

SOME THESES ON CRITICAL COMMUNICATIONS PRACTICE

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Abstract

Critical thinking and practice are given special status in universities, and also some policy and political contexts. As a way of opening up broader discussion of the nature of the critical, this paper presents four theses on critical communications practice. Rejecting an approach within which pre-existent problems would simply be described and/or solved, I explore critical communications practice in terms of the way communications practitioners, from scholars to those doing consultancy work, form or constitute critical problems. This has implications for understanding how these actors imagine their role. Building on Lawrence Grossberg's concept of 'images of communication'— which are 'discursive codes or theoretical vocabularies available as resources for the articulation of communication theories', and which enable and constrain the way we think about inter-subjectivity, and the relationship between the individual and the social—the paper links an analysis of problems and problem-construction to the exploration of different images of communication.

Introduction

For many Communications academics working in a university context some notion of critical thinking, and, indeed, critical practice, forms an important part of opening up professional practice to broader social and conceptual issues. Many academics accept the importance of the critical on this basis. The fact that the 'critical' is closely linked to questions of the relationship between theory and practice, and the theorisation of practice, is also a factor in this acceptance. At the same time, however, the nature and diversity of critical practice does not always get investigated. A focus on reflexive practice, or an explicitly political intervention, does not always result in a consideration of the critical, or a 'critique of the critique'. What we understand by 'critical practices' can be as diverse as basic acts of disagreement and/or comment to more complex instances of deconstruction, and this diversity is not always explored in depth.

Moving beyond discussion of the critical as being fixated on its object - a critique of *x*, for example - it is possible to look at critical practice as an area in its own right. Critical practice invokes its own issues of the ethos or spirit of critique: whether it is oppositional or hopeful, damning or open to new possibilities (see Bishop 2003, pp.138-140), judgemental or pluralistic. Critique poses its own ethical questions (Foucault 2000, pp.322-323; see also Serres & Latour 1995, p.133).

Opening up these issues is, admittedly, not easy, and involves significant demands on language, and the way we imagine the critical. There are also difficulties to do with way we can conceive of critical acts or performances. Perhaps as a legacy of Critical Theory and the Frankfurt School, or our own tendency to map the field of mass communications theory by opposing 'Communication Science' to 'Critical and Cultural Theories' (Baran & Davis 2000), discussion of what it means to be critical can be *over-determined* by assumptions that effectively pre-structure and totalise¹ the terrain and object of critique. Assumptions such as: that being critical is the proper

¹ Themes of totality and totalisation have a prominent place in critical debates between post-structuralist and Marxist positions, where the totality relates to an ordering structure that makes sense of a set of conditions and events, and the relations between different actors, giving rise to a particular knowledge of the world.

domain of - or in other words - belongs to) 'Theory', or that cultural industries are suspect, or that some areas of professional study are a-critical. But over-determination is not the only difficulty. Critical acts can also be said to be *under-determined*. That is, they are so linked to situational and circumstantial factors, evolving sets of knowledge, and on-going judgements—in short, the endless work of criticism and scholarship itself—that their content is unstable and difficult to know. The totality that can order and make sense of the critical enterprise is not always at hand. In a slightly different sense, a critical act can also be under-determined by virtue of being under-elaborated or defined: the act of making a critique, the gesture of intervention, serving as the privileged aspect of critical practice.²

This paper attempts to work with the under-determined nature of critique by offering a way of surfing different 'images of communication', and these are discussed below. At the same time, I resist over-determination by charting issues to do with maintaining a critical practice rather than promoting a particular ideal of critique, or critical program. Rather than focus on the definition of what is or isn't critical practice, I want to present four preliminary and basic theses for discussion around which a notion of critical communications practice might begin to coalesce, as stepping stones to a more complex investigation of the ways in which we 'do' critique and act critically. Such an investigation, I argue, has implications for how we might imagine or figure our engagement with the social. It also has implications for the vitality of our scholarship and research, which I would contend is enhanced by critical questioning.

