Critical Theories and Mass Communication

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Introduction and limitations

In the Oxford Advanced Learners dictionary, the word "critical" can either mean "looking for faults" or "of the art of making judgments on literature, arts, etc."

Stephen W. Littlejohn defined the term "Criticism" as "the application of values for the purpose of making judgments" (Littlejohn, 1996, Chapter 11, Theories of Human Communication, p 226).

Critical analysis has been prominent in communication and social science for many years. Rhetorical criticism or critical dialogues and discussions can be dated to the time of Plato and Aristotle in ancient Greece. For them, and for scientific study, discussions and dialogues mean more knowledge.

Later on, German philosopher George Wilhelm Hegel (1770-1831) used the term "dialectic" to conceive his System Theory (Littlejohn, Chapter 3.) Hegel believed that the evolution of ideas occurs through a dialectical process --- a concept (thesis) gives rise to its opposite (anti-thesis), leading to conflict and resulting in a new concept or "synthesis. It is this "synthesis" that, Hegel believed,

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is the higher or highest level of truth, self-awareness and freedom. Based on this logic, critical thinkers thus identify their theories more with social science.

However, as Littlejohn observed, critical social science is often economic and political in nature, and much of this work concerns communication. Critical theorists are usually reluctant to separate communication and other elements from the overall system and are usually part of a critique of society as a whole.

The Critical Theories are challenging in that theorists of this school, from the Frankfurt School to the Birmingham's Cultural School to the Feminist School in the US, have been able to present critical concepts that generate increasing discussions and researches. Critical thinkers have also brought about reforms – communication, culture as well as social changes. Although their original concepts in communication came from Karl Marx, their theories are even partially critical of orthodox Marxism. It is this nature of critical approach that has helped to develop more discussions, more researches, more findings, leading to a more balanced and better society.

Marxism, considered a significant politico-economic philosophy, has influenced several thinkings as well as ideologies for more than a century. As a result, many philosophical as well as ideological materials have been put out. As a non-orthodox marxist or "neo-marxist", the Critical School has also developed many creative communication concepts for several decades.

The Critical Theories and Karl Marx

Influenced by, but swaying from Hegelian system, Marxism tends to emphasize on political and economic changes by applying the so-called dialectical materialism. In the field of communication, Marxism emphasizes on the means of communication in society. Only when individuals are truly free to express themselves with clarity and reason will liberation occur, and that condition cannot come about in a class-based society. When and how this so-called liberation would occur?

Dialectical materialism, according to German political philosopher Karl Marx (1818-1883), is the social changes form feudalism to capitalism to socialism and finally to communism or a classless society. These changes would be in the form of class struggle between the exploiters and the exploited. Through revolution, the working class or the oppressed would topple the capitalists and the ruling class to create "the dictatorship of the proletariat", leading to the workers" control of the means of production. The final and also the supreme stage of change would be a classless and stateless society called "communism." In theoretical sense, the term "communism" in Marxism conveys an idealistic condition which was reflected in Karl Marx's famous sentence written in 1875: "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs."

With regards to communication, Marx preached that, in the capitalist society, the "superstructure" namely the state and the

capitalists controlled the means of mental production (the arts and the mass media), thus creating a false consciousness among the proletariat and dominating the media content through social class relationships (see Arvind Singhal, Chapter 4, Reading Packet-Communication Theory, Ohio University, 1995).

Critical theorists were first influenced by orthodox Marxism, but later on, they either combined Marxism with Freudian Theory or they were critical of classical Marxism. Although much critical theory has come a long way since Marx, it is still considered basically marxist. It could be this reason as well as Marxim's European philosophical background that the Critical School has not been widely popular in the US and its Cold War allies such as Thailand.

THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL, - MARXISM MARRYING FREUDIAN PSYCHOLOGY

The most prominent school of the Critical Theories is none but the so-called Frankfurt School. Originally, the school was known as the social theorist group of the Institute for Social Research, which was established in Frankfurt, Germany in 1923.

Affiliated with the then University of Frankfurt, the school was then the center of prominent critical theorists such as the institute's second director Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Eric Fromm, Leo Lowenthal and Jurgen Habermas.

In the first seven years of its establishment, the Frankfurt School remained orthodox to classical Marxism through its theoretical

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program called "materialism". Since Horkheimer become the institute's director in 1930, theorists at the Frankfurt School increasingly adopting Freudian theory by combining its social psychology with Marxism. One of the School's leading scholars Eric Fromm viewed that family socialization of the individual was an important psychological agency in society and that even adult socialization was important as a means of social change (Singhal 1995).

