

# **Dialectical imagination: Frankfurt School and IAMCR<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Introduction**

In the age of hashtag activism and TikTok videos, it seems completely out of fashion to revisit Adorno and Horkheimer's (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1972) scathing critique of the culture industry. After all, the contemporary media landscape has become so diverse and fragmented that it is now difficult to imagine the consciousness industry (Enzensberger, 1974) as a whole perpetuating some form of mass deception. In the meantime, the ways in which media companies and digital platforms sustain inequality and injustice on various fronts offer little cause for celebration. While it is convenient to dismiss the uncompromising criticality of the Frankfurt School as either overly pessimistic or irredeemably elitist, their impact on the agenda of critical communication research has been profound. In fact, critics of the Frankfurt School are often preoccupied with their alleged lack of empirical rigor (e.g. Stevenson, 1983), yet fail to engage with their work at epistemological and theoretical levels. Such delegitimization of critical research serves an ideological function without admitting to it, which is exactly why Adorno rejected positivism in the study of culture and ideology. As Martin Jay (1973) points out in his intellectual history of the Frankfurt School, "to the Institute, one of the fundamental characteristics of a nonideological theory was its responsiveness to the interrelationships of past history, present realities, and future potentialities, with all the attendant mediations and contradictions" (p.195). In pursuit of objectivity, a narrow conceptualisation of empirical evidence that is deprived of historical context and alienated from its theoretical positioning would only end up conforming to extant power relations.

From its inception, IAMCR has aligned itself with the strand of critical communication research. Several key factors were at play during the early decades of the organisation that contributed to IAMCR's overall intellectual profile as well as its ideological affiliation. First, the historical connection between IAMCR and UNESCO has been well documented (Hamelink & Nordenstreng, 2016; Mowlana, 1997). Founded in the aftermath of World War II, UNESCO's strong initiative in promoting freedom of information represents "the idealism that had inspired the founding of the United Nations (UN) itself" (Hamelink & Nordenstreng, 2016). Such idealism, on the one hand, recognizes the unequal flow of information internationally and, on the other hand, aspires to bridge the East-West divide (Meyen, 2014; Mowlana, 1997), rather than reinforcing the split between the "free world" and the "communist world".

As a result of the orientation of UNESCO, Eastern European scholars were involved in IAMCR from the very beginning. For example, scholars from Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Yugoslavia were present at the first general assembly in 1959 (IAMCR Bulletin, 1959). Walery Pisarek from Poland and Yassen Zassoursky from the Soviet Union joined in the 1960s (Hamelink & Nordenstreng, 2016). Irena Tetelowska of Poland became head of a new section on bibliography, and the first woman to hold a leading position in the association (Nordenstreng, 2008). Emil Dusiska, a journalism professor at the University of Leipzig in East Germany, became IAMCR's secretary-general and did most of the association's

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paperwork from 1972 to 1978 (Meyen, 2014). Their participation signals that, in contrast to similar research associations established in the United States (US) during the Cold War<sup>2</sup>, IAMCR has much closer affinity with Marxism, even though its members undoubtedly have different takes on a Marxist analysis of media and communication.

Third, the European lineage of IAMCR has important implications for the epistemological inclination of the organisation, which differs from its U.S. counterparts, steeped as they are in the philosophical tradition of Anglo-American empiricism and which identify strongly with a positivist approach to social science. Combining the dual influence of German Idealism and Marxist historical materialism, the Frankfurt School sought to distinguish their aims, methods, theories, and forms of analysis from both natural science and conventional social science. For the founding members of IAMCR who were wary of U.S. dominance not only in the media and communication industries (as manifested in debates about media imperialism) but also in scientific research, Critical Theory provided an important foundation for building an alternative research agenda.

