BOOK REVIEWS

Mosco, Vincent and Janet Wasko, Editors. **The Critical Communication Review.** Volume I: **Labor, The Working Class, and the Media.** Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Co., 1983.

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The essays in this collection are intended to: (1) challenge an established perspective in communication research; (2) connect the communication research issue at hand with a wider institutional complex; and (3) promote the transformation of the system by indicating how critical research can critique the system (p. ix.). The first objective **is achieved simply by choosing to focus the articles on the relationship of labour and working people to the mass media and** information technologies. There is a small but growing literature, sponsored largely by union groups, documenting the negative physical, psychological, social and economic effects on workers of the information technologies, the automated office, and the automation of assembly lines. But there is a conspicuous dearth of studies that examine the transformation of workplaces by communication /information-related technologies and the concomitant effects on workers. It is this gap that this volume is addressing.

The volume has four sections that examine: (a) the history of the relationship of the working class to the means of communication; (b) media unions; (c) the portrayal of the labour movement and workers in the media; and (d) the implications of new information technologies for the workplace. Although there are several excellent contributions, the volume falls short of meeting the second and third objectives, on which an elaboration of a truly critical communication perspective is expected to be built. In the introduction, Vincent Mosco outlines some general characteristics of a desirable critical communications perspective. Yet, for the most part, the reader is treated to descriptive narratives portraying the development of the American labour movement in the media section. This is a useful contribution to the literature. But, most authors stop well short of an analysis that relates the documented labour developments to the changing economic and political structure of media institutions. The implications of the monopoly power of media owners for organized labour are not examined. Instead the reader finds an inordinate focus on the minutiae of inernecine union quarrels, corruption, and criticism of narrow wage-oriented union objectives. This narrow focus generally has prevented a critique of the "system", which is the overriding objective for the book. The capitalist system is recognized as the genesis of labour action, but

analysis of the continuing interaction between capitalists and workers and its subsequent effects on workers and the labour movement is conspicuously absent.

The first section situates the labour movement in the historical emergence of communication technologies. "The Bribe of Frankenstein" (Stewart and Elizabeth Ewan) is an excellent piece developed around the theme of the emergence of a "technology of discourse." This is defined as the development of a means by which the "...law, knowledge, information, transactions, and priorities of an expanding world market economy could be disseminated and controlled" (p. 5). The Ewans correctly place the mass media along side the mechanization of the labour process as a development necessitated by capitalist growth. Essentially covering ground familiar to readers of Harold Innis, the emergence of the printing press and its impact are discussed. However, the contribution of the article lies in its treatment of the dialectical possibilities of the early stages of development of the mass media. Thus, "Beyond serving as a tool of mercantilism, print was a tool of emancipation" (p. 8). The appropriation of the vernacular tradition by the commercial media is traced to the 1830s and the emergence in the U.S. of the mass circulation commercial press. "In the pages of the mass circulation commercial press, commercial enterprise was enshrouded in the magical liturgy of 'progress'" (pp. 11 - 12). The contradictory character of the mass media and associated technologies is examined focussing on the ability to exercise management control over the workplace while simultaneously providing the palliative required to maximize worker compliance with the requirements of production under capitalism.

"Media and the Americanization of Workers: The Americanization Bulletin 1918 - 1919" (Jennifer Slack) documents the role of this magazine in forming the "correct" attitude system required of the productive American worker. The evidence is presented in support of the contention that "...the assumed absence of a distinctive and/or distinguishable working class culture is to some degree a myth perpetuated by class interests and /or the result of control by those particular class interests of the channels of communication which disseminate culture" (pp. 24 - 25). Slack exposes the role of the **Bulletin** as a propaganda tool of the U.S. government. But, the article does not provide a critical analysis of the fundamental institutional relations or of the role of propaganda tools.

The section on media unions is primarily documentary. In "Towards a Workers History of the U.S. Film Industry," Michael Nielsen emphasizes the need for a "bottom-up" approach that addresses the "human consequences of institutional relationships" (p. 48). The history of the motion picture industry and union organization beginning as early as 1890 with the National Association of Theatrical and Stage Employees, through the worker revolts of the 1930s, and the problems confronted by unions in the 1970s and 1980s with tumultuous technological change is documented. Numerous examples of the dislocations engendered by structural change within the union movement are given. But

there is no attempt to trace these structural changes to the broader context of production relations in the film industry.

Janet Wasko's article, "Trade Unions and Broadcasting: A Case Study of the National Association of Broadcast Employees and Technicians," describes the influence of labour organizations in the communication sector, emphasizing the imbalance between trade unions and employers. The author concludes that "the unions today represent reinforcement for the existing structure and no real element of change" **(p. 110). Factors such as the economic and political structure of the** broadcast industry and the potential for change in union orientation are not addressed.

