The Importance of Being Critical—In One's Own Fashion

Epilogue by George Gerbner

Communications as a discipline and its scholarly mission: some reflections.

A symposium is a dialogue of perspectives. Although the essays in this volume extend the discourse beyond the reach of any face-to-face encounter, frozen in print they leave the internal dialogue unvoiced. My purpose is to develop some aspects of that dialogue and to comment on them from my own point of view. My thesis is that the issues joined in this symposium help define the core and critical backbone of our discipline.

The study of communication revolves around the production, nature, and role of messages in life and society. Message-making and story-telling capabilities provide the basic humanizing and evolutionary process of our species. A discipline that centers on that process makes distinctive contributions to the understanding of human problems.

In order to make such contributions, the discipline requires an intellectual domain, a body of theories and approaches that fits its subject matter, and professional organizations and journals that inform, socialize, and nurture its members.

A discipline also requires a sense of professional integrity. This means that its members are not just hired hands, but women and men prepared and free to scrutinize the ends as well as the means of any

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project. That, I believe, is the essence of the critical versus the administrative stance, a dichotomy that is expertly explored in this symposium.

Critical inquiry is the distinguishing feature of a discipline and the hallmark of independent scholarship.

Social and symbolic structures cultivate tacit agreement on the terms of their existence. People growing up and living with these structures come to assume their existence as unwittingly as the proverbial fish in the ocean does salt water. Any scholarly inquiry that explictly recognizes these structures and frameworks is inherently critical. It poses a challenge to unthinking acceptance. It extends the possibility of conscious control and deliberate change. It brings some degree of autonomy, self-direction, and development into the realm of human social possibilities. Posing that challenge is a unique task of an academic discipline and the only legitimate justification for its admittedly limited but still significant freedoms.

So the principal scholarly debate, as this symposium indicates, is not so much between "administrative" and "critical" research (as both are needed for different purposes) as among different approaches to the fundamentally critical functions of scholarship. The significant dialogue of perspectives is, as it should be, about how to make research most productive in illuminating the dynamics of power in communications and of communications in society. In other words, it is about ways to pursue the critical mission of the discipline.

Some scholars still see communications as an entry point to other and presumably broader fields and issues. They may find it a fresh approach to traditional concerns in sociology, economics, history, etc., or may use the study of communications to expose diverse social anomalies and inequities. But using communications study as a means to other ends gives short shrift to the discipline itself and reduces its ability to make significant contributions to the very problems those scholars may wish to address.

Those fixated on the "primacy" of such influences as "primary groups" or "opinion leaders" or economic and social relationships sometimes ignore data showing that mass media tend to weaken and short-circuit, rather than enhance, such influences. Those attributing complex behavior like violence primarily to media, particularly television, equally neglect the role communications study should play in understanding such behavior. As others point out, quite reasonably, unemployment, poverty, neocolonial wars, immorality in higher circles, and repressive activities of police and armies may be contributing "more" to social violence than the mass media. But that is like arguing

about which is the most important section of the orchestra or which leg makes a three-legged stool stand up. If the implication is that the other sections (or legs) are somehow less significant or even dispensible, the statement becomes misleading and harmful.

In dealing with the confluence of complex social configurations, it is idle to claim primacy for any one set of forces and the field that addresses it. Each field offering seminal contributions to the understanding of any significant aspect of the constellation needs to develop its own critical discipline in order to play its appropriate role.

So the question is not whether mass media (or television) "cause" violence, but what common contribution, if any, do media make to viewers' otherwise diverse conceptions of the role of violence in life and society. Asking the question in that way opens the inquiry to a number of critical issues. What relationship does regular exposure to symbolic violence bear to one's own calculus of chances to use it successfully, and against what types of people? To one's feelings of mistrust, insecurity, and vulnerability, as well as aggression? To one's dependence on authority or force for protection? To the acceptance of repression if presented as a way of alleviating insecurity? Posing questions in that way has made it possible to develop structural theories about symbolic violence as a demonstration of power and instrument of control rooted in the institutional order.

The question of "primacy" of social forces leads us to another underlying issue in communications study: the classical vs. a newly emergent line of materialist analysis.

The materialist line that originated with such Greek philosophers as Heraclitus and Democritus was eclipsed by the scholasticism of the Middle Ages. It was revived through the discoveries of Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, Bacon, Newton, and Darwin; reformulated in different ways by philosophers such as Hobbes, Descartes, Spinoza, Locke, and the French Encyclopedists; and developed in the work of Marx and Engels into the theory of dialectical and historical materialism.

A central tenet (not to be confused with its vulgarized form of "economic determinism") is that social existence determines social consciousness. That means that the relationships of ownership and production provide an underlying coherence to political and cultural institutions, ideas, and modes of thinking. The dominant ideology is usually made invisible by being taken for granted and is disguised by religious, nationalistic, and pseudo-democratic trappings. That cultural "superstructure" reflects the more basic productive structure; both can be made visible through critical scrutiny and made accessible to action

through agitation and the press. Thus aroused, class consciousness and struggle would be the prime movers of social change.

