Current Trends in the

Political Economy of Communication

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Abstract:

In this paper five major trends in the political economy of communication are addressed: the globalization of the field, the expansion of an enduring emphasis on historical research, the growth of research from alternative standpoints, especially feminism and labour, the shift from an emphasis on old to new media, and the growth of activism connected to the political economy tradition. None of these are brand new tendencies but rather build on existing ones, which were often submerged beneath dominant trends in the field. Nonetheless, the outcomes of specific struggles within each of these domains suggest that political economists have made significant contributions to the overall resurgence of activism around major communication issues.

Keywords: Political Economy of Communication; Globalization; Feminism; Labour; History of Communication; Activism

Résumé:

Dans cet article, cinq tendances en économie politique des communications sont abordées : la mondialisation du domaine; l'expansion de l'accent mis sur la recherche historique; la croissance de recherches menées dans des perspectives alternatives, surtout féministe et de travail; le déplacement d'une insistance sur les vieux médias aux nouveaux; et une croissance de l'activisme associé à la tradition de l'économie politique. Ceux-ci ne sont pas des nouvelles tendances, mais plutôt construis sur des tendances déjà existantes qui étaient submergées sous les tendances dominantes du domaine. Cependant, le résultat des efforts spécifique de chacun de ces domaines suggère que les économistes politiques ont fait des contributions signifiantes à la résurgence de l'activisme à travers les questions importantes en communication.

Mots-clés: Économie Politique de Communication; Mondialisation; Féminisme; Travail; Histoire de la Communication; Activisme

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This paper addresses five major trends in the political economy of communication, including: the globalization of the field, the expansion of an enduring emphasis on historical research, the growth of research from alternative standpoints, especially feminism and labour, the shift from an emphasis on old to new media, and the growth of activism connected to the political economy tradition. None of these are brand new tendencies but rather build on existing ones, which were often submerged beneath dominant trends in the field.

The Globalization of Political Economy

The political economy of communication has always contained an important international dimension. For example, two founding figures, Dallas Smythe and Herbert Schiller, joined Armand Mattelart to assist the Chilean government of Salvatore Allende to build a democratic media system. Moreover, research outside the developed core began as a response to what was perceived to be media imperialism in the West. Nevertheless, on balance, most of the research in political economy had nationalist tendencies and distinct regional emphases. For example, the bulk of Smythe's major book *Dependency Road* addresses Canada's dependency on U.S. media and asks why the Canadian nation-state permitted this to continue for so long. Nationalism became an alternative to U.S. media imperialism. Similarly, resistance to Western media domination over the developing world was met with calls for national resistance along the lines of the national liberation movements that had won independence for many nations after World War II. In addition to the tendency to focus on nationalist resistance to globalizing media, political economy developed specific regional tendencies that made it difficult for scholars to work together across their spatial and intellectual divides. Today, these regional differences have substantially diminished. Political economists from different regions are working together on common projects (Calabrese & Sparks, 2004; Wasko & Murdock, 2007) and it is no longer

unusual to see research from one region taking up themes that were once prominent in another (Artz, Macek & Cloud, 2006; Mansell, 2004).

North American scholarship has made substantial contributions to political economic theory, once the primary emphasis of European research. This includes research on the integration of digital technologies into a capitalist economy (Schiller, 1999), the relevance of Marxian theory to communication scholarship (Artz, Macek & Cloud, 2006), and the application of autonomist theory to social movements that make use of new media (Dyer-Witheford, 1999). It also is just as likely that one would find concrete studies of media problems, once the focus of North American work, such as the commercialization of media and the decline of public media, in European scholarship (Mansell, 2002; Sparks, 2007). Finally, while it is the case that scholars from developing societies are still concerned about issues of media imperialism, witness their involvement in the successor movement to the NWICO, the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), there is just as much evidence that scholarship in the former Third World has taken a strong interest in the growth of political economic theory (Chakravartty & Zhao, 2008; Liu, 2006; *Review of African Political Economy*, 2004).

