

AN ARGUMENT FOR THE STUDY OF PLAY

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the potential for interdisciplinary solutions to problems resulting from a traditional view of the "diffusion of innovations," which has been one of the more popular topics of social science research during the past twenty years.

The concept of "re-invention" advanced by diffusion theorists is discussed and compared to the concept of "play" advanced by social anthropologists. The paper shows how an anthropological notion of play might be used to refine and extend diffusion theory.

INTRADISCIPLINARY PROBLEMS

As a topic of mass communication research, "diffusion of innovations" has achieved enormous popularity in the last twenty years. Everett M. Rogers' initial text on the subject, for example, has gone through no less than three editions (1962, 1971, 1983). In his preface to the most recent edition, Rogers observes "there is almost no other field of behavior science research that represents more effort by more scholars in more nations" (1983:xv).

One of the more important factors of this success is that diffusion of innovations has been conceptualized in terms that make it seem familiar and accessible to communication researchers. Rogers' own general definition represents diffusion as "the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system. It is a special type of communication, in that the messages are concerned with new ideas ... Diffusion is [then] a kind of social change, defined as the process by which alteration occurs in the structure and function of a social system" (1983:5-6). Also,

according to Rogers, "many diffusion scholars have conceptualized the diffusion process as one-way persuasion" (1983:xvii).

So seen, diffusion is something that can be studied under the familiar assumptions of structural-functional sociology--what Burrell and Morgan call "sociological positivism" (1979:22), wherein "social change is generally conceived as occurring in a gradual and adjustive manner through differentiation and adaptation to extra-systemic pressures" (Strasser and Randall, 1981:151).

By associating "diffusion of innovations" with an exogenous theory of social change, the prevailing view has legitimized the study of diffusion by methods and techniques that have proven beneficial to the study of other "mass persuasions" such as advertising messages and political propaganda. But this same view, bound to an established set of sociological assumptions, has limited diffusion theory and made it inattentive to important features of the diffusion process observed in the field. Other disciplines, with other assumptions, call attention to these features and offer some intriguing solutions to problems currently facing diffusion theory.

Let me describe two of these problems as a basis for looking more closely at the solutions that a turn to other disciplines can provide.

1. In the 1983 edition of *Diffusion of Innovations*, Rogers recognizes for the first time the possibility of innovation "re-invention":

Until about the mid-1970's, re-invention was not thought to occur, or was considered at most a very infrequent behavior. ... Once diffusion scholars made the mental break through of recognizing that re-invention could happen, they began to find that quite a lot of it occurred, at least for certain innovations. ... [Re-invention is] a rather appropriate word to describe the degree to which an innovation is changed or modified by the user in the process of its adoption and implementation, (pp. 175-6)

Although Rogers mentions the similarity between re-invention and the anthropological concept of "re-interpretation" (p. 176), he does not offer any explanation of re-invention beyond the single comment that "there appears" to be a strong psychological need to re-invent" (p. 181).

Nevertheless, re-invention is given new priority in revised diffusion theory:

Recognition of the existence of re-invention brings into focus a different view of adoption behavior; instead of simply accepting or rejecting an innovation, potential adopters may be active participants in the adoption and diffusion process, struggling to give meaning to the new information as the innovation is applied to their local context. This conception of adoption behavior, involving re-invention, is more in line with what certain respondents in diffusion research have been trying to tell researchers for many years, (pp. 181-2)

Yet, despite Rogers' recommendations, few diffusion researchers have found re-invention a theoretically significant topic of investigation. Guided by traditional theory and views, mass communication researchers most commonly regard re-invention as noise that interferes with and distorts the diffusion message--a noise element that need be identified only in order to be avoided.

2. Another major problem of mainstream diffusion research is that its practitioners have been reluctant to consider fully the consequences, particularly the *negative* consequences, of innovation.

Normally, diffusion researchers beg the question of an innovation's consequences by assuming an equilibrium theory of social change wherein the consequences of widespread (i.e. "successful") innovations are inevitably positive.

Not surprisingly, given this assumption, diffusion researchers have frequently been criticized as being favorably biased toward the point of view of "change agencies" advocating adoption of an innovation (Rogers: 103).

