

MOVING FORWARD  
ON THE LEFT:  
SOME OBSERVATIONS ON  
CRITICAL COMMUNICATIONS  
RESEARCH IN THE  
UNITED STATES

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Abstract

With the Soviet Union's demise, some academicians argued that Marxist scholarship was similarly irrelevant. Yet, critical voices are still raised in the United States and critical analyses of corporate America remain central in the political economy of mass communication. Within US communication research, "political economist" is closely identified with the North American Critical School and thus with Marxist scholarship. While that glosses over the wide variety of positions taken by American practitioners of political economy, it is a fairly reasonable assumption within the field of communications. In the 1950s, a self-consciously critical approach emerged in the work of Dallas Smythe and Herbert I. Schiller. Although ostracized by the field's administrative "mainstream," Smythe and Schiller published widely, found an organizational home in the International Association for Media and Communication Research, and inspired a generation of scholars. Their legacy remains vibrant as critical communications research has taken root in the academy, figured in the creation of anti-neo-conservative movements, founded and sustained professional organizations, played a major role in the critique of the mainstream, developed traditions of internal debate and critique, and been targeted for scholarly attack. While much remains to be done, the critical school is clearly moving forward.

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For communications scholars in the United States, political economy is closely identified with the North American School of Critical Communications Research.<sup>1</sup> This identification is so close that it would be fair to say that most communications researchers assume that all political economists are critical, radical, Marxist, etc. That assumption is false in the larger field of political economy, which has its radical, liberal, moderate, conservative, neo-conservative, and neo-liberal wings even in the United States. Within the larger field, radical political economy distinguishes itself from political economy generally, having a separate professional association, the Union of Radical Political Economists (URPE), and a separate publication, *Journal of Radical Political Economy*.

That noted, within American communications research, political economy still carries left connotations and those of us who self-identify as political economists adopt a critical stance toward our subjects of inquiry. In this essay, I will briefly sketch some of the history of critical communications in the United States, outline some of the concerns that undergird current research and debate among critical scholars, and note some indicators that critical communications remains a vital force in the field. That vitality is demonstrated through both publications and organisations as well as through debate and criticism.

From my perspective, political economy specifically, and critical communication research generally, remain strong as intellectual enterprises while greatly increasing their contributions to cultural and political activism. This may be partially due to over two decades of neo-conservative deregulation, which has fostered corporate mergers and the concentration of media ownership. When the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), chaired by Michael Powell, launched a new round of deregulation for radio in 2003, public outcry was particularly sharp, well organised, and inclusive. Much of the organizing was accomplished online, which built on the nearly universal access to electronic mail and the Internet that is enjoyed by students and employees of institutions of higher education. That said, it should be noted that neo-conservative dominance of politics in the United States has reverberated throughout higher education, forcing budget cuts, increasing the influence of corporate donors as well as individual patrons, and sometimes placing at risk non-traditional programs operating under the rubric of communication studies, journalism and mass communication, or cultural studies. The impact of neo-conservatism on the field in general and on critical communications in particular remains to be seen. I will reserve my remarks on those issues for another venue and instead review some of our history.

## Critical Communications Research

Historically, radical research on and critique of communications industries precedes the coalescence of critical communications research directly after the World War II. This is indicated by the tradition of muckraking journalists and reportage like "The Radio Octopus" published in *American Mercury* (Yorke 1931) and by the publication of critical books like *AT&T: A History of Industrial Conquest* (Danielian 1939) or *Economic Control of the Motion Picture Industry* (Huettig 1944).