In this paper I do not address in an explicit way particular forms of critique such as Marxist or Feminist or Post-colonial critique. This is not because they are unimportant, but due to the fact that my primary interest is in a 'critical communications practice', for which communication and communications, and the disciplinary and vocational formations built around those terms, form a key part of what being critical means. This focus is important because critical approaches can be blind to communication issues

² A section in a recent essay on organisational communication scholarship by Mary Simpson and Ted Zorn provides an illustration of the way critical practice can be both under- and over-determined at the same time, and in the same context. In a section called 'Skills to critical analysis' they chart a shift away from a 'communication skills focus'. 'This is in line with organisational communication research that emphasises critical theory and critical analyses of communication processes rather than a focus on "what works" in communicating' (Simpson & Zorn 2004, p.23). In an excellent manoeuvre, Simpson and Zorn do not give up on skills. Critical analysis is a skills pathway in this sense. The over-determination of critique is evident in the construction of objects: skills oriented research is 'managerialist' with a focus on how communication makes organisations more productive and efficient. Key terms signal the critical approach: 'reflective', 'analytic', 'interpretive', 'evaluating communication competence'. The under-determination comes from the way these key terms are mentioned rather than defined. They flag the critical but do not form into critical practice. For Simpson and Zorn, the shift away from skills is towards critical analysis. The focus is on looking through what they call a 'critical theoretical lens' (p.24). But there is a sense that critical practice here is still separate from practice, that research and analysis of communication practices and doing are distinct enterprises. Simpson and Zorn highlight the fact that they are not simply 'making the old quantitative versus qualitative or critical-interpretive versus positivist-functionalist distinction here' (p.24). We can agree, but their intervention nevertheless doesn't escape some of the wider issues to do with deploying critique that many of us face.

(see Smythe 1977; Poster 1984).³ For reasons that will become more apparent at the end of the paper, I do not believe that the only way to look at these issues is to start with a single definition of communication, and judge what is or isn't a properly *communications* practice. 'Communications' in this paper remains a term that is open to activation and actualisation in a number of different ways, depending on your approach.

Thesis 1. Being critical is tied to how communication is problematised, the problem being responded to or to be 'fixed'.

In computer culture, it is commonplace to hear the phrase that a particular piece of hardware or company offers a solution. This rhetorical figure was so common in early debates around multimedia education that one group of authors was led to ask, 'What is the problem for which interactive multimedia is the solution?' (Wild, M., Dickinson, R., Oliver, R., Phillips, R. & Rehn, G. 1994). Closer to home, Robert Heath writes, 'The relevance of public relations theory has always centred on finding solutions to compelling problems' (Heath 2004, p.72). Engaging with our first thesis involves pondering what we do with problems, how we package them, and their relation to solutions. It involves thinking about the ways we *find*, or perhaps more precisely, create, communication as a problem, and problematise communication. Even though there might be, as Lawrence Grossberg argues, 'effective within our theories of communication, a prohibition against problematizing the concept of communication itself' (1997, p.51).

What I want to begin to question is a notion that problems fall from the sky ready-made, and what the critical practitioner does is find and describe them more effectively. Instead, I want to argue that problems are formed in discourse, within particular frameworks.

The idea of the problem is at the core of some forms of critique. One of the legacies of Althusserian critique in the humanities and social sciences was a heavy reliance on a notion of the 'problematic': the 'definite theoretical structure' that 'constitutes its absolute and definite condition of possibility, and hence the absolute determination of *the forms in which all problems must be posed ...*' (Althusser & Balibar 1979, p.25). The notion of problematisation has a prominent position in Michel Foucault's work: which sought 'to define the conditions in which human beings "problematize" what they are, what they do, and the world in which they live' (Foucault 1987, p.10). Foucault saw his approach to politics as problematisation: 'the development of acts, practices, and thoughts that seem to me to pose problems for politics' (Foucault 2000, p.114). Turning to an earlier French philosopher, Henri Bergson placed particular emphasis on the way one approaches problems:

³ As Mattelart and Mattelart observe of the philosophy of Structuralism: 'although everyone invoked the concept of communication to the saturation point, in fact the communication process was what received the least attention' (1992, p.40).