The process of globalizing political economy research is proceeding rapidly. Some of this is the result of the sheer movement of scholars, a development that has sped up over the last two decades. For example, the Canadian political economist Robin Mansell established a base for institutional political economy at the London School of Economics. Yuezhi Zhao, who has provided the foundation for a political economy of China's media and telecommunications system, moved from that country to the United States and from there to Canada establishing important connections among scholars in all three countries.[1] One of her students A.J.M. Shafiul Alam Bhuiyan (2008) came to Canada from Bangladesh and has produced important work on political economy from the perspective of a postcolonial subject. The Korean political economist Dal Jong Yin moved to the University of Illinois, Urbana and worked with Dan Schiller to complete a dissertation on the political economy of telecommunications in South Korea. He has since joined Yuezhi Zhao and Robert Hackett to continue the historically strong presence of a political economy perspective at Simon Fraser University in Canada.

In addition to formal and informal movements of scholars across regions, universities with a strong political economy orientation have established an institutional base concentrating on international research. For example, the University of Westminster, where Nicholas Garnham helped to found the political economy perspective, has established, under the leadership of Colin Sparks, a major global research program with particular strength in the study of communication systems in the Middle East and in China. Similarly, John Downing, who was once based in the UK, has led the Global Media Research Center at Southern Illinois University.

At a more formal level, scholarly associations have been active in their support of global research. The International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) was founded in 1957 and, for many years, was the only global academic society that supported political economy research, making the political economy of communication one of its major sections. The organization continues to grow and to support political economic research with an international orientation. Under the leadership of its recent president Robin Mansell and through the hard work of political economy sections heads, including Janet Wasko, Graham Murdock, and Helena Sousa, the IAMCR provides a genuine home to political economists worldwide. The establishment of the Herbert Schiller and Dallas Smythe awards to recognize the work of young scholars offers the kind of recognition and incentive for continuing the political economy tradition that these founding figures were so instrumental in developing.

The general growth of academic journals has assisted the process of globalization but specific examples have been especially helpful to political economy, including this journal. Founded in 2002 by the political economist Yahya Kamalipour of Purdue University in the United States, *The Global Media Journal* has featured critical, especially political economic, research. By 2008, the journal appeared in eleven different editions including African, Arabic, Australian, Canadian, Chinese, Indian, Mediterranean, Pakistani, Persian, Polish, Spanish, and Turkish. In addition to content from practically everywhere in the world, the linguistic range assures a genuinely global character. Additionally, the Union for Democratic Communication, a U.S-based organization of critical scholars and media practitioners, has established *The Democratic Communique*, a journal that strongly supports political economic research.

One might reasonably wonder what this means for the content of research in political economy. Aside from more research, has this process of global expansion made a difference for what political economists have to say? The primary difference is that current research addresses the profound integration of the global political economy and its media systems. Heretofore the focus was on how one (the U.S.) or just a handful (U.S. plus E.U.) of nation states and their own corporations dominated weaker states and their nascent economies in the process of producing little more than dependency and underdevelopment. Today the emphasis is on the integration of corporations, states and classes across national, regional and even developmental divides (Mosco & Schiller, 2001). In the view of Chakravarrty and Zhao (2008), this involves the creation of a "transcultural political economy," which they document in a book containing contributions from primarily non-Western scholars.

Where once, corporations, including those in the communication industry, were based in one country and moved through the world as an external force, today they are increasingly integrated into the fabric of societies to the point where it is often difficult to determine their national origin. Operating as owners, partners, and in strategic alliances with companies based in the host country, they have led political economists to shift from talking about the power of multinational corporations to addressing the rise of a worldwide transnational economy. Many of these companies originate in the West but the growth of other economies, especially the Chinese and Indian, render simplistic many of the standard models of Western domination. India, for example, which has traditionally been portrayed, quite accurately, as the victim of British and then general Western imperialism, now contains its own transnational firms that have integrated into Western economies, including those of North America. Conglomerates like Tata, Infosys, WiPro, and ICICI have strong bases in North America employing hundreds of thousands of workers, many of whom are eventually dismissed because, after training their own replacements, their jobs are outsourced back to India. They also train North America students as interns and operate their own outsourcing ventures throughout Latin America (Mosco & McKercher, 2008).