Rogers' 1983 updating of the field ends with a chapter addressed to this problem that offers "a new model [of diffusion] to guide future inquiries in which the main dependent variable is consequences" (p. 410). But here, as with the recognition of "re-invention," we get an in-house refinement of the original model that leaves intact its research goals and basic assumptions about the nature of human beings and social change.

What sort of alternative solution might a more interdisciplinary approach provide?

INTERDISCIPLINARY SOLUTIONS

A recent revival of interest in the study of "play" has resulted in a number of books and symposia devoted entirely to the topic. Post-1975 publications include both empirical research and theoretical statements (see Burghardt, 1984, for a list of recent works). As yet, there has been no concerted effort to apply these findings to the study of mass communication.

But, at least on the surface, there appear to be similarities between the concept of play advanced by cultural theorists and re-invention--an element of the diffusion process that mass communication researchers have for so long ignored.

One of the first to comment on the significance of play, Spencer (1898:631) theorized that play activities are performed "partly for the accompanying satisfaction of certain egoistic feelings which find for the moment no other sphere." This description is echoed by Rogers when he describes the pride accompanying re-invention as "an example of what Freud called 'the narcissism of small differences'" (p. 181).

In fact, the concept of play as "an orientation or framing and defining *context* that players adopt toward something" (Schwartzman 1978:330) might represent a first step in Rogers' "innovation-decision process":

The *innovation-decision process* is the process through which an individual (or other decision-making unit) passes from first knowledge of an innovation to forming an attitude toward the innovation (p. 20)

There is also similarity between Rogers' concept of re-invention and the concept of play as potentially dysfunctional to established social values (Sutton-Smith, 1982), a similarity that provides a rationale for the study of negative innovation consequences.

Whether re-invention is good or bad depends on one's point of view. Re-invention generally does not receive much favorable attention from research and development

agencies, who may consider re-invention a distortion of their original research product.. (p. 178)

The basic difference between an anthropological concept of play and Rogers' "re-invention" is that the re-inventor is seen as a goal-directed information-processor while the player is seen as motivated by the *subjective* experience of play.

Similar to the distinction between play and re-invention in this respect is the distinction between play and games, which are "more conventionalized, formalized, or institutionalized forms of play" (Schwartzman:327). Re-invention *as play* can no longer be thought of as merely an institutionalized game played according to change-agency rules; re-invention becomes indicative of vastly more powerful "true" play--play that has the potential to transform drastically the innovation and its intended and unintended consequences.

Reconceptualizing "goal-oriented re-invention" as "self-motivated play" introduces three significant changes into the classical diffusion model that may help to solve its most serious problems. In effect, these changes are theoretical propositions that lead to testable claims about features of diffusion overlooked in the classical model of that process.

How the Concept of Play Transforms the Concept of Diffusion

1. Rogers describes the innovation decision process as

... [one] through which an individual (or other decision-making unit) passes from first knowledge of an innovation, to forming an attitude toward the innovation, to a decision to adopt or reject, to implementation of the new idea, and to confirmation of this decision. This process consists of a series of actions and choices over time through which an individual or an organization evaluates a new idea and decides whether or not to incorporate the new idea into ongoing practice. This behavior consists essentially of dealing with the uncertainty that is inherently involved in deciding about a new alternative to those previously in existence. It is the perceived newness of the innovation, and the uncertainty associated with this newness, that is a distinctive aspect of

innovation decision-making (compared to other types of decision making). (p. 163)

What if we conceive the individual participating in this process as "playing with" the innovation?

Since play is self-motivated, the power of a change agent to aid or to inhibit re-invention/play is diminished. Since play has a meta-communicative aspect--an implication that one is "only playing"--all sorts of otherwise questionable things can be said and done in play without the usual risks.

For these reasons, and because play is not necessarily goal-oriented, both positive *and* negative consequences of the innovation-decision process are likely.

The inclusion of play in a model of diffusion that attends to reinvention would imply a greater *variety* of outcomes (in the sense that uncertainty is as likely to increase as decrease).

