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Ferment in the Field? Review Essay



REVIEWED BY LES SWITZER

Communication as a field of study has been virtually transformed in the past 25 years by the work of various scholars emanating mainly from Europe and parts of Asia and Latin America. Much of this work has been a critique of the media of communication in capitalist and colonialist societies and it has been influenced directly or indirectly by the tradition of historical materialism. Many of these scholars have been trained in disciplines other than communication per se and very few are media professionals.

Until recently they have had very little impact on researchers in the United States where the teaching and study of communication was inextricably linked with the desire to provide communication skills programmes in journalism, speech, broadcasting and film, and eventually in public relations, advertising and in corporate and community organizations. From the beginning, professional training provided a substantive rationale for research as well as teaching. Communication was perceived as a skill to be learned and the study of communication was essentially a functional exercise to evaluate, improve and/or develop communication skills.

Communication as an academic discipline was developed in the United States by scholars in the social sciences (1). They were primarily concerned with developing models and methodologies to study the causes and effects of specific acts of communication. Few were prepared to first locate and then study the communication process within the framework of a given society or to analyze the media of communication as part of the historical process.

Even fewer were prepared to offer a critical assessment of the role of communications media in Western societies. Those who did -- such as the followers of the Frankfurt School in the United States between the 1930s and the 1960s -- remained essentially outside the mainstream of communication research. In a fundamental sense, these scholars could not be homogenized or integrated into the discipline as it was then perceived. They were generally ignored by those who controlled teaching and research in communication in United States colleges and universities and they played a marginal role only in the development of the discipline.

In the past 10 years or so, however, the 'critical' tradition of communication research, as it is dubbed by many American scholars, has penetrated some of the citadels of the communication teaching and research establishment. In a special issue (summer 1983) of the *Journal of Communication*, a prestigious and slightly left of mainstream publication produced by the Annenberg School of Communications at the University of Pennsylvania, 41 "internationally prominent" scholars from the United States and nine other countries (all European) were given the opportunity to express their feelings about the status of communication research and the role of communications in contemporary society.

The issue was entitled "Ferment in the Field" -- perhaps a typical response from American scholars who would have regarded what was new to them as new to everyone else. There is certainly a 'critical' tradition in communication research that has challenged the American academic establishment, but it is hardly a 'ferment in the field' outside America. What we have in this symposium, in fact, is a series of responses to the 'critical' tradition by scholars working within and in varying degree outside of the mainstream US functional empirical tradition in communication research.

EUROPEAN APPROACHES

Some of the least interesting essays were written, ironically enough, by Europeans who were presumably representative of the 'critical' tradition. János Szecsko's essay on the state of the art in Hungary is perhaps a classic example of just how puerile communication research can become in a socialist democracy. In contrast, Roberto Grandi's piece on Italian communication research was well written, effectively addressing the issues posed by the editors of the journal.

Armand Mattelart's article on communication research and policy in France was especially disappointing in view of the author's deserved reputation as a critic of media imperialism. Mattelart chose to summarize a report he had sent to the French government: it said something about the deficiencies of mediated reality in France but virtually nothing about recent contributions of French academics to critical communication research. The same thing could be said about Francis Balle and Idalina Cappe de Baillon's article on contemporary trends in communication research in France. It was reasonable in so far as it revealed the extent to which French researchers had departed theoretically from American models since World War II but one was still left with the impression that French scholars on the 'left' as well as the 'right' had sought to analyse mass media as an independent variable apart from French society. There was little evidence from this article, at least, that French research in reality was all that different in terms of methodology from the functional models cultivated more effectively and more assiduously in America.

Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann's essay was a rehash of media effects research (mainly American and German) over the past 60 years. It seemed a rather sad commentary on the extent to which German communication theorists have been clones of the American empirical tradition since World War II. Equally disappointing were the essays by Jeremy Tunstall, Jay Blumler and even Jim Halloran -- all of whom are highly regarded by the mainstream United States communication research establishment.

