

IAMCR Assembly

By George Gerbner,
Dean, Annenberg School
of Communications

THE TENTH GENERAL Assembly and Scientific Conference of the International Association for Mass Communication Research was held from 30 August to 4 September, 1976, at the University of Leicester, England. Over 300 IAMCR members from some 35 countries converged on the meeting in halls and residences of the University as the worst drought in 500 years broke and rain soaked fields and delegates alike.

Perhaps the chief accomplishment of the conference was its demonstration of the renewed vitality of an organisation that brings together communications scholars from the capitalist, socialist and "Third" worlds. Competing and conflicting ideologies were clearly recognised and acknowledged. But instead of stalemating fruitful discussion, the diversity of approaches to common problems in theory, methodology, and research collaboration became a unique contribution of the conference.

The four main working sessions of the conference were structured so as to make such an interchange possible, if not inevitable. Two persons from different areas chaired each half-day's working session. The main papers, circulated in advance, and the discussants designated for each session, provided carefully balanced cross-sections of major world perspectives on all main issues. The ideological mix also avoided the trap of bloc thinking and the dogmatic presentation of frozen positions. For example, it was an English scholar who advocated the primacy of standard sociological categories such as class structure in communications research, and an Eastern European colleague who maintained an open position on the 'primacy' question in theory.

The first session attempted to look at mass communication research in the broadest historical and social perspective. Plaintive calls for theory (has theory ever emerged because somebody called for it?) were balanced by specific examinations of cultural eras and conditions

that led to the rise of research in communications, and of the levels of theorising appropriate to the stages of development in the field. Some participants questioned the applicability of theories based on the experience of industrial countries to the needs of national development. But it was also pointed out that while each social system must find its own approaches, the research and policy problems of developed and developing countries were also related to one another; underdevelopment is partially a symptom of domination and exploitation, and is thus inseparable from the policies of developed countries.

These themes, and the problem of the links between theory and empirical research, reverberated throughout the conference. The second session produced a cluster of major themes revolving around the question of the role of the mass media in cultivating prevalent conceptions of society and generally maintaining the existing social order. Some contributions demonstrated how media act as agents of social control, how they preserve and promote dominant views, and how they reproduce the ruling ideologies of their societies. Others stressed the role of the media in promoting social change — or attempting to do so. A third view tried to reconcile the apparent contradiction by suggesting that media spread dominant ideologies into hitherto relatively isolated or protected areas thus both promoting the dominant perspective and changing competing conceptions.

The discussion of the role of the mass media led naturally to the major theme of the third session which was the power and influence of the media. After decades of minimizing media effects, researchers seem to have realised that the difficulty of changing attitudes and behaviour by isolated campaigns under otherwise stable cultural circumstances demonstrates the power of the media mainstream in cultivating resistance to change. Several contributions stressed the power of television, for example, in creating a new, organic, and universal symbolic environment which forms assumptions about life, society, and politics almost from birth, and shows up in research as a new 'demographic'

variable distinguishing between heavy and light viewers.

Others contributed views and data on the social constraints and decision-making processes that shape media production and content. Conspicuous by its absence was the conventional social-psychological 'persuasion' approach to media influence.

The fourth major subject was the flow of media materials across ethnic, cultural and national boundaries, and the consequences of this flow for the integrity and stability of societies. The imbalances and distortions of this flow are generally understood by now, and most of the discussion revolved around the reporting of current trends and the explanation of different policies. It is clear that Western urbanised media materials have transformed the traditional cultures of their own societies and can do the same to others. The questions explored at the conference were why that happens and whether it must be so. The export of professional production, ideologies and standards was seen as an influence equal to the export of actual materials. The volume of the demand for programming and the costs of production for relatively small markets were recognised as factors in the uneven flow. Hope was expressed that research now underway will shed light on the dynamics of transnational media flow and assist countries to design national policies on a sounder basis.

The fifth working day was loosely structured to permit the organisation of special interest groups to form around issues that individual members announced in advance or that had emerged during the conference. In many ways this turned out to be the participants' opportunity to extend the discussions into the realm of concrete research and future scholarly collaboration. A special interest group on Cultural Imperialism continued to elaborate the themes of the fourth working session and to share information about forthcoming publications and research efforts in that area. Another group discussed the practical requirements and opportunities of a multi-national cooperative research project on television content and effects, called Cultural Indicators, and planned a workshop of active and potential participants for 1977. •

Next IAMCR Assembly: Warsaw, 1978.