

## Review

Richard O. Young, *How Audiences Decide: a Cognitive Approach to Business Communication*, London: Routledge, 2011. Pp. 398. £33.00 pbk. ISBN: 978-0-415-87900-2.

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Read aright, this can be a startlingly revealing book for anyone who sees themselves as standing within a broadly cultural studies tradition for thinking about audiences. If you can afford it, that is, it's not cheap ... But for your money you get a digest of a huge amount of a particular kind of research (the bibliography tops 2,000 items – I counted). You won't learn much about how these researches were done. And you won't get much in the way of critical/analytic discussion of concepts, or methods. But what you can get, if you read the book symptomatically, is a clear view of the nature of this cognitive paradigm – one which is doing very nicely, makes considerable claims for itself, and gets a lot of coverage for its psychologicistic claims.

Cognitivism is 'the coming thing' in various domains. It veers off into brain research and even evolutionary genetics in one direction, and it provides the theoretical base for a range of work in other fields such as film studies (where it has situated itself as a main alternative to psychoanalysis). But this book operates in the core domain of communication studies. It operates with a very wide definition of 'audience'. A lecturer receiving an essay becomes its 'audience'. A speculative investor reading an investment proposal is its 'audience'. So are people receiving a leaflet, or looking at an advert, or listening to a political speech. In some ways I am attracted by this expansiveness. But so broad is this account, one wonders if there are any limits at all. Would it encompass parents talking to or listening to children, conversations between partners, friends, people on a night out, chatting on a train – anyone communicating at all? Actually the model does not go to these kinds of places. It takes for granted, as given, what is meant by the term. And indeed I struggled to find any attempt at definition of 'audience', let alone recognition that this is a term that others have used, in different ways, in the entire book.

What Richard Young offers is a summary account of the current state of play in his field, from which each chapter derives recommendations. At whom are these recommendations aimed? Broadly, businesspeople, politicians, and other 'professional' communicators. Young's approach does not overtly raise any ethical or political questions at all – that is one of the characteristics of this kind of work, it seems to me. (From my experience of cognitivism within film studies too, where any ethical judgements emerge, they tend to be determinedly mainstream and unquestioning.) So, it doesn't matter what you might want to communicate – Young leaves all that aside. His work will guide you whether you want to 'sell' private health care, nuclear power, climate warming scepticism, green solutions, or evangelical religion. Cognitivism is above all that, it is 'pure research'.

Or perhaps not. Looked at on a chapter by chapter basis, some odd things begin to emerge. Chapters 1-3 consider the various ways in which 'experts' make rational choices about documents and other materials put in front of them. So, Young summarises research into how employers examine job applications or project bids, or bank managers evaluate schemes put in front of them. Here, the theoretical bases are concepts of 'expert evaluative criteria', 'benchmarks', and 'decision schemata'. These devolve into detailed consideration of issues of perception, attention, comprehension (down to sentence level) and processes of 'schema activation'. So, from this section of the book emerges a picture of humans as rational decision-makers who know how to seek information, have principles of relevance, and are not readily fooled. It was striking to me how many of the examples in these early chapters turned around the pitches that MBA students had to make, and how these were evaluated by 'experts'.

A curious absence of any sense of politics should be noted. Investment managers? Purely rational beings, as we all know. Bankers? Strictly intellectual beings, of course. Nothing structural or political need concern us here. Nothing in the theory appears to speak about politics or power at all – unless, that is, you look at some of the detailed examples. Consider the following account that Young gives of the 'major decision types' that professionals make:

... audiences are free to make any type of decision they wish, no matter what kind of decision a professional intends to elicit from them. For example, a supervisor might imagine her request for a productivity increase from her staff would elicit a straightforward compliance from them. But while considering her request, some staff members may make employment decisions instead and decide to look elsewhere for a less demanding job. Similarly, an employee might imagine his request for a salary increase would evoke a straightforward budgetary decision from his boss. But while considering the employee's request, the boss may make an oversight decision and decide to eliminate the

employee's decision altogether. In general, any unilateral request for change can trigger an unintended decision type. (pp.42-3)

Young represents this entirely as a matter of individuals operating with decision criteria. There is not a hint of recognition of the sociology of organisations, of power-relations, of structures of economics and wider bargaining positions. Here, psychology presents itself as the theory of an individualised society. In the process, the term 'audience' is reduced to an ahistorical, asocial, deculturalised collection of separate beings 'free' to do whatever they 'rationally' decide. Actually, that looks suspiciously like a neo-liberal account of a jobs market. And it is striking that the nearest he gets to a critical proposal is at back of his summary of evidence about the mistakes 'rational agents' make. Apparently if only they would use 'linear' models for, for instance, choosing new employees (ie, ones which effectively mechanise the process of selection), they would make more 'accurate' decisions. Let the psychologists in, let them design and run your HR – your 'accuracy' will surely increase ...

