COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL LEGITIMATION

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary communication studies have suffered from a lack of fertile social theory. Only recently have students of communication begun to examine seriously the origins and consequences of their work. In the process they have reconsidered the Chicago School. Increasingly the intellectual power of the Chicago School is recognized for its portrayal of communication as a human activity for building, maintaining, and altering consensus. This contrasts with the typical view that sees communication as a means of domination, coercion, or repression. This article examines that conflicting definition of communication, especially in terms of the ways social groups engage in media criticism and enlist public support for their moral concerns. This article concludes that the United States, to avoid fragmentation, needs a public philosophy of communication based on moral consensus.

A major malady of contemporary communication studies is the lack of fertile social theory. This is especially true in what is typically called mass communication research, where media technologies and media content are isolated from a broad context of intellectual inquiry. Lost are the fundamental questions that precipitated the rise of sociology as a discipline in nineteenth century Europe: How is society possible? What is the relationship between the individual and society? How does one account for social change? In their stead are narrowly conceived searches for media effects, functions and agendas.

American scholars, whose own sociological tradition includes fruitful social theory, have been the worst victims of intellectual blight. At least since World War II, American

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researchers have increasingly severed ties with the Chicago tradition in favor of a host of methodological fads that rob scholarship of theoretical richness and intellectual clarity. Only recently, largely because of the influence of European thought, have American students of communication begun to seriously examine the origins and consequences of their own work and to reconsider the theoretical and methodological ideas of the Chicago School.

Morris Janowitz (1978) has done such rethinking in a recent article on "The Intellectual History of Social Control." According to Janowitz, during the 1940s and 50s American sociologists transformed their definition of social control in fundamental ways that reduced their work's explanatory power. Whereas the Chicago School viewed social control as a type of self-regulation through which people collectively sought particular ends, later sociologists perceived it negatively as "socialization leading to conformity," as an outside force impinging upon the individual. As a result, researchers saw society existing through coercion and repression rather than consensus. It is interesting to examine the implications of that definitional change for the study of communication. In the 1940s and 50s the academy's models of society and of communication showed a preoccupation with manipulation; the media became potent, nefarious forces that directly affected individuals and disrupted normal social activities, and communication became the transmission of messages for the purpose of control. During the 1960s—because of inconclusive survey and experimental studies—many researchers changed their view of the media's efficacy in bringing about social control. In spite of that fact, the assumptions about social theory that led to such simplistic notions of communication have gone largely unexamined. Part of this article's concern is to demonstrate how the Chicago School of Social Thought escapes these deficiencies.

The intellectual power of the Chicago School arises from its defining of communication as a human activity in and through which society is organized and meaning is given to life. Communication is not simply a restrictive process that represses the individual but more importantly a creative activity through which, as Mead (1925) put it, individuals are able to assume attitudes of others who are involved with them in common endeavors. Nowhere is the dependency of

society on individual communicative abilities more clearly stated that in Park and Burgess' tome, *Introduction to the Science of Sociology*. Taking much of their argument from John Dewey, Park and Burgess write:

> Not only does communication involve the creation, out of experience that is common and public but such a common experience becomes the basis for a common and public existence in which every individual, to a greater or less extent, participates and is himself a part. Furthermore, as a part of this common life, there grows up a body of custom, convention, tradition, ceremonial language, social ritual, (and) public opinion . . . all that ethnologists include under the term "culture" (1969:37).

Park concludes his discussion of communication and social control on a characteristically pragmatic note: "We may apply the term social to any group of individuals which is capable of consistent action, that is to say, action, consciously or unconsciously, directed to a common end."

