As the term circulates in current debates within Communication Studies, "critical" may be seen to designate two broad bodies of work. In its most literal and archaic sense, "critical" describes an oppositional stance taken toward dominant communications structures and processes (and the discourses underlying these). In discussions of new communications technologies, wherein this usage is perhaps most common, a "critical" approach is one preoccupied with the social and political effects of such technologies.

Recent discussions of a "critical" communication studies, however, most commonly invoke the term to designate a range of perspectives characterized by their difference from the quantitative, social-scientific approaches seen to dominate the field. Within a discipline widely perceived as undergoing a paradigmatic crisis, "critical" refers in general terms to the variety of currents -- ranging from cultural anthropology, phenomenological sociologies and Frankfurt School through to semiology, (post)-structuralism and cultural Marxism -- whose growing acceptance has produced shifts in the disciplinary alliances making up the field, and conflict within its institutional sites. Much of this work is "critical" in the sense described initially, i.e., marked by an oppositional politics, but its concern with the meanings produced by and within communicational processes, and with problems of reading, decoding and interpretation, make it "critical" in a more modern sense of the term (Williams, 1976, 74 - 76).

The inevitability of a link between these two senses of "critical" has often been assumed, an assumption reinforced in recent years by the emergence of non-empirical methodologies as an important foundation of New Left condemnations of the American media (e.g., Molotch and Lester, 1973). The tendency, from the 1940's through to the late 1970's, for social-scientific research to regularly discount humanist critiques of the media crystallized the association of quantitative research with defenses of the status quo, and qualitative work with "critique" in its judgemental sense. More recently, debates such as that over television violence have proved to be the site within which these assumptions are most threatened. Increasingly, the methodological assumptions underlying laboratory research whose results condemn the mass media are proving unacceptable to proponents of textual or ideological analysis (for an early example, see Hall, 1973).
A further provisional distinction may be made between a pedagogy which is "critical" inasmuch as it seeks to foster interpretative capacities in the student (and thus intervene in authority-based classroom relations) and one concerned with the teaching, in a more conventional fashion, of material designated as "critical." While this distinction signals a problem with a long history, it is particularly pertinent to those whose teaching centers to a great extent on ways of reading or interpreting media texts. The historical importance of semiotic and Marxist practices of reading lies in part in their status as interventions in a context wherein the personal, "unconstrained" response to a literary or audio-visual text was valorized. In their claim to rigor, and in their emphasis on more-or-less formalized frameworks of understanding, these methodologies have often resisted tendencies towards so-called liberal or radical pedagogies. With the recent retreat of such approaches from claims to scientificity or exhaustivity, the problem is that of recognizing the necessary individuality of any analysis while avoiding both the humanist glorification of the untheorized reading and the post-structuralist emphasis on the performative ingenuity of the interpretative act.

Crucial to a "critical" communications studies, at this juncture is a stance which avoids exclusive reference to either of the usages of the term described at the outset. The enshrining of any approach on the basis of the political usefulness of its results, on the one hand, and the assumption that qualitative, "continental" methodologies are inherently progressive, on the other, provide the extremes within which such a stance must fall. At the same time, a critical pedagogy must not allow a generalized critique of academic relations to bar strategic considerations arising from the particularities of a given disciplinary situation.

CRITICAL MEDIA STUDIES: FUNCTIONS AND CONTEXTS

Irrespective of questions of substance, a critical pedagogy may be defined as a set of strategies designed to alter the existing relations of students to particular practices and the discourses which constitute, support or render knowable these practices. The calculations underlying such strategies must take into account the contexts within which a critical pedagogy intervenes.

Undergraduate courses dealing with the media are, as a rule, directed at three broad constituencies within the university:

1) those engaged in media-related vocational training, as in Schools of Journalism;

2) those specializing in the study of the media, but not receiving professional or craft training (majors in Mass Communication, Film Studies, etc.).
3) those taking Communication or Media courses as options or electives.

My own greatest experience has been with the latter two of these groups, and strategies involving these constituencies will be discussed later. A brief outline of problems involved in teaching the first may, however, serve to introduce principles of a more general nature.

The ethical and strategic dilemmas faced by critical media teachers within Journalism schools are considerable and well-known. The most fundamental of these is the clash between the vocational function of such schools and a pedagogy threatening (and often seeking) to disrupt that function. An ethical dimension is necessary if one is to avoid either judging pedagogical success by one's ability to render students professionally unemployable, or fostering unreasonable expectations as to the possibilities for intervention in the professional media field. The strategic dilemma is that of conceiving the relationship of critical perspectives to a curriculum designed to impart craft training. Ways of confronting this seem perpetually torn between the supplementing of craft skills by a critical distance (whose relationship to those skills and their use is rarely theorized) and the training of interested students in alternative or oppositional media skills (an activity often ripe with paradox and contradiction).