There were, however, several exceptions. Cees Hamelink (Holland) criticized the distinction often made by communication scholars (he cited Everett Rogers' of an 'empirical' and 'critical' tradition as being ahistorical. The founders of modern empirical research, in fact, employed this method to defend their critical political positions. Hamelink also pointed out that the empirical-critical distinction ignored the empirical method used by many researchers in the 'critical' tradition. He viewed both traditions as artificial creations but he did suggest they reflected "distinct epistemological positions" offering "fundamentally different value assumptions" that contra Rogers "cannot easily and even should not be reconciled". Hamelink called for a new scientific paradigm "as a tool for emancipation" but questioned whether it could be developed by scholars from the Western world "and its intellectually colonized territories" who were "indoctrinated with the rational-empirical code":

We need to recognize that our field of inquiry has moved from relatively marginal interest to the very center of today's societies, and information technology is increasingly becoming the underlying infrastructure for many economies...With new information technologies creating new dependencies, strengthening established powers, and bringing about new social discrepancies...

In this context, Hamelink suggested that communication research would have to demonstrate "whose side it is on". The perennial problem of "the distribution and execution of power in social systems" would be crucial for the communication scholar of the future. It would have to be examined "in such a way that the forces at work can be exposed, understood, and changed".

NARROW FOCUS

Karl Erik Rosengren (Sweden) offered a typology of four research paradigms based on a model by sociologists Gibson Burrell and Gareth Morgan (2). His concept of a paradigm was too narrowly focused and his subsequent description of the ways in which the dominant 'functional' paradigm could respond to the criticisms of the three 'dissident' paradigms was grossly reductionist (3). Given the way in which Rosengren defines the alternative paradigms outlined in his typology, the reader is not surprised when he is told that in the end these dissident opinions will be harmonized with the 'dominant' paradigm.

British scholar Robert A. White offered a much more coherent summary of the functional-radical debate in his article discussing the links between communication and culture. He begins by offering four reference points in seeking appropriate theories and methodologies for studying these relationships:

- * Does one begin with the cultural context in analyzing the links between media and culture. Do the media directly influence culture or do they "simply mirror and amplify cultural development by picking up cultural themes, reformulating them, and reflecting them back to an agreeing public".

- * What are the precise relationships between the material base (which White suggests is both political and economic) and the non-material superstructure (which White suggests is cultural). What is the role of the mass media in the base-superstructure nexus.

- * Do the new communication technologies directly influence culture or is the influence of technologies mediated through social structures.

- * Does one conceive of the mass media primarily as an agency of social control and of "socialization into a dominant culture" or is the role of mass media to be seen in promoting "sociocultural diversity and change".

White summarized the ways in which the dominant functional or empirical paradigm tried to resolve these questions in the past two generations and then focused on the strengths and weaknesses of five contemporary communication researchers who were deemed to be major influences in the media-culture debate -- Marshall McLuhan, George Gerbner, Stuart Hall, James Carey and Michael Real.

White concludes that both theory and methodology must move beyond "communications as social control to its role in sociocultural change". What is needed, he suggests, is a theory that can account "for the interaction of change in social structure, change in communication patterns (including reorganization of mass media), and change in culture". He offers four new reference points in conceptualizing a framework for analyzing the relationship between communication and culture:



* The emergence of more entrenched and more elaborately hierarchical power elites suggests that new efforts must be made to determine how subordinate groups establish alternative patterns of communication and how they "seek new forms of control over their information, and make better use of the available information".

* The success or failure of alternative communication networks depends in part on how effectively subordinate groups "redefine the organizing symbols...in terms of their own identity and interests to provide the basis for projecting a new meaning of the group to the larger society". These "new overarching symbols" form "the basis for a new 'language' of communication...that cuts through barriers of social class, age, and ethnic and religious identities".

* Researchers need to evaluate the extent to which sociocultural dissent could trigger changes in communication technology. White believes that technology can respond in positive ways to alternative ideologies and activities.

* Finally, more research is needed on how these innovative or alternative social movements are institutionalized within a given society: what are the new forms of ownership and control, the new levels of public access and influence over media policy and administration, and the new norms of what constitutes "valid information" and "valid tastes for entertainment".

