

## Information and Communication Sciences as Critical Social Sciences

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**Electronic version**

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/inmedia/671>

DOI: 10.4000/inmedia.671

ISSN: 2259-4728

**Publisher**

Center for Research on the English-Speaking World (CREW)

**Electronic reference**

Fabien Granjon, « Information and Communication Sciences as Critical Social Sciences », *InMedia* [Online], 4 | 2013, Online since 19 November 2013, connection on 08 September 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/inmedia/671> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/inmedia.671>

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# Information and Communication Sciences as Critical Social Sciences

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- 1 For most social scientists, holding a critical stance consists mostly in epistemological vigilance. The researchers whose works are anchored in Information and Communication Sciences (ICS) share, in their majority, this understanding of criticism as the main standards held in social sciences. So we can read that following the example of “all other human sciences, [it is] as they try to explain and/or to understand phenomena, [that they] are critical by nature.”<sup>1</sup> This positioning thus makes science, objectivation and criticism coincide at little to no expense, and passes off the essential work of discussion of the models of analysis (concepts, hypotheses, etc.) and of reflexivity as sufficient to the work of criticism.
- 2 To criticize turns out to be, rather, one of the operations by which any activity of research begins and without which it does not begin—at least not really. The gesture of criticism, in fact is not only inaugural: it is indefinitely recalled, throughout the stages which lead from the opening of a survey to its completion, then to the writing of its results and finally to their evaluation by the peers—an evaluation to which the “laymen” contribute also sometimes, but with other criteria. In this perspective, to speak of the necessity of criticism in the social sciences, is not, primarily to call upon a political imperative. It is to recall, above all, a technical requirement [...]. That this essential technical obligation at the core of the practice of the social sciences is conducive to the production of knowledge and of visions about the social world that suggest alternatives that can therefore potentially have political effects on the functioning of the societies under study, is obvious<sup>2</sup>.
- 3 Deliberately political, the social sciences (among which ICS) would thus be equivocal and ambiguous. This would be acceptable, however, if they were to be so “in addition” as it were. Our position is that it is not possible to consider that a science is fully critical if it satisfies itself only with fulfilling methodological requirements (*to break with common sense*) and, by so doing, with making sure to make visible or to inform about

little or badly known social realities. In other words, the merits of the aforementioned criticism cannot confine themselves, according to us, to the overtaking of epistemological obstacles. If we admit that the theoretical models that intend to reflect social reality always do so with epistemological imperatives and specific interests, then we must agree that epistemological criticism is only one (crucial) element enabling the evaluation of scientific productions.

- 4 To the epistemological stakes coupling the domain of communication to that of the social sciences other investments need to be added, that question, this time on the political level, the relationships between communication, the social order and the diverse strategies for social change and that also question the value of theoretical constructs under this angle. Criticism cannot thus amount to epistemological criticism that is only one of its pillars, that of disillusionment, but it needs to be extended by a more elaborate work, a work over the negative, the deconstruction and the defetishisation of social reality. It is, according to us, this other type of positioning that would enable ICS to be completely critical, that is to say in full capacity of being reflexive about themselves but also to describe, analyse, understand and *evaluate*<sup>3</sup>.
- 5 The objective of knowledge inherent in criticism relates primarily to the revelation of the various forms of domination that are applied within the framework of a social order that presses on the present and that, most of the time, are the object of a misunderstanding (i.e. not necessarily of an ignorance) from the social subjects which undergo them. Practising the social sciences (among which we count ICS) from a critical perspective can be considered as a form of participation in the “teamwork of political invention”:<sup>4</sup> give *reasons for action*, supply the weapons of indignation and, by so doing, contribute to the liberation of the potential for mobilization that might exert some leverage on reality.
- 6 Criticism can open to a “positive,” to a social progress that needs to be updated in moments when politics become more radical. Against the evidence of common sense, it purports to raise the veil on the truth of social relationships which never appear totally for what they are and adorn themselves with symbolic ornaments that disguise them and contribute to their acceptability (e.g. via media work). Criticism thus contributes to make reality and social order unacceptable and invites to act on this reality, well aware besides that theorization could only be one of the multiple resources of politics.

## A Plea for Critical Information and Communication Sciences

- 7 In France, the body of literature dealing with the encounter of information and communication sciences with criticism is not very large, far from it. There are some works however that are considered as relevant to a critical perspective, but the texts trying to clarify the critical referential and the way it can/must be mobilized within the framework of research in ICS are, to say the least, extremely rare. The works which present sectorial applications of criticism generally connected to domains of specific practices (cultural and “creative” industries, media, internationalization, social uses of ICTS, etc.) or to singular research trends (Frankfurt School, political economy of communication, *Cultural Studies*, “institutional communication”, etc.) are less rare. In spite of this solid but tenuous presence, criticism on the whole does not occupy a particularly important place within the information and communication sciences, even

if, and it must be underlined, it seems to have regained some academic terrain in the last few years, boosting the “pleas for critical research in France.”<sup>5</sup>