The classical conception was rooted in the print era. The era of telecommunications, with its mainstream culture of television, has witnessed a qualitative as well as quantitative shift away from reliance on the diversely and selectively used public-making instruments of the press. Instead of requiring, and building, more or less literate publics, mass media now saturate the life space of all Americans with a ritual serving the industrial establishment and presenting images of society and the world to which there is no equivalent challenge. At the same time, the productive "base" itself is shifting to the production of services and information. Study of the production, nature, and role of messages in social life becomes an integral part of the study of the material "base." It has been said, and not without reason, that if Marx were alive today, his principal work would be entitled *Communications* rather than *Capital*.

When common consciousness becomes a largely manufactured product and an integral part rather than only reflection of some other "base" of social existence, the concept of class or of any other authentic public consciousness may be obsolescent. Therefore, the investigation of industrial behavior in the cultural field—both policy formation and concept cultivation—becomes a central task of social analysis.

One's analysis of the cultural field defines the selection of the problems and definition of social tasks. Those who consider communications a relatively autonomous activity in a pluralistic society will seek media diversity, enlightenment, reform. Those who argue that media as cultural arms of established society cannot be expected to reform the body are more likely to suggest that the "basic" relationships of production must be altered before one can expect cultural industry to reflect the new order. Plausible as that may seem, some contributors to this symposium question the separation of what used to be called the material "base" from its "reflection" in culture.

Those who see communications as an integral part and prime mover of both industrial and cultural structures point to the mass media ritual as the vital nexus between the two. Coming to grips with that ritual requires both the study of industrial production (e.g., television program policy) and product (messages) and of what happens when a coherent mass-produced message system touches the lives of millions of otherwise diverse people directly and continuously. Understanding the dynamics of how particular industrial structures become part and parcel of our attempt to make sense of reality is also a prerequisite for making us aware of and involved in the shaping of policies that cultivate our common consciousness as national and transnational communities.

The new critique thus tends to stress those research tasks that can be seen (or used) to empower rather than control or even persuade people, to unmask rather than augment the established structure of power, and to

reduce rather than exploit public vulnerabilities. It is no longer unusual to argue that a discipline should not condone the use of academic and research skills for purely tactical advantage without regard to ultimate social goals. Contributors pursuing these lines of reasoning tend to suggest that some of the new reseach tasks are: demystifying culture-power; exposing languages (visual, verbal, systemic, etc.) of manipulation and repression (including the systemic role of themes and images that perpetuate inequity and injustice); revealing the dynamics of interdependence between industrial and cognitive structures; exploring how to cultivate resistance to persuasion and receptivity to the search for alternatives; and building, testing, and refining theories that make more visible and accessible the processes of power and control in industrial cultures.

The differences in perspectives about the appropriate goals and tasks of research are reflected in but not really illuminated by the debate over methodology.

Some scholars associate the rise and use of certain methodologies with social and ideological "bad company." But "guilt by association" may not be the best way to determine methodological merit. The proof of the methodological pudding is in the testing. Researchers should not be inhibited from selecting or developing and using any methodology suitable to a problem at hand.

It should not be necessary to point out that scientific thinking in general, and empirical methods requiring careful, representative observation and analysis in particular, have been humankind's chief intellectual weapons against arbitrary authority. The fact that the most effective tools are eventually taken over by those in power should attest to rather than diminish their utility.

Several contributors to this symposium note that the received history of research on communication effects, tracing its progress from the "hypodermic needle" or "magic bullet" theories to the new and more sophisticated "active receiver" theories, should not be taken literally. No responsible communications researcher ever advanced a theory of helpless receivers falling under a hail of media bullets. That construction was advanced more to caricature exaggerated popular beliefs in the uniform efficacy of wartime (and other) propaganda and to call attention to research findings showing the greater complexity of the persuasion process. But it was elevated, with assistance from broadcast industry funds, publications, and researchers, to the stature of scientific ideology relating to media influence in general and not just to specific types of campaigns. As such, the formulation played a particular role at a particular time in postwar research history. Now that communications scholarship and research can be seen in a more balanced perspective, it

is instructive to speculate about what that role might have been. Such reflection should also help us see the role of methodologies in less dogmatic ways.

Communications research has always had a critical thrust, even though it has also been used to justify almost any practice.

Perhaps the most comprehensive and—for its time—sophisticated and critical series of research projects was conducted in the 1930s under the title of Payne Fund studies. Concentrating on the then dominant entertainment medium, the movies, they advanced both a theory of centralized media power and the qualifications and modifications that later researchers were to refine and elaborate.

The traumatic sociocultural pathologies leading to World War II pushed the concern with media manipulation and centralized control to the forefront of political and academic attention. The reformist zeal following the war seemed to challenge the new concentration of industrial and media power about to achieve domestic and global hegemony. The reaction to that threat was twofold.

