Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies

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Despite the proliferation of critical studies of communication, the meanings of the words "communication" and "critical" remain deeply contested. Attending to the history of the use of these terms inside and outside of the academy offers a broader perspective on some of the most pressing issues confronting scholars of communication today.

"Communication"

"Communication" has been primarily understood in its current sense of the interpersonal or mediated transfer of information since at least the early twentieth century, but as some of the most important scholars in communications and media studies have reminded us, the word has a long and complex history in the English language.[1] Armand Mattelart notes that for Diderot in the 1753 *Encyclopédie*, communication encompasses "literature, physics, theology, the science of fortifications, penal law, highways," and that the term invokes "ideas of sharing, community, contiguity, continuity, incarnation, and exhibition."[2] Mattelart goes on to remark that "the original matrix of 'communication' owes [much] to the language of the church . . . Excommunication is defined [by Diderot] as the 'separation from communication or trade with a person with whom one previously enjoyed it.' 'In this sense,' the author goes on, 'any man excluded from a society or a body, and with whom the members of that body no longer have communication, may be said to be excommunicated.'" Of the meaning which has been most obscured for us today, the movement of physical stuff, John Durham Peters writes: "The sense of physical transfer—such as the communication of heat, light, magnetism, or gifts—is now largely archaic, but it is the root . . . of the notion of communication as the transfer of psychical entities such as ideas, thoughts, or meanings."[3]

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The communications scholar for whose work this conjunction of meanings is perhaps most salient is Harold Innis. Beginning students are often surprised to learn of Innis's foundational work in economics, the fur trade, railroads, and fisheries, and often at first assume that this work is conceptually separate from his great studies of media, but of course nothing could be further from the truth.[4] The tight connections between the physical movement of people and stuff, as well as information, propelled Innis, as James Carey writes, "to pierce the organic metaphors that so often ... masked the facts of history, geography, and power in a veil of metaphysics."[5] They are what allowed him to derive his complex and wide-ranging theories of the inherent biases in certain communicative forms (which often turned in part on the availability and/or permanence of the various material substrates of those forms) and of the often imperial politics of media forms and practices.[6]

Today this issue seems important for at least two reasons. First, the digital environment to a much greater degree than other media systems conveys not just information—or forces us to rethink what we mean by "information"—but physical products, goods, and services, as it often reconfigures the nature of these at the same time. Nearly every sort of material good is moved, sold, assessed, rated, and managed via "digital media," and more and more physical goods are becoming actual parts of the digital system of circulation. With the burgeoning widespread advent of 3D printing technologies, RFID tags, UAVs, and the so-called "Internet of things," among many other phenomena, we begin to see more and more ways in which the eroding line between the "digital" and the "physical" implies that information and communication today encompass much more than the ordinary denotation of those terms suggests. From the opposite direction, and to some extent with an even longer history, goods that were primarily informational in nature have become wholly absorbed into the digital environment—here meaning especially the whole of documents, publications, video and audio media formats, communication technologies, and perhaps even more strongly financial (currency, equity, income, and derivative investments) and legal objects (laws and regulations). These phenomena challenge our assumptions about what are and are not media and communication, and require us to expand both the scope and context of the methods and objects we use in analytical practice.

Second, communication understood in its modern sense as media, when taken as a discrete and isolatable object of study, can unfortunately rule out objects and practices whose relevance to communication is difficult to gainsay, but which remain outside scholarly purview largely for reasons of institutional and disciplinary convention. Here I am thinking particularly of language, which remains too often outside of the study of communication and media due to a separate discipline whose existence is justified in part by the technical nature of the issues raised in its close analysis. The exclusion of language from the study of media and communication today plays an important role in licensing a wide range of triumphalist and exaggerated claims for the transformative power of digital media, simply because communicative practices that were in earlier times not located (or not observed) in formal media sites today occur there. We read too often, for example, that it is

"possible" today to respond to television programs by producing media objects, or that the Internet makes possible democratic and/or revolutionary activities, since these were not possible on television or in newspapers, thereby almost completely overlooking the obvious roles of interpersonal communication and its mediated but not publicly visible forms (such as the telephone, postal services, and a wide range of interpersonal social activities). It is only by arbitrarily segmenting off "media" from the range of communicative practices, on the one hand, and then by silently reading them back in precisely via the multimodal nature of digital technology, that such claims are possible, and then this arbitrary segmentation allows a kind of circular reasoning practice by which the availability of that multimodality shows the significance of the digital itself—rather than simply attesting to the importance of those modes of communication that had not yet been considered within the purview of the communication scholar.

I am in no way denying the importance of disciplinary practices or procedures; I consider them vital to the production of responsible and informed scholarship and analysis. But the advent of digital media—and the necessity for all of the traditional disciplines to claim some or even all of "the digital" as part of its own remit—makes it all the more necessary for claims that cut across disciplines to be vetted against the full contexts in which they are implicated. Despite its usefulness as a disciplinary name that sets itself apart from other, related phenomena, "communication" has come again to take on an almost bewildering range of active meanings for us today, and we would do well to pay careful heed to both that fact and its consequences.