But the truth is that in philosophy and even elsewhere it is a question of *finding* the problem and consequently of *positing* it, even more than of solving it. ... But stating the problem is not simply uncovering, it is inventing. Discovery, or uncovering, has to do with what already exists, actually or virtually; it was therefore certain to happen sooner or later. Invention gives being to what did not exist; it might never have happened. Already in mathematics and still more in metaphysics, the effort of invention consists most often in raising the problem, in creating the terms in which it will be stated. The stating and solving of the problem are here very close to being equivalent. (1992: p.51)

This passage from Bergson resists the notion that problems are pre-made, that they are there to be simply *uncovered*. Instead, invention and the positing of problems, ‘creating the terms in which it will be stated’, or what Foucault calls ‘posing the problem’ (2000, p.114), takes a new prominence.

What we might call a *constitutive* analysis of problems would go beyond just the statement or uncovering of problems, and examine how particular problems are constituted and constructed – or posed and stated, as well as institutionalised. This includes problems like ‘lack of communication’, ‘interference’, or an excess of ‘noise’. All of these problems rely on normative understandings to do with communication and the medium.

Maintaining focus on the constitutive aspect of critical communications practice is, however, not always easy to do. Contemporary society demands that a whole range of disciplines be useful, that they address and *apply* themselves to ‘real’ problems whose shape and form are taken as immutable. Unfortunately, in this instrumentalist view, the task of questioning and restating problems, of un-picking the way in which problems are discussed or black-boxed, and which is one of the important aspects of the humanities, is not always valued.

Another difficulty with maintaining a constitutive analysis of problems is the way being critical is defined in many cases by a kind of trade or trafficking in problems that does not declare itself. The strength of a critique is often linked to the nature of the problem being identified, its importance and significance, and the degree to which others can be convinced of this. Critique gives priority and urgency to particular, necessary concerns. But this necessity is also constructed. Critical approaches are often ‘critical’, or in other words ‘crucial’ in the sense they frame crisis in a particular way: they determine key turning points, pathways, timeframes and operations. For the *Oxford English Dictionary*, one meaning of the critical relates to ‘the nature of, or constituting, a crisis’... ‘Of decisive importance in relation to the issue’.⁴ So a constitutive analysis of problems would entail an awareness of the special way in which critique constructs and precipitates its problems, and the different registers upon

⁴ Here, the etymological link between critique and crisis is instructive. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), the Latin crisis is linked to the Greek *krisis*, meaning ‘discrimination, decision’. Thus the ‘critical’ is often linked to the crisis or turning point, or decision point, in some phenomenon, such as an illness or war.

which that problem operates as object of urgent attention, or by-product of critical framing.

Many critical approaches make diagnoses, and as such they rely on some kind of constitutive analysis of the kind I am referring to here. Interestingly, rather than focus on their capacity to constitute or deconstruct problems, they frequently present themselves as oppositional, or 'negative' in nature. This frequently involves value judgements that imply an area or approach is inferior or barren. Indeed, some critical approaches can be 'destructive', antagonistic, or oppositional toward the very concept of communication itself. This is the case with a paper by Bill Bonney presented to the Australian Communication Association Conference in 1981; a paper that also problematises communication in a particular way. Bonney defines a position he wishes to criticise. He argues that a dominant idea of the human communication process at the time was ahistorical and asocial. At the same time, he links this critique to another, and questions the way 'communication' is used to designate an independent field or theory, and forms a particular kind of problematic, or in his words 'structure of interrogation' (Bonney 2001, pp.20-21).⁵ My first thesis, that being critical is tied to how communication is problematised, the problem being responded to or to be 'fixed', is designed to highlight the multiple ways in which critique produces problems, and produces or presents itself as the solution to problems. The way communication is or is not problematised will be a theme that appears again in the discussion below.