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

The most impressive contribution by a non-American scholar at the symposium was by Nicholas Garnham. Garnham begins with the timely reminder that communication scholars have a "social responsibility" in the new information society that depends for fulfillment not on how well "communication per se" is analyzed but on "those wider social developments for which communication is a fashionable and misleading label". In other words, "if we wish to understand the media we must not (my emphasis) look at the media". Rather we must look at those "central concerns" of society that have been the subject of inquiry by social scientists in every discipline (he singles out historians, sociologists and economists). This is the only proper context, he suggests, for studying media of communication.

In contrast to the United States, British media studies emerged from a literary cultural framework (the 'founding fathers' were men like F.R. Leavis, Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams) "that was critical of capitalism and that saw the mass media as part of a specific and concrete historical development of British social and cultural relations". The second major influence (from the 1960s) were the neo-Marxists who detailed "the nature and function of ideology in late capitalist societies".

British media studies was an amalgam of these two currents of opinion and consequently media researchers were primarily concerned "with the nature of culture in a capitalist social formation". Garnham suggests that the strength of the British media studies tradition from the beginning was its opposition to the role of the dominant alliance in education and media of mass communication. Its weakness was in overemphasizing textual analysis ('media effects' in the United States functional tradition) and in its "exaggerated



concern with ideology conceptualized in a highly idealist form".

Garnham summarizes the treatment of ideology in British media studies and calls for a return to the "tradition of historical materialism". A return to the centrality of the mode of production and to the questions that arise from this problematic: how the mode of production reproduces itself ("crisis"), how "the resulting unequal distribution of the surplus is legitimized" ("revolution") and how economic and ideological levels interact.

In a sentence, ideology has been severed from its economic base. Garnham tries to demonstrate that Marxist models in the British media studies tradition and functional models in the United States "empirical mass media sociology" tradition are remarkably similar: Both rely on an asocial and ahistorical "ideological idealism" in analyzing the effect of media on audiences.

Garnham poses two specific problems for the social scientist -- including the researcher studying communication and culture:

- * How does a given social formation -- characterized by its placement in a national and international economy and by a vastly increased and increasing division of labor -- ensure "that there are the right number of producers of the right type in the right place at the right time to produce the necessary mix of commodities to ensure social survival and continuance?"

- * Given the gross inequalities in the distribution of the surplus product...and given the apparent collapse of traditional sources of central moral and political authority (and)...an apparent decline in the use by the dominant class of overt political coercion ... how can social breakdown due to class conflict be avoided?"

To respond to these problems effectively, Garnham urges that scholars working within the framework of historical materialism return to its roots:

My position does not imply, obviously, a wholesale rejection of the often valuable insights of ideological analysis. It does, however, entail a major shift in perspective and emphasis. In order, I would argue, properly to understand the social conditions for the ideological formations so analysed and thereby to explain how producers and consumers of ideology are positioned, not by ideology itself ... but by their material conditions of existence.

The rest of the article is a well-articulated defense of this position.

AMERICAN APPROACHES

However incomplete, this attempt to summarize the contributions of the European contingent provides us with a reference point from which to evaluate the contributions by United States scholars to the 'ferment in the field'. From the perspective of those who control the Journal of Communication, the Europeans represented a carefully selected spectrum of 'foreign' scholarly opinion that presumably would advocate in varying degree the 'critical' framework. In fact, only a minority of these scholars have done so. If one employs the functional-critical dichotomy to discern the direction of bias in these articles, at least 60 per cent by this reader's reckoning are in the





functional mold.

When one considers the enormous range of communication journals in the U.S. and the difficulty of gaining access to any of them if one happens to work within the tradition of historical materialism, the efforts by the editors of the journal to debate the topic --- however one defines the 'critical' tradition --- can only be regarded as commendable. The overwhelming majority of United States communication scholars are overtly or covertly opposed to the critical tradition -- a dominant intellectual alliance that will undoubtedly maintain ideological control for many years to come. Thus when one considers the contributions of American scholars in this symposium who subscribe to the 'critical' tradition, one is actually considering most of the exponents of this tradition -- at least those who publish -- in the United States.