Political economic research also has documented the restructuring of public authorities including nation states, regional blocs, global governance organizations as well as describing their integration into the commercial sector to produce hybrids that blur the distinction between public and private at every level of government activity. Again, it is no longer just a question of demonstrating how a large corporation "captures" a government by getting it to steer policies and resources to big business. Rather, we are witnessing the thorough integration of both forms of power in a transnationalization of political authority (Braman, 2007). As a result, intra-national social class divisions, which once occupied the bulk of social class analysis in political economy, are now less significant than transnational class divisions that restructure networks of power across nations to link newly wealthy people in China, India and Russia to their counterparts in

the United States and Europe. Indeed, any examination of the media elite needs to start with those who run large companies in the United States, but is increasingly incomplete and downright inadequate until it addresses those who wield media power in numerous other states. This would now include, for example, the Chinese executives who own and operate Lenovo, what was once the personal computer arm of IBM, an icon of U.S. dominance in the high tech sector.

Much of this activity is aimed at establishing a new international division of labour with the communication industry in the forefront. By creating global labour markets and by making extensive use of communication technologies to carry out the restructuring process, transnational business gains the flexibility to make the most effective, least costly, and therefore most profitable use of labour. Students of culture have spent a great deal of time charting the transnationalization of culture (Lash & Lury, 2007; Tomlinson, 1999). Much of this work has enriched what we know about the social production of meaning worldwide. But political economists and some students of culture are making up for a yawning gap in that research: the transnationalization of the labour that produces culture as well as the other material and immaterial products of contemporary society.

The global integration of corporate, government, and social class structures is a work in progress. It is fraught with risks, tensions and contradictions. There also is considerable opposition—evidenced in the rise of social movements that have protested this development at meetings of international agencies like the World Trade Organization and other international bodies like the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)—which aims to extend opposition into the communication industry. Political economists have not only examined these developments, they also have taken praxis seriously and participated at the political and policy levels. In doing so, they acknowledge the importance of the trend to transnationalize the political economy of communication. They also recognize the need to create transnational democracy and a genuine cosmopolitan citizenship.

A Political Economy Approach to the History of Communication

Recent years have brought about significant growth in the amount of historical research and important departures from earlier work. Research from the mid-1990s to the present has continued the trend to pursue historical analysis from a political economy perspective. More significantly, it has departed from more traditional forms of historical analysis in communication studies. Specifically, current political economy research demonstrates that media systems in place today are the result of a deeply contested history, involving not just duelling capitalists and their allies in government, but labour unions, citizens groups, consumer cooperatives, religious enthusiasts, and social justice organizations of all stripes. McChesney (1993) firmly established the importance of this approach in his analysis of the battle for control over radio in the United States. Neither above politics, nor the privileged policy domain of a handful of elites, radio broadcasting was recognized early on as crucial to democracy and numerous social movement organizations used what power they had to democratize the medium. They did this by fighting for stations that trade unions, local communities and public interest organizations of all types could control for themselves. They fought for citizen access to the airwaves to counter the dominant corporate control of broadcasting. And they fought to democratize the policy process by making the case for popular control over regulations that gave and took away licenses, that assigned spectrum to services, and that established rules for the fair use of the medium. In

essence, the struggle for radio was the struggle for democracy. More than the instrument of a handful of pioneers, or the esoteric magical diviner of the air, radio was embedded in the most significant political battles of the twentieth century, pitting supporters of the New Deal against the dominant conservative forces which generally held the upper hand in American politics.

Radio was a central instrument of what Denning calls "the cultural front" a movement extending from the late 1920s to the early 1950s in the United States that provided the cultural energy for attempts to establish alternatives to America's traditional power structure led by big business. In addition to New Deal liberals, it included social democrats, socialists and some communists. It gained strength in the Great Depression and withered in the 1950s when business marshalled a massive counter attack, including the reactionary movement known as McCarthyism. Communication scholars writing history today from a political economic perspective are explicitly and implicitly telling the detailed story of the media's role in the cultural front. Some have continued to enrich the story of radio. For example, Nathan Godfried (1997) examines the history of a Chicago radio station that was established and run by a labour federation representing unions in that city. Providing a voice for labour in a sea of commercial broadcasting was no easy task, particularly since many of the unions, whose members were also big fans of commercial stations, struggled to define a labour alternative. In the face of enormous commercial and business pressures, WCFL (for Chicago Federation of Labor) was able to retain its unique character through the 1940s, providing both news and entertainment from a labour standpoint. Returning to WCFL, Elizabeth Fones-Wolf (2006) describes the broader role of radio in the effort to build a democratic Left in twentieth century America. She tells the story of several alternatives to commercial radio, and describes the political battles that pitted labour and its allies against business in some of the central policy debates of the time. These included decisions about granting and renewing broadcast licenses, determining the limits of station ownership, setting rules about acceptable content, and deciding precisely what should be the requirements to air diverse perspectives (see also Fones-Wolf & Fones-Wolf, 2007).