However, the emergence of a self-consciously critical approach to communications research can be dated to the 1950s and connected first to Dallas Smythe and Herbert Schiller, and next to Thomas Guback, Janet Wasko, Manjunath Pendakur,

Vincent Mosco, Oscar Gandy, and others. After leaving the FCC, Smythe briefly joined the Institute for Communication Research at the University of Illinois. During his long career as a scholar, Smythe considered such topics as conservative ideologies implicit in mainstream research, the audience commodity, and cultural imperialism (Smythe 1977, 1978, 1979, 1981, 1989 among others). Long associated with the College of Communications at the University of California at San Diego, Schiller focused his research on U.S. domination of international flows of information and entertainment, economic censorship of the news in the U.S., the corporatisation of public space and culture among other topics (e.g., Schiller 1973, 1976, 1989, 1996). Taking his doctorate with Smythe, Guback examined ownership, concentration, and employment in the film industry as well as Hollywood's domination of films co-produced under governmental initiatives to support national film industries outside the U.S. (Guback 1969, 1971, 1974, 1979). In the 1970s, themes of ownership, concentration, market structures, industrial structure, political supports, class, and international impacts of U.S. companies were central to political economy as represented by Schiller at San Diego, Guback at Illinois, and Smythe at Simon Fraser University.

Similar themes were pursued by George Gerbner at the Annenberg School of Communications at the University of Pennsylvania but without explicit references to Marxism and with a considerable interest in measurement of television's impact on viewers' perceptions of the world (Gerbner 1977). In the 1970s, Gerbner and his research team for the Cultural Indicators Project testified before Congressional Hearings on televised violence. As editor of the *Journal of Communication*, Gerbner published critical work including critiques of the World Area Radio Conference, essays in support of UNESCO's McBride Commission, and the special issue "Ferment in the Field" (1983). His editorial decisions were made despite the predictability of Walter Annenberg's negative reactions to such scholarship (Nordenstreng 2003). While Gerbner is not considered a political economist and was generally not thought of as a member of the North American Critical School while at Annenberg, his work has increasingly become critical as he pursues the connection between media corporations, mediated violence, and viewers (Gerbner 1993).

## Critical Research and Debate

"Ferment in the Field" was the culmination of debates between scholars working in the tradition of behavioural research using quantitative analyses and rooted in survey or experimental research and critics. "Ferment" included essays by eminent administrative scholars like Wilber Schramm, Kurt and Gladys Lang, and Elihu Katz matched by essays from equally eminent critical scholars like Armand Mattelart, Schiller, and Smythe and Tran Van Dinh (all citations 1983). Perhaps because the papers were intermixed and because scholars associated with other positions were included, "Ferment" approximated a conversation about the field. Overall, the 1980s were marked by debates over administrative versus critical research, quantitative and qualitative methodologies, implicit world views driving research, the audience commodity, feminist cultural studies versus masculinist cultural studies, etc.

Such debates still occur, both on topics specific to critical research and over the broad range of issues defined in "Ferment." This was particularly reflected by the

*Journal of Communication's* special issue on "The Future of the Field" (Levy and Gurevitch 1993). Divided into seven parts, "Future" dedicated one section to "Rethinking the Critical Tradition" with four essays. Lawrence Grossberg considered the uneasy relationship between American cultural studies and the larger field of communication. Robert McChesney critiqued left scholarship in general through the particular critique of cultural studies. Dan Schiller argued for the analysis of communications as a social force, requiring a class analysis and a critique of capitalism. Janet Wasko, Vincent Mosco, and I reviewed political economy's assumptive base, research methods, and the then-current challenge from postmodernism (all citations 1993).

The pairing of the Grossberg and McChesney essays fostered continued discussion on the relationship between cultural studies and political economy. Two years later, a special colloquy in *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* (Gandy 1995) engaged Nicholas Garnham, Lawrence Grossberg, James Carey, and Graham Murdock on the relationship between political economy and cultural studies. Garnham argued the classic point that the two traditions were linked but antagonistic, finding cultural studies to have erred and likening the relationship to a difficult marriage (1995a). Grossberg replied by rejecting the critique as reductionist and pointing out the problems inherent in the metaphor (1995). Carey reiterated his rejection of critical research generally and political economy specifically (1995). Murdock presented a case for synthesis (1995) and Garnham (1995b) got the last word – a somewhat exhausted and cranky response to Grossberg and Carey.