Nevertheless, the contributions by the United States-Canadian contingent are very impressive. (I group the two together because the critical frameworks employed by many Canadian researchers has had some impact on United States scholars and the two groups often collaborate on projects).

Articles worth reading include William Melody and Robin Mansell's piece on critical versus what they call administrative research -- a North American code name for functional research. The team from Simon Fraser University condemn the empiricists for excluding from analysis "issues relating to the structure of economic and political institutions (and sometimes social and cultural institutions as well), the centralization of power, the characteristics of dominant-dependent relations and the incentives of vested interests". The critical researchers who focus on these topics "contradict and fundamentally threaten the administrative tradition". Melody and Mansell supported by Stuart Ewen, Timothy Haight, Vincent Mosco, Herb Schiller go on to suggest that problems in communication do not rest with the empirical evidence but rather "with the decisions as to what evidence will be sought, how it will be gathered, and to what use it will be put...the context of its interpretation". They maintain that the "real basis" for the positions taken by adherents of the administrative and critical traditions "lies in the allegiance of researchers to the status quo versus changes in existing political and economic institutionalized power relations...They are not merely theoretical disputes that can be resolved through scholarly debate".

To gain the measure of quality in the critical research undertaken by North American scholars, I shall concentrate on two articles. The first one is by Dallas Smythe, a 'founding father' of critical communications scholarship in North America and a member of the critical studies group at Simon Fraser University, and Tran Van Dinh of the Pan African Studies Department at Temple University in Philadelphia. They are also concerned with critical versus administrative research but the focus of their concern is with "the ideological orientation of the researcher".

ADMINISTRATIVE PROBLEM

Smythe and Van Dinh's definition of an administrative problem is instructive in the above context --- "how to make an organization's actions more efficient" -- as their definition of a critical problem -- "how to reshape or invent institutions to meet the collective needs of the relevant social community". In terms of methodology, they see a dichotomy between the "applications of neopositivist, behavioural theory to the end of divining

effects on individuals versus "historical, materialist analysis of the contradictory process in the real world". And in terms of ideology:

By 'administrative' ideology, we mean the linking of administrative-type problems and tools, with interpretation of results that supports, or does not seriously disturb, the status quo. By 'critical' ideology, we refer to the linking of 'critical' researchable problems and critical tools with interpretations that involve radical changes in the established order.

To this reviewer, Dalles and Smythe offered the best definition of the functional-critical dichotomy that was given in the symposium.

The authors go on to explore the different types of administrative research and conclude:

After half a century of such repetitive, noncombinable 'communications research', it should be evident to all that no large theory can emerge from it. In addition to providing academic careers for its practitioners, it is also a fertile base for market research. It is undeniably 'administrative' in the interest of the ongoing political-economic order.

The authors also consider, albeit briefly, a type of 'institutional' administrative research in North America that appears to be "independent and critical" while in reality it is "methodologically ahistorical and nondialectically materialist". These are the would-be 'radical' scholars, of which there are many in the United States, who try to formalize critical research frameworks which at best are reformist and continue to adhere to the assumption that 'market forces' constitute "a universal solvent for institutional problems".

Research on the 'information age' provides the most recent example in administrative research of how communication scholars have celebrated America's continuing love affair with technology as the cure-all for the world's problems: "this literature obscures the real processes of change with a technical determinism that serves the core area's industrial institutions well".

MARXIST SCHOLARSHIP

Smythe and Van Dinh offered one of the few articles in the symposium that was in any way systematic in its exposure of the whole of the American functional tradition. The authors were equally critical, however, of the 'critical' tradition, which, as they defined it, did not preclude a non-Marxist perspective. Nevertheless, the article is concerned mainly with the Marxist tradition in critical scholarship as it has evolved in North America -- especially since the Vietnam War.

Smythe and Van Dinh pointed out that "Marxist scholarship" in the United States was "characterized by fragmentation and a lack of coherence". They added that there was "virtually no ongoing contact between the Marxist work in the social sciences and critical/Marxist work in communications". This

reviewer was surprised to learn that there were "several dozen" journals in the U.S. offering a forum for Marxist scholars but "communications theory and research are conspicuously neglected":

Critical/Marxist work in communications must make its own way. Its Marxist friends in the social science disciplines are too bureaucratically inward-looking with their disciplinary politics or too culture-bound to provide much help.