Political economy has also addressed the historical trajectories of other media, especially print journalism. For example, Tracy (2006) has written about the crucial role of the International Typographical Workers Union in battles to control the labour process and the introduction of new technologies in the printing industry. These culminated in a 1964 strike that shut down the newspaper business in New York City for four months. Drawing on interviews with the leader of the labour action, Tracy documents labour's once powerful voice in the media industry and assesses its strengths as well as its weaknesses, such as hanging on to a narrow craft ideology that ultimately contributed to muting that voice. My research with Catherine McKercher extends this view by telling the story of the battles between craft and class among communication workers throughout the history of American media (see also Mosco & McKercher, 2008).

As political economists who study media concentration have demonstrated, one of the ways business was able to defeat those calling for more democratic communication and press for a singular commercial form of media was through cross-ownership or the purchase of multiple media located in a single community or region. But that also met with strong opposition from coalitions of citizen and labour organizations (Fones-Wolf & Fones-Wolf, 2007). The battle for control over Hearst-dominated media in San Francisco provides a stunning example of a company that refused to tolerate the slightest deviation from a conservative viewpoint in either print or broadcast media.

One also can find major recent examples that document the history of resistance in the telecommunications and computer industries. Countering the traditional great inventor,

technicist, and pro-corporate readings of AT&T's story, Venus Green (2001) examines the significant interplay of race, gender and class in the company's history. Dan Schiller (2007b) recounts the struggles in the workplace and in policy-making circles that challenged business efforts to control the postal and telephone system. Pellow and Park (2002) take the analysis into Silicon Valley by telling the story of the struggles first of indigenous people, then of agricultural workers, and now those of immigrant women who do the dirty hardware work and of more privileged but often exploited young software workers.

This is not just an American tale. Political economists north of the U.S. border have also worked in this heterodox form of history. It is one of the truisms in countries with a national broadcaster like the BBC or the Canadian Broadcasting Corporations, that such institutions provide a public defence against universal commercialism. But in her groundbreaking research on media history in Canada, Patricia Mazepa (2003, 2007) demonstrates that the story is significantly more complex. And unlike academic complexity which often does not appear to matter, hers makes a difference for how we think about public media and for what we do about it. Drawing on archival sources, Mazepa shows that the CBC developed not just to defend against commercial broadcasting crossing the border from the United States, but also to protect against alternative definitions of "public" embodied in the media produced by immigrant, socialist and labour organizations in Canada that the national broadcaster generally ignored. In Canada, public broadcasting came to be associated with white settler media, mainly English, and a largely elite French version based principally in the province of Quebec. As a result, community and regional media developed by organizations outside the mainstream was not deemed to be fit for the CBC. Immigrant, socialist, and labour media went up against both commercial media and the state. And the state often demonstrated far less tolerance and considerable eagerness to use its policy powers to undermine media emerging from outside the CBC and big private broadcasting. Mazepa's work uncovers the largely ignored story of media production and resistance from below. It calls on scholars, especially those involved in the process of making broadcasting policy, to question the meaning of "public" in public broadcasting. Indeed, it broadens that definition to incorporate genuine democratic alternatives as opposed to those that predominantly represent a white settler vision of Canada.

Writing about the history of journalism in Canada, McKercher (2002) charts the conflicts that erupted over control of the labour process, the use of technology, and the shape of the news. These were not simply established by those who owned the presses or imposed by the changing technologies in the workplace. They arose from strikes and other labour actions as well. Several of these opened spaces for workers and for those who wanted or needed a more diverse press. Many of them fell far short of success, but her historical work, like those of other political economists described in this section, offers a genuine alternative to the standard stories. In doing so, it gives back to social activists and workers the agency that is rightfully theirs.