### **Repudiating positivism**

As is well-known in the field of media and communications, the dichotomy of critical vs. administrative research arose from the unsuccessful collaboration between Adorno and Lazarsfeld on the Rockefeller-funded Princeton Radio Project in the late 1930s. Putting aside the consensus on Adorno's personality which was that he was very difficult to work with (Jay, 1973; Morrison, 1978), the intellectual cleavage runs deep between Critical Theory and the kind of empiricist research Lazarsfeld advocated. The Princeton Project overall needed to figure out what exactly audiences were listening to on the radio and Adorno directed the part of the research on music programs. He later recalled that "I was particularly disturbed by the danger of a methodological circle: that in order to grasp the phenomenon of cultural reification according to the prevalent norms of empirical sociology one would have to use reified methods as they stood so threateningly before my eyes in the form of that machine, the program analyzer. When I was confronted with the demand to 'measure culture', I reflected that culture might be precisely that condition that excludes a mentality capable of measuring it" (Adorno, 1969, p. 347).

Lazarsfeld was equally aware of their incompatibility, if less sentient about its root cause. In a sharp-tongued letter he wrote in the summer of 1939, voicing disappointment with their association, Lazarsfeld expressed frustration over Adorno's "grave deficiencies of elementary logical procedure". He also criticised Adorno's arrogance and naivete when it came to verification techniques: "your disrespect for possibilities alternative to your own ideas becomes even more disquieting when your text leads to the suspicion that you don't even know how an empirical check upon a hypothetical assumption is to be made" (Jay, 1973, p. 225). On the surface, their differences lie in divergent methodological choices. For Adorno, however, the problem with the positivist approach of hypothesis testing is not just trying to

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<sup>2</sup> Despite the involvement of Eastern European scholars though, IAMCR was not immune from Cold War politics. The Association's second president Raymond Nixon actively recruited mainstream American scholars, including Paul Lazarsfeld and Wilbur Schramm, whose book *The Process of Effects and Mass Communication* (1954) was prepared under government contact as training materials for U.S. Propaganda programs. Schramm was also known for reporting on Dallas Smythe to FBI during the McCarthyism witch-hunt when Smythe was working at the Institute of Communication Research in the University of Illinois.

measure things that cannot be measured, but also asking the wrong question altogether. Even more importantly, by only raising questions within the ideological parameters of the status quo and through identifying linear correlations without regard to the totality of history, positivist research ultimately was understood to serve the conservative function of reinforcing the hegemonic political order.

Either deliberately or unconsciously, scholars who identify with positivism often fail to recognize the political implications of epistemological orientation and methodological choice. In his 1941 piece that canonized the label of critical vs. administrative research, Lazarsfeld (1941) called for the integration of the two perspectives by assigning the role of theorist to the former and that of empiricist to the latter. He proposes that, “if it were possible in the terms of critical research to formulate an actual research operation which could be integrated with empirical work, the people involved, the problems treated and, in the end, the actual utility of the work would greatly profit” (p. 14). Elihu Katz, who, among many other achievements, is famous for working with Lazarsfeld on developing the two-step flow of communication model, expressed a similar sentiment decades later when revisiting the famous debate. Even though Katz (2016) acknowledges that the rift between Adorno and Lazarsfeld has an ideological dimension, he narrowly interprets the ideological difference as whether “we need to question the ulterior motives of those who posed these questions to researchers and respondents” (p.8). Katz seems to understand administrative research at face value by referring to the practice of an external funding body setting the agenda for researchers. The real issue for critical scholars, however, is the extent to which researchers have internalised capitalist values through positivist training so that they lose the ability to ask the most important questions.

For scholars who associate more closely with the Frankfurt School tradition, this epistemological tension is always at the forefront even as they advocate for pluralism in research approaches. James Halloran, the longest serving president of IAMCR, cautioned against “the positivistic/behavioristic blindness” when making a case for critical eclecticism. Halloran’s view of critical researchers excludes “those who are not even aware, who are unable to recognize or unwilling to accept that value assumptions are implicit in every research question and that such assumptions enter into the formulation of every research design.” (Halloran, 1983, p. 274). George Gerbner, another long-term member of IAMCR who joined the organisation in 1967 (Hamelink & Nordenstreng, 2016), readily admits that “the long and checkered history of empiricism certainly produced fractured positivistic fantasies based on real data abstracted from their historical context” (Gerbner, 1983, p. 362). He reminds researchers who aspire to retain criticality not to “surrender authority to some critical mystique based on the assumption that methodological chastity and terminological purity are the best guarantees of truth” (Gerbner, 1983, p.362). In fact, the whole “Ferments in the Field” special issue published in the *Journal of Communication* in 1983 is organised around the critical vs. administrative research debate. In addition to Halloran and Gerbner, many contributors who sided with the critical camp were IAMCR members, including for example, Armand Mattelart, Cees Hamelink, Jeremy Tunstall, William Melody, Robin Mansell, Dallas Smythe, and Herbert Schiller.

