

THINKING ABOUT MASS COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

The article presents an argument for a return to phenomenological (mass) communication research. The article is informed by social semiotics' emphasis on the multimodality of communication and phenomenological hermeneutics' emphasis on the development of a semiotic consciousness. The central argument is that the technology and market-driven media, media landscape and media culture have created a media studies which disregards and overlooks the phenomenological nature of mediated communication. The article expands on and substantiates this criticism as it has emerged from, what for the purpose of this article, is called a group of French, Harvard and Bloomington academics. As a solution the article argues for a phenomenological approach, taking as its point of departure the basic constructs of what constitutes mass communication, viz. signification, dialogue, rhetoric, and representation.

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INTRODUCTION

This article is informed by the emphasis in contemporary social semiotics¹ on the multimodality of communication (see for example the work of Kress 2010) and the emphasis in phenomenological hermeneutics² on the development of a semiotic consciousness (see for example the work of Deely 2004). The article is essentially about mass communication. Mass communication is increasingly also referred to as *public communication* to include organisational, political, and strategic communication, as well as marketing, public relations, etc. – all of which, in one way or another, deal with and concern the mass media.

Social semiotics and phenomenological hermeneutics share the view that the technology and market-driven media, media landscape and media culture have infiltrated all forms of public communication and have wiped out almost all the old assumptions about mass communication and the validity of “old theory”.

Social semiotics and phenomenological hermeneutics also question the market-driven nature of present media studies research and argue that in the process of being market-driven the phenomenological nature of mediated communication (and for that matter, organisational and all other forms of communication) is neglected, if not completely ignored. Therefore, there should be a return to phenomenological hermeneutics in mass communication research and theory building.

In a paper (see Fourie 2010a) at North-West University in 2009, when 50 years of communication science in South Africa was celebrated, the author also referred to this questioning and made a plea for a return to phenomenology and the search for new paradigms, especially in the field of media studies. Specific reference was made to the so-called “chaos paradigm”, which questions the validity of the key tenets of critical political economy in the new digitised, converged and pluralised media landscape, and the “practice paradigm”, in which the focus is on what people (and academics) are *actually* doing with the media, and what the media is doing to them and the discipline. That paper was concluded by emphasising the need for a meta-theory to direct South African mass communication research based on an analogy with Yuri Lotman’s *semiosphere* of meaning and reformulated for communication science’s purpose as the concept of the *mediasphere* of meaning. In this article, the idea of a meta-theory is continued but now the emphasis is on the need for a return to phenomenological mass communication research and theory building.

With this as background and introduction, the article sketches the content and drift of the above concern and criticism. Thereafter four theoretical constructs, namely, signification, dialogue, rhetoric, and representation, are explicated. In social semiotics these constructs are dealt with as modalities. The constructs also characterise the phenomenological nature of mass communication and perspectives from which many fundamental questions, assumptions and hypotheses in mass communication research and theory building could depart.

What is meant by these constructs? If one asks from a phenomenological perspective what constitutes communication, then the phenomenological study of communication has shown over and over again that mass communication is always about the production of meaning, dialogue, rhetoric, and representation. This applies to all forms of mass communication – whether the communication is basic, sophisticated, arbitrary and/or symbolic. It can also be argued that much of what is going on in organisational, political, intercultural, health and whatever other forms of communication can also be described, interpreted and analysed from the perspectives of these constructs.

The article concludes by emphasising that apart from research, the teaching of communication science should also return to the study of, *inter alia*, these constructs as a *theoretical foundation*.

One could pose the question whether this theoretical foundation has not declined if not completely disappeared from South African communication sciences' teaching programmes, to the detriment of the academic value and depth of the discipline.

CRITICISM

The extent of the criticism and concern about mass communication research's lack of a phenomenological paradigm and depth is so wide, and growing, that it has led to what is described, for the purpose of this article, as three groups, namely, a group of concerned French academics, a group of Harvard University academics and a group of USA Bloomington academics. In one way or another, all of them emphasise the need for phenomenological research and theory and the need to demythologise the myths of and about the information society, including the so-called "new (social) media".

The criticism is that the new media landscape in new and changed (postmodern) societies³ has led to a market- and technology-driven communication science. This has happened to such an extent that it has corroded the study of communication as a unique human and mental facility⁴.