In sum, a first testable implication of the inclusion of "play" in established diffusion theory is that a significant portion of the innovation-decision process will have consequences that are dysfunctional with respect to the strategies of the change agencies.

Is there anything to support this prediction?

Like play itself, an innovation's "consequence" is deemed a difficult concept to measure using empirical methods (Rogers:378). Yet Sutton-Smith (1982) and other anthropologists (Knapp and Knapp, 1976) have documented many instances of "destructive" play using qualitative methods. These studies provide excellent models for diffusion researchers interested in documenting the existence of "destructive" re-invention.

2. At the group level, introducing the concept of play into a diffusion model argues against the possibility of effecting fundamental social change through a change agency. There is instead the implication that society is self-regulating through a dialectical process--and that undesirable *individual* consequences of play might eventually lead to desirable *group* consequences (cf. Levins, 1979).

Thus, change agencies might successfully control a diffusion process only insofar as that process a) serves to maintain the *status quo*

(of which the change agency is a part), and b) is not capable of being creatively transformed by individual play at the local level (i.e., is "reinvention-proof).

A great deal of a change agent's daily activities in this model must be devoted to maintaining social control (so that "change" agent becomes largely a misnomer). The most important function of the "change agent" would be to divert potentially destructive play activities into socially approved "games" of one sort or another. As a possible test of this model, it would be interesting to learn what percentage of an agricultural extension agent's job (the proto-typical agent of change in the classical diffusion model) is devoted to introducing innovations into the farming community and what percentage is devoted to teaching more traditional farming techniques within the context of established social values.

3. Finally, reconceptualizing re-invention as play helps to simplify an increasingly complex model of diffusion that leads to an equally complex research strategy. In the classical model, the invention-process and the diffusion-process are conceived as separate events: invention occurs first, diffusion second, and (occasionally) *re*-invention last. Correspondingly, research based on this model examines separately the multiple variables associated with invention, diffusion, and (to a lesser degree) re-invention.

The concept of play offers the opportunity to combine the study of invention and diffusion into a single process consisting of "framing" old content/materials into new forms/structures (suggested by the meta-communicative aspect of play)--and to drop the awkward concept of *re*-invention entirely. Attractive if only for its parsimony, this alternative model has the further advantage of retaining the results of past diffusion research as applicable to those situations in which innovators do indeed seek information to "reduce uncertainty about the advantages and disadvantages of the innovation" (Rogers: 13).

A testable corollary to a play-based model of diffusion is the possibility that a "properly" functioning society (or organization) *requires* that there be a certain degree of uncertainty in the innovation-decision process--in order to increase opportunities for socially beneficial play. New "information" societies may, in fact, be best defined by the mutability (rather than functionality) of their innovations.

To summarize:

Diffusion of innovations theory seems to suggest an intuitive relationship between "re-inventing" innovations and simply playing with them. And integrating the interdisciplinary concept of play into existing diffusion models provides ample motivation for studying innovation consequences by emphasizing previously ignored end-user activities occurring *after* adoption, particularly re-invention. This approach brings with it new research opportunities and new theoretical insights.

But is this enough--simply to understand "re-invention" as a subcategory of the larger and more complex concept of "play" and investigate it as such?

No, of course not.

The newly defined "re-inventing" no longer fits securely within old diffusion theory. And incorporating the vague, "fuzzy" variable of play into the existing diffusion model undermines some of that model's most basic assumptions concerning exogenous social change.

Intradisciplinary Problems with Interdisciplinary Solutions

Interdisciplinary solutions cause intradisciplinary conflicts.

Mine is not the first suggestion that a mass communication theory might be as well served by the concept of play as by the concept of oneway persuasion.

It has now been almost two decades since William Stephenson published *The Play Theory of Mass Communication*. Originally appearing in 1967, the book advanced the thesis that: "Mass communication allows people to become absorbed in *subjective play*" (p. 1). Stephenson further distinguished between "social control" and "convergent selectivity":

The principle of social control is made manifest in our inner beliefs and values. It gives us our religious belief, our political faith, our status and place in life. Depending upon the region in which we live, each of us follows the same customs, worships the same god, and has the same basic way of life. These are all subject to social control. The principle of convergent selectivity is very different. It concerns new or non-customary modes of behavior, our

fads and fancies, which allow us opportunities to exist for ourselves, to please ourselves, free to a degree from social control. It is here that mass communication is important, and, as will be shown, in a fundamental way (p. 2).

