A PROBLEM OF THEORY, OR A THEORY OF PRESSURES : A REVIEW OF A REVIEW OF COMMUNICATION SCHOLARSHIP TODAY

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Recently, the prestigious American published *Journal of Communication* devoted two issues to a "collective reconnaissance of communication scholarship and its future" (Levy and Gurevitch p.4). As will become apparent, referencing this article requires some deviation from the norm: I shall simply state author and page number, all of which, unless otherwise indicated, refer to contributions collected in *Journal of Communication*, Vol.43 No's. 3 & 4, 1993.

Entitled *The Future of the Field - Between Fragmentation and Cohesion*, the articles, the editors believe, "look like the field" (Ibid. p.4). The collection comprises 48 contributions organised on the basis of 7 categories (derived largely from a set of provocative questions posed by the editors) which are: the disciplinary status of communication research; new directions; new agendas; connecting communication scholarship to public policy; audiences and institutions; rethinking the critical tradition; the search for a useable history; the academic wars. It is my intention to review selected parts of this daunting outpouring of self-reflection (and occasionally, self-criticism) by the leading communications scholars of the day.

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It is an unfortunate fact that these arguments and opinions are largely those of U.S. based academics, with a handful of contributions from Europe and only one from the developing world (Latin America). Moreover, the collection does favour mass communications, which the editors argue is broadly in keeping with the "tradition" of the journal.

My own leanings are towards the sociology of mass communications and consequently such a collection, while challenging for a reviewer, does offer itself as irresistible bait. Finally, there are contributions which cannot fruitfully be reviewed by an outsider - the section on useable history and academic wars for example, which deals with institutional and organisational aspects of communication research in the United States.

It may be presumptuous to read these articles as reflecting a position in communication studies, around which one can (or should) develop a critique. It is obvious that they do not constitute an argument which presses an analytic case for communications studies in the 1990s and beyond. Nevertheless, in all their complexity and range, they display symptoms which it may be useful to diagnose (bearing in mind that diagnosis itself is subject to mis-reading, and in its early stages at least, offers a variety of potential cures).

I am particularly interested in (i) the theoretical foundation of a study of communications which can and does (ii) adequately capture, conceptualise, describe and enhance our understanding of communication in order (iii) that we may better contribute that knowledge to what Giddens calls "contingent moral rationalism" (Giddens in Held and Thompson 1989:291) or a critical project.

DISCIPLINARY STATUS OF COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

Throughout the contributions on this topic is a pervasive sense of pessimism with regard to a paradigmatic unity of communication research direction. While each author finds a more or less interesting and compelling approach to solving this difficulty, there are some general problems identified as central to this state of fragmentation.

i) Methodological Problems of Communication Research:

Rosengren argues that the preoccupation of the sociology of the 1970s with debates in a radical change vs social regulation dimension has now been eclipsed (through global political and intellectual change) by an objectivist vs subjectivist dimension which locates the acting and willing subject as the ontological basis for growth in communication research. Furthermore, these humanistic/subjectivist research trajectories are incapable of co-operating (or confronting) more structuralist/objectivist research orientations because of their suspicion of quantification, and more precisely, their avoidance of formal models. These he argues, are a vital element, along with substantive theories and empirical data, of all research. These views are supported by Kurt and Gladys Lang who equate theorising with model building. Throughout Rosengren's brief overview of "uses and gratifications" research, lifestyle-oriented research, and reception theory, he does not specify what is meant by a formal model except to distinguish levels of complexity (from simple cross-tabulation to advanced multi-variate statistical modelling). His suggestion is that humanistically oriented communications scholars must overcome their aversion to formal models, which presumably will lead to some friendly croaking between what are, at present, isolated frog ponds.

James Beniger makes the point that the most significant models (of information processing and communication) remain linear and rooted in what he calls "the three R's": readin' (input and decoding), writin' (encoding and output) and 'rithmetic (computation and decoding); themselves the "outmoded baggage of the late 1940s"

(p.19). Robert Craig suggests that communication researchers have contributed more and better original theory in recent years, but have become less certain of exactly what they are doing or should be doing (p.26) because basic questions about theory are now open and unsettled. In an elegant argument he locates this problem in an essential transformation of the human sciences arising out of the blurring of the distinction between the social sciences and the humanities. Developing the ideas of Geertz, he isolates the rhetorical and discursive features of theory as having severely compromised the old epistemological criteria underpinning our definitions of theory (falsifiability, scientific explanation). Add to this the return of speculative social theory (Habermas, Giddens, Foucault), increased appreciation of qualitative methods (ethnography, discourse analysis), and the increased attention to the historical dimension of social processes, and one "calls into question the metatheoretical vocabulary of explanatory scientific theory in social science" (p.30).