In their co-authored piece for the special issue, Smythe and Tran (1983) singled out Adorno’s *The Authoritarian Personality* as a representative case of institutional administrative research, which addresses “institutionally framed problems with either a critical or a seemingly ‘neutral’ ideological perspective” (p.121). Funded by a large Jewish organisation during the early period of Cold War, the study led by Adorno found that the leftists (socialists

and communists) had attitudes close to the polar opposite of those held by persons high on the “F” (fascist) scale. Smythe points out that by using the scaling technique developed in conventional social psychology, the study is devoid of any historical, institutional analysis of the social process that led to the ascendance of fascism. What is particularly noteworthy is that, while Smythe regards *The Authoritarian Personality* as failing to understand the characters of individuals in relation to the social totality, Lazarsfeld considers it a major success of integrating critical and administrative research, which even prompted his self-criticism for not being able to achieve the same with the Princeton Radio Project (Jay, 1973).

While Smythe’s attack on Adorno reflects his general discontent with Western Marxism for what he considered as an overemphasis on ideology and the neglect of the concept of commodification, *The Authoritarian Personality* should be understood in relation to Frankfurt School’s wider programme of research into the roots of Fascism. In fact, in the first major study the Institute of Social Research at the University of Frankfurt produced under Horkheimer’s directorship, the group explicitly stayed away from “developing a theory of specifically political authority”, because to do so would have implied a fetishization of politics as something apart from the social totality. Horkheimer wrote at that time, “A general definition of authority would be necessarily extremely empty, like all conceptual definitions which attempt to define single moments of social life in a way which encompasses all of history... General concepts, which form the basis of social theory, can only be understood in their correct meaning in connection with the other general and specific concepts of theory, that is, as moments of a specific theoretical structure.” (Cited in Jay, 1973, p. 118)

Even though many scholars made clear that critical media and communication research is neither purely theoretical nor has anything against empirical work per se (e.g., Murdock, 2017) the misconception persists in the field. Youchi Ito, one of the few Asian scholars in the leadership of both IAMCR (Board Member 1988-1996) and ICA (Board-member-at-large 1997-2000), chose the latter as his favourite association, because “My approach is basically empirical. In that sense, ICA suits me better than IAMCR.” (Meyen, 2012, p. 1665). Roderick Hart, another ICA fellow and a political communication scholar based at the University of Texas, Austin, when being asked to draw a landscape of communication worldwide, readily admitted that “I just don’t know much about people who attend IAMCR. There are more progressive groups in IAMCR and a lot of South American institutions” (Meyen, 2012, p. 1652). Putting these two pieces of comments together, one might wonder whether, from the vantage point of ICA core members, IAMCR is comprised of critical scholars who do not care as much about empirical rigor. But as Smythe and Tran (1983) point out, critical and administrative research should be differentiated based on three inter-relating features, “the type of problem selected, the research method employed, the ideological perspective as identified by the researchers’ treatment of the results of the analysis as well as the choice of problems and tools” (p. 118). In other words, within the paradigm of critical theory, methodological choice is always a political decision. Positivism excludes the “unspeakable” from the domain of scholarly inquiry by restricting reality to that which could be expressed with established protocols. As a result, existing order becomes reified through unreflective acceptance of “facts” as well as the separation of data and value.

### **The dialectics of ideology**

As a multi-layered, hugely complex, and fiercely uncompromising intellectual enterprise, the Frankfurt School defies any form of reductionism and reification. For one thing, there are plenty of debates among its main theorists on many important issues. For another, key figures of the Frankfurt School, including Horkheimer, Adorno, Benjamin, Marcuse, Lowenthal, etc.,

each engages with Marxist philosophy via a different entry point and each has their own analytical focus. Instead of focusing narrowly on whether and how the works of the Frankfurt School are cited in the publications of IAMCR members, I highlight how they offer crucial intellectual resources for envisioning a broad research agenda that examines media and communication as part of a social totality.

