BOOK REVIEWS

Powermatics: A Discursive Critique of New Technology
Marike Finlay

Plainly Dr. Finlay does not like computers. In her own library research she becomes frustrated with the "tree accessing pattern" preferring "browsing, intuition, and imaginative association." (121, 133) A visit to her students reveals them playing computer games. (108) However, her critique of new technology, although reflecting the alienation of an outsider, goes well beyond a psychological attitude.

Indeed the most interesting part of this learned book is Dr. Finlay's interweaving of philosophy and sociology to provide a basis on which to build a critique of the celebration of new technology. Put simply, Finlay claims that the new technology is based on a world view ("episteme") of power and control; a true revolution, not the so-called Information Revolution, would lead to true interaction and democracy. From the French philosopher, Foucault, and the German sociologist, Weber, Finlay creates a viewpoint from which to attack the claims of new technology:

"By combining Focault's attribution of relationships of domination and the control of the discourses of knowledge with Weber's theories of domination...an interpretative framework has been formed for the discourses on and of new communication technology." (237)

Finlay's framework is to be sharply distinguished from Marxist critiques of new technology: "Economics is not the dominant base structure of society. Rather, the procedures of knowledge constitute dominant configurations of reason which subsume economic practices." (195) Consequently, a true revolution requires a change of ideas: "The episteme itself...would have to be altered since it is the condition of possibility of the particular manifestations of technology." (196) "The old episteme itself...would have to be altered since it is the condition of possibility of the particular manifestations of technology." (196) "The old episteme does not work anymore." (224) A useful summarizing diagram of the conflict between the two worlds views (power and control vs. interaction and democracy) is provided in Figure 4.1. (246)

After examining a set of discourses of new communications technology and then presenting more systematically the Foucault-Weber synthesis (fleshed out with Weizenbaum, Carey, Innis, Cohn-Bendit and Castoriadis, and especially Habermas) Dr. Finlay moves to look at alternative procedures of discourse. Practically she suggests the importance of "rights to communicate," a "communications
ombudsman" and of viewing "free flow" not as an object but as interaction and exchange. (250-252) Minority rights should be strengthened; closed user groups should be "discouraged." (262, 265) Local information provision and "discursive education" should be encouraged. (272-3) Further policies cover anti-trust legislation, software development, centralization, networking and public inquiries.

Dr. Finlay's strategy of concentrating on what people say about new technology displaces a discussion of the technology itself. Her lack of awareness of many developments will lead her to be discounted by many people working in the field. Added to this is the permeation of technical, philosophical terms throughout the book. Finlay has already anticipated an "almost total incomprehension on the part of most empiricist students of mainstream communication." (330) We could add that many students will also have great difficulty following her argument. Is this not ironic in view of Dr. Finlay's attempt to launch a True Revolution where plain folk can talk plainly to each other?

Reviewed by: Christopher Podmore
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Public Relations and Community: A Reconstructed Theory
Dean Kruckeberg and Kenneth Starck

This slim volume hits hard at one major point: public relations practitioners need to abandon their dominant attitude of narrowly serving the needs of their clients and instead attempt to engender a broad-based sense of community. By approaching public relations from this broader perspective both the needs of the client and the community are served. Implicit in this theory is that a closer-knit community will retain more traditional family-based values and therefore comprise a more stable and appreciative economic unit for one's client.

This "idealistic" theory of public relations and client-market role relationships in modern-day mass society is offered without counter arguments. Also, empirical tests of this theory are not presented. A case-study of Sugar Creek, a Missouri company-town built in 1904 as the base for a Standard Oil (Indiana) (now Amoco Company) refinery, is used to illustrate the way a "sense of community" can be affected by corporate public relations.

Although it is not all that evident how Standard Oil purposely and successfully engineered this "sense of community" in Sugar Creek, the telling of the case is interesting. By the 14th and final chapter, the authors delineate a helpful list of ways public relations practitioners can accomplish the goal of "community". At this point, the case study community is used as an example for each of the eight ways.