An interview with Alan Sapper, Chairman of the British Trade Union Congress and President of the International Federation of Audiovisual Unions, expresses the concerns of labour:

> Multinational possession of the global means of communication poses the danger of the invasion and subjection of one national culture by cheaper foreign products. Trade unions organized along national lines but with an international component cannot only bring pressure to bear through their industrial muscle, but they can also exert political influence on their own national governments to defend the values of their own nationhood, as well as to support their members in the defence of democratic values and national ethos. (p. 127)

Sapper effectively pinpoints the core of the problem confronted by workers and labour organizations.

> In on-going situations, communications workers may have to intervene into what is actually being said in their name by their professionalism. And there may come a time when they must say "No more." There may come a time when they have to say, "I, on behalf of my family at least, will not cooperate with this conspiracy." **(p. 124)**

He describes tentative steps that have been initiated by British labour to diffuse this threat.

In the section on Media Control and Working People, Jerry Rollings, "Mass Communications and the American Worker," laments the failure of organized labour to respond to what he sees as the insidious and subtle attack on labour launched by the corporate backed communications media from the 1950s onward. In response to the declining popularity of the American labour movement, the Machinists Union's Media Monitoring Project was launched in 1979. **The results of this content analysis of entertainment and news coverage,** and a later one in 1981, are reported indicating the misconceptions and biases created by the depiction of unions and workers in the media. **The essay concludes with**

a discussion of Federal Communications Commission (FCC) rules concerning fairness and equal time and a call for action by workers and audiences to track and question the performance of broadcasters on this issue.

"The Working World as Represented by the Mass Media in the Federal Republic of Germany," (Hans-Friedrich Foltin) presents the results of a number of content analyses. Foltin concludes that "the working world in the mass media in the Federal Republic of Germany has been largely ignored" (p. 135). The reader is permitted to hope for a change in political and economic circumstance.

The article "On Counting the Wrong Things," (Brian Wilson) is a searing attack on the misuse of content analysis. The critique focusses mainly on the capacity to fortify preconceived expectations through the construction of categories, selection of samples, and inferential conclusions. Rather than reject the methodology, the author attempts to rescue it:

> The function of content analysis within critical communications studies is therefore clear. It is to provide an account of the content of television and other media output that can be used to raise consciousness as to the nature of the output, as well as to demonstrate the underlying ideology governing its production. (p. 185)

The problem is how to adapt the technique of content analysis so that one can explicate the true social relations that television represents. Calling for the study of relevant contexts in terms of the relevant categories, the minimization of inferences as to intent, and the use of inferences as to effects predicated on other accounts of the same phenomena, Winston hopes to rehabilitate content analysis as a tool of the critical researcher. Winston fails to support his case, notwithstanding the fact that content analysis can be a valuable tool of the critical researcher as an adjunct to other research methodologies that focus on institutional economic and political relations. He calls instead for a stronger bonding between content analysis and semiological research. In so doing he strays further into a domain of research that is equally subject to appropriation by the very institutionalized powers he wishes to convince of the pervasiveness of "cultural skewedness" (p. 185).

The final section of the collection -- New Communications Technologies for the New Workplace -- is the weakest with respect to the objectives of the text. An exception is found in "Information Technology, Luddism, and the Working Class" (Kevin Robins and Frank Webster). This article covers no new ground, but it does concisely overturn the misconstructions of much of the mainstream literature. Thus, "It (Luddism) was an answer from many ordinary working people to changes imposed from above that had repercussions on their whole way of life" (p. 194). Marshall McLuhan and Daniel Bell are condemned for

their approach to technology as an abstract and reified entity. In criticizing the currency of the opposition between workers and labour organizations that question the benefits of new technologies (the Luddites) and responsible labour that promotes or accepts technological change, the authors dispel the logic and inevitability of technology.

Michael Goldhaber's "Microelectronics Networks: A New Worker's Culture in Formation?" strays far from the reality of the institutional constraints affecting the development of the microelectronics industry and the incursion of its products on the worker. His speculations about the possibilities for inter-worker solidarity and communication are entirely unsupported. He posits the initiation of a new society based on information with new possibilities for communication. While recognizing that there are indeed negative aspects that may prevent increased cohesiveness among workers, his belief in the information society overrides these concerns. "Briefly, it offers a society of abundance -- there need be no scarcity of information or human contact" (p. 240). His admittedly utopian vision in which "each worker could gain a rich new social identity" (p. 242), flies in the face of the interests of the transnational corporations that control the introduction of information technologies in reality.

The final chapter provides a useful documentation of technological change clauses contained in a survey of American collective agreements. This is followed by a Selected Bibliography and Resource Guide that will be of interest to communication researchers working in the labour studies fields.

Given the general lack of analytical content in this volume, it is difficult to envision the evolving definition of critical communications research that is expected to emerge from this volume. One is led to assume that critical research is so labelled simply because it addresses a less fashionable topic from perspectives outside mainstream research. Nevertheless the volume serves as a contribution to a much needed area of study. It provides a resource to those hoping to develop further the relationship between labour and the communications industry in the United States.