In practice, critical pedagogies have altered Journalism Schools most often by serving as the basis for a research component, and, in many cases, by providing the impetus for Mass Communication programs which formalize the distance between critical and vocational approaches.

These dilemmas may be regarded as inevitable, rooted less in the current underdevelopment of a critical journalism pedagogy than in the real limits of intervention within media institutions. To a great extent, careers which provide both reasonable levels of income and openings for practice of an oppositional nature are much less common in journalism than in such fields as Social Work or Law. At the same time, the field lacks equivalents to the academic/state-funded/art-world bohemia sectors which, however impoverished, provide outlets for ongoing theoretically informed and interventionist production by students of film or the other arts.

Nevertheless, the presence of critical perspectives (however defined) within the curricula of journalism schools ensures the same sort of intervention which such courses may accomplish when directed at non-vocational students. A critical media pedagogy at the very least possesses the potential to affect the shaping of an academic and post-academic political culture, and to alter the ways in which cultural products are read and understood. In their capacities as citizens and members of the student and working populations, journalists and those studying journalism are as likely to be affected by such activities as are those studying the media without these vocational objectives.
While critical teaching designed as an intervention within journalistic training may only rarely escape the status of doses of conscience accompanying a largely unaltered practice, it may at least be directed at the range of non-professional activities (television-watching, workplace politics) in which journalists are implicated through their careers and life cycles.

The relationship of Mass Communication programs to vocational or professional training is obviously a much less direct one. My own experience, working within three such undergraduate programs, has suggested that their rarely-acknowledged principal status is as the most popular of undergraduate degrees, rather than as programs leading to specific career paths. In this respect, they are within a lineage of disciplines, including psychology and English which, in different historical periods, have been central conduits for those who seek an undergraduate degree and either lack specific career ambitions or are statistically unlikely to work in a professional capacity within the field.

A critical communication pedagogy must address this reality. My characterization of the discipline is not intended to suggest that such problems sacrifice specialization in the name of a general liberal education. Training in focused areas of work, particularly at upper levels, is obviously important, not only for the ways in which it may shape post-academic activity, but in making Mass Communication programs significant producers and disseminators of knowledge about the mass media. Nevertheless, it might be argued that a critical pedagogy conceiving its intervention in terms of presumed professional activity exclusively suffers from a misplaced concreteness, and a heroic impulse towards direct effect in extra-academic sectors which is almost always frustrated. Likely, we have all participated in meetings between media scholars and practitioners designed to open up dialogue and exchange between the two groups, and noted the tendency of most such encounters to end with expressions of divergent aims and incompatible premises. Most frequently, it is academics who are allotted and accept the better part of the blame for this, as if the practice their work sought to inform was inevitably that of media production, and consistent failure to accomplish this the sign of perpetual political impotence. What needs to be argued is the futility of forever tracing these frustrations to problems of vocabulary or the differences between an isolated academic community and a production sector confronting the constraints of the real world. Neither the social role of Canadian universities in the 1980’s, nor the likely forms of involvement by ex-students in the media make this conception of academic work and critical communications teaching a strategically useful one.

The critical pedagogy to be discussed is one directed at the ways in which undergraduates "read" and render meaningful the discourses of the media. This reflects both the strategic considerations dealt with above, and the nature of my own experience in teaching media analysis. My argument is, however, not one which reduces communication processes
to their "discursive" aspects, as part of a conceptual movement towards the semioticization of political and social realities. Indeed, the tendency for this to occur within current discussions of a critical communication studies is often disturbing.

MEDIA ANALYSIS AND THE UNDERGRADUATE CURRICULUM

In a suggestive phrase, Gregory Ulmer recently discussed the implications of certain theoretical works for pedagogy in terms of a "decentering of disciplinary identities" (1985, xiii). One can argue that one function of a critical media pedagogy might be precisely such a decentering, albeit one aimed less at an undermining of the academic institution itself than at the network of discourses which are brought to bear on certain objects of study.

At the present time, three characteristics of the field of communications studies render it appropriate for such an intervention:

1) the state of theoretical work within the discipline, currently, marked by conflict between a variety of currents with different disciplinary backgrounds.

A study of attendance patterns at Learned Society meetings over the past half-decade would likely demonstrate the recent emergence of communication studies as an important site in which debates and tensions within the humanities and social sciences are being confronted.

