Glossarium-BITri

- BITrum-Público (SP)
- Public-BITrum (EN)
- BITrum-Privatum
- Contribuciones (SP)
- Contributions (EN)
- BITagora
- PRIMER

Glossarium BITri

- Glosario (sp)
- Glossary (en)
- 1. Introductio (sp, en)
- 2. Índice (sp)
- 2. Index (en)
- 3. Instrucciones (sp)
- 3. Guidelines (en)
- 4. Administratio (sp, en)
- 5. Abbreviatūra (sp, en)
- 6. Novedades (sp)
- 6. Updates (en)
- 7. Consilium Editorum
- 8. Propositio articulōrum
- Mapa del sitio

Recent site activity

- Tecnologías de la Información y de la Comunicación (TIC) || Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) edited by José María Díaz Nafría
- Sociedad de la Información || Information Society edited by José María Díaz Nafría
- Información y organización || Information and organisation edited by José María Díaz Nafría
- View All

Contactus et Loci

José María Díaz Nafría
Francisco Salto Alemany
Mario Pérez-Montoro

Critical Theory of Information, Communication, Media, Technology

Article

Version española

Editor	Fuchs, Christian christian.fuchs@uti.at
Incorporated contributions	Fuchs (28/02/09)
Usage domain	Pragmatics, Communication studies, ICT, Critical Theory
Type	theory
French	Théorie critique de l'information, communication, media et technologie
German	Kritische Theorie der Information, Kommunikation, Medien und Technologie

The notion of critical theory has a general and a specific meaning (Maces 2001: 74f, Payne 1997: 118). Critical theory as a general term means theories that are critical of capitalism and domination. Critical Theory as a more specific term means the work of the Frankfurt School, and particularly of Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Jürgen Habermas, and Herbert Marcuse. Its starting point is the work of Karl Marx (Held 1980: 15, Macey 2001: 75, Payne 1997: 118, Rush 2004: 9, Wiggershaus 1994: 5). For Horkheimer and his colleagues, critical theory "was a camouflage label for 'Marxist theory'" (Wiggershaus 1994: 5) when they were in exile from the Nazis in the USA, where they were concerned about being exposed as communist thinkers and therefore took care in the categories they employed.

First, there are definitions of critical theory that remain very vague and general. So for example David Macey provides a definition that is circular, it defines critical by being critical without giving a further specification what it means to be critical. By critical theory he means "a whole range of theories which take a critical view of society and the human sciences or which seek to explain the emergence of their objects of knowledge" (Macey 2001: 74). Unspecific theories include those that do not define a certain normative project, but argue that critical theory is about political engagement or showing the difference between potentiality and actuality. So for example Michael Payne sees political engagement as the central characteristic of critical theory. He defines the latter as "research projects in the social sciences and/or humanities attempt to bring truth and political engagement into alignment" (Payne 1997: 118). Craig Calhoun focuses on defining critical theory as a project that shows the difference between potentiality and actuality and argues for potential futures: Critical social theory "exists largely to facilitate a constructive engagement with the social world that starts from the presumption that existing arrangements – including currently affirmed identities and differences – do not exhaust the range of possibilities. It seeks to explore the ways in which our categories of thought reduce our freedom by occluding recognition of what could be. (…) It helps practical actors deal with social change by helping them see beyond the immediacy of what is at any particular moment to conceptualize something of what could be. (…) By taking seriously the question of what it would mean to transcend the current epoch, critical theory opens more space for considering the possibility that the world could be different than it is than does any simple affirmation of existing differences or claim that postmodernity is just a matter of perspective" (Calhoun 1995: xiv, 9, 290).

It is certainly true that critical theory focuses on society, wants to foster political engagement, and wants to show the difference between potentiality and actuality in society. But these specifications do not suffice for speaking of critical theory. Further characteristics need to be added in order to avoid for example that theories, which argue for right-wing extremist or nationalist goals, can be considered as critical.

Entries

New entry.
Before doing a new entry, please, copy this line and the following ones and paste them at the column bottom. Next fill out the fields: 'name', 'date' and 'text', and delete this upper blue paragraph.
Name (date)

[Entry text]

Incorporated Entries

Fuchs, Christian (28/02/09)

It corresponds with the first version of the article, which is now reproduced on the left column

Second, there are definitions that are so specific that they only consider one approach or a few approaches as critical theories and exclude other approaches. So for example Rainer Forst gives a definition of critical theory that is clearly focusing on a strictly Habermasian project. Critical theory would explain and question factors that constrain communication: "As normative theory, Critical Theory thus argues for the integrity of a sphere of communicative, normative integration as well as for the realization of the possibility of social and political discourse; as social-scientific theory, it explains the factors and structures that impair the communicative social infrastructure and that hinder discourse (e.g., by the exclusion of actors from political argumentation and decision making); and as participant in social struggles, it argues for those norms and institutions that can be defended to all those who are 'subjects' of these norms and institutions" (Forst 1999: 143).

Axel Honneth puts two concepts at the heart of critical theory, disrespect and malrecognition. He sees critical theory as an analysis of structures that cause disrespect and malrecognition:
Critical Theory analyzes "social relations of communication (…) primarily in terms of the structural forms of disrespect they generate", it focuses on "the damage and distortion of social relations of recognition" (Honneth 2007: 72). Honneth says that all Critical Theorists share the assumption that "the process of social rationalization through the societal structure unique to capitalism has become interrupted or distorted in a way that makes pathologies that accompany the loss of a rational universal unavoidable" (Honneth 2004: 349).

So on the one hand, if one defines critical theory in very broad sense, then the normative aspect of critical theory as critique of domination becomes lost. On the other hand, if one defines critical theory in a very strict sense focusing on specific theories, scholars, or single concepts, then one risks advancing a narrow-minded definition that weakens the academic and political power of critical theory by isolating approaches.

