

SOCIAL CRITICISM IN COMMUNICATION: A CRITICAL THEORY PERSPECTIVE

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji teori kritis komunikasi sebagai pendekatan analitis yang berfungsi untuk mengkritisi struktur kekuasaan, ideologi, dan relasi sosial dalam praktik komunikasi. Tujuan utama penelitian ini adalah untuk mengungkap dinamika kekuasaan dominan, menganalisis representasi dan konstruksi realitas, serta mendorong kesadaran kritis dan transformasi sosial melalui komunikasi. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain penelitian kualitatif dengan metode studi pustaka (library research), yang mengandalkan analisis kritis terhadap literatur, buku, jurnal akademik, dan konten media yang relevan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa teori kritis komunikasi berakar pada pemikiran Marxis, kritik budaya, poststrukturalis, dan perspektif feminis. Dalam kajian komunikasi, teori ini diterapkan untuk menganalisis konten media, iklan, propaganda, komunikasi politik, dan wacana antarbudaya. Temuan penelitian ini menegaskan bahwa teori kritis komunikasi memiliki peran penting dalam meningkatkan kesadaran kritis, mendekonstruksi ideologi dominan, dan mendukung perubahan sosial. Simpulan penelitian ini menegaskan relevansi teori kritis sebagai kerangka berpikir untuk melakukan perlawanan terhadap hegemoni dalam praktik komunikasi. Implikasi dari penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa teori kritis komunikasi dapat digunakan sebagai alat strategis bagi pendidik, praktisi media, dan akademisi komunikasi untuk mendorong komunikasi yang emansipatoris dan mempromosikan keadilan sosial dalam kehidupan masyarakat kontemporer.

Kata Kunci: *Teori Kritis; Komunikasi; Kekuasaan Dominan; Kesadaran Kritis; Perubahan Sosial.*

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Abstract

This study examines critical communication theory as an analytical approach that critiques power structures, ideologies, and social relations within communication practices. The main objective of this research is to uncover the dynamics of dominant power, analyze the representation and construction of reality, and promote critical awareness and social transformation through communication. This study adopts a qualitative research design using library research (*studi pustaka*) as the primary method, relying on the critical analysis of literature, books, academic journals, and relevant media content. The research results show that critical communication theory is rooted in Marxist thought, cultural criticism, poststructuralism, and feminist perspectives. In communication studies, this theory is applied to analyze media content, advertising, propaganda, political communication, and intercultural discourse. The findings emphasize that critical communication theory plays a significant role in enhancing critical consciousness, deconstructing dominant ideologies, and supporting social change. The conclusion highlights the relevance of critical theory in providing a framework for resistance against hegemony in communication practices. The implication of this study suggests that critical communication theory can be used as a strategic tool for educators, media practitioners, and communication scholars to foster emancipatory communication and promote social justice in contemporary society.

Keywords: Critical Theory; Communication; Dominant Power; Critical Consciousness; Social Change.

INTRODUCTION

Critical theory in communication has profound historical and philosophical roots, originating from critiques of capitalism, modernity, and mass media. Influenced by Hegelian, Marxian, and Habermasian thought, this theory seeks to uncover the relationships between communication, media, and power within society. By analyzing how media operates to sustain ideology and social domination, critical theory provides a significant perspective for understanding the world of communication. However, despite offering sharp critiques of social structures and media, critical theory also faces challenges concerning objectivity, empirical validation, and practical solutions for social change. Research that examines the historical and philosophical context of critical communication theory focuses on how the theory has evolved within the history of social thought



and philosophy, and how these concepts play a role in understanding communication phenomena, media, and power. In this context, it is essential to see how critical theory integrates Marxian ideology, Hegelian philosophy, and the thoughts of key figures such as Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, and Jürgen Habermas, who have significantly shaped our understanding of the role of media in society (Fuchs, 2017)

