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Editorial

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The media are central institutions of modern societies, providing channels for corporate and political control and public space for disseminating and consuming information on systemic changes in politics, culture, and economics to the public. The media underwent massive restructuring through neoliberal policies in the 1970s. Introducing new communication technologies such as satellite and cable television, the internet, and web platforms went hand in hand with market liberalisation and communication commercialisation. The multiplication of channels and media outlets was accompanied by the concentration and centralisation of ownership. Recently, large transnational digital platforms have solidified their position as core companies within contemporary capitalism, restructuring the distribution of media advertising investments, speeding up the circulation of capital, automating global consumption patterns, avoiding national taxes, and syphoning revenues to offshore entities.

At the same time, they benefit from automated management of their diversified and essentially precarious workforces of content moderators, warehouse workers, and gig workers, as well as from software inputs from free and open-source communities (FLOSS). The rise of platforms and algorithms reshapes traditional institutional mechanisms that broadly safeguard freedom of expression, media pluralism, and public interests. An open political issue is how these mechanisms will be reconsidered and how private interests will shape markets and societies. Alternatives are envisioned in areas ranging from platform cooperatives and commons projects to strategic calls for technological sovereignty and public wealth creation. However, such initiatives usually need broader political support from the public. This is a difficult undertaking. The commodification of everyday life through data capture, surveillance and privacy intrusion is easily dismissed by citizens as a minor side effect of free usage and flexibility of ubiquitous digital services.

The critical political economy of communication and media explores ownership, production, content, consumption, labour, regulation, and contemporary topics such as algorithms, platforms, data, and artificial intelligence. It looks at how capital and the state(s) control, regulate and form the media (broadly conceived as ranging from traditional printed press to algorithms and software) in societies shaped by persistent social inequalities. The level of analysis can vary from the macro phenomena of geopolitics, transnational, national and institutional dynamics, through to mid-range phenomena (such as analyses of public spheres). Micro-phenomena would cover class-based inequalities of access and skill concerning the use of media in everyday life and work.

Under this broad conceptual umbrella, the inaugural 'Political Economies of the Media' postgraduate biennial course was held at the Interuniversity Centre (IUC) in Dubrovnik, Croatia, between 11 and 15 September 2023.[1] It was co-organised by the Institute for Development and International Relations from Zagreb, Croatia and the Department of Journalism, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. A total of seven co-directors were responsible for evaluating student applications and providing them with feedback: Thomas Allmer (Paderborn University, Germany), Paško Bilić (Institute for Development and International Relations, Croatia), Benjamin Birkinbine (University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh, USA), Jaka Primorac (Institute for Development and International Relations, Croatia), Jernej A. Prodnik (University of Ljubljana, Slovenia), Toni Prug (University of Rijeka, Croatia), and Sašo Slaček Brlek (University of Ljubljana, Slovenia).

The course included keynote presentations by Christian Fuchs (Paderborn University, Germany) and Kylie Jarrett (University College Dublin, Ireland), presentations by course directors, and presentations by thirteen PhD students coming from Austria, Canada, Germany, Greece, Netherlands, Serbia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, UK, and USA. Through lectures and discussions with keynotes, co-directors, and their fellow participants, students gained in-depth knowledge and feedback about recent communication, media, and journalism developments from the critical perspective of the political economy.

This special issue is only a selection from a wide range of innovative, interdisciplinary and thought-provoking PhD project presentations. We are certain that all of these students will develop successful publishing track records as their projects move to more advanced stages. Our special issue is aimed at helping those who are near PhD completion gain a wider audience for their exciting work. This will open new directions to the political economy of the media.

Tobias Stadler's article situates digital capitalism within the longue durée of capitalist transformation. Drawing on Marxist conceptualisations of primitive accumulation, Landnahme, and real subsumption, Stadler examines how digital infrastructures, particularly open standards and protocols such as XMPP and ActivityPub, are being enclosed and reconfigured by corporate actors. His analysis unfolds across three key dimensions: first, the logic of datafication and exploitation underpinning commercial social networking platforms; second, the reshaping of subjectivities and modes of social reproduction within these enclosures; and third, the ideological legitimations that render these processes seemingly inevitable. Stadler argues that ideologies of technological progress and determinism obscure the capitalist logics at play, facilitating the normalization of corporate enclosure under the guise of innovation.

Building on concerns around the opacity of digital infrastructures, Thomas Zenkl's contribution explores the methodological challenges involved in studying algorithmic governance and its effects on everyday life. Inspired by the tradition of peasant resistance and the methodological device of "breaching experiments," Zenkl proposes a tactical research agenda aimed at rendering visible the often-subconscious resistances users deploy against algorithmic control. His analysis underscores

how algorithmic power operates not only through technical systems but also through cultural imaginaries of neutrality and precision. In response, Zenkl advocates for an empirical approach capable of surfacing users' tacit knowledge and embodied engagements with algorithmic systems. This would reposition research participants as active agents rather than passive recipients of technological governance.

Turning toward the working conditions of media practitioners, Igor Išpanović critically examines the precarisation of local journalists in Serbia. His article foregrounds the entanglement of political and economic forces in shaping the vulnerabilities experienced by journalists in the country's transitioning post-socialist context. Based on qualitative interviews with practitioners in local newsrooms, Išpanović demonstrates that digital technologies have both enabled new forms of journalistic practice and exacerbated the precariousness of labour. Notably, he argues that this precarisation cannot be fully understood through Western-centric models of capitalism; instead, it must be contextualised within the politicised nature of Serbian media ownership, clientelism, and the uneven effects of platformisation. This contribution calls for a more expansive conceptualisation of precarious work that recognises its situated, political dimensions.

Finally, Corinne Weinstein's article interrogates the neoliberal underpinnings of identity politics within American television production. Situated in the context of recent labour struggles and shifts in industry practices, Weinstein critiques how progressive ideals of diversity and inclusion are increasingly co-opted by neoliberal imperatives. Through an analysis of the "neoliberalisation of identity politics," she demonstrates how the industry deploys representational diversity as a market strategy while disarticulating it from its political origins. The rise of "prestige television" further complicates this dynamic, as thematic complexity and aesthetic sophistication obscure the economic logics underpinning media production. Weinstein's contribution thus raises urgent questions about the commodification of identity and the limits of representational politics within a commercial media system.

Taken together, the articles in this special issue offer a critical cartography of contemporary political economy shaped by digital infrastructures, algorithmic governance, and the restructuring of cultural labour. Rather than treating these developments as discrete or technologically driven, the contributors foreground their imbrication within broader projects of capitalist regulation, ideological reproduction, and social transformation. In mapping these intersections, the issue advances a nuanced, interdisciplinary agenda for understanding the complex configurations of power, resistance, and inequality in the digital age.