ON HUMAN COMMUNICATION:

A Review, a Survey, and a Criticism

COLIN CHERRY

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The comments on the dust jacket for the third edition of Colin Cherry's On Human Communication come from reviews of previous editions which appeared in such diverse places as the Canadian Journal of Psychology, Physics Today, and Romance Philology, and indicate that it is a broad ranging and fascinating book. The range is certainly broad, so broad that I have included a table-of contents as an appendix to this review rather than attempting to summarize the contents of the book.

But it is no longer fascinating. Students of human communication have thought and debated much and even learned a little between the publication of the first edition of On Human Communication in 1957 and the publication of the third edition in 1978. But very little of that material has become part of the substance of Cherry's book (although some of it is cited). Thus, while the first edition may well have been "A Review, a Survey, and

a Criticism" (the book's subtitle), the third edition is not. Too much is left unconsidered.

The most serious gap is in the consideration of natural languages. Cherry gives the impression that information theory, statistics, Fourier analysis, and perhaps a little logic are the most important formal tools for the analysis of natural language. That may have been true when Cherry wrote the first edition of the book, but it is certainly not true now. Cherry does make a few references to Chomsky, but none of the substance of the Chomskian revolution (not to mention post-Chomskian developments) has affected Cherry's treatment of natural language. The texture of theorizing and model building in linguistics, psycholinguistics, and cognitive psychology has undergone considerable change since the Fifties, but little of that has become part of the substance of On Human Communication.

Similarly, a great deal of work has been done on nonverbal communication in the last two decades. While Cherry alludes to some of this work, he makes no attempt to summarize any of the major lines of inquiry. As with modern linguistics, the material is too diverse to cover it all in the sort of survey which Cherry intends On Human Communication to be. What I find so disheartening is that so little of this material is mentioned at all, especially when one realizes that Cherry has added a new chapter ("Human Communication: Feeling, Knowing, and Understanding") to the third edition for the purpose of talking about what is specifically human about human communication. That Cherry should devote ten pages to Zipf's law while not even mentioning the work of Paul Ekman, Carroll Izard, and Manfred Clynes (to mention only the work which comes most readily to my mind) on the expression and communication of emotion is bizarre.

Finally, Cherry's treatment of semiotics is relatively insulated from most of the semiotic research of the last two decades. Semiotics is itself

such a diverse and amorphous enterprise (as diverse and amorphous as the study of human communication is) that it is perhaps unfair to criticise Cherry for shortchanging it. But Cherry introduced the topic of ritual into his final chapter and that is a subject on which semioticians have had a great deal to say (I am thinking of structural anthropologists such as Claude Levi-Strauss, Edmund Leach, and Victor Turner). Consequently I am inclined to view Cherry's neglect of semiotics perhaps more harshly than I otherwise would.

No doubt Cherry could be charged with other sins of ommission, but the three I've mentioned are serious enough. It is equally beyond doubt that an edition of On Human Communication which included this material would be a very different book, not Colin Cherry's book at all. If Cherry had attempted and achieved a synthesis of his material, then its value as a synthesis might well outweigh the dated nature of some of the elements of the synthesis. But Cherry wasn't after a synthesis; he simply wanted to see what was out there. There is now much out there which Cherry hasn't seen. Consequently On Human Communication is not a good guide. The person who wants or needs a general introduction to the subject of human communication which reflects the current state of the art(s) will have to look elsewhere.

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