

## THE 1980 ECA PANEL ON PLAY THEORY

The 1980 meeting of the Eastern Communication Association convened April 24-26 at the Carousel Hotel in Ocean City, Maryland. Under the direction of Theodore Glasser of the University of Hartford, the Mass Communication Interest Group of the ECA presented a panel entitled "Stephenson's Play Theory of Mass Communication." The papers presented and participants were: James R. Smith, State University of New York-New Paltz, chairperson; Theodore L. Glasser, University of Hartford, "Play, Pleasure, and the Value of Newsreading"; K.E. Wilkerson, Salisbury State College, "Media Ludentia"; Alexander Nesterenko, University of Tulsa, "Applying Q-Methodology to Mass Communication and Play: An Inquiry Into Subjectivity About Death"; Michael Stricklin (with Wilma Crumley and Lewis Zager), University of Nebraska-Lincoln, "Mass Media Technology and Bundling Behavior: A Ludenic Perspective"; Charles E. Cottle, University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, "Politics as Play and Politics as Work: A Q-Method Study of the 1976 Presidential Debates"; and William Stephenson, University of Missouri, respondent.

Perhaps appropriately for a discussion of play theory, the panel was held in the Racquet Club Disco of the Carousel Hotel. Although the colored spotlights were not in use, the black Naugahyde bar stools, the behemoth loud-speakers hanging from the ceiling, and the mirror-chip covered ball suspended directly above the panel participants initially created an ambience one hardly expects to find at academic gatherings of this sort. As the paper presentations got under way, the atmosphere remained quite pleasant, although there was no indication that anyone felt the inclination to dance.

The following paragraphs present brief summaries of the papers which were presented as well as a discussion of Stephenson's remarks. The first two papers presented were theoretical in orientation, i.e., they were essays which examined the history, utility, and logic of play theory as applied to mass communi-

cation. In contrast to these efforts, the last three presentations reported the results of varied data based projects.

#### PAPER SUMMARIES

Drawing upon the expansive body of literature on play, Glasser's paper, "Play, Pleasure, and the Value of Newsreading," examines the relationship between play as communication and the activity of newsreading. Central to the essay is Stephenson's theoretical contribution which articulates the linkage between play and what some theorists have deemed a "serious" matter. According to Glasser, communication theorists have generally been preoccupied with a transmission view of communication wherein communication is viewed as a process moving messages in space. From this perspective the reading of newspapers is understood only as information acquisition. Glasser asserts that such an approach largely ignores the symbolic and experiential dimensions of newsreading and, consequently, misses the cultural significance of newspaper consumption. In contrast to most communication theorists, Stephenson emphasizes the playful nature of newsreading. As a form of communication-pleasure, newsreading has consequences that go beyond the instrumental acquisition of information. Glasser points out that the newsreader acquires an enhanced sense of self, an opportunity to clarify goals and aspirations, and an appreciation for the larger society and community. Thus, newsreading leads to "ego-object integration" wherein the playful self becomes one with the objects it contemplates.

Glasser concludes with a call for an ethnographic approach to the study of newsreading. This will require an examination of the symbolic dimension of newsreading in which investigators attempt to uncover the conceptual structures that inform the act of reading the news. To this end Glasser suggests that Stephenson's Q methodology may prove useful.

In contrast to the generally laudatory tone of Glasser's essay, K.E. Wilkerson offered a strong critique of Stephenson's work. In his paper, "Media Lu-

dentia," Wilkerson remarks:

One requirement of an adequate theory even in the social sciences is that its terms be clearly defined; another is that the terms should accurately map onto the territory they are designed to comprehend; still another is that the territory not be arbitrarily bounded unless its boundaries are clearly limited to limitations of objectives. (p. 5)

According to Wilkerson, Stephenson's *The Play Theory of Mass Communication* fails on each count.

First, the term "play" itself is in doubt. Citing Jacques Erhman, Wilkerson asserts that Huizinga's definition of play, which Stephenson adopts, "makes no convincing distinction between play and seriousness, between gratuitousness and usefulness, play and work, play and everyday life" (p. 6). The notion of play is further confused by Stephenson due to certain discrepancies between Huizinga's and Stephenson's definitions.

Second, whereas play is partially defined by Stephenson as an interlude or break from routine, Wilkerson points out that mass media consumption is routine. Hence, any attempt to define mass media consumption as communication-pleasure or play fails in establishing the correspondence between the concept and the phenomena it is supposed to comprehend.

And third, Wilkerson feels that the various characteristics which Stephenson subsumes under play are not necessarily peculiar to it. He suggests that aspects of play such as voluntarism, disinterestedness, and pleasure pertain to other activities (e.g., eating when one is not hungry) as they do to play. Stephenson's definition, therefore, arbitrarily limits the domain of investigation.

Wilkerson concludes with a note on the explanatory and predictive capability of Stephenson's play theory. He argues that Stephenson's theory is not a theory of mass communication at all, but rather a *de facto* theory of mass audiences. It is advantageous only in that it can provide some insight into audience atti-

tudes and how those attitudes are formed, but it explains nothing we did not already know about the impact of mass communication upon society.