The notion of social totality comes from Marx, whose theory of political economy combines historical materialism and dialectic materialism. Critical Theory's conceptualisation of social totality is different from orthodox Marxism which emphasises the centrality of the economic base in the functioning of capitalist society. For Horkheimer and his colleagues at the Institute of Social Research, a cultural phenomenon is not an ideological reflex of class interests. In Adorno's (1983) words, "the task of criticism must be not so much to search for the particular interest-groups to which cultural phenomena are to be assigned, but rather to decipher the general social tendencies which are expressed in these phenomena and through which the most powerful interests realise themselves. Cultural criticism must become social physiognomy" (p.30). In addition, core members of the Institute started to engage with psychology and psychoanalysis as early as the 1930s. The first task Horkheimer outlined for the Institute under his leadership was a study of workers' and employees' attitudes toward a variety of issues in Germany and the rest of the developed Europe. He particularly stressed the role of social psychology in bridging the gap between individual and society (Jay, 1973). Erich Fromm's *Escape from Freedom* is considered one of the founding texts of political psychology. Lowenthal calls mass culture "psychoanalysis in reverse", and Marcuse later wrote the highly influential *One-dimensional Man* by combining Marxism with Freudian psychoanalysis. These two important points of departure from Marxist political economy, together with the Frankfurt School's consistent emphasis on dialectics and social totality, make Critical Theory particularly generative and capacious in setting the research agenda of an interdisciplinary field.

Perhaps as crucial as the discussion of critical vs. administrative research in shaping the contours of our field, is the debate between political economy and cultural studies within the subfield of critical media and communications research. These polemic exchanges may have created the impression that the two approaches are incompatible. But a careful reading of the Frankfurt School provides a unique vantage point to view political economy and cultural studies as not only complementary, but also equally indispensable. A founder of the field of political economy of communication, Dallas Smythe once made scathing comments on the Frankfurt School for their lack of attention to the material conditions of the Consciousness Industry (Enzensberger, 1974). In *Dependency Road*, Smythe (1981) disparages previous Marxist scholarship, including that of Gramsci and the Frankfurt School, for being "idealist" and "subjective", because he argued they focus too much on what goes on in people's mind, yet do not pay nearly enough attention to the economic function that the media industries serve in capitalism. It is understandable that Smythe wanted to make the case for political economy by critiquing the Frankfurt School who, after all, were the principal interlocutors in these debates due to the significant theoretical contributions they made to Marxism.

Moving beyond Smythe's rhetoric, which is partially for the sake of argument, one finds that not only had Marxist political economists such as Henryk Grossman and Friedrich Pollock played pivotal role in the early decades of the Institute, but so also did Horkheimer include economics as an important part of the interdisciplinary research program he formulated after taking over the directorship in 1930 (Fuchs, 2012). Even on the concept of commodity fetishism, which seems primarily "idealist" and "subjective", Adorno (1983) insists upon a

dialectic view by stressing that “the fetish character of commodities is not a fact of consciousness, but dialectic in the eminent sense that it produces consciousness” (p.85). For him, “commodity fetishes are not merely the projection of opaque human relations into the world of things. They are also the chimerical deities which originate in the primacy of the exchange process but nevertheless represent something not entirely absorbed in it” (p. 86). In other words, it is a social reality rather than a psychological reality. In this sense, a political economy of communication is neither rejecting the theoretical premises nor the fundamental concerns of the Frankfurt School. It is extending the inquiries of Critical Theory into new realms.

From the other side of the debate, cultural studies is often the anchor point around which critiques of the Frankfurt School are formulated. As the conventional wisdom goes, by decrying the Culture Industry as instigators of mass deception, the Frankfurt School’s view of contemporary media culture is structural functionalist, pessimistic and elitist. In contrast, by recognizing the polysemy of media texts and the audience capacity for decoding, cultural studies opens up a space for agency, hope and progressive social change. Such a simplistic juxtaposition, on the one hand, reduces the Frankfurt School’s dialectic and holistic understanding of culture into the single most influential piece by Adorno and Horkheimer (1972), while, on the other hand, it ignores the theoretical tensions among different strands of cultural studies.