Thesis 2. Practitioners in the field of communications have learnt to exploit interest in 'communications' issues.

As a discipline area, communications has had the good fortune of having recourse to have numerous problems to fix. While as professionals we may not be as indispensable as plumbers, communication problems requiring attention are wide and varied. 'Communication breakdown', 'relationship break-up', 'lack of feedback', 'effective communication', 'information overload', 'too much noise', 'conflict resolution', 'public relations crisis', 'cross cultural communication' and the 'communications revolution' all come to mind as staple examples. But this is where my second thesis comes in, that practitioners have learnt to exploit public, popular and commercial interest in 'communications' problems: that these problems, no matter how legitimate

⁵ The relevant passage from Bonney is worth quoting in full: 'The one approach (the one I wish to criticise) maintains, or at least assumes, that there is such an object as "the human communication process", conceived of as being ahistorical, asocial, universal, in the sense that it can be studied or theorised without taking essential account of the attendant historical and social circumstances. Associated with this as a consequence is the view that there exists, or should exist, as a proper subject of study, "communication theory", whose aim is to describe, explain, theorise, the human communication process. Another way of putting it is to say that this approach holds that Communication is an independent discipline, not, of course, in the sense that it doesn't draw on other disciplines, but in the sense that there is a central core of study, the study of the human communication process, which is specific to it and independent of other disciplines. In opposition to this independent discipline approach, the Cultural Studies approach holds that there is no such ahistorical, asocial object as the human communication process and hence no such possibility as communication theory. On the contrary, the objects of study that fall under the label "communication" fall wholly within the ambit of theories of culture, theories about signifying practices, the production of meaning, the shaping of consciousness, and the construction of subjectivity' (Bonney 2001, pp.20-21).

and serious, also represent opportunities for exploitation of popularly held understandings of communication.⁶ It is not my intention here to demonise 'exploitation', which could be interpreted as a healthy practice of making use of popular/public interest in communication issues. This thesis is not designed to reinstate 'critical distance' as the preferred model of engagement, or demonise the popular. Rather, I want to ask questions about the implications of forming the field, and critical practice, around such opportunities. I want to bring to the foreground issues to do with what we might call the politics and ethics of intervention.

This thesis has to do with thinking about the nature of intervention and engagement in a more complex way. A useful text here is Peter Putnis' article (1993), 'The public role of communication scholars', which was a president's address to this association. In this paper, Putnis examines the way scholarly aims can be thwarted in engagement. He notes how easy it is

... in one's enthusiasm to be relevant and embrace a particular version of "social responsibility", to fall in with other people's mostly unexamined communication models without fully considering the implications for the "communication values" that we seek to espouse. (p.16)

For Putnis, what is required in this context is critique:

...we must critique projects and claims which proffer simplistic and/or ethically unacceptable "solutions". ... Much more seductive than the idea of accepting a role in a propaganda machine is the idea of becoming a "communication guru" who can "unlock human potential through ten easy steps" or dramatically increase productivity by rearranging the chairs in the canteen or repair community life just through teaching people to talk to one another or resolve world conflicts by forming discussion groups. (p.16)

Here, Putnis elaborates on the dilemmas that popular interest in communication issues can create for scholarship. I don't want to turn this concern into a firm distinction between scholarship and commercialisation. What I am interested in is tracing the careful balancing act that Putnis puts forward, as well as highlighting the special place given to critique. On the one hand he writes: 'There is a danger of being too negative. ... Changing the arrangement of chairs in the canteen might help'. There is a need to be flexible. He warns of the moral paralysis that can come from imposing a particular idea of the problem and what works on a situation. On the other hand, he suggests, in echo of my first thesis: 'We don't want to get caught up in uncritical enthusiasm for communication "solutions" which may in fact be founded on a total misapprehension of the real problem. Hence we try to retain our critical distance and academic scepticism without just becoming armchair critics' (1993, p.16-17).