- A third way of defining critical theory is to see it as analysis and questioning of domination, inequality, societal problems, exploitation in order to advance social struggles and the liberation from domination so that a dominationless, co-operative, participatory society can emerge. Some examples of such definitions can be given:
- Fred Rush sees critical theory as the analysis of domination and inequality for fostering social change: "It is an account of the social forces of domination that takes its theoretical activity to be practically connected to the object of its study. In other words, Critical Theory is not merely descriptive, it is a way to instigate social change by providing knowledge of the forces of social inequality that can, in turn, inform political action aimed at emancipation (or at least at diminishing domination and inequality)" (Rush 2004: 9).
- David Held argues that the critical theorists Adorno, Habermas, Horkheimer, and Marcuse have aimed at establishing a free society and at exposing the obstacles for this development: "Following Marx, they were preoccupied, especially in their early work, with the forces which moved (and might be guided to move) society towards rational institutions – institutions which would ensure a true, free and just life. But they were aware of the many obstacles to radical change and sought to analyse and expose these. They were thus concerned both with interpretation and transformation" (Held 1980: 15).
- Douglas Kellner defines critical theory as a project that confronts societal problems and domination and seeks liberation from these conditions: "Critical Theory is informed by multidisciplinary research, combined with the attempt to construct a systematic, comprehensive social theory that can confront the key social and political problems of the day. The work of the Critical Theorists provides criticisms and alternatives to traditional, or mainstream, social theory, philosophy and science, together with a critique of a full range of ideologies from mass culture to religion. At least some versions of Critical Theory are motivated by an interest in relating theory to politics and an interest in the emancipation of those who are oppressed and

dominated. Critical Theory is thus informed by a critique of domination and a theory of liberation" (Kellner 1989: 1).

- Alvesson and Deetz define critical studies as the disruption of domination that provides impulses for liberation from it: "Critical research generally aims to disrupt ongoing social reality for the sake of providing impulses to the liberation from or resistance to what dominates and leads to constraints in human decision making. (…) Critique here refers to the examination of social institutions, ideologies, discourses (ways of constructing and reasoning about the world through the use of a particular language) and forms of consciousness in terms of representation and domination. Critique explores if and how these constrain human imagination, autonomy, and decision making. Attention is paid to asymmetrical relations of power, taken for granted assumptions and beliefs. (…) " (Alvesson and Deetz 2000: 1, 8f).

Karl Marx provided a definition of critique that allows us to define critical theory not just as critique and analysis of capitalism, but of domination in general. Critical information theory as critique of domination in the context of media, culture, and communication correspond perfectly to the understanding of critique given by Marx in the Introduction to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right in 1844: "Theory is capable of gripping the masses as soon as it demonstrates ad hominem, and it demonstrates ad hominem as soon as it becomes radical. To be radical is to grasp the root of the matter. But, for man, the root is man himself. (...) The criticism of religion ends with the teaching that man is the highest essence for man – hence, with the categoric imperative to overthrow all relations in which man is a debased, enslaved, abandoned, despicable essence, relations which cannot be better described than by the cry of a Frenchman when it was planned to introduce a tax on dogs: Poor dogs! They want to treat you as human beings!" (MEW 1: 385).

If we conceive ontology as the philosophical question about being (What exists?), epistemology as the philosophical question about the cognition of being (How do we conceive and perceive reality?), and axiology as the philosophical question about human praxis as the consequence of the cognition of being (What form of existence is desirable for humans?), then we can say that an academic field has three dimensions. Based on this insight and on Marx's notion of critique, we can identify three important elements of critical theory:

- Epistemology – Dialectical Realism:

  Realism assumes that a world exists that is larger than the human being and its imaginations. The material world is seen as primary and it is assumed that humans are able to grasp, describe, analyze, and partly transform this world in academic work. Analyses are conducted that are looking for the essence of societal existence by identifying contradictions that lie at the heart of development. Critical theory analyzes social phenomena not based on instrumental reason and one-dimensional logic, i.e. it operates: 1. With the assumption that phenomena do not have linear causes and effects, but are contradictory, open, dynamic, and carry certain development potentials in them and hence should be conceived in complex forms; 2. Based on the insight that reality should be conceived so that there are neither only opportunities nor only risks inherent in social phenomena, but contradictory tendencies that pose both positive and negative potentials at the same time that are realized or suppressed by human social practice.
  Dialectic analysis in this context means complex dynamic thinking, realism an analysis of real possibilities and a dialectic of pessimism and optimism. In a dialectical analysis, phenomena are analyzed in terms of the dialectics of agency and structures, discontinuity and continuity, the one and the many, potentiality and actuality, global and local, virtual and real, optimism and pessimism, essence and existence, immanence and transcendence, etc. Such an analysis assumes that the world is not as it is presented to us, but that there is a larger essence underlying existing phenomena.

- Ontology – Dynamic Materialism:

  Critical theory is materialistic in the sense that it addresses phenomena and problems not in terms of absolute ideas and predetermined societal

development, but in terms of resource distribution and social struggles. Reality is seen in terms that address ownership, private property, resource distribution, social struggles, power, resource control, exploitation, and domination.

To make a materialistic analysis also means to conceive society as an interconnected whole (totality) and as negativity, to identify antagonisms means to take a look at contradictory tendencies that relate to one and the same phenomenon, create societal problems and require a fundamental systemic change in order to be dissolved. To analyze society as contradictory also means to consider it as dynamic system because contradictions cause development and movement of matter.

In order to address the negativity of contemporary society and its potential, research also needs to be oriented on the totality. That dialectics is a philosophy of totality in this context means that society is analyzed on a macro-scale in order to grasp its problems and that reasons for the necessity of positive transformations are to be given.

- Axiology – Negating the negative:

All critical approaches in one or the other respect take the standpoint of oppressed or exploited classes and individuals and make the judgement that structures of oppression and exploitation benefit certain classes at the expense of others and hence should be radically transformed by social struggles. This view constitutes a form of normativity.