Although compared with other associations in the field, IAMCR is most distinct for its commitment to critical political economy, cultural studies has also been part of the agenda. Among the three memorial awards that IAMCR has set up so far, two are named after prominent political economists (Herbert Schiller and Dallas Smythe) and the third is for commemorating the achievements of Stuart Hall, whose relationship with Marxism deserves more thorough consideration than what is currently visible even in the celebration of Hall’s work. Despite their obvious disagreement on various fronts, including for example Adorno’s and Hall’s opposing verdict on Jazz music, and the fact that Hall makes scarce reference to the Frankfurt School even when discussing the problem of ideology, they converge on several important issues as a result of their common affinity with Marxism.

First, studies of aesthetics and ideology should always be situated within historicized materialist premises. Horkheimer made clear that the materialist theory of society that he proposed is predicated on dialectic interactions between the subject and the object, between the material base and the superstructure. But he also expressed aversion to the tendency of vulgar Marxists to “elevate materialism to a theory of knowledge, which claimed absolute certainty the way idealism had in the past” (Jay, 1973, p.53). Similarly, Hall (1986) is of the view that ideas arise from and reflect the material conditions and circumstances in which they are generated. By the same token, one detects social relations and social contradictions from thoughts emerging at a given historical conjuncture. What he meant by “arise” and “reflect” is not a mechanical correspondence, but a non-linear process fraught with tension and discrepancy. No one would have accused British Cultural Studies of promoting economic reductionism. Significantly though, in his last interview with Sut Jhally in 2012, Hall reserved his warning for those who became detached from the materialist premise, commenting that this is: “much more damaging than that in its attempt to move away from economic reductionism, it sort of forgot that there was an economy at all” (Hall, 2012). To do so would mean for cultural studies to lose its political edge.

Second, media industries play a central role in percolating the “common sense” about contemporary capitalist society. The overtly pessimistic tone of *Culture Industry: Enlightenment as mass deception* (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1972) often leads to the misconception that the Frankfurt School simply regards commercial media industries as producers of “false consciousness” and that the mass are being duped. In fact, Adorno argues that a dialectical, or “immanent” critique of art, “takes seriously the principle that it is not ideology in itself which is untrue but rather its pretension to correspond to reality.” What is less well-known than the unsuccessful Princeton Radio Project is the television research project Adorno directed while at the Hacker Foundation of Beverly Hills, California. In an article published after the completion of this project, Adorno (1954) argues that “the psychoanalytic concept of a multi-layered personality has been taken up by cultural industry, but that the concept is used in order to ensnare the consumer as completely as possible and in order to engage him psychodynamically in the service of premeditated effects” (p.223). Noticing that George Gerbner was one of the research assistants for this study, one cannot help wondering whether Cultivation Theory was, to certain extent, Gerbner’s attempt to support this argument with systematic empirical data. Further, the incorporation of psychoanalysis by scholars like Marcuse and Fromm opened up new lines of inquiry, which generated nuanced insights into how exactly mass media function as new forms of social control.

### **Praxis oriented social science research**

Whether it is the repudiation of positivism or an emphasis on social totality, regardless of the analytical focus on either the political economy of communication industries or the media culture of our times, the dialectical imagination that the Frankfurt School fosters demands is “not mere contemplation but praxis” (Adorno, 1983, p. 150). For the Institute of Social Research, the possibility of transforming social order through human praxis lies in combining philosophy and social analysis, in exposing the incongruency between ideology and material reality, and in critiquing the corrosive power of instrumental rationality in late stage capitalism. The concern over the ideological impact and the political influence of media and communication industries naturally lead to further inquiry into alternative institutional arrangements that could avoid the pitfalls of an advertising driven and profit-oriented commercial model. For many IAMCR members who conduct research on policy and governance, the writings of Jurgen Habermas not only offered important conceptual tools but also set out key normative principles toward which an ideal speech environment is oriented. As an academic association dedicated to critical research on media and communication, IAMCR’s orientation toward praxis manifests in scholars’ involvement in media activism and policy research (Melody & Mansell, 1983), in raising the consciousness of younger generations through education (Wasko & Wiedemann, 2015) and in preserving - in its comprehensive research agenda - the yearning for and the imagination of another kind of society beyond the status quo.

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