The Play Theory of Mass Communication received mixed reviews after its publication. It was the object of a particularly vitriolic review by Melvin DeFleur in *American Sociological Review*:

In short, play theory, taking a purely subjective and individualistic approach to the study of media, would ignore . . . socially significant issues and concentrate on what is essentially a trivial matter, the 'self-enchantment' of the communication receiver. (1968:483)

DeFleur is now an influential presence within introductory mass communication theory courses (Lowery & DeFleur, 1983; Defleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1982). His opinion of Stephenson's book appears to have been accepted in the intervening twenty years. In sharp contrast to Rogers' original volume on diffusion theory, published at about the same time, Stephenson's 1967 text languished in mass communication backwaters. And while a revised edition of the book was published by the University of Chicago Press in 1987, the concept of "play" has clearly failed to catch the imagination of mass communication researchers.

Why?

DeFleur's opinion of *The Play Theory of Mass Communication* was not universally held. Robert Monaghan, reviewing the book for the *Quarterly Journal of Speech* in 1967, stated that "the theory and method are so practical and simply profound that the implications of the book are much too inescapable to ignore" (p. 399). Yet this is the same book that DeFleur characterized in a single paragraph as: "irritating, . . . pompous, . . . irresponsible, . . . outdated, . . . poorly organized, . . . and superficial" (1968:482).

Confronted by such diametrically opposed points of view, we are forced to look past the specific merits (or lack thereof) of Stephenson's original work and to consider the topic of play itself. Is there some fundamental characteristic of play that precludes it from study within dominant mass communication theoretical paradigms?

The basis of DeFleur's criticism of the study of play was that it denied "the validity of the group as a proper unit of theory" and adopted a rather limited, *psychological* approach to the study of mass communication (1968:482-3).

Yet most play theorists would argue that the study of play is not intrinsically limited to any theoretical paradigm in that it "is an area of research best delineated by topic rather than professional discipline" (Smith, 1984:viii). If they are right, then perhaps what is "wrong" with play as a topic of study within mass communication research is simply that the topic invites divergence from those traditional structural-functional assumptions that have long guided the field in the United States. Specifically, these assumptions deny the importance of subjective experiences achieved through play and de-emphasize the dysfunctional aspects of play at both individual and group levels (Burrell and Morgan, 1979; Strasser and Randall, 1981).

Perhaps in order to use an interdisciplinary approach successfully, it is first necessary to ignore temporarily the theoretical framework surrounding diffusion of innovations and simply work from the ground (or field observations) up. Certainly the determining factor will be whether subjective play turns out to be more or less significant than those factors that traditional theoretical assumptions have placed at the center of diffusion theory. Ultimately at stake is the difference between a theory of exogenous change "caused" by the innovation and a theory of endogenous change "created" by the (re)inventors.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

A popular structural-functional model of exogenous social change--the diffusion of innovations--deals with behaviors similar to play in its concept of "re-invention."

If the concept of re-invention is broadened to include the anthropological concept of play, then classical diffusion scholars are better able to answer criticisms based on their paradigmatic allegiance to models of persuasion and their frequent ignoring of innovation consequences.

However, there are practical and theoretical disadvantages to broadening Everett Rogers' notion of re-invention to include play. The study of play properly requires qualitative methods that are difficult to use in mass communication contexts. It assumes a critical stance unfamiliar

to most mass communication researchers and requires modification of some of their most basic assumptions about human thought and creativity.

Yet, in conclusion, this argument is strongly in favor of the study of play in mass communications contexts--if only so we are not blinded by currently fashionable ideologies. Interdisciplinary study forces consideration of alternative points of view and symbol systems which is, in itself, a form of play--and perhaps the first and most necessary step toward fundamental change.

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