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KEY THINKERS IN CRITICAL COMMUNICATION SCHOLARSHIP

From the Pioneers to the
Next Generation

Edited by
JOHN A. LENT
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Key Thinkers in Critical Communication Scholarship

From the Pioneers to the Next Generation

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International Journal of Comic Art, USA

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*For those who took a firm stance,
and those who never had a chance*

JAL

*For TR and JC:
Look beyond the glitter,
and never stop asking questions*

MAA

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Preface

As we finalize the manuscript for this book in early 2015, institutions throughout the United States are reeling from the reverberations following the hack into Sony Pictures' computer systems, allegedly by the North Korean Government. The cyber-terrorists were intent on suppressing the release of the movie *The Interview*, because it depicted the assassination of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un (Auerbach, 2014). Just a few weeks later a satirical cartoon of the Islamic prophet Mohammed resulted in the actual assassination of nearly a dozen cartoonists, journalists, and others at the offices of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris, France (Bilefsky and de la Baume, 2015). In the wake of these tragedies, a global conversation about freedom of speech and censorship has been revisited. A contentious issue up for debate is the advisability of silencing those who have political or religious views that are not congenial to one's own. Both of these situations exemplify the psychological theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). When confronted with information that is threatening to one's belief system, people attempt to relieve the tension in some manner. In these cases, extreme forms of censorship were employed. Nonetheless, they are pulled from the same quiver as the death threats, harassment, and precarious employment that the scholars who are the focus of this book have varyingly endured.

This volume profiles a dozen critical scholars who have withstood differing attempts to silence them over the years because they dared to challenge the status quo of communication, economic, and/or political institutions. What makes one critical? According to the scholars profiled in this book, it's a reluctance to accept the way things are. John A. Lent has previously defined critical communication scholarship as "an in-depth analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of dominant communication institutions, processes, and artifacts, with the intention of arriving at solutions, guidelines, and policies that benefit the masses, not the power brokers" (1995, p. 2). As we shall see, this critical orientation is problematic when academic institutions take on the role of vocational training rather than encouraging an understanding of how communication industries can be used for public good. Before sharing an overview of the scholars whom we interviewed, we first provide context on the

origins of this book, followed by a discussion of its objectives and the methods used to collect data.

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Background

Only a year after the Lent-edited *A Different Road Taken: Profiles in Critical Communication* was published (1995), there were calls for a sequel. The editor recognized that some important critical scholars (e.g. Noam Chomsky, Edward S. Herman, and Armand Mattelart) were omitted from *A Different Road Taken*. This resulted from the structure of the book, which concentrated on the lives and careers of Dallas W. Smythe, George Gerbner, Herbert I. Schiller, James D. Halloran, and Kaarle Nordenstreng, with commentaries by ten other critical scholars who were chosen by the interviewees.

The first serious thrust for an expanded edition came out of an International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) plenary session which Lent chaired when the group met in Sydney in late August 1996. The plenary, called *Critical Communication: Past Dreams, Future Options*, included *A Different Road Taken* interviewees Gerbner, Halloran, and Nordenstreng, and commentators Wolfgang Kleinwachter, Manju Pendakur, Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi, and Janet Wasko.

In his plenary introduction, Lent explained the genesis, format, and dimensions of his book, before discussing the theme of the plenary. For comparative purposes, perhaps it is worth repeating what he felt about the dreams and options of critical scholarship in media and communication in 1996:

I believe some dreams have been realized. Obviously, critical research in communication has made its presence felt since the 1970s. More researchers now acknowledge that there can be other ways of looking at the world other than through the eyes of the “empiricists.” Qualitatively executed, communicator-targeted, and policy-oriented research studies have found favor in some quarters, as have theoretical notions such as media/cultural imperialism, dependency, perils of globalization, or political economy. The past generation has witnessed critical studies linking up with social movements (unfortunately, still too rarely), forming alternative organizations (for example, Union for Democratic Communication in North America), and feeding publishing outlets that opened up to their views.

As for what he called “promises unfulfilled,” Lent said:

1. In an effort to justify its existence, critical communication scholarship sometimes sets up barriers to admission and the “coining of a different vocabulary of often incomprehensible and irrelevant gobbledegook.”
2. While organizing themselves, critical communication scholars sometimes follow the highly structured, institutionalized, and bureaucratic route that they meant to replace or modify in the first place.

He also encouraged critical (and mainstream) communication scholars to be aware of the rich tradition of critical journalistic work by Upton Sinclair, George Seldes, Heywood Broun, and A. J. Liebling, who, in the first half of the twentieth century, wrote about concentration of power in journalism, the big business-oriented press, publishers’ cover-ups to serve their or advertisers’ interests, and exploitation of reportorial labor.

During the plenary, Gerbner and Nordenstreng suggested that the session transcript should be published. Gerbner went a step further: after the plenary, he took Lent to meet Barbara Bernstein, president of Hampton Press, to whom he suggested that her company should buy the rights to *A Different Road Taken*, sell the remaining copies, and then publish a sequel based on the IAMCR panel. Apparently, Gerbner liked the book, or at least the entries about him, because he listed it, along with two others, as recommended books on 3,500 copies of a flyer that he distributed to Cultural Environment Movement members.

