

Book Reviews

Karl Erik Rosengren:

Communication: An Introduction

Sage, London/Thousand Oaks/New Delhi, 2000, 219 s.

(Also published in Chinese, Italian, and Spanish)

At a time when several of the founders of European media and communication research are retiring, at least from their formal academic positions, it is encouraging to still encounter them as active contributors to the field at conferences and through publications. Their original conceptions of where the field should move, and their current perceptions of where it is, in fact, moving, are of evident interest to its second generation of researchers.

Karl Erik Rosengren's latest book reflects such conceptions and perceptions, but presents itself as a general introductory textbook. Even its title is modest, compared, for example, to Denis McQuail's (2000) bestselling introduction, which in its fourth edition is now simply titled *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory*. On the back cover, however, Rosengren's volume is endorsed by both Emeritus Professor McQuail and Emeritus Professor Jay Blumler, as part of its positioning in a field that is, necessarily, also a market. According to McQuail, Rosengren's book has "an equal power to inform novices and to stimulate and delight older hands."

It is easy to agree that this book is a valuable statement on, and in, the field, and that it will be a useful resource for its readers in a variety of contexts. As noted in Blumler's blurb, one of its unique features is that it spans "interpersonal, group, organizational, mass-societal, and international levels of communication." Another characteristic feature is that the volume suggests ways of placing some of the constitutive concepts of the field both in the history of research and in the history of ideas. The introductory Chapter 1 in Part I specifies key concepts and terms of an "elusive phenomenon" which is being studied in an "emergent discipline" (p. 1). Particular emphasis is placed on the relations between theories and models in different traditions of research, and, like later chapters, the

introduction presents several typologies and systematics in which to compare traditions. The two chapters in Part II next lay out the forms, levels, and functions of communication with illustrative examples. Chapter 2 reviews, for example, the differences and similarities between human and (other) animal communication as well as the long historical line "from writing to printing to computing" (p. 42), and Chapter 3 begins to describe and exemplify the roles of communication in society with reference to issues such as socialization and social change. These roles are examined in greater detail in the four chapters of Part III, which constitutes the core of the book. In each case, special characteristics and selected research findings about individual, organizational, societal, and international or intercultural communication are considered and compared. Throughout, the reader is offered not only traditional research with references, but also boxes and figures with a liberal mix of genres and epochs, from Shakespeare and Joyce, to organizational charts and LISREL-generated models. Chapter 8 in Part IV concludes the volume with a (surprisingly) brief look at "the future of communication and communication research" (p. 199). In view of earlier hints, for instance, that an entire communication faculty, above and beyond the humanities and the social sciences, may be needed in the university of the future (p. 17), an elaboration of Chapter 8 would presumably have been welcomed by readers.

After completing Rosengren's book, readers may find it less easy to agree about the nature of the statement that he makes. On the back cover, McQuail suggests that "it is original and daring, but also firmly rooted in the latest ideas and evidence." For an introductory textbook, the ideas and evidence presented are, indeed, daringly selective. On the one hand, half-forgotten concepts, for ex-

ample, the notion of "the strength of the weak tie," through which peripheral members of a group may be instrumental in binding it to other groups, are examined for their relevance in current research (pp. 95-98). On the other hand, international and intercultural communication comes across in Chapter 7 as a surprisingly peaceful subspecialty of research and practical politics. Perhaps it would be too much to expect a mention of something like postcolonial theory in this kind of introductory volume. But the MacBride Report is mentioned primarily for the "vision" expressed in its title – *Many Voices, One World* – and it is added that reality tends not to realize visions, so that "international diplomats still have difficult problems to solve" (p. 176). Elsewhere (e.g., p. 44, p. 198), Rosengren projects, nevertheless, and without evidence to back it up, that various gaps of information and communication are already closing, or are likely to close in the future.

The publication year of the MacBride Report is indicated as 1984 (p. 176), while in fact it should be 1980, following international debate and research during the 1970s. Mistakes happen in the best of publications, and do not in themselves imply bias. Bias is more likely to arise from selectivity, above all when the recipients of a message, such as first-year communication students, are not made aware of the criteria of selection, and are unlikely to be able to infer them. While every textbook carries one view of the world, it should allow for several voices to speak, as far as possible, for themselves. To mention a few examples of the opposite from Rosengren's book, central concepts such as denotation and connotation are buried deep in a discussion of the measurement of meaning, with special reference to Osgood, and with no mention of either Barthes or his sources in linguistics and logic (p. 59f.). Interpretative communities are described as rough synonyms of subcultures or fan groups, whereas, in fact, the concept goes back to Peirce and has been imported widely into media and communication research, in part via Fish's reception theory, to refer to audiences as interpretive and cultural, rather than merely sociodemographic formations (p. 168). And, Habermas' concept of the public sphere is presented in so imprecise terms that the bias is bordering on mistake, even apart from the fact that Habermas is said to have defined his concept in the 1980s (p. 145) – his volume on this topic was published in 1962, and became highly influential in the following decades, first in continental Europe, but no later than the mid-1970s also in the US through articles, although the full text was not translated into English until 1989.

Returning to McQuail's assessment, one must ask how Rosengren addresses respectively novices and older hands. In my opinion, this volume could only be said to "inform novices" if corrected and supplemented on numerous points by the "older hands" teaching the novices. In the process, the book may stimulate the older hands; whether it will delight them, is an open question whose answer will depend on their own assessment of its selectivity.

Performing a critical reading of Rosengren's new book, I personally have been delighted with it – as a highly competent and personal intervention into the field, rather than as a textbook. Rosengren is, in practice, an unrepenting methodological fundamentalist. He even suggests that "a growing consensus" is joining him in making a sharp distinction between substantive theories and the formal models by which theories must be tested (p. 18). The position is specified in his wellknown adaptation of Burrell and Morgan's four-field typology of research paradigms to communication research, in which he aligns himself with mainstream sociology as the source of 'hard' answers to the 'soft' questions that may also be posed by the other paradigms (p. 8). That position is, again, argued here, even if, once again, Rosengren signals an ambiguous readiness to examine "both conflict and consensus" by "combin[ing] a scholarly and a scientific perspective" (p. 10).

The elaboration of such foundational concerns, and the clarification of a position in this regard, is the stuff that theoretical monographs as well as pamphlets are made of. If Rosengren had chosen one of these genres, I would have liked his book even better. As it stands, it requires a great deal of textual commentary and exegesis by those entrusted with socializing the third generation of media and communication researchers. In contrast to *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory*, which is a new edition of a book by one prominent author, this is truly "Rosengren's Communication Theory." I, for one, would be an eager reader of a second edition, or another volume, with that title.

*Klaus Bruhn Jensen
Institut for Film-og Medievidenskab
Københavns universitet*

Reference

McQuail, D. (2000). *Mass Communication Theory* (4th ed.). London: Sage.