2) the potential offered by the objects of study to bring together questions of culture meaning and social-political relations, to a degree unlikely within other disciplines.

The risk inherent here is that of the discipline's decline into a diluted interdisciplinarity. Nevertheless, as one of the few academic sites in which questions of meaning are linked to those of gender, or in which both are likely to be examined within socio-historical contexts, mass media courses have demonstrably problematized the compartmentalized examination of these areas which transpires elsewhere. Pressure to sustain this activity need not be based on an anarchistic designation of disciplinary boundaries as artificial or relative, but, in fact, can be shown to result from real, historical tensions surfacing within the study of media and communication.

3) the strategic location of media analysis courses within universities, within either or both of the Arts and Social Science Faculties, and drawing students from each.

To the extent that such courses, especially at entry level, become a significant component of the overall undergraduate experience, they are likely to contribute in part to the shaping of an overall university culture.
Inasmuch as a strategy of this nature involves problematizing existing relations of students to the media, an assessment of those relations is a necessary prerequisite. In the section which follows, I discuss my experience teaching a course on news analysis to undergraduates within an English department. The conclusions outlined apply principally to this constituency, but the argued necessity for an assessment of preconceptions should apply to all situations.

TEACHING MEDIA ANALYSIS TO ENGLISH UNDERGRADUATES

The most significant characteristic, perhaps, of English undergraduates in Mass Communication programs is their apparent openness to elements of critical media studies: a skepticism concerning quantitative methodologies, a general aversion to the perceived power of the mass media, and a critique of mass society. What needs to be assessed is the extent to which these are rooted in aspects of English undergraduate culture, taste patterns associated with that culture, and an anti-sociologism at odds with the premises of most critical work on the media. The danger is that of overlooking the roots of these stances, and assuming that negative judgements of, for example, television news, are evidence of a more complete and profound politicization.

The easy acceptance of "critical" approaches in these contexts arises from their apparent convergence with a popular scape-goat sociology (as in the debate over television violence and crime) and notions of cultural debasement in a period of commodified cultural production. At the same time, one frequently finds a conspiratorial view of the news media which can be seen as a natural outgrowth of the humanist distinction between a high culture of unconstrained personal artistry and a low culture of rule-bound ideologizing. These traits are often combined with a decline in television watching, due to a combination of taste preferences, economic situation, and the nature of peer-group interaction between university students.

Many of the foundations of this critique need to be problematized so as to not only shake up existing beliefs about television, but break down the distinction between a high (usually literary) culture studied in aesthetic terms and a popular culture judged moralistically. Quite probably, most students encountered are likely to have taken Film Studies courses, and thus have been exposed to elements of sociological-ideological analysis, albeit one likely to employ literary-critical notions such as of myth and genre. This, at least, provides the rudiments of a perspective in which a textual reading may be linked to the analysis of particular historical and institutional processes. A consistent emphasis, in the study of television news, on the groundedness of all cultural production within such processes, and drawing on examples outside of television news, e.g., literature, film, are part of this strategy of problematization.
My preference is to conceive such a course in two clearly-linked sections: an overview of basic writings on news, and a sampling of newer approaches grounded in principles of textual analysis. In neither case is the objective that of stressing the substantive value of particular methodologies. In the overview of the discipline's history, attention is paid to the premises underlying different perspectives, and the contexts in which these emerged. In the subsequent teaching of semiotic and Marxist analyses, the emphasis is on a view of the text as constructed within particular social contexts, rather than on specialized technical methodologies. Stated briefly and schematically, my objective is that of demonstrating the relationships between theories of meaning, theories of communication, and theories of society. (The situation of the particular course in question within the departmental curriculum was such that it was not part of a stream of courses running through all undergraduate years. While this meant that it was not required to fulfill a groundwork-laying function, i.e., acquainting students with basic works within a particular area, my choice of texts was intended in part to create a familiarity with such works.)

In overviews of a discipline's development, the danger is that of a narrativization which describes a process of rising complexification. My own response to this, following Hirsch (1978), is to present the discipline as a site wherein a number of discourses and imperatives have come into conflict and dialogue. Instead of presenting the 1940 election study by Lazarsfeld et al. as simply a "corrective" to mass culture critiques of the 1930's, for example, one might regard it as enshrining the focused, variable-based survey study as the model for media research, and setting the pattern for such research in the post-war expansion of the discipline.

Part of this overview involves an examination of treatments of the news production process. Gatekeeper, organizational and symbolic-interactionist analyses are read, with students discussing the theoretical implications of each and their implications for conceptualizations of the news message or text. This, in conjunction with the analysis of codes and structures undertaken later, serves at the very least, to question conspiracy-theory assumptions about television, by showing their basis in theories of human intentionality which have taken other forms in news research.