- 8 The locus of criticism is neither natural, nor reserved and turns out not to be very comfortable, but the “corpse” still moves and even seems to show obvious signs of vitality. The *libido sciendi* continues to flow within the body of the critical community and to animate it, in spite of the condescending indictments of certain penitents who hastily try to justify their own renunciation and consider that “critical claims are [just] a career move, as much as any other, fostering a logics of clans and tribes. And that the fact of moaning on its supposed depreciation is a way of institutional and politicking positioning [sic].”<sup>6</sup> Why should the critical researchers complain? It is not a question of complaining.
- 9 Today, more numerous and more regular initiatives are visible than during the last twenty years. They appear in dedicated events, conferences and seminars. They unfold their own editorial production and their educational supply is far from negligible. Nevertheless, if criticism gains in visibility, it weighs relatively little in the internal debates in information and communication sciences and it deserves to be more publicised (i.e. set in contradictory debate). Dictionaries, textbooks, encyclopaedias, mappings and bibliographies in the field that purport to provide a relatively complete panorama of the scientific sensibilities within ICS tend to cover them tenuously, if they mention them at all. The proceedings of the yearly national conferences of French National Association for Information and Communication Sciences (SFSIC) testify to a presence that is spectral rather than stable.
- 10 At the beginning of 1990s, Pierre Mœglin already regretted this situation that he identified as a consequence of the combined attacks led against criticism by the various functionalisms, the “subject-oriented researches,” the prevalence of expertise and the very crisis within criticism itself. It seems to us that, twenty years later, these logics are still more or less at work, which can be deplored. It would moreover be necessary to locate exactly the various updates, and also their evolutions, as well as to limit the new assaults that are carried against it.
- 11 As for us, if we were to mention only one kind of threats, we would probably emphasize at first those that weaken criticism “from within,” and repeat emphatically how much a simple moral agreement about the questioning of social order, and the attendant communication social facts, could not suffice to establish a critical policy for SIC. One has indeed to recognize that on the subject, the texts aiming at going beyond the simple exercise of sectorial assessments and literature reviews (however necessary and useful they may be) to reach some epistemological distance are not numerous<sup>7</sup>. And yet, the price to pay to reach a semblance of unity within criticism —while at the same time respectful of its various constitutive differences—, lies in these attempts to try to clear the main points of articulation of criticism, diverse such as it is, that can get organized within SIC.

## Toward Critical Interdisciplinarity

- 12 One of these “epistemological hinges” is undoubtedly interdisciplinarity, to be understood neither as an artefact playing a rhetoric part of identification in the abstract economy of information and communication sciences, nor as a strategic support of distinction in the opposition to other disciplines within the social sciences.

Our thesis is that, to become a real principle of epistemological demarcation, interdisciplinarity needs to be first and foremost critical.

- 13 Inherently characterised by their transversality, SIC are supposed to find part of their coherence and their autonomy in their supposed capacity to establish bridges between disciplinary fields by adopting specific domains of study (the media, ICTS, etc.). If there is indeed one element information and communication sciences would definitely not want to part with (and correctly so), it is their wilful determination to maintain the interdisciplinary project at the very core of the field. Interdisciplinarity is recognized as quintessential heuristics and it is considered as the disciplinary foundation of these “crossroads sciences”.
- 14 We have to admit that if ICS are in line with other disciplines by often borrowing from them their concepts and their theoretical frameworks, the latter also interfere in the field of communication research, by being interested in the objects which SIC would be tempted to claim as being part of their (exclusive) enjoyment. Besides, the social sciences also develop epistemologies of complementarity that take shape within a constructivist paradigm advocating the study of mediations and social constructions, rather than the study of the things and the essences.
- 15 This epistemological attitude is indeed shared by many of the “new sociologies”<sup>8</sup> with which the information and communication sciences sometimes engage in “conflicts of territory,” but on which —this is to be recalled— they also took support to emerge. The proposal of theoretical postures overcoming the traditional contradictions between idealism and materialism, micro and macro levels of analysis, collective and individual perspectives, subject and object, etc., cannot be decently presented as an exclusive feature of SIC.
- 16 If the analysis of communication phenomena has everything to gain by distancing itself from binary epistemologies and by adopting a positioning that gives primacy to relations over essences, this principle should not be exclusively attributed to SIC, nor obviously be reserved to them. So, to assert that “the will to build complex objects, characterized by a multiplicity of fitted levels, is not present in the disciplines from which SIC borrow”<sup>9</sup> is a matter either of a lazy (or feigned) poor understanding of the social sciences, or a self-fulfilling prophecy.
- 17 Interdisciplinarity, when it is neither rhetoric, nor strategic, but truly critical requires the gathering of varied but compatible theoretical determinations. It refuses “disciplinary subdivisions in the name of the transversality of all the social objects” and tends to generalize “the multireferential and complementarist approach.”<sup>10</sup> It considers these necessities while maintaining a distance from theoretical hybridization without control. Critical interdisciplinarity has nothing to do with postmodern theories that tend to multiply the abstract borrowings and to juxtapose notions without taking into account models of analysis to which they belong originally, or even axiological foundations that support these analytical models.
- 18 From the perspective of criticism, the interdisciplinary principle does not justify itself so much by the singular (e.g. “communicational”) complexity of the objects that it purports to understand, as by the critical outlook that underlies it. In this regard, what characterizes research on the social facts of communication maybe that they address classes of phenomena playing for some (e.g. the media facts) an obvious role in the adjustment of people’s lives to the imperatives of contemporary society. But more still

(because this role is rather widely distributed: politics, education, etc.), the peculiarity of the “communicational” may be due to the fact that, somehow or other, it always contributes to the establishment of such facticity, that is pseudo-concrete in nature<sup>11</sup> and so potentially can be overcome: “the object of critical research is not to study communication in its contexts. It is to deal with it as a component within situations that through it can be globally accounted for”<sup>12</sup> This important comment invites us to envisage communication in connection with the conditions of production and reproduction of the social relationships that frame them. Being interested for example in media, ICTS or cultural industries urges to consider these so-called “communicational” realities in relation to other larger social dynamics, a challenge which only a completely critical –that is dialectical– interdisciplinarity, is capable of meeting.

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## NOTES

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