Brenda Dervin correctly identifies the practise of various other forms of theorising - sociological, psychological, anthropological - as part of the problem facing communication theory and research (p.46), and asks: What if we were able to develop communication theory for communication practice. In an upbeat and constructive attempt to demolish "false dichotomies" (such as culture vs individual, structure vs agency, power vs freedom) which is a narrative structure leading back to sociology etc., she argues that

"we fail to fully capitalise on our understanding of the role of communication in the implementation of order as well as disorder, structure as well as agency, constraint as well as freedom, homogeneity as well as difference" (p.50).

Elsewhere she remarks that "communicating is where the micro becomes the macro, the macro the micro. It is the in between, the doing, the making, the experiencing" (p.52). In fact, she goes so far as to suggest that theorists (such as Giddens and Habermas) from other social sciences point to communication as a way out of their own substantial and/or illusive polarities.

While Dervin seeks to unify communications theory and research by focusing inwards, on communication itself, and thereby banishing the polarities characteristic of "parent" social scientific enterprises, the general consensus appears to be that these polarities are here to stay. Joli Jensen suggests that

"we cannot escape the endlessly interesting epistemological divide between objectivism and expressivism, between belief in an neutral world out there that waits for us to know it and belief in a world that is constituted in our knowing it" (p.69)

while Gregory Shepherd provides a useful archaeology of the way in which words/languages have been conceived as little more than vehicles for thoughts/ideas/intentions from John Locke onwards, and consequently communication has no ontological basis in modernity. In summary he argues "as a vehicle, communication has no existential status in modernity: from modernity's point of view, then, how can there be a discipline of communication" (p.87).

This emphasis on method, theory, ontology and epistemology, variously marshalled in a number of interpretative frames does not appear to be that different from the kinds of metatheoretical problems that have plagued sociology (and other core social sciences) from time to time.

Beniger's work stands out in its efforts to rethink the fundamental categories of communication research, and turns to those disciplines where totalising theory has a long and chequered career. His approach, like that of Dervin, emphasises less the metatheoretical and more the pragmatics of communication studies: Beniger seeks to enhance theoretical leads (the study of culture, control, cognition and communication) residing elsewhere in the data, models, concepts and theory of many disciplines; Dervin seeks to rethink communications without the undue influence of many of the "old" social scientific hang-ups.

Theory and Practice

Inasmuch as these contributions affect a struggle to grasp the disciplinary fragmentation of research, bemoaned or celebrated as the case may be, they posit a range of real or possible relationships between theory and practice. These range from an urgent call for confrontation and dialogue (Rosengren and Craig), a movement away from the ossified subject divisions towards the other disciplines that increasingly usurp its claim to academic study (Beniger) and a concentration on "the elusive moments of human communicatings" (Dervin).

Joshua Meyrowitz re-casts the central questions and arguments about media into three underlying metaphors which he argues will simplify (and encourage) a new dialogue within communication studies. Firstly, the notion of media as conduit: primarily concerned with content; secondly, media as languages: primarily the grammar of each medium and finally, media as environments: emphasising the unique features of each medium. He argues that issues covered by these metaphors have tended to be dealt with in relative isolation from each other. Krippendorf endorses this view by skilfully outlining the way "in which much communication scholarship to date has

been message driven" (p.34). This dates back to Lasswell's dictum "who, says what, in which channel, to whom and with what effects" which, according to Krippendorf "codified the field, its research questions and explanations" (p.35). Taking a rapid turn through "uses and gratifications", information-seeking, and agenda setting as partial critiques of the message driven foundation of communication studies, he then subsides into social constructivism, "a radically new and virtuous synthesis", which places actors and their conversations at the base from which one works upwards towards theory. He does raise important ethical questions, but the problem of power and the determination of "preferred readings" (Hall) remains unresolved.

In fact, surveying the varied responses to communication's disciplinary crisis sheds little light on how exactly communications researchers should proceed. Once again, the problem is not unique to communication - witness the soul searching amongst development theorists and practitioners, and the endless breast-beating among sociologists and political scientists around value freedom and praxis. However, Mancini is one of the few contributors to identify the strange relationship between mass media research and a broad range of other intellectuals and opinion leaders from different backgrounds. In the context of European communication research, he suggests that the more or less direct commitment to public life by intellectuals, and the growth of the mass media in the 1970s and 1980s has contributed to the production of easy and appetizing texts written for public consumption - the success of which releases many researchers from the need for university recognition. The discipline, he argues, is contaminated by its very connectedness in civil society, is subject to fashions and marketable specialisms and bandwagon effects (from

other disciplines). He concludes by asserting

"what seems certain to me is that we are in the process of a development that has been perhaps too tied to the very system mass communication research intends to study" (p.108).