⁶ Robyn Penman's critique of the Plain English movement as providing a response to a problem that is poorly worked through, or based on under-theorised ideas about communication, is worth noting here (1992).

Putnis recommends a measured blend of scepticism and optimism: 'Given the pitfalls of uncritical enthusiasm and the sterility of mere armchair criticism, ours is not an easy lot. We must be sceptical of simplistic "communications solutions", yet remain optimistic about the great benefits that improved communication can bring' (1993, p.22). In addition, he opens up a way to examine our own investment in exploitation by thinking about relationships constructed within communicative structures and practices.

Thesis 3. Communications does not have a special ameliorative vocation.

Underpinning comments about the great benefits that improved communication can bring is an image of the communications practitioner as good Angel, as the possessor of a special ameliorative vocation, respondent to a unique calling.

Seeing communications in political and ideological terms, 'in the context of its role in the processes of culture and domination' (Grossberg 1997, p.45), is an important antidote to the notion that communication is an inherently ameliorative practice: that it will make things better, that it will repair and improve; although I should add that ideological analysis is not immune to a 'make it better' mentality. When Robert D. Putnam remarks that 'community, communion and communication are intimately as well as etymologically related' (2000, p.171), or when Raymond Williams suggests that 'the process of communication is in fact the process of community' (1961, p.10), they are operating within a tradition in which communication is granted a primarily ameliorative role, particularly in relation to the status of community.

There are numerous alternatives to this tradition. Using the work of Armand and Michèle Mattelart, for example, we can look at the way that 'communication now occupies a central place in strategies whose object is to restructure our societies' (Mattelart & Mattelart 1992, p.xii). They argue that the philosophy of communication is today assuming the role played by the philosophy of progress in the nineteenth century (1992, p.32). From this perspective, even usually 'positive' terms like network take on an ominous connotation to the degree to which they are means of integrating and connecting different nodes within a system.

Drawing on the work of James R. Beniger, we can analyse the issue of control. Beniger states that control should not be seen only as 'strong control' (1986, p.7), or absolute power over something. The definition he proposes sees control as 'purposive influence toward a predetermined goal' (1986, p.39). Through this concept, Beniger is able to suggest that control is the engine of the information society, requiring more intensive forms of organisation and programming to effect influence and purpose, and to manage interaction. Beniger situates the work of Shannon, Weaver, and other figures in Communications Science, as an extension of the control revolution.

A third illustration comes from the work of James W. Carey who, although he sees communication in a unique relationship to community (Grossberg 1997, p.43), casts suspicion over the way Communications Science uses communications models.

Carey's work gives rise to a different understanding of models: 'models of communication are, then, not merely representations of communication but representations *for* communication: templates that guide, unavailing or not, concrete processes of human interaction, mass and interpersonal' (1988, 32). Carey notes that models of communication are not simply 'models of communication, representations of the communication process. They were also models for the enactment of the communication, powerful models of an actual social practice' (1988, 149). For Ien Ang, implicit in the transmission paradigm underpinning such models, and its interest in persuasion, psychology and attitudes is 'an (unstated) desire for a compliant population' (1996, 164). This opens up a perspective on the public sphere as not only a space for communication, but a diverse terrain for the management of populations.

It is not easy to summarise all the different permutations of these positions. They all contribute to a more complex understanding of the role of communication in modernity, in the definition of social and media environments, and the production of individuated, expressive, communicative subjects. They allow us to go beyond the banality of the argument that communication can be good or bad, depending on how you use it, by showing how communications transforms our sense of the world, and the world itself. As communications scholars we are students of the way different media and professions create their contexts. At the same time, however, our own practice is constitutive and transfigurative of the world.

Thesis 4. Critical communications practice should maintain an 'open' relation to the figurative firmament of communication, and different images of communication.