Critical theory does not accept existing social structures as they are, it is not purely focused society as it is, but interested in what it could be and could become. It deconstructs ideologies that claim that something cannot be changed and shows potential counter-tendencies and alternative modes of development. That the negative antagonisms are sublated into positive results is not an automatism, but depends on the realization of practical forces of change that have a potential to rise from the inside of the systems in question in order to produce a transcendental outside that becomes a new whole. The axiological dimension of critique is an interface between theory and political praxis. It is based on the categoric judgement that a participatory, co-operative society is desirable.

Critical theory is a transdisciplinary project that at the epistemological level employs methods and theoretical categories that are employed for describing reality as dialectical contradictory field that poses risks and opportunities so that at the ontological level reality is grasped in terms that address ownership, private property, resource distribution, social struggles, power, resource control, exploitation, and domination so that at the axiological level dominative structures are judged as being undesirable and potential ways for alleviating suffering and establishing a co-operative, participatory society are identified that can enter as impulses into into political struggles and political transformations of society.

Two central texts of Critical Theory, Horkheimer's Traditional and Critical Theory and Marcuse's Philosophy and Critical Theory, can be interpreted for not being constitutive for Frankfurt School Critical Theory, but for critical theory in general. In these works, Horkheiemr and Marcuse on the one hand stress the limits and one-dimensionality of positivism that they consider as stabilizing forces that neglect potential alternatives to capitalism in their analyses. On the other hand, the most important uniting feature of the two works that makes them grounding works for critical theory in general is the axiological questioning of domination and the focus on the necessity of the establishment of a non-dominative society.

For Horkheimer, the goal of critical theory is the improvement of society: "In the interest of a rationally organized future society", critical theory sheds "critical light on present-day society (…) under the hope of radically improving human existence" (Horkheimer 1937: 233). He specifies this improvement as the right kind of society that in negative terms is non-exploitative: "The Marxist categories

of class, exploitation, surplus value, profit, pauperization, and breakdown are elements in a conceptual whole, and the meaning of this whole is to be sought not in the preservation of contemporary society, but in its transformation into the right kind of society" (Horkheimer 1937: 218). Critical theory strives for "a state of affairs in which there will be no exploitation or oppression" (241), a "society without injustice" (221).

This emancipation in positive terms would bring happiness and self-determination for all: "Its goal is man's emancipation from slavery" (249) and "the happiness of all individuals" (248). Critical theory advances "the idea of self-determination for the human race, that is the idea of a state of affairs in which man's actions no longer flow from a mechanism but from his own decision" (Horkheimer 1937: 229). Such a society is shaped by "reasonableness, and striving for peace, freedom, and happiness" (222) and the "the establishment of justice among men" (243). Mankind will then become conscious of its existence: "In the transition from the present form of society to a future one mankind will for the first time be a conscious subject and actively determine its own way of life" (233). Political transformation is a process of negation, the corresponding theoretical procedure in critical theory is the method of negation: "The method of negation, the denunciation of everything that mutilates mankind and impedes its free development, rests on confidence in man" (Horkheimer 1947/1974: 126)

For Marcuse, critical theory is oriented against the negative totality of capitalism: "Marx's theory is a 'critique' in the sense that all concepts are an indictment of the totality of the existing order" (Marcuse 1941a: 258). In turning negativity into a potential positive result, Marcuse (1937: 135) says that critical theory is concerned "with human happiness, and the conviction that it can be attained only through a transformation of the material conditions of existence" is a central element of critical theory. Its goals is "the creation of a social organization in which individuals can collectively regulate their lives in accordance with their needs" (Marcuse 1937: 141f), a societal condition, in which we find "the subordination of the economy to the individuals' needs" (Marcuse 1937: 144). It struggles for universal freedom and can therefore be considered as a universalistic theory. It claims that "all, and not merely this ort hat particular person, should be rational, free, and happy. (…) Critical theory's interest in the liberation of mankind binds it to certain ancient truths. It is at one with philosophy in maintaining that man can be more than a manipulable subject in the production process of class society" (Marcuse 1937: 152f). Critical theory's task is "to demonstrate this possibility and lay the foundation for a transformation" (Marcuse 1937: 142). It wants to bring "to consciousness potentialities that have emerged within the maturing historical situation" (Marcuse 1937: 158).

If we assume that information, media, communication, culture, and technology play an important role in contemporary capitalism, then the critique of these phenomena in contemporary society becomes one of the tasks of a critical theory of society. A critical theory of information, communication, and media therefore is a sub-domain of a contemporary critical theory of society.

Based on the general notion of critical theory that has already been outlined, we can from a praxeo-onto-epistemological perspective on science (See Hofkirchner, Fuchs and Klauninger 2005: 78-81) define critical studies of information, communication, and media as studies that focus ontologically on the analysis of information, media, communication, culture, technology in the context of domination, asymmetrical power relations, exploitation, oppression, and control by employing at the epistemological level all theoretical and/or empirical means that are necessary for doing so in order to contribute at the praxeological level to the establishment of a participatory, co-operative society. Given such a definition, critical communication and media studies are inherently normative and political.

This definition is fairly broad and allows to combine different concepts that come from different critical backgrounds, such as for example – to name just some of many – audience commodity, media accumulation strategies, commodity aesthetics, culture industry, true and false consciousness/needs, instrumental reason, technological rationality, manipulation, ideology critique, dialectical

theatre, critical pedagogy, aura, proletarian counter-public sphere, multiple publics, emancipatory media usage, repressive media usage, alternative media, radical media, fetish of communication, ideological state apparatuses, the multitude, the circulation of struggles, hegemony, structure of feelings, articulation, dominant reading, oppositional reading, negotiated reading, capital-accumulation function of the media, commodity circulation function of the media, legitimatizing function of the media, advertising- and public-relations function of the media, regenerative function of the media, propaganda model of the media, communicative action, dialogic communication, discursive communication, communication empire, transnational informational capitalism, working class culture, subculture, etc, under one united umbrella definition that sees them as differentiated unity in plurality that is termed critical information, communication, and media studies.