Finally, the need for cohesion, dialogue etc., or even an organised consensus, appears to be a chimera when one considers the impact of cultural studies on the communication field. Cultural studies is self-consciously anti-disciplinary and constitutes an intellectual movement spread across the academic landscape. The Lang's, Rosengren and Jensen appear to favour a discipline with a coherent paradigm, disciplinary legitimacy and methodological certainty because it makes academic life "infinitely easier" (Jensen p.68) in a context of growing institutional pressures. Balancing these two trajectories - the necessity of legitimacy and intellectual freedom remains a thorny problem for many social/human scientists.

However, this view is argued from a methodological point of view, not a theoretical one. It is a realistic point of departure for an academic discipline attempting to consolidate itself in a period of perceived institutional insecurity, and will embrace a methodological "unity in diversity" programme. However, the diversity of theoretical positions (basic questions about the subject of the discipline) which informs this methodological approach renders such a project unworkable, for the multiplicity of starting points initiates a domino effect throughout communications studies.

NEW DIRECTIONS, NEW AGENDA

In this somewhat disparate collection, there is certainly not the kind of focus encountered in the previous one, which probably accounts for their being more provocative. Sandra Braman provides a periodisation of the information society and the research agendas which flow from what she calls "the third stage - the harmonisation of communication systems". The 1990s, she argues, herald a qualitative change from the post-industrial information society (the second stage) which was characterised by new organisational forms (the transnational corporation); the burgeoning information economy (a new stage beyond agricultural and industrial eras); and the attack on facticity (evidenced by new epistemologies and the blurring of genres alluded to above). Harmonisation for Braman means the global linkages between broadcasting and telecommunications and the linkage of communications with other social systems (for example international finance, the just-in-time re-organisation of production etc.). Furthermore, the transnational corporation comes to dominate not only the economic scene but increasingly the legal and political domains as well, which necessitates a rethinking of economics itself (and its fundamental units of analysis). On the cultural front, facts are increasingly isolated from context - the content of information flows now refers to the content of other information flows (reminiscent of Baudrillard's "hyperreality") and the facticity which underpinned institutional and organisational credibility is eroded. The combination of post-modern cultural form and network economics implies firstly, a decrease in the ability to act meaningfully (signifying a change in the domain of politics which is not yet fully understood) and secondly, a delineation of new class divisions based on ownership of expression of fact and relative position in the information economy (rather than ownership of material resources).

The overall implications of her analysis are profound: organisation and net-

works will have to be studied as media; questions about appropriate decision making tools will have to be answered; cybernetics and chaos theory will become increasingly important. Braman paints a picture of the future-as-now which is deeply disturbing, particularly for those on the periphery and for those whose social scientific vocabularies and conceptual frameworks are apparently appropriate only for a disappearing world. How many of us know anything about morphogenesis, chaos and autopoeiesis (which is not in my dictionary)?

Elsewhere (in the section on Rethinking the critical tradition), Meehan, Mosco and Wasko attempt to address some of these concerns through a reappraisal of political economy. Starting off by detailing the damage inflicted on materialist analyses by the developments in Eastern Europe and the failure of Keynesian and monetarist economics alike to understand the "new" capitalism, they go on to outline the challenge of postmodernism to both conservative and critical academics. Arguing that the central elements of political economy viz history, social totality, moral philosophy and praxis remain effective tools with which to analyze the challenges posed by

"economic crisis, national transformation, deepening divisions between communication haves and have-nots, and the role of entertainment in the creation of hegemony" (p.109)

they go on to show how postmodernism (despite its emphasis on style and superficiality) is rooted in radical economic and technological change. Where modern societies were industrial and national, postmodern societies become information based and global. This transformation of power relations, categorical hierarchies and hegemonic processes

"leaves the postmodern landscape strewn with bits of the social categories, economic roles, personal identities, cultural definitions and hegemonic ideologies that once comprised the rigid structure of industrial modernism" (p.109).