We have yet to get to the heart of Carey's observation that 'our models of communication ... create what we disingenuously pretend they merely describe' (1988, 32). For while this statement can be read in terms of how the models organise the objects, practices and processes we study, the models also organise our own discourse and sense of disciplinarity. They create a space of performance as it were. Two possibly unfamiliar concepts have a prominent place in this fourth thesis, and I want to discuss them briefly.

In a recent paper, Chris Fleming and John O'Carroll use the term 'figurative firmament' to describe the way different critical approaches construct and imagine the world around them—this could be through concepts of dispute, supercession, break, transgression, change, paradigm shift, revolution and so on—and deploy a particular rhetoric that might set up one figure as conservative, or radical, modern or out-of-date. The notion of the figurative firmament thus helps to re-think the shifting nature of our position and relation to the field, and the way it is stabilised through rhetorics, metaphors, and figurations of the Other - such as the way 'critical' and 'functional' approaches might be placed opposition. The notion of a rhetorical figure will be familiar to many communications scholars. The concept of firmament as a sphere of activity perhaps less so. In my understanding of Fleming and O'Carroll's argument, the firmament is made up of - or constituted by - figures. Painters make a distinction between 'figure': form or shape of a person, and 'ground': background. In the concept

of figurative firmament, the background is comprised of figures and figural understandings.

I want to link this idea of a figurative firmament to another concept, namely that of 'images of communication', in order to suggest that the figurative firmament of critical communications practice is comprised of many images of communication.

In an essay called 'The ideology of communication: Poststructuralism and the limits of communication', Lawrence Grossberg looks at the way different frameworks for the study of communication 'reproduce communication within their very account of it, thus defining communication tautologically' (1997, p.49). Or, in other words, each framework creates its own firmament, its own image of communication to draw on as a support.

Grossberg's critique is especially concerned by a 'transcendental' view of communication: one that posits communication 'as a given rather than a human creation' (1997, p.37). Grossberg's approach is provocative. Firstly because of the radical idea of communication practice that emerges from it, where every approach works through, and over, presuppositions about communication. Secondly, and typical of many disciplines, as it goes against the grain of the tendency to establish foundations, universalise a single definition of communication, create transcendent models, and naturalise particular understandings. Emphasising the possibility of a plurality of images of communication obviously challenges a monolithic understanding of communication. While it may be reasonable to argue that the study of communication is fundamental to understanding the human condition, Grossberg's work encourages us to challenge the ways in which communication is made foundational, and to question what kind of foundation it provides, if it provides one at all.

In order to do this, Grossberg examines some different views about communication in terms of the way they construct inter-subjectivity and the relationship between the individual and the social (1997, p.52). He calls these views 'images of communication', by which he means 'discursive codes or theoretical vocabularies available as resources for the articulation of communication theories' (p.52). These images of communication, we can suggest, set up the scene of communication, and our place in it, in particular ways.

To provide a sense of Grossberg's approach I want to briefly look at just one of the three images of communication he discusses: Communication as 'Coming Together'. The meeting of 'two souls', having a 'heart to heart', these are popular ways in which one might picture communication as coming together. The idea that communication is a form of sharing, or coming together, is based on a particular image of intersubjectivity. This image assumes a distinction between the individual and the Other. Like many views about communication that make the idea of 'coming together' a key part of the process, 'sharing' involves positing forms of separateness or isolation and difference. For Grossberg, this separateness can take the form of isolation between

individuals, or it can take the form of a gulf between the subjectivity of the individual and the objectivity of the social world (1997, p.52). In the first form, communication can be about sharing a subjective meaning with another, for example: a personal secret. In the second form, communication can be about re-negotiating one's place in society.

For Grossberg, this particular image constructs the world in particular ways. For example, in order to share a personal meaning, there must be an objective or social meaning that is not the exclusive property of any specific individual. However, if these latter meanings do indeed exist, then it follows that, despite an assumed isolation, we are in fact 'connected' with others via the signs we use.