Then comes Part II. Here we shift to another 'kind' of person, and another whole set of processes: the intuitive. Here, the grounds shift from criteria-led, information-seeking choosing (the domain of the 'experts'), to the study of the aesthetically persuasive, the vivid, the easily-remembered, the impact of 'spin'. And here in turn we move to a different body of humans: the 'consumers' (or, better and more broadly, people on the receiving end of deliberately persuasive communications). In this domain the kinds of example change. But now, there is a curious sense of *comme çà, comme ça* – this or that – one or t'other. Persuasion might work, or it might not – who can tell? Consider this passage, about how audiences evaluate the truthfulness of speakers:

Studies of actual liars confirm the commonly accepted belief that people behave differently when they are lying than they do when they are telling the truth ... Liars blink more, fidget more, tap more, and scratch themselves more than do people who are speaking truthfully. Liars avoid the audience's gaze unless they are being purposefully manipulative. Although liars do engage in different nonverbal behaviors, audiences still have difficulty identifying them. For example, consumers have great difficulty discriminating truthful from deceptive salespeople. (p.227)

How do you tell when someone is being deliberately manipulative? You can't, because their purpose makes them invisible. This passage is typical of many in the book, in saying effectively contradictory things, enabled by small conceptual slides. In effect this passage says that liars should be clearly visible to trained experts unless they are deliberately not being visible. But either way, 'consumers' won't know. I am not suggesting for one moment that the book is recommending lying as a sales strategy. But the closing summary from the

chapter has a curious resonance. It becomes clear that the address is indeed to the 'salespeople':

The main takeaway for communicators in Chapter 6 is that audience decisions are based in part on audience perceptions of how well the professionals who communicate with them play their roles. Audience decisions are also biased by additional communicator attributes. Who you are perceived to be can be as important as what you say and how you say it. Use the information in the chapter to adjust your behaviors and appearance to meet audience role expectations and to bias audiences in your favor. (p.246)

'Bias' is now something to be actively courted – and once again, Young has nothing to say about who might use or not use this. In this marketplace of persuasive ideas and images, only the winning counts.

Then comes Part III, and here we meet 'emotional decision making'. This is where people do things which definitely don't fit the 'rational' model. So we are definitely not now talking about 'experts' – indeed this is where people can go against their own 'interests'. Sometimes they might be right to do so ('For example, the ratings of consumers who were asked how much they liked the taste of various brands of jam corresponded better with those of gustatory experts than did ratings of consumers who were asked to rationally justify their preferences' (p.253); sometimes they are definitely wrong ('In the courtroom, emotionally arousing testimony and/or evidence can inhibit rational decision making and can lead jurors to render excessively severe sentencing judgments' (p.254). Notice in both cases the operation of an 'expert' measure which determines when the emotional joes/jos were right or wrong. But notice also the complete absence of any consideration of what sorts of 'emotion' might be involved here. Indeed it doesn't appear to matter, because 'emotions' have highly typified sequences – they are all pretty much the same, and have the same 'biasing' effects. And 'we' can work with them and on them. as the book's closing words say: 'Clearly the time has come for professionals in every field to form an accurate picture of audience decision making. To do so promises high returns to any professional, organization, or student of communication who put the lessons of this book into practice – returns in the form of greater trust, respect, and long-term success.' (p. 287)

This book to my mind pretty accurately summarises a whole tradition of thinking, an entire paradigm (in Thomas Kuhn's sense). It is entirely uninterested in other kinds or traditions of research. (I am reminded of an exchange with a leading representative of this field at a recent conference, who responded to my query about how his work relates to the large body of evidence on cultural variations with a dismissive 'I am not interested in variation, only in universals'.) It is utterly absorbent of contradictory results. It stands above all

ethical and political considerations because it is, after all, only about 'expertise'. It deals in vast decontextualised abstractions, yet derives from them close recommendations aimed at 'professionals' wanting to communicate. And at back is a model – and a pretty perturbing one at that – of what a human being is, which is closely interwoven (as many such models have been since the early twentieth century) with an economic worldview rooted in a boosterist account of the obviousness of capitalist relations and individualist democracy.