What cannot be stressed too strongly is the extent to which debates over the very nature of institutional processes are foreign to most arts undergraduates. The usefulness of studies such as those by Tuchman (1978) lies in (a) the level of detail provided concerning news production practices, detail which students are likely to find interesting; (b) the clear link between her analysis and a specific philosophical stance, which foregrounds the inevitability of such a link; and (c) the introduction into an institutional analysis of problems of meaning and interpretation, which not only allows the course to pursue such questions, but provides links with practices of reading undertaken in other humanities courses. While dealing with such studies involves,
In my case at least, temporarily bracketing reservations about them, their usefulness in demonstrating the link between theory and analysis is considerable.

In conjunction with these studies of news production we examine different ways in which the news text itself has been conceptualized in the discipline's history: as an impulse, as a message, as a discourse, and so on. This exercise sought to bring out the ways in which particular theoretical accounts of the news text are necessarily linked to theorizations of audience activity, and of the relationship of the news to social and political processes. Two particular cases are interesting in as much as they seem torn between conceiving of news as a particular arrangement of pre-existent knowledges and seeing it as a specific form of knowledge itself. Lippmann's conception of news, balanced as it is between seeing it as information and as "picture," and agenda-setting research, likewise caught between investigating news' ranking of pre-existent issues and regarding it as involved in constructing knowledges about social/political processes. Subsequently, Morley's research employing the encoding/decoding model can be examined as both the latest attempt to conceptualize news processes and as epitomizing problems involved in giving this enterprise a survey component.

Semiotic notions of the news as text or discourse provide an intervention, both in the common ways in which news has been studied, and in the relationship between thinking about news and ways of dealing with other cultural productions. The most useful semiotic notion to news analysis, I would argue, are those relating to mode of address and narrative structure. Very basic and easily grasped analyses of patterns of looking and speaking within the news program can lead to more complex examinations of hierarchies of speaking positions, gender relations, and contextualization. Similarly, principles for differentiating modes of story-telling provide the basis for what might be called an epistemology of news: looking at the procedures by which it renders phenomena knowable. It proved important to stress, as well, that studies of conventions and formal patterns do not compete with knowledge of the financial and legal regimes of news production as explanations of the same things: what is important, rather, is very often the emergence of discursive regularities as a product of these factors.

On the basis of those notions, I develop what I regard as the two principle semiotic qualities of television news. The first is its formal heterogeneity, its bringing together of a diversity of voices, modes of expression (sound, photos, graphics, etc.), phenomena with different status as events, etc. The work of the news discourse is to produce a coherence across this heterogeneity, linking stories under particular semantic umbrellas, establishing hierarchies of modes of expression, etc. The second quality is what might be called the "inter-textuality" of news: its employment of formal and semantic features found across the range of cultural production. In particular, the reliance of news narratives on patterns common within popular culture.
(the little person's encounter with bureaucracy, the politicians rise and fall) are seen to relate to the circulation of ideological motifs across the larger cultural space and to the status of news as something other than simply a reporting of reality.

These notions, derived from a semiotics whose premises I do not always share, nevertheless prove useful in both defamiliarizing the qualities of news as representation and maintaining links with questions of social order, ideology and meaning. To pose the question of gender, for example, in terms of speaking positions within an established hierarchy of these, or of the familiarity of certain narrative patterns, is to both confront the older feminist question of stereotyping, and pursue the more recent concern with the place of women within narratives and texts.

The activities addressed in a course such as this are two-fold: the reading of theoretical texts (so as to reconstruct their presuppositions) and the reading of television news texts (as representations of certain kinds). Given both the temporal limits on such a course, and the unlikelihood of students pursuing further academic work in the field of Communication Studies, training in specialist methodologies does not seem a useful objective. Success might be judged by the extent to which the obviousness of each of these activities is diminished: a very old pedagogical ambition. Clearly, though, the notions that theoretical texts in specific domains presuppose theories of society, and that news texts are constructed representations, constitute substantive and partisan principles which, however self-evident, have not emerged without controversy. In the context of a literature department, they are likely at worst to problematize distinctions between sociological and textual perspectives, at best to alter the students' relationships to cultural productions in general.

