative reservations about the GMS. A plenary presentation by political scientists 2, 3, and 5 would serve to focus a penetrating beam on the main perspectives at issue by selecting as presenters those who, to judge by their factor saturations, would be best able to articulate each point of view. In this instance, the factor results would provide a convenient opportunity to take advantage of diversity in training by asking respondent no. 1 (a psychologist associated with factor A), no. 4 (physicist, factor B), and no. 6 (sociologist, C) to comment on all three presentations from their disciplinary standpoints, with rejoinders then following from the political scientists. While providing no guarantees, the functional strategy sketched out above would improve chances of getting to the nub of matters when compared with a panel comprised of individuals selected for their memberships in conventional categories but with unknown status when viewed operantly.

It is not difficult to conceive of experiments which could be constructed to fine-tune panel design. Three separate panel presentations could be arranged, for example, in which single presenters from factors A, B, or C would then be challenged by questioners from the other two factors. In addition, non-panelists drawn from the three factors could be strategically placed in the audience to serve as "social indicators," with subsequent re-Q sorting being used to detect which of the factor attitudes (if any) began to change in light of deliberate exposure to the arguments of the others. Experiments of this kind will be recognized as having been systematically organized in such a way as to provide answers to the following questions (Lasswell, 1948):

| | |
|------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Who? | spokespersons for factors ABC |
| Says what? | perspectives of factors ABC |
| Through which channel? | the functionally constructed panel |
| To whom? | audiences comprised of factors ABC |
| With what effect? | measured changes (if any) in ABC |

The factor results can also be employed to clarify the "says what?" aspect of the process by identifying those elements most worth saying something about in the first place. Consider, for illustrative purposes, the following statement (scores for factors, A, B, and C, respectively):

- (+3 -4 0) 15. The GMS proposal offers something all too rare in policy science -- a multimethod blending of qualitative and quantitative indicators which recognizes both the need for standardized measure to facilitate analysis and the potentialities of forecasting methods.

As expected, factor A is optimistic about this matter while factor B is characteristically critical; the normative philosophers defining C may lack the technical training requisite to holding an informed view about this, but for whatever reason have given the statement a score of zero. This statement by itself could provide the focus for a panel devoted to clarifying the implications and drawing out differences between A and B. Or consider the ideological dimension on which the following two statements converge:

- (0 0 +3) 5. We need a science of value as well as a science of facts in order to achieve an adequate appraisal of institutional effects on human dignity. We need to know whether conservative or socialist ideologies are merely matters of taste, or whether some ideologies are more conducive to realizing human dignity than others.
- (0 0 +3) 37. The ideological reaction to global monitoring, from conservatism to radicalism, will plague all our efforts to develop a worldwide appraisal of institutions toward realizing human dignity, unless this dimension itself is brought into focus as one of the objects of that appraisal. Otherwise, the project may fail by leaving out that upon which everything else depends.

A panel on this topic would provide an occasion for factor C to lecture A and B about the importance of an issue (as C sees it) about which the other two groups are perhaps insufficiently sensitive; or for A and B to convince C that its apprehensions in this regard are much ado about nothing.

Humans assemble around tasks and for purposes of achieving collectively what cannot be achieved singly; assembling brings with it new weaknesses as well as strengths, however, and necessitates continuing effort to ensure that the former do not nullify the advantages of the latter. (One of the best summaries of the threat to the work function posed by non-work forces remains Bion, 1961.) The scientific conference is unique in this respect inasmuch as the threats to its

effectiveness -- from individual loyalties, theoretical blinders, ambiguous composition, and other defects literally too numerous to mention -- are diametrically opposed to the very enlightenment which the conference was created to advance. (All conferences are subject to counter-enlightenment threats, but the scientific conference is unique because its purpose is to advance enlightenment, which is the opposite.) The conference work-function can use all the help it can get, and in this regard the Q-methodological procedures described above can assist by shoring up the focus of attention, thereby helping the group to remain on task.

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