Critical studies of information, media, and communication should be embedded into a broader social science perspective in order to show which position they occupy in the overall field of the social sciences. They should therefore be connected to social theory and social theory typologies.

Anthony Giddens sees the "division between objectivism and subjectivism" (Giddens 1984, xx) as one of the central issues of social theory. Subjective approaches are oriented on human agents and their practices as primary object of analysis, objective approaches on social structures. Structures in this respect are institutionalized relationships that are stabilized across time and space (Giddens 1984, xxxi). Integrative social theories (such as the ones by Roy Bhaskar (1993), Pierre Bourdieu (1986), Anthony Giddens (1984), or Margaret Archer (1995)) aim at overcoming the structure-agency divide.

Burrell and Morgan (1979) have combined the distinction between subject and object with the distinction between continuity and discontinuity in order two identify two axes that set up two dimensions so that four different approaches can be identified in social theory: radical humanism (subjective, radical change), radical structuralism (objective, radical change), interpretive sociology (subjective, continuity), and functionalism (objective, continuity).
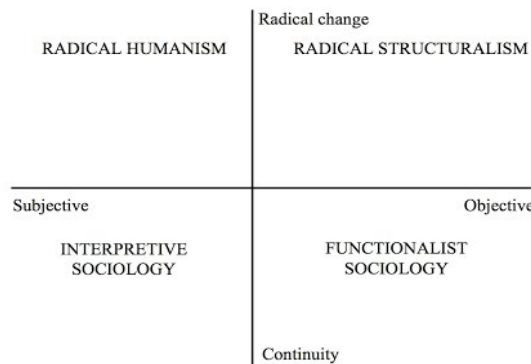

Figure 1: Four paradigms of social theory identified by Burrell and Morgan (1979)

The problem with this approach is that in contemporary social theory there are approaches that cross the boundaries between the four fields and that the four paradigms therefore can no longer be strictly separated. The distinction continuity/discontinuity remains valid in political terms. So for example the approaches by Roy Bhaskar (1993), Pierre Bourdieu (1986), Anthony Giddens (1984), and Margaret Archer (1995) have in common that they are based on a dialectical subject-object-integration, but Bhaskar and Bourdieu are overall critical of class society that they want to abolish, whereas Giddens and Archer want to transform modernity, but overall aim at its continuation. The approaches by Bhaskar and Bourdieu could therefore be described as integrative-radical change, the ones by Giddens and Archer as integrative-continuous. This requires certain changes to the typology of Burrell and Morgan that are shown in Figure 2.
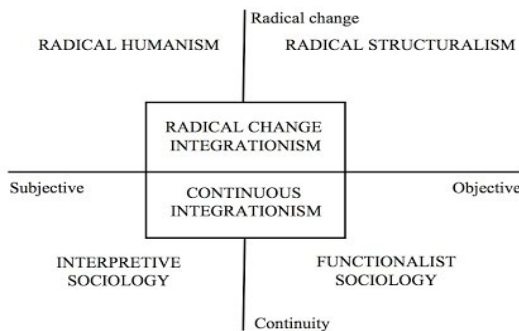
Figure 2: A refined version of Burrell's and Morgan's typology

A number of communication scholars have stressed that it makes sense to use the typology by Burrell and Morgan for identifying different approaches in communication studies and communication theory (Deetz 1994, McQuail 2002, Rosengren 1993, 2000). "This scheme is equally helpful in mapping out the main alternative approaches to media theory and research, which have been seriously divided by their chosen methodologies and priorities, as well as by their degree of commitment to radical change" (McQuail 2002: 5). "It is highly relevant when trying to understand different traditions within the study of communication" (Rosengren 2000: 7).

Robert T. Craig (1999) has identified seven traditions of communication theory that are based on how they communication is defined (See table 1). Although his approach is very relevant and his paper (Craig 1999) has been one of the most frequently cited papers in communication studies in the past decade, he does not specify an underlying distinctive criterion for his typology, which gives it a rather arbitrary character. Therefore it makes sense to combine his seven traditions of communication theory with the refined version of Burrell's and Morgan's typology. The results are shown in figure 3.

Type of approach:	Communication theorized as:	Subject/ object	Examples
Rhetorical	The practical art of discourse	Subjective	Aristotle, Lloyd F. Bitzer, Kenneth Burke, Thomas B. Farrell, Sonja Foss & Cindy Griffin, Stephen W. Littlejohn, Plato
Semiotic	Intersubjective mediation by signs	Objective	Roland Barthes, Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz, John Locke, Charles Morris, Charles Sanders Peirce, John Durham Peters, Ferdinand de Saussure
Phenome-nological	Experience of otherness; dialogue	Subjective	Martin Buber, Briankle G. Chang, Hans-Georfg Gadamer, Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Joseph J. Pilotta & Algis Mickunas, John Robert Stewart
Cybernetic	Information processing	Objective	Gregory Bateson, Annie Lang, Niklas Luhmann, Claude Shannon, Paul Watzlawick, Warren Weaver, Norbert Wiener
Sociopsy-chological	Expression, interaction, & influence behaviour in communication situations	Subjective	Albert Bandura, Charles R. Berger & Richard J. Calabrese, Carl Hovland, Marshall Scott Poole
Socio-cultural	Symbolic process that reproduces shared sociocultural patterns	Objective	Peter L. Berger, Deborah Cameron, Thomas Luckmann, George Herbert Mead, Mark Poster, James R. Taylor

Critical	Discursive reflection	Subjective/ Objective	Theodor W. Adorno, Stanley A. Deetz, Jürgen Habermas, Max Horkheimer, Sue Curry Jansen