The changing meaning of social control indicates central differences in the thought of the Chicago School and that of most American communication researchers of the last four decades. Communicationis portrayed by the Chicago School as an activity of building, maintaining, and altering consensus; for later writers it becomes a means of domination, coercion, or repression. The major distinction between these different notions of communication, of course, rests on the problem of ends. As Park's words make clear, the Chicago School defined communication as symbolic action directed at common goals, at agreed ideals as to what life ought to be like. Society is always moving from conflict toward accommodation. The Chicago School had faith in the human ability to validate a mutually satisfactory picture of the good life. Dewey (1927) expressed confidence that the Great Society could be transformed into the Great Community. The most fundamental difference between the Chicago School's definition of communication and that expressed by more recent communication researchers is a faith in the ability of rational persons to govern their own affairs.

Critics of the Chicago School frequently argue that Park and others held an overly simplistic view of social conflict, particularly the political and economic struggles among groups and ossified in institutions. Such judgments are for the

most part well founded. However, it can also be argued that such critics generally fail to see the necessity of consensus for the maintenance of society. The Chicago School looked at the urban conflicts of nascent industrial America and saw the need for consensus; its critics look at mid-20th century America and see battles over political power, economic wealth, and cultural styles of life. The Chicago School's faith led it to seek consensus—and thus communication—as a solution for social problems. Most criticism of the work of Park and others is as much a rejection of that faith as it is an accurate assessment of the state of contemporary affairs. Although the idea of consensus can blind the investigator to society's internal conflicts, it can also help the academy recognize its own faith in repressive and manipulative models of communication. When communication is reduced to the transmission of messages and their reception by audiences, society becomes little more than a collection of senders and receivers. When it is portrayed as the ongoing interaction of individuals and groups seeking a common symbolic significance, society becomes an organism.

The major weakness in the Chicago School's concept of communication is not its implied assumption of consensus but rather its limited power to elucidate the social significance of the "mass" media. The belief that communication is action toward consensus is taken from a metaphor of community, where mutual empathy and coordinated action among individuals are possible and where the democratic spirit of rational discussion and debate are most feasible. In what ways do the media engage members of society in a search for consensus? Do they promote dialogue? Or are advanced media technologies such as radio and television invariably sources of manipulation and control?

This article argues that the Chicago School's view of communication provides insight into the nature and consequences of the media. However, the concept of social control should be replaced with the more productive notion of social legitimation because the media exist outside of any public arena of common understanding or critical interpretation. In other words, the American media, as both institutions and cultural forms, play no significant role in aiding individuals and groups to create a generally agreed consensus as to the good society. On the contrary, the media often become a battleground for the legitimation of particular values, beliefs,

and more generally styles of life. Various social groups increasingly view the media as vehicles for sanctioning their own interests rather than for pursuing public or common interests. Ethnic groups, religious organizations, parent-teacher associations, decency leagues, community groups, and other bodies in the past two decades have become vocal critics of media content.

The first section of this article outlines a general cultural view of communication as a context for comprehending the significance of media criticism in contemporary America. Using the ideas of the Chicago School as a springboard, I suggest that all communication is both political and moral. The second section examines how social groups engage in media criticism and how they translate their implicitly moral concerns into scientific strategies designed to enlist public support and challenge the actions of media owners and operators. The professionalization of media criticism groups alters their philosophical character and transforms their political style. The final section argues that the United States needs a public philosophy of communication based on moral consensus and grounded in truly critical standards of interpretation. Without such a philosophy the conflicts between media criticism groups, media industries, and regulatory agencies will exacerbate the fragmentation and polarization of American society.

In a broad sense, the Chicago School held a cultural view of communication. Influenced by both German idealism and American pragmatism, the sociologists saw human communication as symbolic action directed toward particular ends. Park (1972:102) amd Dewey (1916, 1927) repeatedly stated that communication is the active construction of social reality, which they called "culture":

> Communication. . . is, if not identical with, at least indispensable to, the cultural process . . . . Communication creates, or makes possible at least, that consensus and understanding among the individual components of a social group which eventually gives them the character not merely of society but of a cultural unit. It spins a web of custom and mutual expectation which binds together social entities.