The historical and philosophical context of critical theory in communication is rooted in critiques of capitalism, dominant ideology, and the influence of media in reproducing structures of power. Through the Marxist tradition and critiques of modern rationality, critical theory aims to reveal how communication and media function not only as tools for disseminating information but also as instruments for maintaining social and political hegemony. With the continuous development of digital media, these ideas have become increasingly relevant in contemporary communication analysis (Dahlgren, 2009). Research highlights the importance of linking social critique with social knowledge to avoid epistemic violence and promote epistemic empowerment. This underscores that critical social theory must consider the relationship between social critique and knowledge to be effective (Renault, 2020). In communication research, QuantCrit has been used to pursue social justice and equity agendas. This approach provides guidance on how researchers can integrate critical awareness in quantitative communication research, including expanding research scope, reformulating research questions with a social justice orientation, and challenging dominant narratives (Kim, 2024).

This study explores the relationship between social critique and normativity within the tradition of Critical Theory, particularly through the work of Jürgen Habermas. The theory employs immanent critique to reconstruct the normative aspirations of the social reality it seeks to critique (Ortega-Esquembre, 2018). In the context of social representation theory, critical theory has the potential to support or critique social order. However, there are controversial issues that need clarification, such as the relationship between psychological processes and social practices, as well as the reification and legitimization of different systems of knowledge (Howarth, 2006). Critical social theory in education emphasizes the importance of critique in the pursuit of quality education. It promotes students' ability to critique institutional and conceptual dilemmas that lead to domination or oppression (Leonardo, 2004).



Challenges and future directions of critical theory highlight how social problems often originate from social structures that constrain groups within society. This research seeks to help people imagine alternative social organizations that facilitate the development of human potential without limitations (Murray & Ozanne, 1991). Revisiting Habermas' Colonization Theory, this study re-examines Habermas' thesis of colonization to analyze contemporary forms of domination that hinder social and political participation. It demonstrates the potential to transform oppressive relationships (Kreide, 2023). This research shows that social criticism in communication from a critical theory perspective can serve as a powerful tool to promote social change and justice, although challenges remain to achieve this goal. Critical theory, rooted in the Frankfurt School, emphasizes the importance of social critique in understanding and transforming existing social structures. It connects social criticism with knowledge and seeks to overcome domination and injustice in society through critical analysis of communication and social practices.

Critical theory emphasizes that social critique cannot be separated from knowledge about the social world. Effective social critique must consider the relationship between critique and knowledge to avoid epistemic violence and promote epistemic empowerment (Renault, 2020),(Leonardo, 2004). Critical theory in communication focuses on the analysis of power discourse that maintains elite privilege and existing social relations. It includes critiques of domination and freedom, and views critique as a transformational practice (McKerrow, 1989) Critical theory offers a robust framework for understanding and critiquing social and communication structures. By linking social critique with knowledge, this theory seeks to overcome domination and social injustice. Despite facing challenges from postmodern theories, critical theory remains relevant in contemporary social analysis and education, as well as in developing more humanistic and participatory communication.

THEORETICAL BASIS

Social Criticism

Social criticism serves as an essential tool for understanding and driving social change. It involves the analysis and evaluation of existing social structures, norms, and practices with the aim of identifying and addressing injustices and imbalances within society. Social criticism often arises from conflicts of values, distribution, and identity. Distributional conflicts emerge from the growth of capitalism that generates new inequalities, while identity conflicts focus on the social recognition of



individuals and groups. Criticism can be regarded either as a condition for or as a consequence of social change (Kern et al., 2017).

Critical theory, as developed by the Frankfurt School, emphasizes the relationship between social criticism and knowledge of the social world. However, there is an ongoing debate over whether social criticism can be separated from knowledge, with some arguing that such separation may lead to epistemic violence (Renault, 2020). The concept of social criticism is also explored through the themes of utopia, recognition, and dissent, which help construct a framework for critical social theory and resistance practices (Rodríguez, 2020). Studies of social movements demonstrate how social criticism is articulated within the context of collective action. The concept of “critique in movement” links critical social theory with the study of social movements, highlighting the renewed focus on capitalism within contemporary movement studies (Rodríguez, 2020).