Table 1: Definitions of communication according to Craig (1999) (The examples are mentioned in Craig (1999) or Craig (2007))
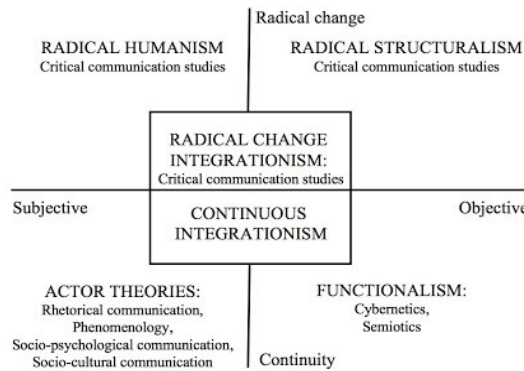

Figure 3: A typology of communication theories

Figure 3 shows that critical communication studies are primarily characterized by their radical change perspective, i.e. the analysis of how communication contributes to domination and how ways can be found that communication can take place in a dominationless way within a participatory society. This also means that there are subjective, objective, and subject-object-dialectical approaches within critical communication studies. Craig mentions several boundary-crossing approaches that can be considered as representing attempts at combining some of the four fields in figure 3: Kennth Burke, David S. Kaufer and Kathleen M. Carley (Rhetoric-Semiotics); Briankle Chang, Richard L. Lanigan (Phenomenology-Semiotics), David S. Kaufer and Brian S. Butler (Cybernetics-Rhetoric), Klaus Krippendorff (Cybernetics-Phenomenology), John C. Heritage, Gerald T. Schoening and James A. Anderson (Sociocultural Studies-Phenomenology-Semiotics), W. Barnett Pearce (Sociocultural Studies-Rhetoric-Cybernetics), Rayme McKerrow (Critical Studies – Rhetoric), Robert Hodge and Gunter Kress, Norbert Fairclough (Critical Studies-Semiotics).

For Craig, the characteristic that distinguishes critical communication studies from rhetorical, semiotic, phenomenological, cybernetic, sociopsychological, and sociocultural traditions of communication theory is that for "critical communication theory, the basic 'problem of communication' in society arises from material and ideological forces that preclude and distort discursive reflection. (..) Fundamentally, in the tradition of Marx, its point is not to understand the world (…) Its point is to change the world through praxis, or theoretically reflective social action" (Craig 1999, 147f). Craig works out the specifics of critical studies and other traditions in communication studies. However, I would add to Craig's account of critical communication studies that it is not only about the analysis of those conditions that distort communication, i.e. the ways how communication is embedded into relations of domination, but also about finding alternative conditions of society and communication that are non-dominative and about struggles for establishing such alternatives. Craig argues that "communication theory has not yet emerged as a coherent field study" and that this fragmentation can be overcome by constructing "a dialogical-dialectical disciplinary matrix" (Craig 1999, 120) that enables the emergence of a conversational community, "a common awareness of certain complementarities and tensions among different types of communication theory, so it is commonly understood that these different types of theory cannot legitimately develop in total isolation from each other but must engage each other in argument" (Craig 1999, 124). The same can be said about critical communication studies as a subfield of communication studies: A disciplinary matrix of critical communication studies can enhance the dialogue between various subfields of the subfield, such as critical theory-, critical political economy-, cultural studies-, feminist theory-, postcolonial theory-, queer theory-, new social movements-approaches in critical communication studies, so that common assumptions and differences about what it means to conduct critical studies of communication can emerge.

Fuchs (2010) identifies different types of critical media, information, and communication theories (See Table 2). Those approaches that see media, information, and communication primarily as embedded into repressive contexts, can be considered as more structuralistic-objectivistic approaches, they focus on how media structures negatively shape humans and society. Those approaches that see media, information, and communication primarily as potential forms of liberation can be considered as more humanistic-subjectivistic approaches, they focus on how media structures positively enable human participation and liberation. Integrative approaches try to blur the boundaries between subjective and objective theories.

	Production Sphere	Circulation Sphere	Consumption
Repression Hypothesis	Commodity Hypothesis: Media as commodities for accumulating capital		

Repression Hypothesis		Manipulation- and Ideology Hypothesis: Media as means of manipulation for the ideological enforcement of class interests
Emancipation Hypothesis	Alternative Media Hypothesis: Media as spheres of grassroots production and circulation of alternative content	Reception Hypothesis: Media reception as contradictory process involving oppositional practices
Unification	Integrative critical media theories	

Table 2: A typology of critical media theories

Representatives of the commodity hypothesis argue that the media are not primarily ideological means of manipulation, but spheres of capital accumulation. The basic contention underlying the manipulation and ideology hypothesis is that the media are used as tools that manipulate people, advance ideologies, forestall societal transformations, create false consciousness, false needs, and a one-dimensional universe of thought, language, and action. Scholars who argue that there are alternative ways of doing and making media for critical ends and for fostering participatory media practices advance the alternative media hypothesis. Such approaches have a strong subjective orientation. Representatives of the reception hypothesis argue that reception is a complex and antagonistic process that provides potentials for oppositional interpretations and actions. The most prominent representatives of this hypothesis can be found in cultural studies. The shortcomings of existing critical approaches can be overcome by integrative dialectical critical media theories/studies that try to bring together some or all of the various levels of critical media studies. One can identify some existing approaches that point into this direction. Integration and unification does not mean that difference is abolished at the expense of identity. It rather means a Hegelian dialectical sublation (Aufhebung), in which old elements are preserved and elevated to a new level. New qualities emerge by the interaction of the moments. Such a dialectical integration is a differentiated unity that is based on the principle of unity in diversity. It is a dialectical relation of identity and difference. Fuchs (2010) mentions the following example theories for integrative critical media theories: Robert McChesney, Stuart Hall, Douglas Kellner, Shane Gunster, Vilém Flusser, Herbert Marcuse. These theories would bridge certain hypotheses of critical media and information studies to a greater or lesser degree, but an overall synthesis would still be missing.