When Hitler and the Nazi rose to power in Germany in the early 1930s, the Frankfurt School began their study in Fascism, anti-Semitism (anti-Jews), and authoritarianism. This phenomenon was understandably caused by Hitler's anti-Jew policy while most of the Frankfurt School's theorists were Jews. In 1933, the Nazi government closed the institute, forcing its members to flee to other countries including the US. The Frankfurt scholars in 1934 revitalized the institute in the US by affiliating it with Columbia University in New York. Later in the early 1941, Horkheimer and Adorno moved themselves as well as the institute to Los Angeles.

One of the Frankfurt School's major works took place in Los Angeles in 1943 when some of the institute's scholars began an empirical research on "*The Authoritarian Personality*". The research team included Adorno and three Berkeley psychologists --- a good mixture of Marxist and Freudian proponents. Their study showed that "the authoritarian personality" is weak and dependent but seeks to maintain law and order by enforcing a punitive, conventional morality. Moreover, such personality thinks in stereotyped categories

and fell strongly prejudiced against out-groups of all kinds. Their finding reflected somewhat Hitler's personality in Germany.

After the end of W.W. II. Horkheimer and Adorno returned to Frankfurt and reestablished the Institute for Social Research in 1950. This time the institute had produced another prominent critical scholar, Herbert Marcuse. In 1964, Marcuse released his masterpiece entitled *"One-Dimensional Man"* which became so popular among students in the 1960s. Again, Marcuse followed the Frankfurt School's critical approach of combining Freudian and Marxism's socio-historical perspective. Marcuse argued that the differences between freedom and happiness and between sexuality and culture were the result of institutional domination and not the outcome of human nature. In *"One-Dimensional Man"* he confirmed the task of Critical Theory is "to analyze society in the light of its used and unused or abused capabilities for improving the human condition" (Hanno Hardt. *Critical Communication Studies,* "On introducing ideology : Critical Theory and the critique of culture," London: Routledge, 1992).

Prof. Hardt of the Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Iowa presented an indepth study of Marcuse's communication concept. According to Prof. Hardt, Marcuse raised the problem of functional and manipulated communication in which the use of language of government public relations, advertising, or journalism becomes an agency of domination, linking individuals to the functions they perform in society.

In fact, throughout most of his writings Marcuse posed the picture of individuals trapped by a consumer economy and the politics of corporate capitalism that have resulted in material dependency and need fulfillment and served to stabilize the corporate capitalism.

Marcuse followed Marx in criticizing the capitalists' control of the means of communication. According to Marcuse, communication research expressed itself in the creation of methodological instruments and asserted itself in the application of such methodologies to series of research problems defined by organized capitalism. Thus, it participated in the defense of entrenched institutional interests and their media system, affirming the power of communication in the reproduction of capitalism, that is, in the improvement of its means of manipulation. (see for example, Rubin and Earl Babbie, Research Methods for Social Work, Chapter 7, California, USA : Brooks/Cole Publishing Allen Company, 1997)

The most well-known contemporary critical theory of the Frankfurt School came from Jurgen Habermas. Prof Singhal of Ohino University, while mentioned briefly about Habermas, called him a "grand theorist, operating at a high level of abstraction" (Singhal, 1995). Prof Hardt of the University of Iowa and Prof Littlejohn both wrote in great length about Habermas and his critical approaches to communication (Hardt, 1992 ; Littlejohn, 1996).

Habermas first joined the Frankfurt School or Institute for Social Research between 1956 to 1961, and in 1983 became its

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director. Presenting his critical idealism in several books, Habermas saw communication in the 'lifeworld' being 'colonized' by the social system and ideally he wanted communication to be emancipatory and free from exploitation in its effects. Habermas used the term 'lifeworld' to mean 'a shared culture' or 'the ordinary, daily activities of the people'. The media are part of the 'lifeworld' and they function as generalized forms of communication (Hardt, 1992). Habermas proposed that the study of the media must be a study of culture, the conditions of the lifeworld, and, indeed, the prospects of a public sphere that serves the emancipatory interest.

When we discussed about the emancipatory interests proposed by Habermas, we are talking about the central idea of his critical theory. His thinking is not only ideal but also democratic because he called for emancipation of an ideal speech situation --- freedom as well as legitimacy of speech, and the equal distribution of power to all social groupings. He viewed that language is the means to fulfill emancipatory interest.

In Habermas' critical theory, people should be aware and critical of the problems of the 'colonization' of our 'lifeworld' as well as the influencing of our thinking of life by the social system. Only then, we will be free and emancipated from the system's domination.