The "French group" has formed an international association called *Ars industrialis* (cf. *Ars industrialis* 2001; Stiegler 2010; 2011). Its purpose is to promote an "industrial politics" of the spirit. A key argument is that the "life of the mind" (in other words, the human spirit) is subjected to the demands of the market, "to the law of rapid profits for firms exploiting the technologies of what have come to be known as the culture industries, program industries, media, telecommunications and lastly the technologies of knowledge or cognitive technologies" (cf. *Ars industrialis* 2001) – the last being the Internet and related media. All this has created an industrial spirit. Mass communication plays a key role in the creation and maintenance of this de-humanising spirit.

Mass communication research itself has not succeeded in explaining, and eventually breaking, the hegemonic, shallow, insecure and superficial role of the media in the control and shaping of individual and collective modes of thinking and experiencing the world and its realities and fictions. The media as a key instrument for the promotion of capitalism has created a culture of desire – a desire for commodities shaped to

conform to the requirements of profitable investment. This desire for commodities threatens humanity as a whole. Mass communication research should rather aspire towards raising the standard and quality of mass communication and its phenomenological nature as an instrument for the enrichment of human experience.

From Harvard University (cf. Darnton 2009; 2011) comes the argument that mass communication research, and especially research about the new media has not succeeded in wiping out confusion about the nature of the so-called “information age”. To the contrary, in its complete ignorance of the phenomenological nature of mediamorphosis (cf. Fidler 1997), and thus of how different and new media throughout the centuries have developed from and out of each other and complement each other, mass communication research, and especially the lack of phenomenological research about the *new media*, rather contributes to a state of collective false consciousness. “It’s no one’s fault but everyone’s problem, because in trying to get our bearings in cyberspace, we often get things wrong, and the misconceptions spread so rapidly that they go unchallenged. Taken together, they constitute a front of proverbial non-wisdom” (Darnton 2011: 3).

In this regard Darnton highlights five myths:

1. “The book is dead” – which is nonsense;
2. “We have entered the information age” – no, we have always been in it;
3. “All information is now available online” – which is not so, and will never be the case;
4. “Libraries are obsolete” – which is also nonsense; libraries are flourishing more than ever; and
5. “The future is digital” – so what? Digital is only another technical/electronic instrument for communicating; only another platform. It is not the communication itself. It may be new technology but the communication itself is very old.

Phenomenological mass communication research will prove these myths wrong, and by doing so, will contribute to a better understanding of the “new” media, its use, and predictions about its future.

The results of not doing phenomenological research is, however, best pointed out by the “Bloomington group” as formulated by Lang in a 2011 ICA paper in the Division: Mass Communication. Briefly, the criticism also boils down to an emphasis on the lack of phenomenological research and theory – the taking of communication for granted (including meaning, rhetoric, dialogue, and representation) without decoding its phenomenological nature.

The Bloomington group claims that although there may have been agreement and cohesion in mass communication research about research topics (usually a novel topic) and the use of the same methodologies, an underlying phenomenological paradigmatic

point of departure was and remains missing. When this happens a discipline is in a crisis. Such was/is the case with the effects/power research and theory which has and is in one or another way still the dominant perspective, often also called paradigm, in mass communication research. However, it is not a paradigm but rather a set of technological deterministic assumptions about the effects and power of mass communication as an instrument for social change and human behaviour. It says nothing about communication as such.

The same technological deterministic assumptions about effects underlie much of today's research about the new media. Again there is no phenomenological paradigm guiding and steering the reasons why the new media are communicating as they are and are able to do what they do and how they function on a cognitive level as communication phenomena.

For Lang (*op.cit.*) and the Bloomington group the phenomenological paradigmatic question should be what constitutes the new media as communication, and from that why and how people, viewed from a cognitive perspective, use, experience and communicate with, in and through the new media in the ways they are doing; how communication works cognitively, neurologically and biologically. Only when we know something about this, will we be able to contribute explanatory, diagnostic and predictive knowledge about mass communication and lately especially about the new forms of mass communication.

By not asking fundamental questions and not formulating assumptions based on the phenomenological nature of media as human communication, Lang (2011: 5) continues that:

We have made remarkably little progress in answering our questions about how mass communication affects people and societies ... we glorify a few small effects with the name theory(ies) (such as the 'agenda setting theory' and 'uses and gratifications theory'), but we fail to explain how (even if they may be small effects) they come about; we have made very little progress in explaining how they occur, nor have we made much progress in developing interventions which prevent their occurrence (suggesting that our understanding is at the best inadequate and more likely wrong)".

When talking about phenomenological paradigms it is unavoidable to quote one of the most seminal science philosophers, Thomas Kuhn (1996: 96): "Without a [phenomenological – PJF] paradigm, one can do science, but one cannot create science. This is because, without a [phenomenological – PJF] paradigm, one is merely 'looking around' to see what one can see. The observer within a [phenomenological – PJF] paradigm, on the other hand, is looking, with difficulty, for something they *expect* to see that has not yet been observed or demonstrated."