From this cultural perspective, communication is the primary human activity that makes all forms of human association possible and gives meaning to human affairs. It is political

because it validates or challenges extant interpretations of life, because it defends particular social worlds to the exclusion of others. Communication is moral because all social worlds are value laden; cultures are maps of and for appropriate thought, action, and belief. The human capacity for prescient insight into the indirect and direct consequences of actions is a moral and intellectual skill that enables individuals and groups to play significant roles in constructing, maintaining, and altering the types of social worlds in which they seek to live.

Writing at the turn of the century, Weber (1946) recognized that in modern societies a general moral consensus was being extirpated by conflicts among particular social groups seeking to legitimize their own definitions of human existence. Contemporary social orders—status hierarchies among various social groups—were in flux; the legitimacy of particular modes of conduct, increasingly wrenched from tradition, had become an open question to be negotiated in the conflicts among the various contending social groups. Culture was not a container in the Durkheimian sense that merely "restricts" the actions of men but rather was the always-changing web of meaning and significance given to life by various social groups as they defined their own existence in relation to the cultural schemes of others.

The unstable moral character of many contemporary societies, including the United States, in a sense launched both the study of communication and the rise of media criticism groups. As scholars realized that the established social order was not the only possible social order, as moral consensus was replaced by contrasting and conflicting views of human existence, the academy turned its attention away from matters of moral and religious certitude and toward the study of how particular views of society and types of culture come into being.

Americans' response in the early twentieth century to the rise of film and later television parallels the beginnings of the study of communication in the university. Church groups, community organizations, and family groups viewed the development of such communications technologies as a threat to the moral fabric of American society. Actually, such media technologies exposed the wider world of other cultures and subcultures to members of formerly isolated geographic communities and previously stable ways of life. The Chicago

School recognized and embraced this irony: to them, communication both held society together and, in the form of new technologies, played a crucial role in upsetting the moral stability provided by tradition. John Dewey (1927) came to the paradoxical conclusion that large-scale communication technologies could usher in, on a national level, the harmony of a new social order founded on empathy and foresight.

Media criticism groups today vocalize the faith of the Chicago School. They see media content as an agent for the social legitimation that sanctions particular moralities. Rather than condemning communication technologies as intrinsically destructive of the moral fabric of communities—a position taken by the Amish—most groups attempt to adjust media content to support their own view of the world. Believing that media technologies would enhance the quality of life only if content reflected their own moral consensus, such groups frequently devise legal and economic plans for influencing the decisions of media owners, operators, and distributors. Underlying the actions of media criticism groups lies the progressive impulse for pragmatic social change. They display a fervent faith that American society will be a better place to live when media content conforms to their own styles of life.

Contemporary clashes between various social groups and media managers point to the problematic social character of popular culture. The technological reproducibility of cultural artifacts transforms them from sacred symbols located in specific traditions to market commodities whose value rests primarily in their economic utility (Benjamin, 1968). Virtually all popular culture carries a dual signifiance as product and symbol, as utility and meaning. Media content, as one type of mechanically reproducible commodity, is the expression of no particular social group. Popular culture is created by technicians for markets rather than by artists for specific cultures. Television shows, popular records, and films cannot be easily linked to the cultural worlds of specific groups of American people or to the consensus upon which rests the stability of any group. The more "mass" the medium—that is, the more widely consumed the content—the more trivial the artifact becomes to the maintenance of moral consensus in society and the more vocal and active are media criticism groups.

This seemingly contradictory situation, in which media content appears to sanction the social reality of no particular group while simultaneously eliciting the criticism of many different groups, is starkly portrayed in recent controversies over the depiction of women in television shows and commercials. Groups such as the National Organization for Women (NOW) publicly chastise media operators and owners for portraying women in stereotyped roles as naive housewives and "sexual objects." Numerous church groups, on the other hand, while agreeing that networks should curtail the sexual portrayal of women in television shows, find no fault with their depiction as housewives. In fact, to them such domestic characterizations of women are confirmations of the professionalization of the housewife. Almost as many different criticisms of the depictions of women in television shows exist as do different media criticism groups. Each group hopes to convince media managers to choose content which promotes its own view of the role of women in modern society.