Grossberg work is interesting for the way it re-casts the 'touchy-feely' dimensions of sharing in terms of a gesture of distancing, separation and postponement. This opens up a particular way of seeing intersubjectivity. Communication as coming together is not simply the meeting of two souls, but involves making decisions about our relationship to meaning and to the culture. 'Coming together' thus simultaneously involves constructing the terms, or 'felicity conditions' as speech act theorists call them, on which both parties can come together. These terms shape communication in a particular way, but are difficult to bring to light because of the structure of the image of communication. This leads Grossberg to state: 'thus the image of intersubjectivity as "coming together" and the resulting views of communication as sharing are unable to address the question of communication without assuming or recreating communication within their solution' (1997, p.53).

None of this is to necessarily make a value judgement on the nature of sharing, or on the sincerity of the parties involved. The main point here is, rather, that if one is interested in making 'coming together' or 'sharing' a foundational aspect of communication, there are difficulties. As some of these strategies may have to do with stressing the isolation of the individual with respect to society, then communication as 'coming together' also has at its core communication as a 'keeping apart'.

In his discussion of images of communication, Grossberg is especially interested in the forms of signification at work in different situations: the way meaning is made as well as the way the act and concept of communication is re-worked within this situation. Using this methodology, he questions some of our most familiar ways of thinking about communication. Grossberg's work highlights a significant epistemological blind-spot or constraint for our field: namely that every analysis of communication presupposes an idea of communication that limits the investigation.

Grossberg's approach or vocabulary may seem unusual, but it extends a common practice in communication theory, which has to do with charting the ways in which communication is figured in practice. David Sless suggests that there have been two main ways of imagining communication: transmission and sharing (Sless 1986, pp.10-23). Carey draws a distinction between a transmission view of communication and a ritual view (1988, pp.13-19). Thayer argues that 'to conceive of communication primarily as *consequential* rather than *referential* ... would fundamentally alter the

very nature of our civilisation' (Thayer 1987, p.32). In Thayer's pithy phrase: 'As we communicate, so shall we be; and as we conceive of communication, so we shall communicate' (1987, p.39). More recently, Carl H. Botan and Maureen Taylor chart a shift in public relations from metaphors of building and function to dialogue and co-creation (2004). These critics see a strong correlation between the way communication is formulated and the way it is researched or explored in practice.

Moving on from, but hopefully building upon, Grossberg's analysis, we should engage with a powerful and common image of communication, based on 'getting your message across'. This image informs a range of practices, from business communication, to marketing, to spin doctoring and a number of areas from health political communication through to advertising and public relations. Government communication with the focus on sending the right or wrong kind of message is rich with examples. Like the previous image of communication, this one involves making decisions about the relationship between communicators, or in the jargon: 'stakeholders', and the nature of culture.

Rather than repeat criticisms of the transmission model of communication here, I want to focus on the way, through the idea of getting across, this image of communication structures the idea of distance, delivery and destination. The space between the 'Sender' and 'Receiver' is figured either as an apparent cultural vacuum, or a uniform and homogenised sense of the public domain. This image is highly instrumental in the way it thinks about meaning and messages, and treats contextual factors of interpretation as secondary. Successful communication becomes a point of fixation (Ang 1996, p.167). By placing any disturbance to communication in a negative position of 'failure' the model leaves little room for a complex reading of culture, difference, or uncertainty. For these reasons, Ien Ang is suspicious of the very 'topography of communication' established by the transmission model (Ang 1996, p.170). At the same time, Ang tackles the idea of destination and the principle of certainty that has been attached to it (see also Derrida 1987).