One of the reasons why critical theory is important for analyzing media, technology, and information is that it allows to question and provide alternatives to technological determinism and to explain the causal relationship of media and technology on the one hand and society on the other hand in a balanced way that avoids one-dimensionality and one-sidedness. Technological determinism (See Figure 4) is a kind of explanation of the causal relationship of media/technology and society that assumes that a certain media or technology has exactly one specific effect on society and social systems. In case that this effect is assessed positively, we can speak of techno-optimism. In case that the effect is assessed negatively, we can speak of techno-pessimism. Techno-optimism and techno-pessimism are the normative dimensions of technological determinism.

A critical theory of media and technology is based on dialectical reasoning. This allows to see the causal relationship of media/technology and society as multidimensional and complex: A specific media/technology has multiple, at least two, potential effects on society and social systems that can co-exist or stand in contradiction to each other. Which potentials are realized is based on how society, interests, power structures, and struggles shape the design and usage of technology in multiple ways that are also potentially contradictory.
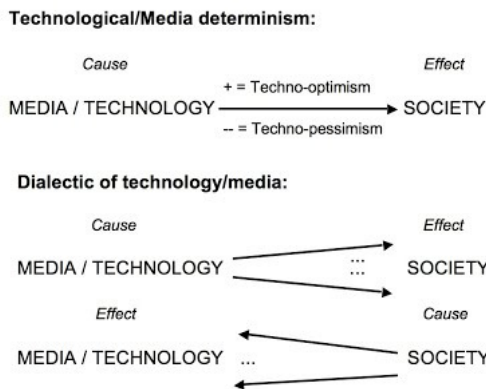

Figure 4: Technological/media determinism and dialectic of technology/media

Andrew Feenberg argues in his critical theory of technology that technology is an ambivalent process: "Critical theory argues that technology is not a thing in the ordinary sense of the term, but

an 'ambivalent' process of development suspended between different possibilities. This ambivalence of technology is distinguished from neutrality by the role it attributes to social values in the design, and not merely the use of technical systems. On this view, technology is not a destiny but a scene of struggle. It is a social battlefield, or perhaps a better metaphor would be a 'parliament of things' in which civilizational alternatives contend. (…) Critical theory holds that there can be at least two different modern civilizations based on different paths of technical development. (…) Technologies corresponding to different civilizations this coexist uneasily within our society" (Feenberg 2002: 15). "In sum, modern technology opens a space within which action can be functionalized in either one of two social systems, capitalism or socialism. It is an ambivalent or 'multistable' system that can be organized around at least two hegemonies, two poles of power between which it can 'tilt'" (Feenberg 2002: 87). "Technological development is overdetermined by both technical and social criteria of progress, and can therefore branch in any of several different directions depending on the prevailing hegemony. (…) While social institutions adapt to technological development, the process of adaptation is reciprocal, and technology changes in response to the conditions in which it finds itself as much as it influences them" (Feenberg 2002: 143). Feenberg says that the critical theory of technology is a dialectical theory of technology (Feenberg 2002: 176-183). Its goal is a transformation of technology from "reification to reintegration" (Feenberg 2002: 183).

Feenberg's critical theory questions technological determinism, which he defines as "the deterministic assumption that technology has its own autonomous logic of development. According to this view, technology is an invariant element that, once introduced, bends the recipient social system to its imperatives. (…) Determinism is based on the following two theses: 1. The pattern of technological progress is fixed, moving along one and the same track in all societies. Although political, cultural, and other factors may influence the pace of change, they cannot alter the general line of development that reflects the autonomous logic of discovery. 2. Social organization must adapt to technical progress at each stage of development according to 'imperative' requirements of technology. The adaptation executes an underlying technical necessity. (…) Technology appears to be an application of the laws of nature to problems of production, as independent of human will as the movements of the heavenly bodies" (Feenberg 2002: 138f).

The dialectical critical theory of technology is grounded in the works of Karl Marx, who said that technology has contradictory potentials and that under capitalism the negative ones predominate: "The contradictions and antagonisms inseparable from the capitalist application of machinery do not exist, they say, because they do not arise out of machinery as such, but out of its capitalist applications! Therefore, since machinery in itself shortens the hours of labour, but when employed by capital it lengthens them; since in itself lightens labour, but when employed by capital it heightens its intensity; since in itself it is a victory of man over the forces of nature but in the hands of capital it makes man the slave of those forces; since in itself it increases the wealth of the bourgeois economist simply states that the contemplation of machinery in itself demonstrates with exactitude that all these evident contradictions are a mere semblance, present in everyday reality, but not existing in themselves, and therefore having no theoretical existence either. Thus her manages to avoid racking his brains any more, and in addition implies that his opponent is guilty of the stupidity of contending, not against the capitalist application of machinery, but against machinery itself" (Marx 1867: 568f). Also Herbert Marcuse is a representative of a dialectical critical theory of technology that identifies contradictory potentials of technology: "Technics by itself can promote authoritarianism as well as liberty, scarcity as well as abundance, the extension as well as the abolition of toil" (Marcuse 1941: 41).

