
In Primal Scenes of Communication, Ian Angus, a communication-studies professor at Simon Fraser University, seeks nothing less than to define “the thesis proper to communication studies [as] the constitution of perception, institutions, and thought by media of communication” (p. 38, author’s italics). Angus favours theory over “a descriptive focus,” even though the theorist’s standpoint “is also formed by the media” (p. 38). More descriptions of how specific “media constitute reality” and “social relations,” I suggest, would have probably clarified and bolstered his theory (pp. 101 and 4, respectively; author’s italics). His text is in need of greater clarity, as the following passage shows:

Comparative media theory can investigate an immanent history of media forms oriented to the rhetorical construction of a cultural complex that is the mirror-image, as it were, of the transcendental manifestation that is the philosophical constitution of the phenomenon of expression itself. (pp. 55-56)

Angus writes more clearly when he comments on thinkers such as Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan in Part 1, where he proposes his central thesis about the materiality of communication. His stress on Innis’ themes of space, time, bias, and balance is especially welcome. He perspicaciously notes a tension in Innis’ thought between favouring oral media and treating them as a competing medium. Even though Angus supports Marx’ s view of consciousness as a “social product,” based on “human sensuous activity, practices” (pp. 7, 37), he endorses McLuhan’s postmodern communications theory against Raymond Williams’ regurgitation of the shopworn base/superstructure, foundationalist concept of materialism, his focus on hardware and broadcasting media. Angus’ critique of the fact/value dichotomy is well taken, but he associates it with European theory’s privileging of a vague, metaphysical notion of reason over practical, instrumental knowledge.

Angus criticizes the mathematical theory of communication for assuming “the transportation model of communication” (pp. 40f). But the core assumptions of the mathematical model, about uncertainty, information, signal and noise, etc., are cognitive, not mechanical. The criticism that the mathematical model needs expansive social reinterpretation repeats similar concerns expressed decades ago by Colin Cherry in On Human Communication (1957) and restated in John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid’s Social Life of Information (2000). Transportation considerations, moreover, remain relevant when messages are relatively heavy masses. The electronic transmission of weightless energy pulses makes possible today’s high-speed, high-volume, extraordinarily accurate telecommunications systems. Electronics, I suggest, also explains the social impacts of what Angus terms the “continuous circulation of signs and messages” (p. 109): viz., current concerns about data smog, privacy and security, the rise of decentralized network organizations, and rapid social change, as Innis and McLuhan both suggested.

Angus charges Innis with supporting the transportation metaphor in his communication theory, erroneously in my view. Innis’ communications theory was more radical than most people realize, as I have argued elsewhere (1990). Innis criticized Marx’s materialism for its obsession with economic explanations and then reinterpreted it in communication terms, viz., of the competition between oral and written media. Nor did he neglect social relations. On the contrary, he proposed a complex social ecology of the historical interactions between technologies, media, languages, religions, markets, empires, and civilizations, and their centre/margin, centralizing/decentralizing dynamics. He also noted that political revolutions often precede economic ones.
In addition, Angus commends Gregory Bateson’s neo-Darwinian view of communication. Bateson saw “mind as synonymous with a cybernetic system … immanent in the large biological system—the ecosystem” (1972, p. 470). Idealism, it follows, treats the world around us as mindless and therefore not entitled to moral respect; it justifies the destructive domination of nature. In a similar vein, Angus opposes Cartesian dualism and Husserl’s idealist view of communication as expressing and transferring the content of thoughts between minds (pp. 49, 69f). Communication, he contends, does not so much express pre-processed thoughts as shape their articulation.

Despite his materialist bent, Angus endorses Husserl’s idealist views about “indications” of states of mind and of the “emotional, volitional, motivational” unities of judgment (pp. 68f). The effect is to substitute an idealist, coherence model of knowledge for the copy model. One must therefore question Angus’ preference for Husserl’s “transcendental phenomenology,” with its model of consciousness as a subjective intentionality directed toward the world. The idealist tendency is reinforced by Angus’ neo-Kantian view of freedom as an unexplainable “mystery” (p. 133). A genuine communications theory would, in contrast, posit consciousness as socially interactive cognitive flows mediated by complex semiotics, as pragmatist philosophers such as Charles Sanders Peirce and William James suggested.

Following postmodern convention, Angus offers “a critique of foundationalism,” notably its representational treatment of ideas as copies of objects (pp. 8f). But Angus’ communications theory expressly rests on the “foundationalist metaphor of excavation” or “digging down to the fundamental unity” (p. 34), metaphysical language that would be very much at home in German idealism. On the other hand, Angus is right to suggest that natural, oral conversation is in some sense a core, culturally specific human practice and a source of other forms of human communication. But whether techniques such as rhetoric make speech itself a communications technology is doubtful. And it is far from evident that “speech is action,” tout court (p. 27). Even less does it seem that communication media have the “fundamental” role of being “the primal scene instituting … social reality and action” (pp. 4, 13). Foundationalist metaphors are in addition reinforced throughout the book by phrasing such as “the relation between technology and the body,” “the mathematical substruction,” “the fundamental contradiction,” and “the root-phenomenon of meaning” (pp. 31, 32, 57, respectively).

A temporal foundationalism underlies Angus’ socially conservative proposal to return to a simpler past. For instance, he criticizes information society for the loss of the historic “meaning-fundament” of culture, which is said to be rooted in “oral encounters” (p. 135). They represent small-scale, “inherently local” social practices (p. 93). Consumer society, Angus suggests, needs to recover its traditional roots and return to the “pre-industrial fundament of cultural experience,” and thereby “gain the strength to resist current culture” (p. 136). He even laments “the loss of amateurism[,]” citing traditional folk songs (pp. 97, 136f). But rural communities and social traditionalism are for many of us problematic, socially and morally.

Communications media, Angus contends, can help mediate the individual and society and mitigate the separation of the economic and political institutional spheres in civil society (pp. 78f, 81f). But the problem about separation is not clearly stated. Institutional differentiation can also be explained as reflecting the evolution of the division of social labour spurred by recent population growth. The lack of adequate separation between business or religion and government furthermore tends to breed monopoly and corruption. In his concluding discussion of social movements, Angus stresses the critique of consumerism and free communication as forms of social action. He stresses the critical strategy of breaking through ideologically encrusted common sense to reveal the “lack of fit” between the seemingly “natural” dominance of the rich, whites, and males over the poor, non-whites, and females (pp. 140f). Perceptively, he compares Innis’ idea of a “reflexive
appraisal” of civilization with critical theory’s stress on the emancipatory role of social reflection (p. 25). However deliberate and planned social change may be, he astutely observes, it is neither predictable or controllable.

In fine, Ian Angus’ project of reinterpreting key philosophical questions in terms of materialist communications theory is commendable. But many good insights are buried under obscure prose, and the core project is marred by an overly intimate association with idealist thought and foundationalist metaphors. Absent those debilitating associations, the core theses of communications studies would likely enjoy a more descriptive, and more persuasive, theoretical formulation.

References

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