"Critical"

I have written elsewhere at some length on the importance of both critical theory and cultural studies for the study of digital media.[7] The insights of the Frankfurt School (for critical theory) and the Birmingham School (for cultural studies), and the scholars associated with and influenced by them, are of vital importance to any study of media and communication, even when these are taken more broadly than the particular forms of media usually associated with their formal study. While there are definitely some scholars working to adapt these forms of analysis into the digital world, it has been surprising to me how fully non-critical and explicitly celebratory paradigms have come to dominate some academic discussions of digital media, and how much work that entirely discounts the value of critique—either implicitly through a complete avoidance of such topics, or via explicit disavowal of critical paradigms—has now become mainstream in media education. In part, I see this as an overall consequence of the commercialization and corporatization of the university, wherein corporate–academic partnerships that would have been anathema a generation ago, and often illegal and/or against explicit rules, are today encouraged and actively solicited. This is not unique to the digital, although the rise of the digital is certainly at least worryingly coterminous with the vast infiltration of every part of life by what can loosely be called "digital media"; it is also reflected in the recent and to my mind remarkable development of media and communication studies as a form

of "embedded reporting," where scholars are encouraged to work along with production teams and companies to develop "internalist" accounts of media. While I do not want to discount any forms of academic work, even including in some circumstances internalist investigations of production practices, to my mind the entire tradition of scholarly investigation and in particular critical investigation presumes at least the appearance of distance between the scholar and her object. Given that the greatest impact of media is through consumption and not production, interpretation and understanding of media as produced remains the most urgent task for scholars. The contemporary emphasis on consumers-as-producers especially in social media strikes me as unconvincing, or at least notably over-emphasized; while I am certain that production can be an important part of consumption, this has been true for much longer than social media advocates want to claim, and the production of responsive media forms does not necessarily alter the effects of consumption to begin with, and does not license a dismissal of the consumer/producer distinction.

"Critical" is to me a word that can be too easily misunderstood. It means not being necessarily negative about a phenomenon, but rather exploring all of its facets. In this way its most salient usage for the study of media and communication may extend beyond the familiar loci of "critical theory" and its various associates, although those theorists were keenly aware of this larger context. Perhaps the most famous and most important use of the word in the Western tradition is that of Immanuel Kant in his three Critiques, which make up a large part of Kant's "critical philosophy." The notion of critique advanced by Kant in these works is one to which we could pay even more heed today. When Kant uses the word in the titles of these works, "critique" does not mean "negative evaluation": few could be more emphatic about the value of pure reason, practical reason, and judgment than is Kant. Rather, "critique" in the Kantian sense is an activity directly related to Kant's notion of Enlightenment, disinterested inquiry, and of civil society. "Our age is properly the age of critique," Kant famously writes in the Preface to the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, "and to critique everything must submit. Religion and legislation commonly seek to exempt themselves from critique … But in so doing they arouse well-deserved suspicion and cannot lay claim to unfeigned respect."[8] That sort of respect is vital to the Enlightenment notion of intellectual practice and citizen participation; it is a great part of what Derrida clings to in his various critical investigations of even Kant's version of the Enlightenment project.

Toward the end of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant returns to the question and nature of critique. One part of the philosophy of pure reason is the "*propaedeutic* (preparation), which investigates our power of reason with regard to all pure a priori cognition, and is called *critique*."[9] While Kant is writing about deep issues of metaphysical doctrine—and dispelling some of them, in a fashion somewhat consistent with Innis's resistance to certain forms of metaphysical argument—his point is both applicable and relevant to all forms of analytical and interpretive thinking within scholarship. One of the problems in segregating media and communication studies from the rest of social practice is a troubling tendency to take them as discrete, self-contained subjects (sometimes even demarcated by media

genres), and failing to comprehend them within the larger contexts out of which they emerge, even while then applying the analysis back into those social contexts. This pattern is especially pronounced in work on social media and other new media forms. It is not just the job but the responsibility of scholars of media to subject the entire range of their practice to the most general forms of critique and the most comprehensive forms of understanding, constantly correcting for biases and hidden assumptions. In many ways, despite the proliferation of communicative modalities, our age is less the age of critique than was Kant's, a tendency that has become even more pronounced in the recent enthusiasm for digital media. We would do well to work harder to combat that tendency and to show our subjects and our students the respect demonstrated by letting all aspects of our practice invite critical thought.

Notes

[1] See "communication, n." *OED Online* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[2] Armand Mattelart, *The Invention of Communication* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), xiii.

[3] John Durham Peters, *Speaking Into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 8.

[4] See, for example, Harold Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada: An Introduction to Canadian Economic History*. Revised edition (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1956) and *The Cod Fisheries: The History of an International Economy* (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1940).

[5] James Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 153.

[6] See Innis, *The Bias of Communication* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1951) and *Empire and Communications* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950)

[7] See, for example, *The Cultural Logic of Computation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), "Computers and Cultural Studies," in Robert Kolker, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Film and Media Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press), 2008. 508–26; and "Critical Theory," in Marie-Laure Ryan, Benjamin J. Robertson, and Lori Emerson, ed., *The Johns Hopkins Guidebook to the Digital Humanities* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, forthcoming).

[8] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (unified edition) (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1996), 8 (A xii).

[9] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 761–2 (A 841/B 869).