

Critical Forum

History Matters

Sue Curry Jansen

When Daniel J. Czitrom conceived *Media and the American Mind*, media scholarship was dominated, even defined, by a behavioral science orientation (“effects” research). As a result, the field was indifferent to historical inquiry. The terrain was essentially unmapped. This gave Czitrom exceptional freedom to conceptualize the field but also, as he noted in his “Preface,” an “eerie sense of intellectual isolation” (p. xiii).

Much has changed in the past quarter century. The Internet, mobile telephony, digital video, advances in computer and satellite technologies, and consolidation of media ownership and control have combined to transform how and what we know. “Effects” research no longer dominates media and communication scholarship. “Culture” has been discovered and mainstreamed as cultural studies. The poverty of history and theory in the field has been decisively documented (Hardt, 1992); and some serious efforts to remediate the deficit have been made (Schiller, 1996; Sproule, 1997; Peters, 1999; Starr, 2004 and others).

Even more significantly, however, the so-called “communication turn” in contemporary scholarship, which gained momentum in the mid-1980s, has displaced communication researchers as the primary stakeholders in media scholarship. Sociology pioneered scholarly study of mass media in both Europe and America, but this research has never been central to sociology’s dominant paradigmatic concerns. As electronic media have saturated and increasingly defined American culture and dire predictions about the relevance and future of print have gained currency, however, language and literature scholars have increasingly embraced the postmodern and their students’ flight from the book, focusing instead on popular culture, film, the Internet, technologies of writing, and other media. Political scientists, recognizing the centrality of mass media to democracy, international relations and diplomacy, the origins of the nation-state, the decline of the public sphere, and political campaigning and voting behavior, now study media as well as politics. Historians confront mass-mediated versions of the past as pervasive sources of error and resistance among students. At deeper levels, mediation is also

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increasingly recognized as a persistent form of misdirection in historiography as inquiries into structures and processes of cultural production reveal that even “primary sources,” newspapers, documents, and other artifacts, bear the imprimatur of human agency: prior censorships, myth-making, and political and/or commercial imperatives. Philosophers, psychologists, economists, computer scientists, even religious scholars now find that media impinge deeply upon their subjects. In short, whether we like it or not, media and communication are now considered too important for any single discipline to claim.

Czitrom’s map still works because he anticipates many of these developments. His deeply sourced studies of the history and reception of the telegraph, motion pictures, and radio demonstrate that the distinction between communication and culture eroded steadily during the twentieth century, supporting his thesis that, “Modern media have become integral to both the conception and reality of culture, especially popular culture” (p. xii). That is, media have become significant constituents of the American mind. In some sectors of contemporary life such as electoral politics, consumerism, performances of gender identities, sport and leisure, they have become definitive constituents.

Czitrom’s prescience attests not only to his analytic and interpretive skills, but also to the crucial importance of historical inquiry in identifying cultural patterns and trends. By extension, it also underscores the cost of ignoring history. If communication scholars had fully appreciated and pursued Czitrom’s thesis in the early 1980s, the field might have been at the cutting edge of the communication turn in scholarship, instead of finding itself positioned, ironically, at the periphery.

Foresight also permeates Czitrom’s specific claims. For example, interdisciplinary renewal of interest in John Dewey and pragmatism was just beginning when the book was written; yet Czitrom’s assessment of Dewey’s contributions to communication scholarship remains the best short exegesis available, although subsequent scholarship has ascribed more influence to William James and George Herbert Mead in the geneses of the thought of Dewey and Robert Park (Cook, 1993; Westbrook, 1991). Czitrom also cuts deftly through the muddle that once conflated the work of Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan, even though he crafted his assessment before the sun had fully set on the “McLuhancy” craze of the 1960s and 1970s.

Czitrom’s accounts of the dead ends, power struggles, and unanticipated innovations that led to the commercial development of the telegraph, motion picture, radio—and at least by implication, television—make him acutely aware of the folly of predicting future technological developments; and his highly qualified forays into that arena in the “Epilogue” are predictably the most dated aspect of the book, albeit no more dated than the predictions made by Bill Gates and Steve Jobs in the early 1980s when the PC revolution was still in its infancy.

A revolution in feminist scholarship in communication as well as history also took place during this period, which places gender at the center of studies of communication technology (Balsamo, 1996; Cockburn, 1985; Gray, 1992; Jansen, 1989; Rakow, 1992; Wajcman, 1991, and many others). Czitrom’s sensitivity to issues of race, gender and class was ahead of the field in the early 1980s; however, much humanistic

communication scholarship now takes as a founding premise Stuart Hall's (1988, p. 26) claim that, "*all* social practices and forms of domination—including the politics of the Left—are always inscribed in and to some extent secured by sexual identity and positioning."

Czitrom acknowledged "frustration at barely having scratched the surface," and expressed the hope that his work might encourage others to begin to fill the void", noting that the: "Metahistorical and epistemological questions concerning how new media reshape our perceptions of the past and the contours of knowledge itself remain almost totally unexplored" (p. xiii). A substantial amount of interdisciplinary scholarship is now dedicated to exploring these contours. Unlike Czitrom's work, however, much of it tends to focus on media texts while ignoring their material underpinnings—the political economy of culture production including the social structures of media organizations, labor processes, law and policy, as well as the social constituents of media reception. These are areas where communication scholarship has made some of its strongest contributions and, in my judgment, still possesses potential to exercise some interdisciplinary intellectual leadership.

The beauty of this book is that it raises big questions from the bottom up through compelling narratives about the social forces and historical figures that shaped the modern media environment and humanistic communication scholarship (Dewey, Cooley, Park, Innis, McLuhan). The book not only explains the origins and early reception of media, but even provides some rudimentary explanations of their engineering; moreover, in doing so, it serves as an exemplar of scholarly research.

Slowly rereading *Media and the American Mind*, to assess it through the lens of subsequent developments in communication and culture, has significantly amplified my respect for Czitrom's singular achievement. The fact that the book grew out of a dissertation is both inspiring and daunting. The dazzling display of humane learning, imaginative conceptual reach, depth of archival sourcing, and judicious critical judgments are what a reader might hope to find in a book that represents the culmination of a life's work—an opus magnum, not a debut performance.