Turning now to the data based studies, Nesterenko's paper, "An Inquiry Into Subjectivity About Death," reports the results of a study based on Jacques Choron's *Death and Modern Man*. Nesterenko extracted 60 statements from Choron's book to form a Q sort which was then performed by a single subject under ten different conditions of instruction:

1. Describe your *own viewpoint* toward death, as you discuss death with yourself
2. Describe a *playful viewpoint* toward death
3. Describe your *father's viewpoint* toward death
4. Describe an *ideal viewpoint* toward death, as you would like it to be
5. Describe how you normally *discuss* death with others
6. Describe yourself as you are in your *dreams*
7. Describe your *mother's viewpoint* toward death
8. How do the *mass media* portray death?
9. Describe a *close friend's viewpoint* toward death
10. Describe the *church's viewpoint* toward death

The 10 sorts were subjected to centroid factor analysis and hand rotated to reveal three orthogonal factors. Factor A was composed of the subject's own viewpoint, the viewpoint he discusses with others, and the viewpoint of a close friend. Factor B sorts were a playful viewpoint, the father's viewpoint, an ideal viewpoint, the church's viewpoint, and the viewpoint portrayed by the mass media (negatively loaded). Factor C was composed of the single sort from the viewpoint of a dream experienced by the subject. The mother's viewpoint exhibited mixed loadings on factors A and B.

Nesterenko interprets factors A and B to be in conflict with each other, while factor C represents an attempt to resolve the conflict. Factor A depicts a point of view in which death is seen as a natural yet absurd and meaningless occurrence. Factor B depicts

a more traditional orientation towards death in which the fact of death is placed within a larger order which gives meaning and comfort to its occurrence. Factor B, however, finds expression in metaphor, a mode which conflicts with the rational (scientific) approach to knowledge exhibited in factor A. The synthetic function of factor C appears to occur in a mode of play in which life is viewed as "a profound adventure, a grand game." Interestingly, it is the figure of the mother in the dream which effects the conflict resolution between factors A and B.

Stricklin's paper (co-authored with Wilma Crumley and Lewis Zager), "Mass Media Technology and Bundling Behavior: A Ludenic Perspective," focuses on the activity of media consumers. Stricklin et al. argue that most studies of television viewing are too simplistic in that they fail to assess the actual activity of the "viewers." Instead of conforming to a *priori* researcher conceptions of what viewers should do when watching television, the authors suggest that viewer behavior is best conceptualized as "bundling," a complex of behavior in which the media user combines and switches attention from one medium to another. If total absorption in media consumption is the goal of the viewer, then bundling is that process whereby the goal is accomplished. Bundling, therefore, is a ludenic activity which is best understood from the vantagepoint of the media consumer. To this end the authors suggest that Stephenson's Q methodology, which objectifies subjectivity, is best suited to the task.

My own paper, "Politics as Play and Politics as Work: A Q-Method Study of the 1976 Presidential Debates," reports an attempt to demonstrate play and work orientations among 45 subjects who viewed the 1976 televised presidential debates. Following a brief review of theoretical points from the work of Huizinga, Riesman, and Stephenson, the results of a Q study based on those debates are presented. The 56 Q-sort statements were obtained through personal interviews with the subjects, and from a variety of commentary in the electronic and print media. The data were subjected to principal components factor

analysis and orthogonal rotation. Two major factors emerged which did appear to indicate that reactions to the debates depended in large measure upon the work or play orientations (social character) of the subjects. A follow-up study tended to confirm this interpretation.

The play oriented subjects displayed a generally positive attitude concerning the debates, despite the fact they could not assert that they had learned anything about the candidates or the issues which was not already known. These subjects tended to attend to the competitive aspects of the performance, and felt proud to live in a nation where such debates are possible. Moreover, the debates were fun. Work oriented subjects, in contrast, did not find the debates fun. Generally, they considered the debates a waste of time because nothing was learned. Underlying this factor was a strong tone of moral indignation at having been subjected to such a poor performance as that presented by the candidates.

#### STEPHENSON'S REMARKS

After the presentation of the papers, Stephenson spoke at some length on a wide variety of topics. It was my impression that he had some matters he wanted to discuss which touched only tangentially upon the content of the paper presentations. Other topics, however, were directly suggested by the research at hand. In the former category were such concerns as the genesis of Q methodology, including Stephenson's association with Spearman and Burt, his years at the University of Chicago, Q methodology and philosophy of science, and research now in progress or in press. To embark upon a discussion of Stephenson's remarks on these matters would quickly exhaust the space allotted for this report. Instead, I will confine the few observations which follow to his remarks on the paper presentations.

Noting that the dream component of Nesterenko's research on death illustrated the elegance of Q method, Stephenson went on to suggest that Nesterenko's research provides "an example of undercurrents

of operant subjectivity which are far more common than you would imagine." The dream interpretation as manifested in the Q-sort results reveals an "inherent structure" to subjectivity which can be found in such diverse places as the poetry of Keats and Yeats, Buddhism, or within the minds of children from different cultures.

This theme of inherent structure was picked up again in Stephenson's comments on Wilkerson's rather critical review of Stephenson's *The Play Theory of Mass Communication*. Obviously pleased that someone had taken him to task for his views, Stephenson enthusiastically and joyfully rebutted his critics. He cited DeFleur and Schramm as two leading communication theorists who do not understand his approach to theory nor the value of his inductive approach which, through "factor analysis, reveals operant factor structure inherent in phenomena." Although interpretation is the job of the researcher in Q methodology, the researcher cannot depart from the factor structure which often reveals an implicit lawfulness, or forms, within subjectivity.

Stephenson noted that while it has been some time since he worked with Riesman's theories, the concept of other-directedness is particularly appropriate for understanding current playful modes of media consumption in the United States. Referring to my paper on the 1976 presidential debates, he suggested that the Carter campaign as a whole was one directed at an other-directed populace. Similarly, Stricklin's paper on "bundling" reveals the playful approach to television consumption within an other-directed culture.

At the end of his talk, Stephenson turned to a few observations on his own career. After briefly summarizing his own work in the fields of statistics, psychology, politics, and communication, he concluded by noting that while he has been led into diverse fields of study over the years, all of his efforts have been directed at understanding the human condition from the subjective perspective.

*Reported by Charles E. Cottle*