That, however, was not the end of exchanges over the cultural studies and political economy. Lisa McLaughlin and Ellen Riordan subsequently organized the panel "Paradigm Dialogue: Crossing the Gap between Cultural Studies and Political Economy" for the International Communication Association's 1999 conference. Presenters focused primarily on resolving the debate through integrations of political economy, cultural studies, and feminism. Particularly noteworthy were papers by McLaughlin and Riordan.<sup>2</sup> McLaughlin argued that the debate assumed separate, gendered spheres – domestic space for cultural studies, public space for political economy – while the media phenomena under study always intertwines those spheres and then rethought the debate via feminist theory. Riordan showed how those spheres are interlinked, theorizing an approach that integrates political economy, cultural studies, and feminist research. These points were further explored and tested in case studies in the edited collection *Sex and Money* (Meehan and Riordan 2002).

In my view, the fact that the formal debates were followed by analysis, research, and theorizing indicate the vibrancy of critical communications research. Despite antagonisms between particular scholars and scholarly factions, the overall trend in critical research has been an increasing integration of "warring" methods and theories. Here are a few examples of topics investigated by political economists combining methods and theories from political economy, cultural studies, feminist research, ethnography, and attitudinal research: Advertisers' appropriation of postmodernist styles (Andersen 1995); impact of advertisers' demands on representations and narratives in popular culture (McAllister 1996; Wittebols 2004); the construction and manipulation of gendered, ethnic or sexual identities for commercial profit (respectively, Byars and Meehan 1995; Record 2002; Beer 2002; Fejes

2002); representation of women and women's production of media (Ross and Byerly 2004); social structure, media, and racism (Gandy 1998); political economy and audience ethnography (Hagen and Wasko 2000); corporate branding, media exposure, and audience attitudes (Wasko, Phillips, and Meehan 2001); media workers and their histories, identities, and struggles, (Mosco and Wasko 1983; Clark 1995; Neilsen and Mailes 1995). As these new directions have emerged, interest in traditional concerns has remained strong with outstanding work on ownership and concentration (Mosco 1989; Wasko 1995; Banks 1996), political processes and supports (McChesney 1999; Bettig 1996; Streeter 1996), and globalisation (Fejes 1986; Pendakur 1990; Schiller 2000). To me, this suggests the dynamism of critical communications research.

## Publications and Organisations

As Hanno Hardt has pointed out (2003), critical communications has no journal of its own in the manner of URPE and the *Journal of Radical Political Economy*. Although both critically-oriented, the *Journal of Communication Inquiry and Media, Culture, and Society* reflect the broad range of qualitative scholarship. Perhaps the closest to such a journal was Mosco and Wasko's series of edited books *The Critical Communications Review* (1983-1985). Over the last several years, the Union for Democratic Communication (UDC) has attempted to launch a journal under the title of *Democratic Communiqué*, which appears annually. This would seem the logical group to launch a journal specializing in political economy and materialist cultural studies but the challenges in terms of labour and funding are considerable.

Two newsletters should be noted – the defunct *Communications Perspectives* published by doctoral students at Illinois under Guback's aegis<sup>3</sup> and the newsletter of the UDC, variously called *News and Notes* or *Democratic Communiqué*. As the UDC attempts to sustain an annual publication, its list serve has taken over the informative functions of the newsletter. Founded in 1983, the UDC draws its membership from critical scholars, policy activists, and media practitioners, thus reaching beyond the academy. While the early conferences had no concurrent sessions and a small number of participants, the last five conferences were comprised of concurrent sessions dedicated to presentations of papers, screenings of alternative media, workshops, and roundtables. Typically, three sessions were offered in each time slot; at the 2004 conference, participants had a choice of five sessions per time slot. The number of conference papers is worth noting: In 1998, at the University of San Francisco, 81 papers were presented; in 1999, at the University of Oregon, 87 papers; in 2001 at Carleton University, 87 papers; in 2002 at Pennsylvania State University, 98 papers; in 2004 hosted by Southern Illinois University, 92 papers. The numbers of workshops, screenings, and roundtables varies across conferences. Besides attracting participants from Canada and the United States, these UDC conferences have been attended by colleagues from Australia, Europe, and Asia. All of this suggests that the UDC performs a vital function for critical communications as both an academic and a praxical community.