Postmodernist sensibilities therefore lie in the socio-cultural consequences of economic restructuring. Theirs is a spirited defence of a tried and trusted method of analysing the relationship between economics and media/culture. They do realise that establishing the data/information on which to base their political economy is increasingly problematic - corporate obfuscation, government secrecy, privatisation and the commodification of public information are but a few of the hurdles in the path of a political economy that wants to know "who is involved, what interests are served" (p.114). It is certainly a reassuring antidote to the Braman scenario whose evocation of the complexity, impenetrability and inexorability of the third stage of the information society is profoundly disempowering.

Davis and Jasinski address the Meehan (et al) concerns about access to information, suggesting that "despite the enormous growth in accessibility of political information, public knowledge of politics remains low and declining... media campaigns have done little to stimulate political interest or participation" (p.145). They argue that the present research agenda concerned with these, and similar questions, is one which is dominated by a search for solutions to many practical problems created by new technologies and the decline of modernism. They believe that communication research should instead seek to contribute to the development of a constructive postmodern perspective. Essentially hostile to modernism (with its wars, genocide and exploitation) Davis and Jasinski argue that social science (including communication research) has in fact contributed to the undermining of mod-

ernist assumptions, through for example, showing how human subjectivity emerges out of communication practices; showing how the smallest social unit is the community sharing a culture; showing that performance rather than transmission is the most basic function of communication and finally, showing how, for the individual, the social world consists of many overlapping and interrelated realities (a multi-cultural world). Furthermore, it is the limitations imposed on the public sphere ("a proud achievement of modernism" according to Habermas) by the dominance of specialized technocratic elites which should be the major target of communication research, which would hopefully, restructure such institutions "so that they become places where culturally diverse groups come together to elaborate public culture"(p.147). This vision of postmodernism is really quite different from that posited by postmodernists such as Lyotard and Baudrillard - a softer and manifestly optimistic tone predominates. At the same time, the elevation of communication research to a role of first base from which to launch a sustained transformation of institutions is a particularly effervescent argument: optimistic but unrealistic. Both Meehan (et al) and Braman are more convincing in their recognition of postmodernity as an abandonment of humanism as we know it and a colossal edifice of power from which flows a culture of stylish abandonment to pleasure for those privileged to be part of it, and abandonment full stop for those who are not.

Two contributions to the New Directions, New Agendas section are decidedly backward looking. Firstly, Monahan and Collins-Jarvis hark back to the Chicago school in order to recapture and recreate the excitement and interest in communication processes evident in a bygone era. Their analysis of the (changing) hierarchy of values underpinning communication disciplines is really a plea for a re-shuffling of the priorities of the disci-

pline itself. They allege that theoretical and methodological diversity was, during the 1980s, the academic value most widely embraced and supported. This was a response to the gradual breakdown of the dominant value of connectedness (shared core of knowledge) which characterised the behavioural science that was communication in the 1950s and 1960s. The pluralist value is closely followed by social relevance (in the 1980s), emphasising the disciplinary commitment to improving the human condition. The dominance of these two values has curtailed creativity (generation of original theory) largely because of "economic expansion and dissatisfaction with the status quo" (p.153). Looking forward, the authors suggest that the realities of shrinking academic resources will shift the value hierarchy back towards distinctiveness (self-identity) and place a large question mark around social relevance. They then sketch out the enduring creativeness of the Chicago school, which, despite its plurality, emphasised social relevance. Much of this is speculative because the parameters of institutional pressures are not clear, and there is no discussion of the relation between communication discipline values and other disciplinary values. Nevertheless, this kind of analysis should strike a chord here at home, if only as a prompt to begin figuring out the kinds of values which are implicitly adopted by non-academic organisational practices upon which much that is academic is partially dependent. At another level, the contribution reflects the space that communication research has created for itself, upon which to develop a rigorous self-reflection. This is as yet a non-starter in our own context and is an indictment of the values, broadly held, which locate communication studies on the periphery of legitimate and necessary social investigation.

The second backward looking piece is Rothenbuhler's invitation to re-read Durkheim as part of a project to re-mine the old diggings in social theory. He points out that Durkheim is "hardly anywhere to be seen in communication studies today" (p.159) notwithstanding Durkheim's answer to the question "How do societies reproduce themselves?" was suggestive of much that communication research is now itself committed to: symbolic activity and culture. While Rothenbuhler beats a not very convincing drum about Durkheim's continued relevance to social theory in general, he does, almost inadvertently, hit on a number of contemporary issues which are suggestive of a fruitful re-reading of the old master. It may be that the argument developed by Jameson that postmodernity is in fact the completion of the modernist project, does open a door to viewing economics as an elaborate system of symbolic exchanges, politics as a contest of expressions and history as a symbolic relation of present and past. Perhaps it is only in the 1990s that society (the globe?) can be conceived of as a communications system (as argued by postmodernists) and as a process which simultaneously individuates within a constraining discursive/symbolic structure. Does Durkheim have a word or two to say about an era of harmonisation? Rothenbuhler is oblique and brief, and on the surface, provocative. Much of the antagonism to conservative functionalist sociology would have to be suspended if his project is to bear fruit.