The explicitly political reaction was the attack on Hollywood, the blacklist, the so-called McCarthy era. The scholarly reaction, taking advantage of wartime and industry research on persuasion, was a new wave of agnosticism. The "hypodermic needle" and "bullet" formulations were set up as straw men with which to deride the concern about media power. The brilliant work of pioneers noted (and represented) in this symposium was diffused in a new wave of emphasis on traditional sociological and other "intervening variables" and "predispositions" deflecting media effects and channeling uses in audience-gratifying directions. These formulations were neither new nor wrong; they just ignored and distracted attention from what *was* new. That was a sea change taking place in the common symbolic environment involving directly, constantly, and systematically, though of course not uniformly, all who grew up in the new culture That sea change was the rise of television. Unlike all previous media, campaigns, and propaganda, television is a relatively nonselectively used mass ritual into which children are born and which contributes, along with all other "variables," to the shaping of the very "predispositions" that are to structure subsequent media selections and effects.

Nevertheless, the "new wave" research came to dominate academic thinking for many years, and it still provides ammunition for media evasions of responsibility. Students trained in it learn valuable skills in applied work on communications campaign tactics and effects, needed by industries and governments alike. But the agnostic ideological implications of that training make it less likely that they will note, let

alone challenge, the continuing concentration of media power. Even today, as some contributors note, scholarly as well as industry voices hail the march of new technologies as necessarily enhancing choice and pluralism, when in fact it can also signal further penetration of centralized electronic culture-power into every aspect of governmental, business, and personal life.

The emergence of communications as an independent and critical discipline using the full range of methodologies is beginning to right this imbalance. But the tendency of some scholars to associate empirical research only with administrative uses or evasive tactics blunts that critical thrust. It is a way of falling victim to history while attempting to explain it.

The danger is that the mixed bag of impassioned antiscientific arguments may congeal into a mystique that thwarts and trivializes the broadly critical thrust of the discipline.

Opposing science to art or humanistic scholarship presents a false dichotomy. The essence of humanism was its scientific (as well as artistic and linguistic) challenge to medieval scholasticism. In communications terms, science is the human attempt to penetrate the realities of existence, and art is the effort to express them. Science thus works to make statements true while art struggles to make them compelling and believable. The two complement rather than contradict each other.

Equally misleading is the qualitative-quantitative dichotomy. Qualitative distinctions and judgments (as in labeling or classifying) are prerequisites to quantitative measurements; the two are inseparable. To say that one can only measure what exists and, therefore, quantitative efforts can only support the status quo, is sophistry. The careful observation of existing conditions is necessary to support any judgment of or strategy for change, and judgment is not hurt by some attempt at precision.

Qualitative change cannot be understood, let alone achieved, without noting the accumulation of quantities. Add heat (quantity) to water and it changes to steam (quality). To consider quantification only mindless counting or number crunching is both a philosophical and a strategic fallacy.

Somewhat related to the question of counting is the issue of head counting. Methodological critiques of emphasis on individuals as units of analysis instead of social collectivities, and on collectivities instead of tangible human experiences, are both misplaced. Different levels and purposes of analysis require different focuses and units.

Those advancing sweeping historical claims should not, at the same time, disdain research on large collectivities, the proper testing ground

for such claims, just because such research can also be used for other purposes. Critics who charge that mass-produced communications create impersonal bonds among otherwise diverse individuals or that they "atomize" and "privatize" individuals, loosen traditional bonds, dissolve authentic publics, increase alienation and dependence, etc., should not, at the same time, oppose the empirical testing and refinement of key aspects of these theories just because such research addresses individuals *as* individuals. The nature of the propositions makes that the proper focus. Only publicly accessible and replicable demonstrations, and the willingness to let the chips fall where they may, can make critical theories credible to those not already convinced.

While the long and checkered history of empiricism certainly produced fractured positivistic fantasies based on real data abstracted from their historical context, it also had a consistently critical line.

Its critical line is based on the assumption that freedom of action and protection against thought control depend on the ability to recognize salient aspects of reality existing independently of consciousness. No arbitrary power can make a false but testable proposition, no matter how widely believed, demonstrably true. Any recourse to publicly creditable procedures for testing significant propositions, rather than just professing them, provides legitimate leverage against arbitrary authority.

Those with little social power or dominant doctrine backing them have but one alternative for gaining attention and authority in rational public discourse. It is to be able to say: "If you don't believe it, here is how to ascertain key parts of it for yourself." Researchers who exclude that alternative from their repertory surrender authority to some critical mystique based on the assumption that methodological chastity and terminological purity are the best guarantees of truth. That ancient delusion makes for isolation and vulnerability to repression (or cooptation) when in opposition and the inclination to inquisition when in power—both unfortunate scholarly strategies.

The critical task of a discipline is to address the terms of discourse and the structure of knowledge and power in its domain and thus to make its contribution to human and social development. Those who search and struggle toward that end are critical scholars in the best and basic sense of the word. They should be able to search and struggle uninhibited by myths and mystiques that deprive them of opportunities or means at their disposal. The ferment in the field, and the expression of and response to it in this symposium, attest to the vitality of the discipline and to its ability to tackle the critical tasks ahead.