With UDC as the focus of our formal organizing, critical scholars have not formed divisions or sections within the professional organisations traditional to the field in the United States: Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, International Communication Association, National Communication Asso-

ciation, and Society for Cinema and Media Studies. While political economists and cultural scholars join such groups, participate in sections or divisions, and present research at their conferences, UDC remains the organisational home for critical researchers in the U.S.

Historically, the most significant organisation for the North American Critical School has been the International Association of Media and Communication Research (IAMCR). For Smythe, Schiller, and Guback, IAMCR provided opportunities for networking, discussion, research, and conference presentations at a time when the U.S. organisations were dominated by the mainstream. For the second generation of U.S. critical scholars, IAMCR's Political Economy Section, founded in 1978, provides a truly international forum. In the Association's 2004 conference in Porto Alegre, Brazil, the Political Economy Section held fourteen well-attended sessions with forty-four papers, co-hosted a reception and book signing, and convened for a business meeting. For U.S. researchers, the IAMCR remains a lively forum operating at a high level of intellectual sophistication and camaraderie.

Besides academic organisations, educational organisations are relevant to critical communications. Paper Tiger/Deep Dish TV and the Media Education Foundation release a steady stream of critically-oriented videos for classroom use in high schools and colleges. Addressing curricular issues is the Action Coalition for Media Education (ACME), which has held two conferences since its founding in 2002. ACME attracts critical scholars, media practitioners, activists, and literacy educators from across the U.S. In terms of activism, two other organisations immediately come to mind: The Cultural Environmental Movement spearheaded by Gerbner and Free Press campaigns including Media Reform.net and the National Conference on Media Reform, connected with McChesney. These are but a few of the organisations that promote a critical view of media in the United States, provide educational materials to foster critical media literacy, and, where appropriate, lobby for change and reform.

While critical communications is not poised to become the dominant paradigm in U.S. communication research, it is an established, recognised, and robust part of the larger field. In the last decade, as ownership of the media has become increasingly concentrated and integrated across industries, critical scholars have translated research into the discourses of public activism, education, and policy. Given how the academy works in the United States and given a national tolerance for "red-baiting," perhaps one would expect that critical communications would become a target for criticism. I now turn to some of that criticism.

## The Charge of Preformed Ideas

Research on media industries has not solely been the province of political economists. Sociologist Charles R. Wright's functionalist approach was adopted by many scholars researching media industries (Wright 1959), most notably Muriel Cantor (1971). Such scholars generally describe how media systems work and what roles are played by companies and individuals within them. As with much functionalist scholarship, the accounts suggest that the media are as they are because that's how society needs them to be. A more policy-oriented approach is associated with Douglas Gomery who articulates his media economics position in opposition to political economy. He argues that:



*Media economics should move into the center of communications study by offering powerful and flexible methods by which to analyze mass media industries in the context of core concerns of the communication process. Marxist "critical studies" and free market empiricism lack appeal because they ask people to analyze a subject when they already "know" a predetermined answer. For critics from the left, the mass media assume an all encompassing conspiracy by monopolists ... Such "critical analysis" is a simplistic, incomplete, and narrow discussion, the product of fitting examples to predetermined conclusions based on a single set of values (Gomery 2000, 507).<sup>4</sup>*

The charge is familiar: Marxists are dogmatic and hence can not be real scholars because Marxists can only see their preformed beliefs in the data regardless of what the data really say. If true, one would expect strong agreements among critical scholars regarding the research of such foundational figures as Smythe and Schiller. Yet that is not the case. Let's take one quick example: Smythe's notion of the commodity audience.

In 1977, Smythe published "Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism" stating: "The argument presented here – that western Marxist analyses have neglected the economic and political significance of mass communications systems – is an attempt to start a debate, not to conclude one" (Smythe 1977).