One further example might clarify the sociological complexity of contemporary media criticism. *The Life of Brian,* a recent film about a young man whose life partly parallels that of Christ, unified religious organizations in Dubuque, Iowa, that otherwise share few theological views: the Roman Catholic church and fundamentalist Christian groups. Although none of the leaders of the Dubuque group had actually seen the movie, they collected over 4,000 signatures of local residents on petitions which they sent to Warner Brothers in hopes of blocking the showing of the film in their city. A spokesman for the large production house told an Iowa reporter that people should try to understand that the movie is nothing more than a satire (Carlson, 1979).

In the last decade media coverage of media criticism groups has increased dramatically, but not all groups have an equal chance of publicizing their organizations. In order for a media criticism group to gain media recognition it must first choose strategies and tactics that attract the attention of the media themselves; second, it typically must gain public respectibility by casting its moral arguments in the form of quasi-scientific truths. Two factors—newsworthiness and professionalism—together give media criticism groups public status while altering their political style and philosophical character.

The appearance of professional media criticism organizations in the news media during the last decade has twisted the relationship between the public, media criticism groups, and media industry in new directions while simultaneously amplifying the apparent importance of the media in American society. News reports of the work of media criticism groups have themselves become popular artifacts. Representing the points of view of neither media operators and owners nor those of media criticism leaders, such reports take on symbolic dimensions as dramatic rituals displaying good versus bad forces in society. However, the three main contenders in the drama have no clear-cut identities as angels or demons; media criticism organizations, government regulatory agencies, and communications businesses are portrayed typically as contentious opponents marshalling scientific data for battle. As depicted in media reports, the real villain in the struggle between contending forces is morality and the savior is science.

Action for Children's Television, probably the most widely known media criticism group today, provides an excellent example. Founded by a group of Boston parents in 1968, today it is involved in national campaigns to increase the federal regulation of children's television programming and advertising. Like early twentieth-century progressives, the parents who formed ACT firmly believe that communication technologies account for much of the erosion of traditional sources of authority. At the First National Symposium on the Effect of Television Programming and Advertising on Children, organized by ACT (1971) and funded by the Ford Foundation in 1971, the participants stated repeatedly the belief that program producers and advertisers should be held accountable for their role in weakening the family, the church, and the community. The decline of such primary sources of "socialization," they said, made it increasingly difficult for children to differentiate between "reality" and the version of reality created by program producers and advertising agencies. Mrs. Francis Sargent began the symposium with the following words:

> There is a climate of doubt and concern regarding the massive effect of TV. This concern I am sure is shared by citizens in all our sister states. It is a concern rooted in these facts: Ninety-three percent of today's homes have TV sets. The child spends somewhere on the average of fifty-four hours a week watching that TV set. Parents,

> teachers, institutions, values, mores, traditions, all are under the pressure of the world of fantasies that come out of the massive TV tube. Where it would take us is yet unclear. What the product will be is yet unknown (ACT: XI).

Behind the work of such organizations as ACT are fundamental moral concerns about media content and its impact on both institutions and individuals. The media are viewed as legitimizing agents that portray distorted and often immoral views of the world. In the case of ACT, commercialism is frequently contrasted with traditional values of home, family, and community.

As members of ACT realize, however, the moral concerns of individual parents will themselves not alter the functioning of large American media institutions. In the early 1970s ACT began enlisting the financial support of similar minded people throughout the country. The organization had few problems gaining widespread support because of the general moral tone of its arguments. Who would disagree with ACT's contention that traditional sources of authority were declining? That children were doing more poorly in school? That parents were "losing control" of their children? That children watched large amounts of television? That many television shows depicted acts of violence? That community life was declining? ACT's rapid growth in the late 1960s and early 1970s was timely and predictable.