Social criticism requires a critical standpoint, which can be attained through heightened awareness. Nevertheless, not all epistemic practices that appear to foster awareness are necessarily justifiable. Under certain conditions, the development of awareness can lead to a legitimate critical standpoint (Haslanger, 2021). Radical social criticism imposes a greater burden of proof compared to moderate criticism. Radical critics, such as Marxists, feminists, and libertarians, often challenge the fundamental structures of society, whereas moderate critics believe that existing institutions can be reformed to approximate better ideals (Nold, 2005).

Focusing on the relationship between social criticism and knowledge, this theory underscores the importance of understanding the social world to conduct effective critique. Thinkers such as Adorno, Habermas, and Honneth have contributed to this approach, linking social criticism with principles of social justice (Delanty, 2011), (Renault, 2020). Pierre Bourdieu developed the concept of social criticism emphasizing semantic struggles and transformations of dominant social configurations. This critique focuses on how social structures influence cognition and individual agency (Croce, 2019), (Renault, 2020). Michel Foucault introduced the genealogical approach, tracing the origins and development of social practices to reveal hidden mechanisms of power and domination (Delanty, 2011). Postmodern social theory challenges the fundamental principles of modernity, emphasizing profound reflection on tradition, although often adopting a pessimistic stance (Wen-Juan, 2006). This theory explores the concepts of utopia and recognition as crucial elements in social



criticism, focusing on how utopia can motivate social change and how recognition can address injustice (Rodríguez, 2020).

Social criticism theories encompass various approaches that focus on analyzing and transforming existing social structures. From Frankfurt School critical theory to postmodern critique, each offers a unique perspective for understanding and challenging social injustice. These approaches are crucial in promoting more just and equitable social change, identifying, and addressing injustice and domination. Criticism plays a vital role in social change by serving as a catalyst and guide for social transformation. Criticism can emerge from various conflicts, such as value conflicts, distributional conflicts, and identity conflicts, all of which can trigger social change (Kern et al., 2017).

Communication

Communication is one of the most frequently used yet least theorized concepts across various academic disciplines. Although numerous communication theories and models have been developed, a precise and comprehensive definition of communication remains a subject of debate among scholars (Özçetin, 2023). Communication is often defined as an interaction between two or more individuals involving the exchange of cognitive or affective-evaluative information. It encompasses a complex process of constructing and developing relationships through information exchange (Islam, 2022),(Dimon, 2019). There are fifteen major themes identified in the definitions of communication, with three critical points serving as key differentiators in communication theory. These points significantly influence the construction of communication theory (Dance, 1970). Communication is often perceived as a clear and unproblematic concept; however, in reality, the boundaries and content of this discipline remain ambiguous. This has led to an identity crisis within communication studies, marked by ontological pluralism and theoretical heteroglossia (Özçetin, 2023).

Many definitions of communication are considered inadequate because they are either too restrictive or overly inclusive, often encompassing interactions not commonly recognized as "genuine" communication (Lewis & Gower, 1980). Non-verbal communication includes body language, facial expressions, and gestures that do not possess verbal meaning but play a crucial role in human interaction (Islam, 2022). Remote communication, facilitated by technology, enables information exchange that overcomes physical distance between sender and receiver,



with concepts such as asynchronicity and durability becoming essential in written and electronic communication (Kaufer & Carley, 1994).

The communication process has evolved alongside human history and has been defined from various scientific perspectives, such as philosophy, sociology, and psychology. However, there is still no universally accepted definition that encompasses all the characteristics of this phenomenon (et al., 2022). The concept of communication is a complex and multidisciplinary phenomenon, with definitions that vary widely and are often inadequate. Despite the development of many theories, the challenge of comprehensively defining communication persists, particularly due to its polysemous and complex nature (Özçetin, 2023),(Lewis & Gower, 1980),(et al., 2022).