The argument began with Smythe asking what commodity was produced and sold by advertiser-supported mass communications. At the time, the dominant view among critical researchers was that the media produced messages that legitimised capitalism, essentially selling the system to the people. Thus, much research focused on analyzing media artefacts in order to get at their underlying messages. Smythe argued that, while useful, ideological critique did not illuminate the economic relationship driving the creation of messages: the relationship between advertisers wanting to buy audiences and media corporations assembling audiences for sale to advertisers. While he recognised that some media in the late 1970s still derived revenues directly from audiences, he argued that commercialisation would intensify, making the audience commodity the primary product of film, performance, and recorded music, thereby joining those industries to the advertiser-supported media traditional in the United States – newspapers, magazines, television, radio. To study the central dynamics of mass communication, then, required studying the audience commodity in terms of the relations of production, the means of production, and people's labour.

Smythe's invitation to debate was quickly accepted. In print, Murdock argued for a more nuanced approach, offering four criticisms: first, that western Marxism should not be limited to academic Marxism with its emphases on ideological critique and media texts; second, that media earning revenues from advertisers had to be differentiated from media depending on consumers; third, that the media's dual roles as manufacturer of the commodity audience and manufacturer of consent had to be recognised and theorised; and finally, economic analyses of the audience commodity should not replace research on audiences as social and cultural collectivities capable of exercising agency (1978). Smythe's reply was published in the same issue (1978), followed a year later by Bill Livant's attempt to integrate Smythe's and Murdock's main points.

Subsequently, Sut Jhally (1982) argued that Smythe had inadequately conceptualised the audience commodity and offered a corrective in terms of use-value, exchange value, and value-added labour. Livant responded with a reflection on surplus value (1982). Two years later, I argued that Smythe had erred in his claim that companies measuring the audience commodity had no influence over the definition of that commodity (1984).

The debate was not limited to print. In 1978 at the IAMCR conference in Poland, the then Political Economy Interest Group hosted a session dedicated to the Blindspot Debate. Smythe presented his argument, with critiques presented by Murdock and Garnham, who argued for a rethinking of political economy as an approach to communication research. The presentations were followed by lively interaction among the presenters and much questioning from the attendees. As a beginning doctoral student, I was impressed by the good humoured rough-and-tumble of the debate as presenters and questioners challenged each other. Each presenter had some supporters, but all faced challenges from the audience. By the end of the session, it was clear that more work had to be done and that no one person had the last word on the subject of blindspots, audiences, and audience commodities.

This sketch of the blindspot debate in print and in person does not fit Gomery's claim that critical researchers share preformed beliefs that led them to produce predetermined answers to their questions. Smythe, himself a foundational figure in critical communications research, asked for a debate over his claim, to which others responded with alacrity. The debate itself focused on fundamental issues about critical research itself including how to balance scholarship on texts and messages with economic analyses of market structures and commodities with research on people's lived experience with media. This also raised the issue of how to build better relationships between political economists and cultural scholars in order to better apprehend mass communication as a political, economic, social, and cultural phenomena. Ultimately, this has played out in research synthesizing the two traditions – quite an achievement for an invitation to debate.

In retrospect, Smythe clearly made a major breakthrough in his notion of the audience commodity. But his insight was not simply accepted as truth. It was argued, chewed on, reconfigured, tried out in research, and modified to reflect that research. The implication is that, had it proved fruitless, it would have been discarded. The blindspot debate, then, provides a case study in how social scientific inquiry works. Researchers present their work; colleagues criticise and offer counter interpretations; still others try out the ideas and offer assessments. Overtime, some ideas get incorporated into the paradigm and others are left by the wayside.

This is a far cry from Gomery's claim. But that claim – essentially a charge that political economists are Stalinists following "the" party line – should remind us of the degree to which critical communications research remains a target and the degree to which the career paths of critical researchers are less secure than those of their administratively-oriented peers.