New directions, new agendas (which includes pieces on interpersonal communications and public relations) is the place to seek an elaboration of the postmodern world and what it means for communication studies. Both Braman and Davis & Jasinski, in their different ways, picture it for us - but without specifically identifying a unifying theoretical approach which may enable a synthesis around a series of core propositions, such as those made by Gandy with the

notion of "panoptic sort" - the extension of technical rationalisation into the social realm (see Gandy 1993).

CONNECTING COMMUNICATION SCHOLARSHIP TO PUBLIC POLICY

The articles collected in this section are diverse, but at least three of the contributions are at pains to point out the failure of communication scholarship to impact upon public decision making.

Docherty (et al) mount a polemic against cultural studies, as exemplified by Carey and Geertz, who appear to argue for a project which will reveal the processes of meaning creation through an analysis of culture, defined as a multiplicity of subjectivist constructions (p.233). This approach is contrasted with a long tradition of social scientific research (with C.W.Mills as an exemplar) which stressed the relation between culture and power. A turn towards the active audience, ethnography and understanding, has de-centred the problem of determination - "do we in fact see no equation between the institutionally based articulation of particular symbolic systems and the formation of public consciousness? (p.233) they ask. The rest of their article is taken up with an elaboration of struggles within the BBC, and the resulting argument that in Britain at least, the relationship between academic research and public broadcasting policy is closer than is to be found in the United States.

A similar kind of argument is put forward by Gomery in his analysis of media economics. He stresses the necessity to go beyond "simply listing who owns the media" - and develops a research agenda which links structure, conduct of organizations (behaviour dictated by structure) and performance

(promotion of diversity, freedom of speech and discussion etc). These performance criteria he argues, while broadly articulated in moral terms, are seldom linked normatively with empirical research which goes beyond a paradigmatic stock response (for example the conspiracy theories associated with media monopolies by those on the left). There is little that is new here, for the problem of institutional structure and conduct and its relation to cultural production is a long standing theme amongst critical communication scholars. The resonance with Docherty et al. lies in their mutual concern with careerism and specialism which somehow erects a barrier to carrying a critical project through the last mile - to public debate about policy.

Eli Noam too believes that communication scholarship has failed, notwithstanding its often overtly political stance, to influence governmental decision makers. However, he identifies a series of developments (globalization, networking, supra-national cultures and so on) which have left academics behind. His suggestions for action are largely speculative and assume a range of characteristics of communication scholarship in the USA which are dubious (for example, a field full of ideological conflict, without a strong empirical base and largely insular).

Rowland's review of mass media scholarship and the challenges it faces from the growing significance of telecommunications education/training (and its technicist bias) picks up the Noam "we are being left behind" observation, but does not suggest a coherent research (or interventionist) strategy which will bring social aspects of communication research to an increasingly attractive, well-funded university based technicist education of the future. Suggestions such as

"it is incumbent upon telecommunications to foster a critical social understanding of the changing information technologies, and to apply that same interpretative discipline on the parallel problems in telecommunications policy"

is a bit like asking for fairness and objective reporting from paid propagandists. What is required are arguments based on an already well-established research tradition which links technological development to social development (or the lack of it) (see Mulgan 1991). Gomery's point about the conduct of institutions and organizations and the resultant performance would be an appropriate starting point in putting flesh on the bones of Rowland's rather weak suggestions.

RETHINKING THE CRITICAL TRADITION

I have already discussed at some length the contribution of Meehan (et al) in the context of Sandra Braman's analysis of the information society. The remaining contributions in this section are deeply disappointing from the point of view of providing new tools with which to develop the critical moment of communication studies.

