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 Stephenson, W. Homo ludens: the play theory of advertising. *Rivista Internazionale di Scienze Economiche e Commerciali*, 1979, 26, 634-653.

COMMENT BY WILLIAM STEPHENSON

As one writes these lines, it is fifteen years since *The Play Theory of Mass Communication* was published (1967), and Professor Wilkerson's paper affords an opportunity to ask why it is still ignored in communication theory and research. Twenty years ago I was surprised to find that communication theorists, making an ideal of objectivity, overlooked that mass communication at its best is a form of subjective play. The informational function of the mass media is an interlude, still, in the daily thrust of the media to entertain people, for whatever ulterior purposes, and even the *news* programs are in ludenic form, however biased one way or the other. The play theory sought to provide means for exploring the *play* at issue, and to explain the nature of its enjoyment. The ulterior purposes were categorized into two main areas of concern, that of *social control*, and the other *convergent selectivity*, the key into the former being *communication pain* (as loss of self) and into the latter, *communication pleasure* (as gain of self). The real problem concerned the latter concepts, of communication pain and communication pleasure, i.e., of making gain or loss of self operational. The real question, thereafter, was what did this matter?

The theory called for an abductive methodology, not the hypothetico-deductive methodology assumed by Wilkerson: For this we make no excuse, since we are in the forefront of science method, and not dragging behind the 19th century deductive methodology. The theory remains highly viable, even according to Schramm (1973), who, like Wilkerson, nevertheless misunderstood it. One has to ask, then, why it remains completely ignored, and almost completely misunderstood?

This comment can suggest three answers. We tried

to kill too many birds with one stone in *The Play Theory of Mass Communication*: It was also a polemic for Q methodology. Next, it required wide scholarship for its understanding--a matter to which I shall return in due course. Third, communication research and theory remained then, and is still, locked in an ideal of objectivity. J.M. Foley (1979), in an overview of mass communication, theory and research, remarks on the tremendous amount of research done in the field in recent years, and adds:

Paradoxically, I find I am also impressed by how little we seem to have learned. We have a multitude of individual fragments of information, each of which is interesting itself. However, most of these fragments are isolated; they do not fit together to make a united whole. (Foley, 1979: 263)

He continues into an assertion that there is general agreement that we have not found "the kind of general laws that have been discovered and accepted in the physical sciences":

...Thus far we have discovered little that even remotely approaches the foundation of law and theory which has been the framework for so much of the development of the physical sciences...[and] ...It is debatable whether such laws will ever be discovered in social science research. Perhaps there are no general laws appropriate for the social sciences and the search for them is futile. (Foley, 1979: 264)

However, he has to say that perhaps we have not found these general laws because we have been studying the wrong variables.

Not only should we *not* be studying *variables*, but the notion, common to the field, that laws are to be *discovered*, like finding gold in California, is wrongly posed. This is not to say that nature is without lawfulness; but, since Einstein, physicists and biologists have learned that laws have to be used as *in-*

structions which help the scientist to devise his experiments and thus to find his way about in reality. This approach is essential for research on mass communication for the same reasons that made it necessary and sufficient for research in nuclear theory-- matters are too complex to make formal representation, as in geometry, either possible or necessary. One has to make discoveries, not logic. Thus, our theories are in league with experimentation, not merely logic: We are not testing a definition of "play," but experimenting with "playful" situations, each unique. A rough definition of "play" is all one needs to begin the process of experimenting with such situations: We study the Royal Wedding of Charles, Prince of Wales to Lady Diana Spencer, not anyone's definition of "play."

How, then, did our theory proceed?

It meant digging into *subjective play*, as immediate experience--not audiences, but self-referent statements, were expressly asserted as the foundation of the theory (Stephenson, 1967: 31f).

Thus, Wilkerson's conclusion that our theory is about mass audiences could not be more mistaken: That it can proceed in that direction isn't what is fundamentally at issue.

Theoretically, there was Freud's famous paper, "The Relation of the Poet to Daydreaming" (1908). *Stories* are at issue, of poets and people talking, not merely or even necessarily to give information, but for communicability, with the self as projected hero or heroine. Stories are subjective play, without formal rules, such as in tennis, but with self reference everywhere urgent for expression. There was also Murray's *Thematic Apperception Test* (1938), giving substance to such projection.

Then there was Huizinga's *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (1950). For Huizinga, culture begins in play. One could grasp at once the stabilizing function of ritual in religion, of pageantry in armies, of formality in the civil courts, of "natural symbols" in the family (Douglas, 1970): All such involved social controls (LaPiere, 1954), supporting the ancient institutions of church, the

military government, law, family, and by the same token subject to *communication pain*, a loss of self (Szasz, 1957) in the sense that one was under command of others--as in religion, the army, courts, family. But there were some new institutions, of cultural proportions, those of political government, advertising, and mass communication. In these there was abundant subjective play, not yet ritualized, but smothered in changing myths. For these there was the promise of a different principle, of convergent selectivity (Blumer, 1955) and *communication pleasure*, with a gain in self (Stephenson, 1967), a counterpart to Szasz's concept. Anyone who has seen the pride in the demeanor of a Latin American peasant at the casting of a political vote--the peasant illiterate, in bundled habit--will recognize the core of this concept, of self expressiveness for oneself, without harm to anyone. And note that it doesn't require a two-party political system to give this sense of self expression! Communists can experience it, and Cubans, with one-party systems.