Hegemony

Hegemony refers to the domination or control exercised by certain groups within society, not merely through physical force or visible power, but also through the control of ideology, culture, and societal ways of thinking. Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Marxist scholar, developed the concept of hegemony within the framework of social theory, focusing on the relationship between social classes and ideological power. According to Gramsci, hegemony is a strategy by which the ruling class maintains its power without resorting to violence or overt coercion, but rather by obtaining the consent or approval of the subordinate classes through ideological control.

The concepts of hegemony and ideology are interrelated and fundamental in critical communication theory. Both are employed to explain how power operates within society through media and culture, either directly or indirectly, via ideological control. Hegemony demonstrates how dominant groups sustain power through consensus and cultural control, while ideology explains how dominant worldviews produce social and political inequalities. By analyzing these two concepts, we can better understand how media plays a role in reinforcing existing power structures and how critical analysis may deconstruct and challenge them (Sterne, 2012).

The hegemonic concept, developed by Antonio Gramsci and further integrated by critical theory scholars, explains how dominant ideologies are maintained through media and communication. Media not only disseminate information but also shape public perceptions of what is considered “normal” or “acceptable.” In this regard, media function as instruments for strengthening power by creating and spreading specific ideologies that support the status quo. Hegemony and ideology are deeply



interconnected. Hegemony creates and reinforces dominant ideologies, while ideology serves to maintain hegemony. In other words, ideology is a tool used by dominant groups to gain and sustain their hegemony. Conversely, strong hegemony ensures that such ideologies are widely accepted within society (Baudrillard, 2016).

RESEARCH METHODS

This study focuses on social criticism in communication from the perspective of critical theory, with the unit of analysis directed toward various social phenomena represented in communication practices. The research observes and analyzes multiple artifacts, including written texts, public discourses, media content, and socio-cultural events where communication becomes the site of criticism against social structures. The location of analysis is not limited to a specific geographical place but rather to symbolic spaces where communication is used to voice resistance, inequality, or social injustice. These include popular media, online platforms, speeches by public figures, cultural celebrations, protests, and published works that reflect critical messages toward dominant power structures. The unit of analysis also encompasses significant figures in communication thought, critical theorists, and media practitioners who apply communication for emancipatory purposes. Events such as public debates, mass demonstrations, or media campaigns that challenge the status quo are considered relevant objects of study. This broad unit of analysis enables the research to explore how communication functions as a medium of social criticism in various contexts, thus providing rich empirical evidence to elaborate critical theory perspectives.

This research adopts a qualitative research design with a library research (*studi pustaka*) approach, which is appropriate for conceptual and theoretical exploration. The study does not rely on fieldwork or empirical interviews but rather engages critically with a variety of secondary sources. The library research method involves systematic collection, review, and analysis of literature that discusses social criticism in communication within the framework of critical theory. The primary sources consist of scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, theoretical manuscripts, and previous research that provide a foundation for analyzing the subject matter. In addition, the study also utilizes relevant digital sources, including academic databases, online archives, and media content, to support the depth of analysis. This design enables the researcher to engage in a critical dialogue with existing theories, identify gaps, and offer new insights grounded in the critical tradition. The qualitative approach emphasizes interpretive analysis, seeking to understand the meanings and



intentions behind communication acts of criticism, and how these contribute to the transformation of society.

The data analysis in this research is conducted through a critical review of textual and audiovisual materials relevant to the theme of social criticism in communication. The primary sources of information include theoretical books, scientific journal articles, manuscripts, media reports, audiovisual content, and relevant digital archives. The data collection procedure involves several stages: first, the identification and selection of literature based on relevance to critical theory and communication criticism; second, categorizing sources according to themes such as power relations, ideology, resistance, or emancipation; and third, reviewing and synthesizing the arguments presented within those sources. The method of analysis follows a critical discourse analysis framework, emphasizing the deconstruction of texts and the uncovering of ideological elements embedded in communication practices. The analytical stages involve reading and interpreting texts, comparing multiple sources, and contextualizing findings within the framework of critical theory. The researcher systematically identifies patterns of criticism, rhetorical strategies, and emancipatory messages in communication practices, aiming to construct a comprehensive understanding of how social criticism operates within the communication process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Critical theorists, particularly Adorno and Horkheimer, in their seminal work *The Culture Industry*, criticize how the culture industry and mass media transform cultural products into commodities tailored to market demands. They argue that mass media lead society towards homogeneous cultural consumption, diminishing individuals' capacity for critical thinking and reinforcing greater social control. Criticism of mass media encompasses various dimensions, ranging from power concentration and information bias to broader social and psychological impacts. Addressing these issues requires critical awareness among audiences and efforts to improve journalistic practices and establish fairer and more transparent media regulations. In today's digital era, these challenges have become increasingly complex, as social media exerts a more direct and profound influence on how we access and consume information (Andrejevic, 2007).