The authors cited several American communication scholars who have made significant contributions in critical communications research, but much of it has been in the international rather than the intranational arena:

The problems selected in the past two decades have related to the institutional aspects of developed countries as they collide with the real needs and situations of peoples in dependent countries -- in the Third World and to some extent in the developed areas.

Smythe and Van Dinh suggest that the time is ripe for the integration of critical studies on national and international communication -- as evidenced by the acceleration in the nuclear arms race and the effort to establish a worldwide information society. They conclude that critical communications research in future must strive to analyze the efforts to resist domination and highlight the strategies of resistance being undertaken at the international, national and -- a neglected area in critical communication studies -- at the community-neighbourhood level.

'YOUNG TURKS'

The last article to be considered in this review essay is by two 'young turks' of critical communications research -- Jennifer Slack and Martin Allor. Their central concern is to demystify the origins of critical approaches to communications research in the United States and to clarify the relationship between critical and mainstream "liberal/pluralist" (read functional/critical) approaches.

The authors focus on the problems of causality in the two traditions. They begin with an analysis of how mainstream researchers have misinterpreted the dynamics of the critical school -- beginning with Lazarsfeld's characterization of the Frankfurt School in the 1940s. They demonstrate how the dichotomy between the 'administrative' and 'critical' traditions came about, how both traditions were appropriated by mainstream researchers and how these scholars came to the conclusion that the two schools would inevitably converge. This review of the literature, however abbreviated, is very significant because it undermines one of the major premises behind the symposium itself -- in other words, to try and harmonize the two traditions.

Slack and Allor then show how every model in mainstream communications research since the 1950s -- including the 'hypodermic', two-step and multiple-step flow, gatekeeping, uses and gratifications, attitude and cognitive models -- have been but variations of a single linear model:

mainstream mass communication research has, despite its increasing sophistication, retained a commitment to a conception of communication as a contextless process. Sender, message, receiver, and effect are

all isolatable phenomena, related to one another in single and direct relationships ... Conceptualising context in this way ... seriously limits the ways in which social context can be seen as determining the nature of communication.

The alternative critical studies tradition hinges "consideration of social context on a redefinition of the nature of the communication process". As the authors emphasize, the "apparent diversity (my italics) of critical approaches derives from the different ways in which they fracture the linear causal model".

The authors consider some of these critical approaches -- including political economy, the Frankfurt School, Marxist sociology, dependency theory, cultural studies and what they call continental philosophy. Again, these are not mutually exclusive categories and they do not all necessarily stem from the tradition of historical materialism. But all focus on causality in social context.

SOCIAL POWER

The last section of this very important article is devoted to the notion that causality alone is not enough in critical communications research: "the political question of social power, linked with the epistemological question of causality, is what ultimately distinguishes the critical approach". The major issue is the role of communication in the exercise of social power.

As structuralists, Slack and Allor are adamant that "power is exercised in and by social processes and institutions". Individuals also exercise power "but exercise of power by individuals is always conceived within the constraints of structural determinations". Hence "control of knowledge" -- the focal point of concern in critical studies -- "is fundamental to the exercise of social power".

Thus a nonlinear model of causality (in other words, one framed in a social context) is inextricably linked to the way one poses the question of power. The communication process, then, is the study of power relationships (the control of knowledge) embedded in the institutionalized structures of the social formation. Marxists pose power in terms of hegemony which "necessarily leads to redefinition of the power of the media to define reality.

Slack and Allor's article is a good example of how sophisticated critical communication studies is becoming in the U.S. One can only hope that scholars in this tradition will find a more receptive audience than they have in the past. The symposium offered by the Journal of Communication is certainly a move in the right direction. Unfortunately, it is not the beginning of a new era.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Wilbur Schramm cites four 'founding fathers': political scientist Harold Lasswell, sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld, and social psychologists Kurt Lewin and Carl Hovland.
2. *Sociological Paradigms and Organizational Analysis*. Heinemann, London 1979.