The problem was, how to find operatives for the self concepts. This we solved with Q methodology, in which self is central to all else. We could experiment with the immediate experiences individuals have with regard to ritual, pageantry, formality, and "natural symbols"--with any feature in play form, subject to social control. We could also do the same with respect to experience of *movies* (Stephenson, 1978), *poetry* (1972), *literature* (1980). We first wrote, however, about political play, in a volume *Amelioration of Political Conflict* (1961) which scandalized its political science reviewer, and was rejected for publication. Several of its chapters, however, found a place in *The Play Theory of Mass Communication*, including a chapter on a masterpiece of broadcasting, "The Army-McCarthy Hearings," and another on "Khrushchev's Visit to the United States," also a marvel of mass communication at the time. Still another chapter, on "The Democratic Myth," remains decades ahead of its time. Nor were any of the applications trivial exercises in subjectivity, unresponsive to worldly troubles: The ideas of peace, se-

curity, safety, and relaxation were shown to be dominant in Europe while the Voice of America was communicating symbols of struggle, conflict, effort (Stephenson, 1967: 164f), just as it is today with symbols of strident militarism in Latin America instead of those of care for the suppressed, and political amelioration. We studied the Cuban crisis (Stephenson, 1964a), and the Kennedy-Nixon television debates (Stephenson, 1964b). A political science based on the *needs* of a culture would concern itself with such matters, providing professional mass communication with *people* symbols in the place of military propaganda. One takes no second place to Wilkerson's Barnouw in appreciation of the wickedness loose in the world! But Hitler's stormtroopers seemed to enjoy their goosestepping; and whereas TV in the U.S.A. is largely puerile, that of the B.B.C., by wide consent, is not. Our immediate concern is with the part played by *self* in all such, focused upon individuals; but the rubrics of social control and convergency are as significant for us, as *principles* which replace the broad ideologies of our institutions. What we learn at one end of the individual bears upon the other in society: One hoped that ultimately a full social science would so bloom, with subjective play at its origins, and with behavioral play, myths and rituals, in full swing. The rest would belong to information science, in which *self* is altogether missing.

It may be objected that the theory is not about the mass media, but only about how people react to it. This is not so: The content of the media is largely a matter of factualities (Arendt, 1967), that is, of *stories* about events, with whatever may be the *facts* (as information). The content has precisely the same form as everyday common communicability, of events dressed up (and often lied about) as stories. Unhappily, most communication theorists attend to the facts, if at all, and never to the factualities: For them, it seems that the media, like laser beams, can cut holes in the most obdurate of human needs and wishes--they can only do so, our theory suggests, in relation to social control and

convergent selectivity conditions.

How self reference enters our theory was the subject of an address in 1978 to the Dutch Advertising Association, published as "Homo Ludens: The Play Theory of Advertising" (Stephenson, 1979): It was shown that of two young married American women, equal in much of social status, income and marriage, one remained under social controls (as judged by Q sorts directed to such), whereas the other was much less so, and subject to convergent selectivity. The one kept a "tight rein on her money," buying only what "she considered to be the best"; she was fastidious, essentially quality-conscious. The other had much more fun in her consumer buying, being exploratory, enjoying sales, etc. This was as close as one could get to self expression in relation to consumership. Many other studies of the kind, using Q, pointed to the ties most individuals have to social control influences, compared with others who are freeing themselves from these influences. One need not doubt this, to judge by the rising divorce rates, the sexual revolution amongst the young, and the like of the modern Western culture! But this in no way is to suggest that the freedoms of convergent selectivity far outweigh the values attendant upon social controls: As one was careful to indicate in *The Play Theory of Mass Communication*, the problem in a developing society is to retain the stabilizing influences of social controls, without stifling the freedoms of convergent selectivity. Nor are the freedoms, so-called, of divorces and sexuality necessarily attended by communication pleasure: Communication pain is much more likely. Illicit love affairs may occasion more of pain than pleasure. The burgeoning entrepreneurship of the thousands of marginal religious movements in the United States (Zaretzky & Leone, 1974) are entirely communication pain, with complete self destruction in the Jonestown deaths in Guiana.

Clearly no simple litmus test is at issue with regard to these concepts of communication pleasure and pain. The mechanics of self reference are complex, which, of course, is probably the main reason why our

theory is ignored: But we have more to say on this score. Faced with doubts, it is worth looking at an example of a reaction to one of the triumphs of mass communication of this century, the B.B.C. broadcast of the wedding of Charles, Prince of Wales, to Lady Diana Spencer on July 29th, 1981, at St. Paul's Cathedral. Subsequently, we shall look as closely, in the same way, at reactions to President Reagan's "State of the Union" message of February 1982.

We should note, however, how scientific we are! The recent paper "Q-methodology, Interbehavioral Psychology, and Quantum Theory" (Stephenson, 1982) now confronts the Foleys. It is perhaps not incidental that its author was physicist before becoming psychophysicist, and then psychologist, and, as one reviewer of *Play Theory* wondered, perhaps our methodology and thinking is "more the man"? It looks as though he was right, to judge by the total neglect of the theory and misuse of the methodology! But we hope not, for so much can be done with both theory and methodology.

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...the aim of methodology is to help us to understand, in the broadest possible terms, not the products of scientific inquiry but the process itself.
(Abraham Kaplan)