The financial support achieved by ACT in its first few years was the result of its clear expressions of moral concern and its vigorous claims of professional status. Moral concerns served as the basis for symbolic unity among members from a variety of religions, life styles, and regions. Professionalization was the key to ensuring media coverage and attaining sympathetic hearings from government regulatory bodies. ACT, perhaps more than any other media criticism organization, realized that battles with industry were in many respects challenges of status in society, not simply legal or economic skirmishes. Moral arguments themselves provided no power in Washington and no assurance of continued public interest. The organization sanctioned its moral crusade by establishing close ties with members of a respected profession—social scientists. Peggy Charen and the other leaders called on the academy for help in establishing legally acceptable documentation of television's impact on children.

In contemporary America, moral dilemmas have become matters of taste; moral questions appear disorganized, subjective, untrustworthy, ambiguous, and problematic. Scientific questions, such as the effects of television, on the other hand, presumably can be empirically validated through the value-free tools of social science—or so ACT thinks. The translation by ACT of its moral concerns into scientific puzzles actually created new ambiguities: validity, reliability, and most importantly, interpretation. As ACT found, and as the Surgeon General's hearings showed in the 1960s, social scientific investigations of human phenomena can produce more uncertainties in courtrooms than they eliminate by oversimplifying the complex, by creating layers of methodological dilemmas and by exacerbating the politics of various feuding scientific communities.

In the case of advertising directed to children, for example, ACT forced itself into a position of having to prove scientifically that children cannot differentiate between television programming and commercials. The advertising business presented scientific studies that contradicted the findings of ACT scientists, and interpretations of each other's data brought disagreements about scientific philosophies into the hearing rooms. Hearings were arranged at different cities across the country, heightening the drama and enhancing the local newsworthiness of each session. In a symbolic sense, the FTC investigation turned into a traveling sideshow that brought serious entertainment to major American cities. The injection of scientific righteousness into such disputes enhances their newsworthiness but rarely solves them. Moral crusades often are defused for short periods of time, only to resurface publicly in another context at a later date. ACT has spent enormous sums of money and amounts of energy crusading for television reforms but has accomplished very little.[1]

Today's professional media criticism groups are no more effective in bringing about institutional change than were the progressive groups that attacked film content in the early years of the century. Organizations such as ACT, by virtue of their professionalization, gain a moderate degree of legal or bureaucratic legitimation that enables them to enter the political arena in Washington, but their growing reliance on social-scientific support invariably produces deadlocks in the regulatory machinery. Media industries play the scientific

game better perhaps than media criticism groups, since they typically have more funds available for research. It might also be argued that media criticism groups are becoming increasingly impotent as they shift from local concerns to a national arena. Community control over pornography, for example, may be more effective than attempts to control the content of national television, although the two issues differ in scope and nature.

The faith in science that characterizes professional media criticism groups in America, when viewed in historical perspective, provides provocative insights into the nature of popular culture. Scientific modes of assessing and evaluating the efficacy of popular artifacts may be seen as replacements for the critical and interpretive schemes of classical literature. Whereas traditional art criticism posited some continuity of thought and purpose between author, critic, and public, scientific analysis becomes a justification for the political or economic positions of the group that can gain a legal advantage at a particular period. In addition, scientific analysis gives prestige and honor to special interest publics, namely professionals, perhaps at the expense of the general public. Instead of solving the moral conflicts created by the rise of large-scale communication technologies, the professionalization of media criticism groups further complicates and extends them.

Finally, media use of quasi-scientific studies has taken on a decidely private function with public consequences: the production of audiences for advertisers. Television networks use ratings measurements as indications of public support and "public interest." However, as an evaluation of the quality of programming, ratings feed the ambiguity that accompanies most contemporary social-scientific media research; audience ratings provide no interpretive or critical evaluation of media content. They are invisible critics that legitimize artifacts for everyone yet render them understandable for no one. The problem of social legitimation evident in the moral crusades of media criticism groups requires a public philosophy of communication that reasserts the relationships between artist, public, and critic in an explicitly democratic context.