### Still Left, Still Moving Forward

The upshot of all this is some rather good news: critical communications research is alive and well in the United States. Despite the fall of the Soviet Union



and the alleged end of alternatives to capitalism, critical communications is still sufficiently threatening to some to be attacked. Despite scholarly factionalism, considerable strides have been made to synthesise cultural studies with political economy, resulting in studies that better apprehend the media as multifaceted phenomena. Despite the deaths of Dallas Smythe and Herbert Schiller, the community of critical researchers continues to grow. Despite the neo-conservative restructuring of the media, organised resistance against media mergers continues to grow and gives new relevance to our work. The UDC remains a meeting place for activists, media makers, and scholars; the Political Economy Section of IAMCR provides a similar, internationally-oriented forum.

Obviously, the future will bring new challenges. Left academics need to resist corporatisation of the classroom and exploitation of adjuncts. For critical professors, the tension between teaching and training may increase as students and administrators feel greater pressure economically and politically to avoid critical thinking in favour of skills believed saleable. New critiques from within and without the paradigm will highlight our failings and set us to rethinking our assumptions, methods, and questions in order to move forward. Changing situations, new events, and unexpected outcomes will need to be documented, analyzed, and interpreted so as to be understood within their historical contexts. In short, for critical scholars in the U.S., things will change entirely but within the immediate contexts of the field and the workplace as well as within the larger contexts of a capitalist nation and a global economy dominated by capitalist nations. Perhaps our greatest challenges will lie in the intersection between the things of everyday life and the overarching structures that define the everyday. In any case, if the past five decades are any indicator, critical communications research will grow stronger as a means of exploring, explaining, and changing our world.

## Notes:

1. An earlier version of this essay was presented at the Conference on What's Left in Communication Research, Piran, Slovenia, 18 September 2003. I would like to thank my co-conferrees for their criticism of the original paper. I also thank the Manship School for its support.
2. McLaughlin published versions of her paper in 1999 and 2002; Riordan in 2002.
3. The founding board was comprised by Thomas Guback, Janet Wasko, Fred Fejes, Jennifer Slack, Marty Allor, and Eileen R. Meehan.
4. The source, *Who Owns the Media?*, third edition, is comprised of chapters written individually by Gomery and Benjamin M. Compaine. Seven essays address particular industries and two present their authors' positions on media economics. The quotation is from Gomery's chapter stating his position. In the original, Gomery attacks Marxists and neo-conservatives. Because I focus only on his opposition to political economy, I have removed the claims regarding neo-conservatism. The data and arguments upon which Gomery bases his conclusions regarding the magazine and Internet industries are found in Compaine's chapters on those industries. Rather than critique the book or selected chapters from it, I focus on Gomery's complaint against critical communications research. Here is the entire statement: "Media economics should move into the center of communications study by offering powerful and flexible methods by which to analyze mass media industries in the context of core concerns of the communication process. Marxist 'critical studies' and free market empiricism lack appeal because they ask people to analyze a subject when they already 'know' a predetermined answer. From critics from the left, the mass media assume an all-encompassing conspiracy by monopolists. A cursory examination of the contemporary magazine and Internet industries undercuts any such monolithic image. Such a 'critical analysis' is a simplistic, incomplete and narrow discussion, the product of fitting examples to predetermined conclusions based on a single set of values.

"By contrast, conservative free market advocates assume that efficient operation represents the paramount, and often sole, goal for any enterprise, even those so vital to democracy and quality of life as mass communication and mass entertainment. Studying the economics of mass communication as though simply contemplating the toaster or pencil industries offers a far too narrow perspective. They see no reason for any government intervention. But the mass media at least create negative externalities. Critics from all sides have long found problems with the media and asserted a plethora of corrective regulations by which to improve industry operation and content production. Analysis of media economics ought not to be restricted to only today's problem industries; the complete range of media industries and institutions, including the Internet when that achieves mass status, needs to be regularly analyzed to establish a base from which to understand and evaluate the workings of the mass media" (Gomery 2000, 507-508).

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