SOME PROBLEMS OF A CRITICAL COMMUNICATIONS STUDIES

As suggested at the outset, a critical communications studies should argue for the necessity of a link between judgemental and methodological senses of the term without assuming that one is an automatic consequence of the other. The Trans-Atlantic itineraries of a number of conceptual frameworks make a reminder of this necessary. What is striking, particularly within much recent American writing on television, is the tendency for semiotic and textual methodologies to emerge as the basis for a new culturalism. In many cases, it is apparent that the sociological and political premises of, for example, British Cultural Studies work, have been displaced in a new symbolic anthropology wherein concepts such as "ideology" and "ritual" emerge as those of "Myth" and "ritual". Undergraduate communication textbooks, in which the inroads of qualitative perspectives are increasingly apparent, manifest the tendency for semiotic work to simply modernize early rhetorical or functionalist approaches.
The problem is not one of an organic link between certain methodological tools and political stances which has somehow been broken, or of a proprietary horror at the fate of tools for whose acceptance one had once fought. Rather, the question emerges of the usefulness of conceiving divisions within the discipline as those between quantitative and qualitative methodologies, or even between those whose objects of study are focused and those whose approach, in whatever fashion, is more macroscopic.

Two particular tendencies within recent "critical" work elicit a somewhat polemical response on my part. The first is the use made of methodologies of textual analysis in the evaluation of mass media products, particularly television programs. Increasingly, one finds such analyses working to demonstrate the textual complexities of such programs, and then offering this complexity in their defense. (The resonances in these defenses of a high-order aesthetics or formalist cultural products deserve further investigation, and will not be dealt with here.)

In a sense, such defenses are founded on a paradox. In their response to mechanistic effects studies, textual analysts rightly argued for an attention to the ways in which acts of televised violence, for example, should not be isolated from a discursive context which shaped their possible meanings. This was a significant conceptual shift in its avoidance of the reduction of programs to behavioural impulses, and in its insistence on those factors which entered into audience readings of programs. The notion that even apparently banal television discourses contained complex and diverse systems of address, levels of meaning, and contradictory "messages" was an important anti-reductionist development. However, once these qualities are accepted as givens within television programming, as they must, they can no longer serve as the basis of judgement, unless an ill-defined quantitative conception of complexity is invoked.

Historically, the argument that media messages are more "complex" than believed has been advanced at those points in which emergent paradigms challenge those in dominance. The terms in which two-step flow theorists countered hypodermic notions, and in which semioticians have responded to effects research, are perhaps the best known of these. What the new "culturalism" highlights is the tendency for arguments as to "complexity" to quickly be adopted as defenses of the status quo. Clearly, the assertion that media texts work in complex and heterogeneous ways can no more contribute to a politics of media processes than can the uses-and-gratifications discovery that people have reasons for watching television.

Finally, the structuralist and post-structuralist concern with trans-historical regularities within discursive regimes and systems of representation has raised the problem of relativism and its uses. As the study of television and other media opens up to situate these within broader histories and systems of discourse, one occasionally
finds the implicit conviction that the demonstration that these histories and systems are not inevitable and not natural is sufficient to condemn them. The value of such work clearly lies in its undermining of the obviousness with which these phenomena are endowed; its problems reside in its relationship to a politics of discourse or of social relations. Paul Hirst and Penny Woolley have directed attention to this difficulty:

Sociological relativism, in showing that certain categories or institutions are neither necessary nor inevitable, that they depend on certain conditions and that things are ordered differently elsewhere tends to neglect or suspend the very effectivity of those (conditional) social relations. Relativism tends to avoid this paradox by refusing to situate itself in definite social relations, by refusing to take questions of policy, reform and genuinely available alternatives seriously. (1982, 97)

In particular, Foucauldian and Derridean attempts to demonstrate the continuities between specific characteristics of media representations and epistemological or cultural tendencies at much higher levels, fail, despite their obvious interest and importance, to contribute to a politics of imaginable alternatives. Put crudely and hypothetically, the demonstration that, for example, modern techniques of video surveillance are linked genealogically to Foucault's penal panopticon, says nothing about the functions of such practices today, the social relations which underpin their existence, or a politics which would oppose them.

FOOTNOTES

¹These observations were inspired in large part by the substance of public discourse at the conference on "New Directions in Television Studies", Ann Arbor, Michigan, 16 - 17 April 1983.

²For an example of a recent debate which both manifests and problematizes these tendencies, see Garnham (1983) and Connell (1983).

REFERENCES


Reading List for Third Year Undergraduate Course: The Discourse of News.


Articles:

Each class involved discussion of an assigned article; these included classic statements of the two-step flow, uses-and-gratifications, gatekeeper, ritual, agenda-setting, encoding/decoding and semiotic approaches, and a list has not been included for reasons of space. Copies may be obtained from the author.