Prof Hardt viewed that specifically communication is a central idea in Habermas' theoretical study. It surfaced with *Knowledge and Human Interest* (1971), in which he presented his approach to language in the context of the development of a

critical social science, and culminated with the publication of *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1984)

BRITISH CULTURAL STUDIES AND THE US' FEMINIST STUDIES

The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham, has been well known for its critical cultural studies. Prominent scholars of this school are: Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall.

By reforming classical Marxism and following partially the Frankfurt scholars' cultural analysis, the "Birmingham School" has provided a less abstract presentation of the critical cultural studies. This school views that social contradictions will resolve to positive change, and to help people understand domination and their desirable changes (Littlejohn, 1996). In more concrete terms, the British cultural scholars see that the media are dominated by, and they are also instruments of, the dominant order or establishments such as the advertisers, producers, and so on. But, through the people's awareness, there will always be opposing voices which are present as part of the dialectical struggle between groups in a society.

The British scholars agrees with the Frankfurt scholars that the media represent a major aspect of modern culture. The media were identified by Frankfurt School's Horkheimer and his colleagues as part of the culture industry, and remained suspect when they became the "irrefutable prophet of the prevailing order". The

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Birmingham School sees the media's important role in affecting popular culture (Hardt, 1992).

In the realm of feminist studies, critical scholars in the US have been more active than the Europeans since the 60's. More research works and studies have been conducted by American scholars such as Karen and Sonja Foss, Robert Trapp, Edwin and Shirley Ardener, Cheris Kramarae, Julia Penelope, for example. This group of scholars introduce two critical theories resulting from feminist studies : Muted-Group Theory, and Theory of Patriarchal Universe of Discourse.

The Muted-Group Theory says that women's voice in many communicative patterns and their meanings have been suppressed or silenced or 'muted'. Therefore, the theory suggests direction for positive changes such as new words or language to reflect women's experience.

In the theory of the Patriarchal Universal of Discourse. Penelope theorizes that language is patriarchal and oppressive to women. She cited the example of grammar and genderization of language are bias to women. Therefore, Penelope proposes the solution by rejecting such assumption that the categories of language are true and invariant, by becoming conscious of the language oppression, and by refusing and resisting such oppression.

APPLICATION AND MODERN CRITICAL SUTDIES

Ien Ang recently applied the critical approaches in his study entitled "*In the Realm of Uncertainty : The Global Village and Capitalist Postmodernity*" (David Crowley and David Mitchell, ed. 1995. *Communication Theory Today*, Cambridge, UK : Polity Press). In his opinion, "communication is, and should be, a crucial site of critical intellectual reflection on cultural relations..."

In his study, this modern scholar was critical of the much-talk-about topic of a "global village". Proponents said that the globalization would be brought about through successful communication. But, Ang proposed in his study a theorization of capitalist postmodernity as a chaotic system. The scholar cited historical and economic backgrounds as showing human interaction pertains primarily to the geographical expansion of modern capitalism to conquer more extensive and more distant markets. Ang suggested that we should look at the communication failure which would lead to new world (dis)order.

Interestingly, this critical scholar quoted John Tomlinson as suggesting that "The idea of 'globalization' suggests interconnection and interdependency of all global areas....the effects of globalization are to weaken the cultural coherence of all individual nation-states..."

Such phenomenon has created the change in the structure of global capitalist order, and there would be the uncertainty created by the disturbing incoherence of a globalized capitalist

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postmodernity. The incoherence or chaos relates to the massive proliferation of possible TV viewing practices in the last few decades. Such proliferation resulted from the expansion of TV industries in capitalist modernity such as 24-hour satellite channels like CNN, MTV. And, it also occurred as a result of TV avialability in every corner of daily life.

Ang pointed out that such phenomena can surely only make for an endless, unruly and uncontrollable play of differences in social practices related to TV viewing: continuous social differentiation bordering on chaos. He summarized the whole phenomena that "...capitalist postmodernity is an orderly disorder, or disorderly order."

Asst. Prof. Katherine T. Frith and Asst. Prof. Subir Sengupta of the College of Communications, the Pennsylvania State University recently published their critical research on **"Multinational Corporation Advertising and Cultural Imperialism : A Content Analysis of Indian Television Commercials"** (Asian Journal of Communications, Volume Seven, No One 1997, Singapore: AMIC) which is an interesting work of critical theory publication.

By basing their study on the cultural aspect of the critical theory. The two scholars conducted an empirical research into multinational corporation (MNC) advertising in Indian television. Their assumption was based on he notion of cultural domination or influence coming from developed nations through MNC advertising.