It should be clear from the above discussion that media content is not simply art—at least not art in the classical context of public, critic, and artist. Although most popular

artifacts are interpretations of human life, they are interpretations produced without critical standards by no one in particular for everyone in general. Nor can media content be considered culture, since its relationship to the everyday lives of specific social groups or historical traditions is always problematic. The popular artifacts produced by American communications businesses and industries cannot be understood solely as art, culture, or commodity; they can be reduced to one of these categories only through academic magic. Popular artifacts exist simultaneously as meaningful symbolic worlds and as commodities.

The ambiguous social significance of popular culture makes it increasingly ripe for attack by media criticism groups: created for everyone, it satisfies the aesthetic urges of no one; authored by no one in particular, it defies critical analysis. The barrage of popular culture, rather than stabilizing American public life, elicits a widening field of media criticism which itself lacks any moorings in publicly held standards of interpretation. This is the paradox of popular culture: it exists outside the realm of public criticism because it denies any standards which would make such scrutiny possible.

As with all communication, popular culture is not politically neutral. The interpretations of human life portrayed in the major communications media bear a synergistic relationship to established business institutions and market structures. However, the most important political consequences may not be economic but cultural—the increasing fragmentation of American society and the resultant decline of public life. The content of much popular culture creates not a uniformity of understanding, but rather a conformity of misunderstanding in which no social group is sure of the intentions, beliefs, or actions of other social groups. To put it differently, the mechanically reproducible interpretations of American political and cultural life expressed through communication technologies are social groups' primary text for addressing and understanding the actions of other groups.

The professionalization of media occupations also contributes to the fragmentation of society by removing the philosphies and practices of media organizations from public discussion. Media criticism groups show an amazing lack of

insight into the daily activities of media practitioners. This failure colors their criticism with naive assumptions about the institutional workings of media in a market system. In addition, professional communicators exhibit meager interpretive powers or intellectual insight into the social phenomena on which they comment. Numerous studies recently have shown the large extent to which media professionals rely on the general conventions of an occupation.[2]

It is unrealistic to expect that the actions of media criticism groups will resolve the lifestyle conflicts among social groups in the United States. Such conflicts are not simply the result of unethical media programming or indeed even insensitive media owners and operators; they stem from contrary and often irreconcilable social realities. Further, it is naive to assume, as did the Chicago School, that communications technologies themselves might extirpate social fragmentation and build consensus. Yet the Chicago School's insightful recognition that society exists in and through communication and culture should not go unheeded today. The task is to reclaim the Chicago School's view of communication without falling victim to often sanguine concept of technology and its recurring disregard for the political economy of communications.

The nation needs a public philosophy that would take seriously the moral and political nature of communication. As a beginning point, the public philosophy should view communication artifacts not only as commodities, as is now the case in most commercial media, but as symbolic representations of public life, as one source of the moral fabric of social existence. We need to create standards by which we can critically evaluate the major cultural forms that communication takes in society, including news, popular drama, and the like. How and to what extent do such forms contribute to public understanding of the nation's expectations of itself? Without such standards media criticism groups will continue to be the most vociferous and steadfast critics of media content, even though they are not public representatives. Currently, the increasingly professional strategies of media criticism groups transforms the public issue of social legitimation into private languages of law and social science.

NOTES

[1] Complete transcripts of the hearings are not available. However, ACT's arguments and suggestions are: see *FTC Staff Report on Television Advertising to Children* (Washington: Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1978). Recent FTC budget cuts and political pressure on Congress from the advertising business have virtually stopped the Commission's investigation of children's advertising.

[2] See, for example Gaye Tuchman (1978) and Herbert J. Gans (1979). Although I am largely in sympathy with such works, I sense in them a lack of insight into the nature of popular art as a cultural artifact; such studies invariably seek to explain artifacts solely as products of institutional production, without regard for the relationship between artifacts and the wider culture. Journalistic practices, for example, are not determined by the economics of newspaper publishing or by the organizational structure of the business. Reporting developed historically amid the confluence of economic, political, cultural, and geographic factors. Objectivity is not only a device for streamlining and economizing the collection and dissemination of news reports; it is also a mode of interpretation for a society that distrusts human values. Michael Schudson (1978) captures some of this complexity.

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