Lent embraced the idea of keeping the *A Different Road Taken* project alive, though he was not sure which direction to take: add a few interviews to expand the original book, or publish the IAMCR plenary proceedings, or create a new book of different critical scholars. He had some leanings toward the latter because a week after IAMCR, when Ed Herman visited his home to borrow a few books, Lent asked him to be interviewed for a sequel. Herman agreed and said that he would help to get Noam Chomsky to participate, which proved to be unnecessary.

The uncertainty was compounded by what seemed like a diminishing relationship between Westview Press, publisher of *A Different Road Taken*, and Lent. In 1995, the year of the book’s appearance, Westview became a division of HarperCollins, which itself was a subsidiary of Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation. After 15 months, Lent was informed that the book was already out of print. When, in February

1997, he questioned why it went out of print so quickly at the time of the press's new ownership, Westview executive Marcus Boggs said that it was just a "matter of timing," insinuating that it had nothing to do with Murdoch, that it would actually go out of print in a "month or so" or when the stock was depleted. On the day of this conversation the figures indicated that, of the 1,000 copies of the book printed, 262 were sold, 100 were distributed as exam or review copies, and 259 remained in stock. Boggs said that he did not know where the 380 unaccounted-for copies were. He also said that the rights to the book would revert to the editor, who, with or without Hampton Press, could do whatever he wished with it.

Though communication between Hampton Press and Lent continued for years (until the press discontinued publication), the project was put on the back burner. It was revived when Lent was encouraged to proceed by Michelle A. Amazeen, then a PhD candidate on whose dissertation committee he served. Amazeen was asked to co-edit *Key Thinkers in Critical Communication Scholarship*, and after spring 2013 the project swiftly moved along.

Objectives and Dimensions

The primary objective of *Key Thinkers in Critical Communication Scholarship*, as was that of its predecessor volume, is to shed light on the lives and careers of critical communication scholars, both of earlier generations and more recent ones, not just to applaud them but also to learn from them. Through these interviews, patches of the history of critical communication scholarship are sewn together. At the same time, instruction is given (particularly for new scholars) concerning pitfalls to avoid, research topics to explore, and the relevance of critical studies in personal, academic, and societal contexts.

Another key purpose is to recognize, through what these interviewees relate, the significant changes that have transformed the communication industry since 1995. Technology has revolutionized the way in which the public consumes information. Traditional mass media are being overtaken by the digital technology of the Internet. The conventional, one-to-many communication process flow increasingly competes with one-to-one distributed network communication processes. As such, the public no longer have to rely upon media elites to provide content; they can now curate their own, unfortunately sometimes inaccurately, or in poor taste. The Internet, we were told, was going to be a democratizing force, leveling the playing field between the information haves

and have not. But it has not turned out to be the panacea that it was predicted to be. Like other media before it, the Internet has been co-opted by commercial interests, largely restraining its power as a public sphere (Turow, 2011; West, 2013). Other changes that have affected communication are the replacement of the fear of communism by the fear of terrorism, the collapse of journalism (particularly in the United States) – a form of communication that is integral to the functioning of a democratic society (McChesney, 1993; McChesney and Pickard, 2011) – and the tightening stranglehold of the media by a few mammoth corporations worldwide (Bagdikian, 2004).

Similarly, we learn from these interviews that the status of critical scholars in communication has also changed. For example, 7 of the 12 profiled scholars (Chomsky, Lent, McChesney, Meehan, Mosco, Wasko, and Zhao) hold, or have held, endowed professorships, whereas none of those featured in *A Different Road Taken* had such honors. Also, academic environments for most of these scholars are more acceptable now than they were 20 or more years ago, as are some major book publishers who are willing to bring out critical work because it sells. But these scholars face, or have endured, their share of academic harassment because of their critical work, being denied tenure and promotion, threatened by parts of society, and smeared via the Internet and other means by fellow faculty members.

In choosing the scholars to be profiled, we tried to plug some shortcomings of *A Different Road Taken* by including three women scholars and two researchers who hail from non-Euro-American countries. The countries that the 12 interviewees were molded in are Austria, Canada, China, India, the UK, and the United States. Placed alphabetically in the book, the scholars are Noam Chomsky, Christian Fuchs, Edward S. Herman, John A. Lent, Robert W. McChesney, Eileen R. Meehan, Vincent Mosco, Graham Murdock, Manjunath Pendakur, Gerald Sussman, Janet Wasko, and Yuezhi Zhao. Lent was included at the insistence of Amazeen and Sussman, both of whom interviewed him separately.

We recognize that other important critical scholars are not profiled, including (but not limited to) Jörg Becker, Nicholas Garnham, Thomas Guback, and Armand Mattelart. Attempts were made to invite their participation, but two did not respond; Mattelart sent a French-language interview carried out with him by a Japanese researcher, and Becker consented but we could not meet. One of the conditions for setting up interviews was that they had to be conducted live in real time and place, and not electronically by Skype or other