

## COMMUNICATION RESEARCH AND POLITICAL COMMITMENT

Then, Now and Next

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I hope I may be forgiven for beginning this commentary on communication research with a brief account of the shock I received upon transferring (in 1966) from my undergraduate degree in theology at Oxford to my graduate studies in sociology at the London School of Economics.

There were two shocks, actually. One was conceptual, the other political. Contrary to common perceptions, theology at Oxford at that time was dominated by academics weaned on Wittgenstein, who took the basic ruthlessness of the attempt to find irreducible meaning and transferred it into an equally ruthless dissection of religious texts as historical sources. Using the demythologization methods of Rudolf Bultmann, Germany's then foremost New Testament historian and analyst, they put divinity under a microscope and teased it apart. Conventional historians were often slightly shaken by their lack of compunction in junking so much in their sources. Theology was not an exercise in faith!

Thus I arrived at LSE with a dedication to analytical precision, only to be continually bewildered by the consummate vagueness of the sociological concepts with which I was daily confronted. Not only did people not try to pin concepts down, but worse still, they then proceeded to use them in varied ways within one and the same text. My zest for specificity and clarity was outraged. As I then developed a research interest in media and communication – I had always been a newspaper junkie, a TV and cinema enthusiast and radio listener – and began to read the communication literature (Schramm and the rest, mostly from the US), my mood darkened even further. I loved reading poetry, but the fuzzy flights of fancy that I encountered were both unilluminating and singularly unpoetic. Sometimes it is genuinely hard to develop new language for fresh insights and angles of vision, but these people did not appear to be even making an effort.

Second shock: I came into social science study with a determination to use

everything I could find to help me understand better the mechanics of Britain's steadily deteriorating 'racial' situation. The understanding, I then hoped to be able to apply in various forms of intervention, along with others equally alarmed. My astonishment when none of the sociologists in the department were interested in the issue was intense. More intense still, when I was told by one or two of them that they did not think 'race relations' was actually a sociological topic, and this after 10 years' news coverage of the US Civil Rights struggle and *then-current* urban uprisings and police pogroms in a whole slew of US cities. Evidently, these sociologists' filters were irretrievably clogged.

By the time I moved in 1981 formally into communication in the USA, having taught sociology the previous 13 years, things had not changed much. I was nonetheless more convinced than ever that communication research was not only of huge significance for society, but because it was so, the strongest arsenal of concepts and tough-minded empirical research that could be mustered were needed. Initially, I found the field almost asphyxiated still in the US by the dreary empiricist canons of 'true' research, canons still mechanically rehearsed to this day in communication conference panels. As Oscar Wilde once observed of the English gentry and their passion for fox-hunting, it was and is a spectacle of 'the unspeakable in pursuit of the inedible'.

But then a number of constructive influences began to make themselves felt in the field, particularly political economy, cultural studies, feminism, and what today we often call globalization. There was nothing inevitably required of researchers by these foci, but they did represent in their different and sometimes clashing ways a certain push toward what might be called 'knowledge for the people'. In other words, the possibility of perspectives and research questions representing the aches, joys, angers and wit of the general mass of humanity, and not just in the generally privileged OECD nations either.

There came a backlash. During the 1990s, the Rightists who spotted these new trends and liked not what they saw, announced that these trends represented a fussy, busybody primness that they termed 'politically correct'. They snatched this term, in fact, from humorists on the Left who had first coined it to poke fun at petty self-appointed commissars in social justice groups and academic departments, but in the process of snatching it, wantonly amplified it into a generic construct for the entire Left. Suddenly, establishment conservatives were rendered sensible but marginalized, not themselves politically correct at all (let alone still hegemonic). Academic departments were claimed to be saturated with Leftists, and worse still, Leftists using their power in the biased and arrogant ways that had characterized the universities of their own student days.

For communication researchers in the 2000s in the midst of this morass, who want to be other than replicants, other than mere place-holders, other than the obsequious servants of power – yet less than messiahs – the basic task in my view is both humdrum and daunting. It is to explore systematically the opportunities that exist within and despite capitalist globalization for developing new 'worlds', new spaces, new challenges to omnipresent surveillance and branded versions of being, new connections for engagement in constructive social change, new alternative media. Humdrum, because it will mostly be one

brick at a time. Daunting, because the untethered arrogance of global capital and its readiness to use violence seem to be at an all-time high.

In particular, we need to find meaningful ways of engaging as specialists with social movements and civil society organizations, learning as well as suggesting and counseling. We need to develop teaching programs that consistently and creatively mine both sides of the analysis/media practice divide. We need to de-emphasize the importance of Anglo-American or OECD country studies in favor of finding ways to diffuse media research findings from other parts of the planet. In particular, we need to challenge the currently common racist view of the African continent as lost – was Europe ‘lost’ in the past century when its wars saw off tens of millions, was the US ‘lost’ in its Civil War, which saw off a million long before the technologies of killing had been developed to their current brilliant point?

Finally, we need to develop sustained and searching procedures for evaluating our research with the public whom we strive to serve. Not a public demagogically whipped up into a lather of rage against all intellectuals, but one with whom our writings frequently engage directly, one thoroughly accustomed to exchange with us, as we with them.

**John D.H. Downing** was named first director of the new Global Media Research Center at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, in January 2004. He had previously worked at universities in Texas, New York and London. His published research has largely focused on issues of ‘race’ and media, alternative media and social movements, and media and transition in the former Soviet bloc. He is currently developing an Encyclopedia of Alternative Media and Social Movements for Sage Publications.

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