Robert McChesney does a hatchet job on cultural studies because of its de-emphasising of the institutional framework of cultural production and its concomitant emphasis on cultural consumption. In addition he is justifiably critical of the failure of communications scholarship to take capitalism seriously. His call is for communications scholars to consider themselves public intellectuals whose task it is to generate and defend notions of more democratic communication systems, a project which cannot be undertaken without a critique of the political economy and class. Dan Schiller does much the

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same sort of thing, although his periodisation of communication studies, with an emphasis on Fascism and the Cold War is more thorough. He too is critical of cultural studies, arguing that " conceptions of cultural practice that have come to predominate in this body of work developed at the expense of emphasis on class" (p.122). Implicit in both these articles is a commitment to a multi-disciplinary project involving political economists, social historians and other like-minded intellectuals - but little is said of with whom they should be allied (in terms of class and social movement).

These two crucial problem areas - influence on policy making, and rethinking the critical tradition, display the weakness of communication studies to contribute to refurbishing the armoury of social critique, at a time when it is widely recognised that communication is a key site of social transformation (see Featherstone 1989). Whether or not this reflects changing values, or institutionally-driven impotencies, it is clear that anti-theoretical views (such as the death of metanarratives, celebrated by postmodernists) are a problem that has thrown critical communication scholars off balance.

AUDIENCES AND INSTITUTIONS

We find collected here a truly remarkable overview of what is now a central pillar of current communication study. This may be related to the suggestion, made by the editors in their call for papers, that "the question of media effects remains the perennial black box of communication research and still poses the most unanswered questions" (p.4). However, the recognition of the significance of audience effects and the theoretical, critical and methodological questions and problematics encountered in their exploration make it a difficult arena to summarise and pass judgements about. In many ways, audience/media

effects constitutes the heart of communication studies and superficiality is the real stumbling block, as the history of efforts to understand them attest to.

The articles cover a wide range of concerns, from Jensen's analysis of methodology, Gans's defense of the limited effects theory, Geiger and Neeuhagen on information processing as well as the more familiar cultural studies approach of Morley and Livingstone. My own predilection is towards the latter, so I shall begin with Livingstone. She starts by suggesting that there is a long tradition of separation between administrative and critical research - the former neglecting the text (and consequently assuming audience behaviour) the latter neglecting the audience (and consequently assuming textual power), each with its own changing rhythm as in for example administrative research fluctuations between active and passive audiences and strong and weak effects. She asserts that there is now a significant convergence of these two schools of thought such that a new and productive era of theory building has begun. This new era is raising questions of mutual interest such as pleasure, reception, interpretation and domestic context of viewing. The central recognition has been the necessity to consider simultaneously text, audience and context; the legitimacy of methodological debate and the broad acceptance of empirical investigation of all theoretical claims. In addition she asserts that "text and audience can no longer be seen as independent or studied separately..... text and reader are interdependent, mutually conceived, joint constructors of meaning" (p.7).

The critique of structuralism has meant that a new conception of meaning has had to be theorised "emerging from the specific and located interaction between text and reader, where text must be considered virtual until realised by

actual - rather than ideal -readers" (p.7). These virtual texts (or messages) address people through a range of modes, inviting people to insert their own knowledge and experience into the interpretation. Readers may accept, reject or neglect these hailings (which are reminiscent of Althusser) and construct different meanings for themselves. The rise of ethnographic research has shown how gender, culture and power (among other categories) may shape the experience and use of the media. One important consequence of this new approach is the critical re-evaluation of the notion of "mass media" and "mass audience". Livingstone goes on to refine her basic framework by exploring texts, audience reception, genres of programmes, cultural/social contexts and the methodologies of focus groups and ethnography.

It is Morley's piece [largely a re-write of the introduction to his excellent Television, Audiences and Cultural Studies (1992)] that provides the springboard for an engagement with Livingstone's argument, for he attempts to develop a critique of what is now known broadly as "semiotic democracy". In a marvellous irony he suggests that the pendulum may have swung so far away from the passive audience models and towards the active audience that one is left with a "curiously Christian [assumption], in which the sins of the industry (or the message) are somehow seen to be redeemed in the afterlife of reception" (p.16). The new active audience framework would seem to have lost sight of the purpose of studying audience consumption of media texts - that of understanding "the texture of hegemony/subalternity, the interlacing of resistance and submission, opposition and complicity" (Martin Barbero 1988, quoted by Morley p.14). While the active audience thesis does counter-argue the dominant ideology thesis, there is a danger of presuming that interpretative resistance is more prevalent than subordination, or the reproduction of dominant

meanings. The "semiotic democracy" of Fiske and others is really little more than a conservative ideology of consumer pluralism, and fails to acknowledge that some discourses are more powerful than others. Morley argues against a methodological equivalence between producer and consumer of messages (insofar as both make meaning) because there is a difference between "having power over a text, and power over the agenda within which that text is constructed and presented" (p.16). In other words, the newly celebrated consequence of different research traditions should not become a celebration of the disappearance of the power of centralised media institutions. As Ang has so succinctly summarised the problem "audiences may be active, in myriad ways, in using and interpreting media [but] it would be out of perspective to cheerfully equate 'active' with 'powerful'" (quoted in Morley p.16).

