

Editorial

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Critical political economy, broadly speaking, analyses the structural interdependencies of economic, political, and social power from a normative vantage point. In given circumstances, such analysis may elicit a diagnosis of the social totality and a prognosis for political action. In this context, intellectual and activist responses to the growth of mass media eventually produced a distinctive research field—the political economy of communication. It formed in the wake of decolonization, cold war, the non-aligned movement, and international new left activism. An overview of the various schools of thought can be found in Peter Golding’s and Graham Murdock’s *Political Economy of the Media* (1997).

During the 1990s after the collapse of the Soviet Union, capitalism and communication merged on a global scale. Digital convergences across mass media, telecommunications, and computer technologies opened up new sectors of production and profit realization. These same technologies also underpinned proliferating networks of finance, production, symbolic representation, and consumer culture. Since then, the growing density, portability, and sophistication of web-based communication has produced a fora of ‘social media’ and a cluster of social media corporations armed with a new set of business models i.e., Apple, Google, and Facebook. Meanwhile, the international political–economic order has been reshaped by a global financial crisis, worldwide recession, post peak oil economics, anthropogenic global warming, the emergence of BRIC nations (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) and the repercussions of US-led military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. Against this background, social media platforms have facilitated national, pan-regional, and local–global activism as evidenced by the Arab Spring, Occupy, and the inter-linked anti-austerity campaigns of Southern Europe.

The scope and urgency of these developments has created ferment in the field. Political economists of communication are extending the range of analyzable phenomena and engaging with adjacent inter-disciplinary subfields such as economic geography, cultural geography, philosophy of technology, and cultural political economy. Within the field, long standing theoretical questions have resurfaced. How should we reconcile particular genealogies of Marxism with the critical political economy of communication? Can this field be singularly defined or is there simply a plurality of approaches within it? Is the prospect of political praxis necessary for scholarly inquiry? Are cross-fertilizations with those subfields which eschew normative commitment possible or desirable?

The preceding observations and questions demonstrate the need for on-going intellectual debate concerning the substance and nature of our field. It should be unconstrained by copyright enclosures or the commercial schedules of publishing companies.

We thus welcome readers to a new online journal: *The Political Economy of Communication*.

This publication emanates from the political economy section of the International Association of Media Communication Research (IAMCR). Appropriately, the first article is from Janet Wasko—IAMCR President and former section chair. She recalls how the section was forged out of cold war controversies within the Association. For Western conservatives and East-European Marxist-Leninists, the political economy of communication was not a valid research field. Independent left scholarship was an anathema; albeit for different reasons. Certain individuals renewed their opposition to the section when the Berlin Wall came down; left wing thought of any kind was deemed irrelevant. This was a premature judgment. With the spread of global capitalism and neo-liberalism, there is now no shortage of analyzable material. Accordingly perhaps, Wasko (2013) observes that “The Political Economy section has become a strong and visible component of the overall association” (p. 5). In part, this is also because section members have put forward and developed new research themes. Here, Kathleen Kuehn and Thomas Corrigan examine a primary feature of social media; its employment of free labor in the name of voluntary collaboration. Drawing from interviews with US sports bloggers and consumer reviewers, the authors note the growth of ‘hope-labor’. This sub-category of free labor contains the future possibility of paid employment. To the extent that workers internalize this prospect, web firms remain viable and digital capitalism continues as the individualized self is ideologically secured. Oliver Jutel explores the symbiosis of social media, mass media, and American populist politics. In his view, the affiliations between Fox News and The Tea Party exemplify a new political economy of the media field. Fox viewers both consume *and* generate news content as Tea Party protestors. The political repercussions of this development may exceed the parameters of neo-liberal capitalism. What appears as a seamless populist commercialism contains the potential for a mass militancy which might extend beyond Fox News, the Republican Party, and the corporate sponsors of activist groups.

Rosser Johnson examines how hyper-commercial television formats result from broadcasting deregulation and the opportunistic creations of advertisers. Ratings driven television networks rely upon infomercials and other program sponsored content for financial sustenance. Johnson details this process in the case of New Zealand during the early 1990s, an era of neo-liberal extremism. His research is based upon interviews with infomercial producers and an analysis of television schedules.

A long-standing theme of our field—media representations of labor disputes, is explored by Jennifer Proffitt and Shea Smock. They follow the 2000 Betty Dukes sex discrimination case against Wal-Mart. The US District Court in California and the Court of Appeals sided with the complainants, but the US Supreme Court did not. The authors trace the passage of events as reported by the major television networks: ABC, CBS, NBC, and PBS. Proffitt and Smock note that television portrayals of the women as individuals precluded any examination of their grievances as a collective entity.

Matthias Niefenführ’s article reveals that in the People’s Republic of China, neo-liberalism has distinctive characteristics. The media industry has been commercialized but is riven by tensions between state and market priorities. Programs and program formats are produced for commercial reasons, yet party, state, and military authorities constantly monitor content. Niefenführ explains how these conflicting priorities unfold in the case of television historical drama. This genre is very popular, commercially lucrative yet politically sensitive. The authorities combine formal regulation with ad hoc censorship without exerting total control over the television industry. This unstable dynamic is seen to reflect broader conflicts between the state and market forces in China.

The commentaries address two major international developments relevant to the political economy of communication.

Johan Lidberg and Martin Hirst consider the Australian repercussions of the News of the World scandal. Tensions between a federal Labor government (with a tiny majority) and the Murdoch press prompted calls for an inquiry into journalistic practices, standards, and accountability. Eventually, an independent media inquiry was established. At the same time, the Convergence Review was already examining the Australian media landscape. The Murdoch press vilified these initiatives along with the federal government itself. Lidberg and Hirst bleakly observe that the resulting legislation was “killed off in less than ten days” (2013, p .134).

Since the late 1980s, in Latin America authoritarian regimes and dictatorships have been replaced, in part, by liberal democratic politics. Against this historical background, Rodrigo Gómez outlines a major polarity within media policy. Some countries have embraced marketization whereby light handed media regulation favors powerful corporate players. Other countries have sought to democratize national media systems by entrenching constitutional rights of communication legally supporting community, indigenous, non-profit media and by de-concentrating media ownership. Rodrigo Gómez notes that these opposing trends play out within, as well as, between countries.

References

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