Critique of mass media in critical theory focuses on the role of media in maintaining power, ideology, and existing social structures. Media serve not only as instruments of information but also as tools of cultural hegemony that reinforce social and economic inequality. Through various



critical perspectives—Marxist, feminist, postmodern, and others—critical theory challenges the ways media disseminate dominant narratives that often disadvantage marginalized groups. This critique opens up space for social resistance and the creation of alternative discourses that are more just and inclusive (Gaber, 2007). Liberation and emancipation are two interrelated concepts in critical theory, particularly in the context of communication, society, and politics. These concepts relate to efforts to transform oppressive power structures and to advocate for the freedom of individuals or marginalized groups. In many social theories, liberation and emancipation are seen as integral parts of social transformation processes aimed at creating a more just and equitable society.

Liberation and emancipation, as interconnected concepts within critical theory, highlight the struggle for freedom, social justice, and structural change. Liberation not only involves freedom from physical or political oppression but also liberation from dominant ideological and power structures. Emancipation, on the other hand, focuses on an active process of liberation, involving changes in self-awareness and the capacity to take control over one's life, individually or collectively. In the modern context, liberation and emancipation are increasingly linked to the use of social media and digital technology to create alternative discourses and resist emerging forms of domination in the digital world (Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2018).

As part of a critical approach, this theory aims to create space for liberation and emancipation. By exposing how power structures and ideologies operate through communication, critical theory seeks to facilitate social change that enables society to become more conscious and critical of existing conditions. This line of thought is closely related to criticism of capitalism and its influence in shaping communication and media patterns.

Liberation and emancipation are two interrelated concepts in the struggle for social justice. Liberation emphasizes the elimination of oppression and domination, while emancipation focuses on granting rights and equality to individuals or groups. These concepts are not only relevant in the historical context of slavery and independence movements but also in contemporary social, political, and economic struggles. The struggle for liberation and emancipation continues in various forms worldwide, whether through structural changes or legal and social reforms (Benkler, 2006). Habermas identified that the public sphere first emerged in 18th-century Europe, particularly among the educated middle class. At that time, cafes, salons, and clubs became spaces for discussing political, cultural, and social issues. These discussions were conducted rationally and openly,



enabling individuals to form collective opinions without interference from political or economic authorities. The public sphere thus functioned as a bridge between civil society and the state, providing space for the formation of critical and free public opinion.

Jürgen Habermas, a prominent figure in critical theory, developed the concept of the public sphere as a space for free and open discussion among individuals. In his view, the ideal public sphere is a place where rationality and argumentation can function without distortion from power or economic interests. Habermas believes that through free and rational communication, society can reach fair and equitable consensus (Kaun, 2024). Habermas' understanding of the public sphere provides us with a framework to analyze media and communication dynamics in contemporary society and to encourage more critical and open discussion in our political and social lives (Sclater, J., & Barker, C. 2017), (Mansell, Robin; Hwa Ang, 2015)

However, over time, especially with the rise of mass media and capitalism, the public sphere underwent a transformation. Mass media, which initially provided public access to participate in public discourse, has increasingly been dominated by economic and political powers. This has triggered the commodification of the public sphere, leading to a decline in the quality of public discourse and limiting public participation in broader political processes. Habermas' ideas about the public sphere remain relevant amid modern challenges. In contemporary socio-political contexts, the public sphere is often constrained by the dominance of mass media, social polarization, and political control. Habermas reminds us that to maintain the quality of the public sphere, we must resist practices of information manipulation and ensure that discourse remains inclusive and rational. Ultimately, the public sphere should continue to function as a space where society can engage in free and critical discussion and shape public opinion capable of influencing government policy and democratic life.