In recent years, the possibility of combining critical theory and information science has been stressed (Day 2001, 2005, 2007, Fuchs 2008b). Ronald E. Day argues that information science has treated information mainly as a "reified and commoditized notion" (Day 2001: 120). "The unwillingness of research on information to actually attempt to situate a culture of information and communication in terms of interested and powerful social and historical forces is evident by even a brief glance at journals in information management or information studies or in policy papers. Coupled wit the dominant tendency of such research to be 'practical' in the service of professional and business organizations and in the service of military and industrial research projects, research in information simply shies away from critical engagement, as well as from foundational, qualitative, or materialist analyses, especially from that which is seen to employ 'pretentious', 'political', or, equally, 'foreign' vocabulary, let alone philosophical or Marxist analyses" (Day 2001: 116f). Day understands critical theory in a very general sense as "the deployment of concepts in critical and interruptive relation to the conceptual foundations of commonly accepted practices" (Day 2001: 116). The problem with such a contextual definition of critical theory is that it is purely contextual: In case that socialism becomes a commonly accepted practice, right wing extremist theory then becomes a "critical" theory. Therefore additional qualities for defining critical theory are needed. A critical theory of information for day examines information's "institutional, political, and social" context and its "reflexive relationships to material forces and productions" (Day 2001: 118). Day (2007) argues that Rob Kling on the one hand has defined Social Informatics as empirical research, which brings forward positivistic associations, but that on the other hand he tried to deconstruct technological determinism as ideology. Social informatics would therefore be "'critical' of the 'uncritical' discourses about the social values and uses of computers/IT/ICTs" (Day 2007: 578). He concludes that "the heart of Kling's conception of social informatics was a critical informatics, and that the cornerstone for critical informatics were approaches that remained a minority in Kling's overall work" (Day 2007: 582).

Ajit K. Pyati (2006) suggests that critical information studies should be based on a Marcusean infusion because his notion of technological rationality allows explaining why information is primarily treated as a commodity and thing in contemporary society and contemporary library and information studies. Marcuse's notion of one-dimensionality would allow deconstructing the neoliberal discourse that argues for the privatization and commodification of information and libraries as ideologies. "An information society that is associated with techno-capitalism, neo-liberalism, and ideologies of

deregulation can ultimately undermine the basis of the public service mission of libraries. In a certain sense, libraries with public service mandates (particularly public and certain academic libraries) act in some degree as 'anti-capitalist spaces' and have the potential to reframe an information society in a more radically democratic, culturally inclusive, and progressive vision. (…) The discourse of ICTs does not have to necessarily be part of a free market, capitalist ideology, but can serve more radical democratic aims, particularly in democratizing access to information and knowledge. Libraries, in becoming active developers and shapers of ICTs for democratic and progressive ends, may help to combat some of the hegemony of the dominant information society" (Pyati 2006: 88).

Christian Fuchs (2008a, b, 2009) has argued that critical information studies should best be conceived within the framework of Marxian theory (i.e. the critique of the political economy, cp. also the "Cyber-Marx" approach by Nick Dyer-Witheford 1999) and a broad notion of a critical theory of media, information, communication, technology, and culture. The task is to analyse domination and capitalism as the context of information and media in contemporary society and to give intellectual impulses for finding alternative modes of information and media that work outside of capitalism and domination. Fuchs suggests that this approach allows constructing a critical theory of Internet/ICTs and society (Fuchs 2008a, 2009) and a critical theory of information (2009a). An objectivist notion of information is for Fuchs an ideology that drives the commodification of information. If information is seen as a thing, then it is obvious to argue that it should be treated as a commodity. But also subjectivistic notions of information are ideologies for Fuchs: If knowledge is considered as individual creation, then the call for intellectual property rights that make sure that knowledge is treated as commodity that is sold on markets in order to generate money profit, can easily be legitimated. In the end, subjectivist notions of information turn out to be ideologies that legitimate private property and the commodity form of information. The alternative is to consider information as a dialectical process that establishes an interconnection of subjects and objects via a threefold process of cognition, communication, and co-operation.

References

- Alvesson, Mats and Stanley Deetz. (2000). *Doing critical management research*. London: SAGE.
- Archer, Margaret S. (1995). *Realist social theory: the morphogenetic approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bhaskar, Roy. (1993). *Dialectic. The pulse of freedom*. London: Verso.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. (1986). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. New York: Routledge.
- Burrell, Gibson and Gareth Morgan. (1979). *Sociological paradigms and organizational analysis.* Aldershot: Gower.
- Calhoun, Craig. (1995). *Critical social theory*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Craig, Robert T. (1999). Communication theory as a field. *Communicaiton Theory* 9 (2): 119-161.
- Craig, Robert T., ed. (2007). *Theorizing communication. Readings across traditions*. London: SAGE.
- Day, Ronald E. (2001). *The modern invention of information: Discourse, history, and power*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Day, Ronald E. (2005). "We must now all be information professionals": An interview with Ron Day. *Interactions* 1 (2): Article 10.
- Day, Ronald E. (2007). Kling and the 'Critical': Social Informatics and Critical Informatics. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 58 (4): 575-582.
- Deetz, Stanley. (1994). Future of the discipline: The challenges, the research, and the social contribution. *Communication Yearbook* 17: 565-600.
- Feenberg, Andrew. (2002). *Transforming technology: A critical theory revisited*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Forst, Rainer. (1999). Justice, reason, and critique: Basic concepts of critical theory. *In The Handbook of Critical Theory*, ed. David M. Rasmussen, 336-360. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Fuchs, Christian. (2008a). *Internet and society: Social theory in the information age*. New York: Routledge.
- Fuchs, Christian. (2008b). Towards a critical theory of information. *In Qué es Información? (What is Information?) Proceedings of the First International Meeting of Experts in Information Theories. An Interdisciplinary Approach (Primer Encuentro Internacional de Expertos Teorías de la Información. Un enfoque interdisciplinar), November 6-7, 2008*, ed. José María Díaz Nafria and Francisco Salto Alemany, 247-316. León: Universidad de León. ISBN: 978-84-9773-451-6.
- Fuchs, Christian. (2009). Information and communication technologies & society: A contribution to the critique of the political economy of the Internet. *European Journal of Communication* 24 (1): 69-87.
- Fuchs, Christian. (2010). A contribution to theoretical foundations of critical media and communication studies. *Javnost – The Public* (Accepted paper, publication forthcoming).
- Held, David. (1980). *Introduction to critical theory*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