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Standardization of MNC advertising, if any, could transfer dominant imperialist values to underdeveloped and developing nations such as India. According to the critique, cultural transmission could come two ways : MNCs standardize their ads for worldwide markets; and when MNCs' Western personnel reflect their values in the ads they create.

By comparing multinational corporation (MNC) advertisings with Indian ads that there was no significant difference in the cultural values and selected creative tactics between NMC and Indian ads. But, the researchers are still critical of the quantitative measurement as it is superficial. They encouraged future deeper studies to see whether Western fashion styles and new modes of communication really affect indigenous cultural values. The two scholars are also critical of television for promoting a one-way, top-down transmission system that theoretically give rise to a passive audience and a powerful media.

On a less critical note, Frith and Sengupta concluded that MNC ads, may in a way be encouraging positive development, even if they are transplanting some company ads on Indian television, using statistical methodology, the two critical scholars found Western values somehow unaffect Indians' traditional way of life.

Modern critical studies have been concerned about the dominant aspect of new communication media and technology. One of these studies is in the book entitled **Communications and**

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the "Third World" (Stanley A. Deetz, **Communication Yearbook,** California : SAGE Publication, Inc, 1992). In the study on **Data: Technological 'Dependence' and Communications,** the author is critical about the developed capitalist economies's domination in data communication and information technology.

In presenting his critical view, Deetz questioned the uneven distribution of satellite and computer /digital technology. The development of computer technology and digital communications, which has basically been dominated by corporations in the major capitalist countries has increased the capacity for the international flow of data at a pace beyond the 'ability of international bodies to regulate'.

Concern has frequently been expressed by critics about the implications of the information technology revolution for "Third World" countries. This critical school contends that the readjustment policies of 'industrialized countries'. Together with their development and 'mastery' of information technology, is simply reinforcing the present international division of labour through substantial increases in productivity and concentration of information-intensive sectors in them. Advanced industrial or capitalist economies control an 'all-pervasive technology' which has both changed their economic production and services sectors, and reinforced their major advantage in science and technology. Any theory of comparative advantage has been effectively undermined by the micro-electronic revolution, with the assumption that "Third World" countries would

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industrialize on the basis of labor-intensive industries challenged by the increased and widespread adoption of 'high technology' by most industries in the advanced industrial or capitalist economies. If there is no need for labor, where will the comparative advantage for developing countries lie.

Interestingly, this critical scholar has pointed out the concentration or domination of manufacturing capability and important data banks of information technology remain in major capitalist countries. This could be seen, for example, in the dominant position of the advanced capitalist world in international news reporting, together with their news agencies such as Radio Free Asia, UPI, AP, AFP, NHK and Reuters, for example, the concentration of information capabilities in a limited number of centres in the advanced capitalist economies has basic implications for employment and unemployment in order areas.

One example is Canada which in 1977 estimated lost 7,500 processing jobs and about $300 million in revenue because data processing was being done abroad, mainly in the US. The projection for 1985 estimated losses of 23,000 jobs and $1.5 billion in revenue.

In this critical view, communication development (radio, television, telecommunications) requires both substantial initial capital investment and increased investment. The production of communication technologies is essentially restricted to a small number of advanced capitalist economies-Japan, the United

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States, Britain, France, and West Germany. As a result much of the investment involves scarce foreign currency in the developing economies. This scarcity is exacerbated by worsening terms of trade, falling commodity prices, and international indebtedness, and cannot be offset by increased sale of services since that occurs in local currencies.

Government investment in high-tech communications and information usually increases indebtedness, especially foreign indebtedness, leading to reducing spending in crucial areas such as health, water supply, and education; and finally resulting in benefiting relatively small sections of the population who are able to take advantage of the extended provision of communications/ telecommunications services.

In concluding his critical finding, Deetz viewed that the developing countries' investment in modern telecommunications and information technologies poses a dilemma: their economic development seems to be predicated at least partly on the expansion of modern communications and information systems which they are generally unable to develop and manufacture themselves, and whose purchase usually involves substantial increases in international indebtedness. The introduction of such systems, however, means incorporation into international communications and information systems over which they have little if any effective control. This is particularly true in the case of Thailand where huge investment in telecommunications and high technology have eaten

into human-resource development as well as health care. Thai leadership who are mostly ignorant of high technology and human-resource development have for several years opted for development of infrastructure, telecommunications, and hardware high tech. Thai government leaders have no serious plan for human-resource development. Short of this crucial development coupled with the lack of serious government support, the future of Thailand is hanging in jeopardy.

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