What does a phenomenological paradigm do for research and theory building, or what are the attributes of such a paradigm? Potter (1993), for example, argues that it provides a researcher with:

- an understanding of the fundamental nature of the thing which he/she is studying;
- based on that fundamental nature, the ability to develop new, particular and/or specific ways of describing, explaining and interpreting the thing being observed; and
- those who share the paradigm to also share agreement on the primary questions that should be asked about the phenomenon.

In other words, a phenomenological paradigm directs in a coherent way the kind of research questions and assumptions about a specific phenomenon, such as in our case, the new (social) media, freedom of expression, and the indigenisation of communication science.

EXAMPLES OF SOUTH AFRICAN MASS COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

If some of the topics addressed at the 2011 conference (Unisa, Pretoria) of the South African Communication Association (SACOMM) and their abstracts are taken as being exemplary of South African mass communication research, then the following examples can be extracted to illustrate or ask questions about the lack of a phenomenological approach.

On new media

It is obvious that as elsewhere in the world, the South African mass communication research agenda is focused on the new media (also to a great extent in organisational communication) and that the “new” media is researched with a variety of methods, be it experimental and/or survey research. However, phenomenological questioning and theory about what these new media are as communication phenomena are virtually non-existent in South Africa.

For example, and to use the constructs of what constitutes communication as referred to earlier, is it ever asked whether the “new” media are intrinsically about signification, dialogue, rhetoric, representation, or what? Are fundamental questions asked about the new media as *communication phenomena* (and enough fundamental questions)? Most of all, are the questions being asked fundamental at all?

African ontology and epistemology

A second example concerns the topic of indigenisation and African ontology and epistemology. Is this topic approached from the perspective of fundamental questions about the nature of communication, or is the topic dealt with only on the surface, in a rhetorical way, as part of politics, and to be politically correct? Is this intrinsic ontological and epistemological topic approached from the perspective of a phenomenological paradigm about what constitutes human communication? Is the thinking about “African communication” (if it is at all possible to distinguish African communication as being different from other human communication and if such a distinction isn’t inherently racist and culturally deterministic) informed by a view in

relation to the constructs of mass communication and thus mass communication as, for example, signification, dialogue, rhetoric and /or as representation?

Freedom of expression and the right to know

Given constant threats in South Africa to freedom of expression and the right to know, this topic is prominent in South African mass communication research. However, from a phenomenological perspective the questions “what is freedom of expression?” and “why should people have a right to know?” are seldom addressed. Do communicologists deal with this topic from the perspective of a coherent paradigm informed by the phenomenological nature of mass communication?

Mass communication research’s focus on freedom of expression still tends to be more political and sociological than communication-oriented and communication-informed. As such, and from a communication point of view, it should be seen as little more than industry talk with an academic slant. Are the arguments about freedom of expression and the right to know motivated strongly enough in terms of the phenomenological nature of mass communication as representation, as symbolic forms of expression, as rhetoric, as dialogue and/or in terms of how mass communication and its media cognitively forms people’s perceptions, thinking, ideas and eventually cognition and behaviour?

Based on a knowledge of the phenomenology of mass communication, does mass communication research propound more or something different than what the industry, politicians and policy-makers coming from the disciplines of political science, sociology, law, and public and development administration offer and what the industry itself knows from experience and practice? Formulated differently: Are mass communication research questions, assumptions, arguments and hypotheses motivated clearly enough in terms of what should be a phenomenological knowledge and understanding of why mass communication and its media are able to signify and represent in the ways they do, how this is done, for example, in dialogical and rhetorical ways, and on the basis of such explanations provide reasons for why mass communication and its media are important for democracy and should be free.

Media ownership

The topic of media ownership is high on the agenda of South African politicians, labour unions and NGOs. Usually they relate debates and arguments about this to representativeness (and the so-called inequality of media ownership in South Africa, still seen to be mainly white-owned), diversity and pluralism and the presence thereof or not in a society. Yet, the discourse about ownership, diversity and pluralism is informed by market, political and economic driven assumptions and arguments. Seldom are these issues addressed from the perspective of the phenomenological nature of the content and form of the mass communication available in society. If media ownership is addressed from the phenomenological perspectives of mass communication as signifying systems, representations, dialogue, and rhetoric, the emphasis will probably move from quantity to quality, and redundancy and insignificance will probably be pointed out and emphasised.