- Hofkirchner, Wolfgang, Christian Fuchs and Bert Klauninger. (2005). Informational universe. A praxeo-onto-epistemological approach. In *Human approaches to the universe,* ed. Eeva Martikainen, 75-94. Helsinki: Luther-Agricola-Seura.
- Honneth, Axel. (2004). The intellectual legacy of Critical Theory. In *The Cambridge Companion to Critical Theory*, 6-39. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Honneth, Axel. (2007). *Disrespect: The normative foundations of critical theory*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Horkheimer, Max. (1937). Traditional and critical theory. In *Critical theory*, 188-252. New York: Continuum.
- Horkheimer, Max. (1947/1974). *Eclipse of reason*. New York: Continuum.
- Kellner, Douglas. (1989). *Critical theory, Marxism and modernity*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Macey, David. (2001). *The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory*. London: Penguin.
- Payne, Michael, ed. (1997). A dictionary of cultural and critical theory. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- McQuail, Denis. (2002). Origins and development of the field of study. *In McQuail's Reader in Mass Communication Theory*, ed. Denis McQuail, 1-19. London: Sage
- Marcuse, Herbert. (1937). Philosopy and critical theory. In *Negations: Essays in critical theory*, 134-158. London: Free Association Books.
- Marcuse, Herbert. (1941a). *Reason and revolution. Hegel and the rise of social theory*. New York: Humanity Books.
- Marcuse, Herbert. (1941b). Some social implications of modern technology. In *Collected papers of Herbert Marcuse, Volume One: Technology, war and fascism*, 41-65. New York: Routledge.
- Marx, Karl. (1867). *Capital Volume I*. London: Penguin.
- Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels (MEW) *Werke*. Berlin: Dietz.
- Pyati, Ajit K. (2006). Critical theory and information studies: A Marcusean infusion. *Policy Futures in Education* 4 (1): 83-89.
- Rosengren, Karl Erik. (1993). From field to frog ponds. *Journal of Communication* 43 (3): 6-17.
- Rosengren, Karl Erik. (2000). *Communication: An introduction*. London: Sage.
- Rush, Fred. (2004). Conceptual foundations of early Critical Theory. *In The Cambridge Companion to Critical Theory*, 6-39. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wiggershaus, Rolf. (1994). *The Frankfurt school: Its history, theories and political significance*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Witheford, Nick-Dyer. (1999). *Cyber-Marx. Cycles and circuits of struggle in high-technology capitalism*. Champaign,IL: University of Illinois Press.

Comments

Glossarium-BITri

Search this site

- BITrum-Público (SP)
- Public-BITrum (EN)
- BITrum-Privatum
- Contribuciones (SP)
- Contributions (EN)
- BITagora
- PRIMER

Glossarium BITri

- Glosario (sp)
- Glossary (en)
- 1. Introductio (sp, en)
- 2. Índice (sp)
- 2. Index (en)
- 3. Instrucciones (sp)
- 3. Guidelines (en)
- 4. Administratio (sp, en)
- 5. Abbreviatūra (sp, en)
- 6. Novedades (sp)
- 6. Updates (en)
- 7. Consilium Editorum
- 8. Propositio articulōrum
- Mapa del sitio

Recent site activity

- Tecnologías de la Información y de la Comunicación (TIC) || Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)
  edited by José María Díaz Nafría
- Sociedad de la Información || Information Society
  edited by José María Díaz Nafría
- Información y organización || Information and organisation
  edited by José María Díaz Nafría
- View All

Contactus et Loci

José María Díaz Nafría
Francisco Salto Alemany
Mario Pérez-Montoro

Creative Commons License

Esta obra se encuentra protegida por una licencia de Reconocimiento - No Comercial - Sin Obra Derivada 3.0 de Creative Commons (Creative Commons Atribución-Sin Derivadas 3.0 España License). Se permite la reproducción, distribución y comunicación pública, siempre y cuando se **cite adecuadamente** la obra y sus responsables:

- Para la **obra conjunta** (edición en español):

  Díaz, J.M.; Salto, F.; Pérez-Montoro, M. (eds.) (2010). *Glossarium BITri: Glosario de conceptos, metáforas, teorías y problemas en torno a la noción de información.* León: Universidad de León. Recuperado el [fecha] de: <http://glossarium.bitrum.unileon.es>

- Para la **obra conjunta** (edición en inglés):

  Díaz, J.M.; Salto, F.; Pérez-Montoro, M. (eds.) (2010). *Glossarium BITri: Glossary of concepts, metaphors, theories and problems concerning information.* León: Universidad de León. Recuperado el [fecha] de: <http://glossarium.bitrum.unileon.es/glossary>

- Para un **artículo**:

  [lista de autores] (2010) "[título del artículo]". En [cita de la obra conjunta, ver arriba]

Libro electrónico editado por la Universidad de León
ISBN: 978-84-9773-554-4
Depósito Legal: LE-1580-2010

Comments

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Atribución-Sin Derivadas 3.0 España License.
Public reproduction, distribution and communications is allowed whenever the work and its authors are properly **quoted:**

- For the **whole work** (Spanish edition):

  Díaz, J.M.; Salto, F.; Pérez-Montoro, M. (eds.) (2010). *Glossarium BITri: Glosario de conceptos, metáforas, teorías y problemas en torno a la noción de información.* León: Universidad de León. Retrieved Month Day, Year, from: <http://glossarium.bitrum.unileon.es>

- For the **whole work** (English edition):

  Díaz, J.M.; Salto, F.; Pérez-Montoro, M. (eds.) (2010). *Glossarium BITri: Glossary of concepts, metaphors, theories and problems concerning information.* León: Universidad de León. Retrieved Month Day, Year, from: <http://glossarium.bitrum.unileon.es/glossary>

- For an **article**:

  [list of author names] (2010) "[Article voice]". In [whole work quotation, see above]

Electronic book edited by Universidad de León
ISBN: 978-84-9773-554-4
Depósito Legal: LE-1580-2010

Venia exscriptum