The images of communication that I have discussed here do not exhaust all the possible kinds that could be discussed. Grossberg also looks at 'Communication as Emergence', and 'Communication as Constitution'.⁷ It is important to note however, building on Carey and Grossberg, that maintaining an 'open' relation to the figurative firmament of communication, and different images of communication, is not the same as simply understanding different models of communication, or mapping different metaphors. Different models might appear different, but can link back to the same idea of communication, or promote the same attitude to process or to an object. Central to opening up the analysis, beyond a descriptive account of models, and the direction of

⁷ Grossberg's work is itself only part of a trajectory of post-structuralist thinking about communication that seeks to question the epistemological certainty of the area. Exemplary here is Jacques Derrida's idea that communication is not just part of a transmission model, but that the very definition of 'communication *itself* as the transmission of a meaning' is filled with issues. Derrida questions the extent to which communication is itself a 'communicable concept' (1982, p.309). His analysis of writing and telecommunications, undermines the image of writing as a vehicle for the conveyance of meaning.

information flows, is to explore how the space of communication, and communication analysis, is constituted.

Conclusion

Grossberg's analysis looks at the way different approaches draw, in something of a surreptitious way, on images of communication that are rarely unpacked. Grossberg's interest in processes of determination makes him extremely wary of what are ultimately for him ideological attempts to turn communication into a naturalised foundation or ground of analysis. The four theses presented in this paper, taken together, promote what could be termed a constructivist approach to critical practice, that looks at critique as a constitutive practice. At the same time, I have linked thinking about critical practice to thinking about images of communication. This latter link leaves us with three challenges:

The first challenge has to do with the way pressures within different areas and fields of study, and the need to establish foundations, lead to an over-emphasis on the values of transcendental models at the expense of a more nuanced investigation of the figurative firmament. At issue here is the very picturing and forming of 'the field'. One might ask, for example, why Botan and Taylor end their article on the state of the field of public relations with a section called 'Model for Applied Communication' (p.654). Interestingly, this model is formed around a particular approach to problems: in this case the problem of the life cycle of an issue, or the 'theory of how issues come to be, evolve, and are resolved'. Why aren't 'issues' placed in a continuum with other approaches or forms of problem here? While issues management may operate as a 'core skill' of public relations, it only partially addresses the need articulated here for a constitutive analysis of problems.⁸

The second challenge has to do with pluralism. Opposition to a particular image of communication very often defines our sense of being critical: think of the weight of commentary against the transmission model of communication, or popular accounts of spin doctoring. And yet, while he is opposed to foundationalism, Grossberg's work does not say that one image of communication is better than any other: thus, it may be perfectly acceptable to draw on an idea of communication as 'getting one's message across'. Indeed, large sections of political communication and journalism rely on the idea of spin to frame their discussion of politics and public communication; even if there is a risk that their dependence on this image distances themselves from other ideas or images of communication, possibly alienating them from readers and

⁸ It would, however, be unfair to give Botan and Taylor special treatment here, as Carey reminds us of the prominence of thinking about models. Linking the idea of a figurative firmament to Carey's insight about communication models, we can suggest that the notion of 'process' forms an important figure to look at. 'The process' has been given great prominence in various areas of communications studies. It has provided a degree of stability and an object of study. But at the same time, it has shaped our approach to communications, and the way that we might question the ground of communication. It has formed an obstacle to a more wide-ranging discussion of the figurative firmament beyond the context in which the process takes place. It has limited the extent to which we can explore different presuppositions about communication by tying communication to the idea of process.

audiences, and other ways of looking at the problem. The challenge of pluralism relates here to recognising the co-existence of many images of communication in the figurative firmament of communications, and also the disconnect between them.

This leads me to the third challenge, which has to do with the possibility of mode of critical practice that does not rely on a particular image of communication, or explores what might be called a 'thought without image' (Deleuze 1994, p.167). This would be a form of thought open to thinking about communication in a way that is questioning of different images of communication, and the way they construct communication and the kinds of problems we face.

The extent to which this represents a challenge can be gauged by returning to Putnis' advice that 'we must be sceptical of simplistic "communications solutions", yet remain optimistic about the great benefits that improved communication can bring' (Putnis 1993, p.22). The question is, should the image of communication that presupposes the idea of 'improved communication', or the techniques of measuring 'the great benefits', be immune to critique? If not, can a critical practice without images by definition remain optimistic? Or are there other forms of optimism based on new realms of what is possible? These are just some of the questions posed by a critical practice without images.

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