Morley's own work has played a pioneering role in establishing a research agenda on the active audience which has ethnography as one of its central methodological tools, but he is at pains to point out that this should not be construed as an emphasis on the micro at the expense of macro level analysis. He suggests that this is a false polarity, which conceives of the macro as a pre-given structure - rather than a process underpinned/reproduced by micro-processes (as Giddens, for example would argue). It is the methodology of micro-processes, for example ethnography, which allows us to understand macro phenomena such as the global, the public, cultural imperialism etc. and their relation to the local, the private and situated consumption. Morley's treatment of the active audience is therefore a continuation of the critical project which Livingstone suggests has disappeared into the convergence. But her convergence is simply an equalisation

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of disciplinary (dare we call it that) fragments which does little to remove the competition over the key questions posed by each.

Jensen, by contrast, is rather pedestrian in his overview of the gradual acceptance of qualitative methodologies as legitimate tools of investigating reception, but does hover on the edge of a "semiotic democracy" argument. He suggests that "the life of signs within modern society is in large measure an accomplishment of the audience"(p.26). His major concern however is that qualitative empirical studies of the audience now begin to provide a new dimension of research data which will assist future researchers in their efforts to understand the changing nature of audience activity. Up until recently, it has been the survey design and experimental research design which have provided the data upon which to analyze the past (thereby making comparative research difficult). In order for a re-writing of the history of the social implications of the mass media, Jensen argues that current and future communication research must produce the sources.

Herbert Gans too, by locating himself in a tradition of media effects, seems rather old-fashioned. He does introduce an interesting question about the susceptibility of institutions to media effects - citing the transformation of political parties and government, but his examples are too few and his suggestions too anecdotal to provide a basis for distinguishing institutions from individual. The rest of his paper restates the well known limited effects theories - questions about when and how media have effects; questions about genres, formats and differential effects associated with them: questions about the limitations of effects imposed by the audience (at least one dimension of the Morley/Livingstone approach) and so on. Finally, he suggests ethnographic research is a good thing - not-

withstanding how time consuming and expensive it is.

Gaye Tuchman offers an interesting account of how two researchers - each operating from an active audience perspective - provide alternative readings of how audiences engage with the media texts they consume/decode. She contrasts Paul Willis's views on how British working class youths' use of media to creatively express individuality embodies resistance to hegemonic meanings, with William Gamson's views on how working class people interpret media according to the issues, their engagement with it and how proximate an issue is to their lives. The conclusion is that "even relatively uneducated individuals and groups of working people have their own thematic understandings of the social and political world" (p.40). This is a rather patronising view of research subjects and the paper does little to explicate the categories which structure their lives (gender, class, ethnicity etc.) and which are more or less significant and why.

Robert Entman shifts the emphasis back to the text or the message in his powerful defence of framing as a central concept in determining the power of the text. Frames, he argues, essentially involve selection and salience; defining a problem, diagnosing a cause, making a moral judgement and suggesting remedies. In addition, frames have at least four locations in the communication process - communicators make framing judgements when they decide what to say (guided by frames which organise their belief systems); texts contain frames, manifested by the presence or absence of key words, stereotyped images, sources etc.; receivers have frames which may or may not mirror frames in the text and those of the communicator; and culture, which is the stock of commonly invoked frames. We are all

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familiar with text framing - making information (or comment etc.) more salient through placement, repetition or association with familiar symbols. After some lengthy examples, Entman proposes that framing can help us understand certain difficulties within the active audience perspective. He argues that framing offers an operational definition for the idea of dominant meaning and preferred reading. Notwithstanding the sophistication and creativity of this methodology it remains trapped in an interpretative spiral ultimately dependant upon a conscious recognition or identification of every frame that culture provides. In this respect it is not so very different from the "semiotic democracy" it purports to counter. This would account for the plethora of framing studies (on issues as diverse as the shooting down of the Korean jet, the anti-nuclear movement and the Iraqi war), but it runs second to agenda setting in the race for legitimacy and theoretical coherence.