Overall, Habermas' thought provides profound insight into how the public sphere, both physical and digital, functions in shaping a democratic society. He emphasizes that a healthy public sphere must uphold freedom of expression, rationality, and inclusivity, while avoiding domination that hinders the process of free and open deliberation (Shirky, 2008). Critical Theory in the context of digital media is an analytical approach that seeks to uncover power structures, ideologies, and social impacts hidden behind digital media such as the internet, social media, and other technology-based platforms. This concept originates from the tradition of critical thought



developed by the Frankfurt School, such as Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, and Habermas, who focused on the relationship between culture, power, and capitalism. In the context of digital media, Critical Theory invites us to question how digital technology interacts with ideology, economics, politics, and culture within society.

Critical Theory highlights how digital media can serve as tools of domination, commodification, surveillance, and information manipulation, which in turn influence how we understand the world and interact in social life. While offering many opportunities for openness and democratic participation, digital media also introduce significant challenges related to inequality, polarization, and the increasing influence of corporate and state power. Through the lens of Critical Theory, we can better understand the forces behind digital media and the ways these media affect social, political, and economic structures, as well as how we might advocate for a more just and democratic digital public sphere (Zuboff, 2020).

Critical Theory in communication provides a profound approach to understanding how media and communication function in reinforcing existing power structures within society. Focusing on critique of ideology, hegemony, and capitalism, this theory aims to pave the way for a more critical understanding of a world shaped by media and communication. These ideas are not only relevant for media analysis but also for broader social change and societal emancipation. Critical Theory in the context of digital media invites us to delve deeper into the relationship between technology, power, and socio-cultural dynamics. This theory emphasizes that digital media are not merely tools for communication or entertainment but also spaces for either challenging or preserving existing power structures. By understanding this perspective, we can be better prepared to face the challenges of the digital era and use it to advance a more just and democratic society (Jenkins & Plasencia, 2017).

CONCLUSION

Communication technology is often perceived not merely as a tool that brings convenience, but also as an instrument of domination that reinforces existing power structures. Criticism of communication technology as a tool of domination points to several crucial issues that reveal how technology is utilized to strengthen political, economic, and social control by dominant groups. The culture industry and standardization illustrate how economic and commercial power can influence cultural production, creating spaces for cultural homogenization



and reducing diversity as well as more authentic cultural values. This process leads to the creation of a consumerist culture that prioritizes profit over aesthetic or social values, which in turn diminishes creativity and diversity within society. Therefore, it is essential to evaluate the impact of standardization in the cultural industry and to seek ways to support diversity and innovation in cultural production.

The myth of technological progress often neglects the complexity of social, political, and environmental consequences generated by technological innovation. This view, which regards technology as a universal solution, needs to be questioned by examining its negative impacts and the inequalities it may produce. Thus, it is crucial to approach technological advancement critically, taking into account how technology can be employed more equitably, sustainably, and humanely. Alienation in digital technology highlights how, despite offering communication convenience and connectivity, technology may lead to isolation, loss of identity, and a decline in the quality of social interaction. In an increasingly digitalized world, it is important to strike a balance between the benefits of technology and the need to maintain authentic social relationships, safeguard privacy, and ensure that individuals retain agency in navigating the digital realm.

Technology as a space of resistance demonstrates how tools often used to reinforce power can also be utilized to challenge injustice, dismantle hegemony, and advocate for social change. Despite the risks of misuse, technology also presents significant potential for defending human rights, freedom, and justice at various levels of society. Therefore, it is imperative to continuously explore innovative ways of using technology to resist domination and to create spaces for constructive and progressive resistance.

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