These discussions about (and within) audience research exemplify many of the problems facing communications studies in general. There is a strong methodological moment; an intimation of the existing ideological rifts; a locus for debate about polarities (such as micro vs macro, structure vs agency) and priorities; the question of culture, the problem of determination of identity and so on. I have a strong sense that, in some quarters at least, audience research (or reception studies) does link broad social questions (such as the relationship between the global and the local in the constitution of identities) with methodological innovations in order to promote a clear understanding of how (and for and against, whom) the modern (or postmodern) world works.

CONCLUSION

While another reviewer may well interpret these texts differently (in true semi-otic democracy fashion), there are a number of issues which, when foregrounded, may contribute something to our current understanding of communication studies.

(i) The field is clearly fragmented - not in a trivial sense of having many trajectories, themes and levels, but in a broader sense of having well-established and mutually exclusive points of departure. I doubt very much whether this state of affairs (if it accurately represents the true state of communications scholarship) is likely to damage the disciplinary status of communication at an institutional level. "Real world" developments and their corollaries (such as the demands of the corporate sector, the relationships between culture and communication etc.) point to a consolidation of the discipline in academic terms - research output is phenomenal, even if it is not paradigmatic.

(ii) This fragmentation, I would argue, is the result of the failure to harness speculative theory in a project which delivers a core of central questions to be posed to communication studies. At the same time, there is a strong sense of the reliance on social, political and increasingly, cultural theory to inform the theorising that communications scholars are engaged in. Giddens, Habermas, Foucault, Berger and Luckman, Hall, Williams, Goffman, Adorno, Mills - so the list goes on - are the referents that are encountered again and again. This incomplete list indicates the eclecticism of the field which - for good or bad, signals both immaturity and broadmindedness. The prevalence of metaphors (as a form of basic theorising) is further evidence of both a vibrancy and a lack of certainty in the enterprise. There can be no doubt that methodologically - in research design at least - communication scholarship is creative, perceptive and attuned to the complexity of the

subject. Nevertheless, the predominance of middle-range theory (framing, agenda-setting and cultivation analysis to name only a few) suggests that the broad speculative and largely abstract theories of Giddens, Bourdieu, Habermas and others, are not being operationalised in any meaningful way: they have become indicators of methodological trajectories or moral/political signposts. A similar problem exists in sociology at the present time. Held and Thompson for example argue that "there are many who feel that Giddens's work, however interesting it may be on a general theoretical level, is too abstract and formal to be of much use in carrying out empirical research projects" (1989:9). This may be so, and may be a source of difficulty for sociology even with its vocabulary in place, but we should not lose sight of a point which Ian Craib so eloquently makes:

"The dominant trends in modern intellectual life are away from synthesis, towards an acceptance of fragmentation, relativism, over-simplicity, and abandonment of morality. All of these things are apparent in [Giddens's] structuration theory even if some of them are denied by the theory. At the same time, it goes against the tendency of modern thought in its attempt to see the whole, in the insistence that we can at least achieve better or less better knowledge of the world and history" (1992:196).

In this respect, these papers reflect a commitment to theory which is not matched by an analytic practical commitment to the critical tradition - notwithstanding the many contributions which make the call to revive it or further it. The explanations offered for the failure of communication studies to engage with the shifts in global power (and its changing locus within society) are perhaps a further indication of a lack of usable theory. In Giddens's case we may not yet see empirical results, but we do see a revitalised sociology and a growing literature around his ideas, which I am sure will translate into useable theory. Why is the ideological spirit willing, but the analytic flesh weak ? Perhaps it may reflect the peripheralization of the task of improving the human condition, or the deterioration of the human condition itself being marginalised through communication practices ? I believe it has to do with a conception of theory as patchwork - sew enough pieces together and we cover the whole bed.

(iii) Many of the issues addressed in this collection are significant in South Africa today. The notion of audience, cultural studies, culture and difference and so on, are crucially tied into any broad restructuring of the mass media landscape - a restructuring which has already begun in earnest at the level of processes of policy formulation, tactics of implementation and institutional reorganization of public broadcasting, the development of media systems for education etc. How much theory do we have ?, how much empirical information do we have ?, and how do we understand the relationships between institutions and the people out there ? My guess is that we don't have very much which is usable in a critical project of turning communication towards more progressive ends. This probably has a lot to do with the view of communication as an object, rather than as a subject of multi-disciplinary and intellectual investigation: the how, and the wherefore of democratization, development and real citizenship depends upon building a social scientific enterprise which sets out to answer the big questions. Finding those questions is not an easy task, but avoiding the hunt makes for a toothless social science.

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