Standpoints of Resistance

Historical research in the political economy of communication has begun to emphasize resistance and not just the admittedly important story of how the powerful dominate. The emphasis on resistance is increasingly generalized in research on the contemporary political economy marking a shift in the central standpoint from a focus on capital, dominant corporations, and elites to alternatives that draw from feminist and labour research. This marks a departure from a trend that has been a hallmark of political economy from the start: focus on media concentration

and on the erosion of content diversity (Bagdikian, 1992; Green, 1973; Herman & Chomsky, 2002).

Recent research in the political economy of communication recognizes the importance of this work but argues in favour of a departure. One of the models for this type of thinking is feminist standpoint theory which maintains that social science needs to be practiced and society needs to be understood from the standpoint of women's rather than men's experience, as has been the case for so much of what has passed for general social science. Developed by Hartsock (1999) in the early 1980s, feminist standpoint theory has flourished in the work of Harding (2003), Haraway (2003) and others who maintain that women's subordination provides a uniquely important basis for understanding a wide array of issues from the most general philosophical questions of epistemology and ontology to such practical issues as the appropriate social science techniques to deploy in research. While this perspective has faced charges of relativism from inside and outside feminist scholarship (Haraway, 2003), it counters with the claim that feminist standpoint theory offers a genuine alternative to the equation of science and universalism with research by and about men, as well as to the reduction of feminist research to work that only documents the exploitation of women.

Feminist standpoint thinking has begun to influence research in the political economy of communication. One of the first major attempts to do so is contained in a collection by Eileen Meehan and Ellen Riordan. Meehan has made extensive contributions to political economy, most notably by extending the work of Dallas Smythe on the question of how the audience is made into a marketable commodity. In 2002 Meehan and Riordan produced *Sex and Money* which gathered the work of leading feminists and political economists to address the relationships between these perspectives. Specifically, it describes how political economic and feminist standpoints contribute to understanding capitalism at many different levels including the personal, experiential, institutional, and structural. For example, Balka's chapter on women's work in the telecommunications industry starts from the lived experience of women as they understand what she calls "the invisibility of the everyday." This includes how women experience the detailed measurement and monitoring of their work as well as their attempts to gain some control over it. Her description of this process is connected to a political economic analysis of the industry which, in the region of Atlantic Canada which she studied, is undergoing intense change. Specifically, the shift from regulation in the public interest to a more intense commercial model leads companies to eliminate jobs and, using advanced technologies, impose tighter controls on those that remain. This gendering of political economy offers a rich reading of an experience that all too often is simplistically described as the inevitable consequence of technological change and global imperatives. Chapters such as this enable Meehan and Riordan to provide the empirical detail that carries out a genuine integration of feminist and political economic theory.

In their 2007 book *Feminist Interventions in International Communication* Sarikakis and Shade take a further step to advance a feminist standpoint. This volume engages with central issues that political economists address but from a more explicitly feminist starting point. Like many political economic analyses, the book addresses power, technology, labour, and policy but it views them from the entry point of gender. So, for example, the globalization of media industries is tightly connected to women's employment in media and new technology. In using a feminist standpoint, they enable us to rethink the study of international communication. Yes, traditional issues such as flows of news between rich and poor nations, do matter. But international communication is also about policies for women's development, media production

of pornography, media representations of HIV/AIDS and global campaigns to bring an end to this plague. It also is about the location of women in the new international division of labour, especially media and high tech labour, and what women are doing about workplace exploitation. In essence, Sarikakis and Shade demonstrate that international communication is not gender blind; nor is it a field that simply describes a set of impacts on women. Rather, they and the contributors to their volume, demonstrate how women can shape international communication, from production through employment to policy and their book takes an important step by seeing all of these as women's issues.

There is a strong and growing literature that has taken off from the issues addressed in these two books. The work of Micky Lee (2006, 2007) and McLaughlin and Johnson (2007), among others, clear an enormous amount of ground in addressing political economic power from a feminist standpoint. Their work ranges from media, through telecommunications, and on to information technology, from consumption to production, and from home to office (see also, Huws, 2003; Mosco & McKercher, 2008). There is also interesting work on feminist standpoint theory that spans political economy and cultural studies by examining how audience performances can be viewed as performances of power that defend or resist a dominant ideology (Atkinson, 2005).

This section concludes by taking up new departures in political economy research from a labour standpoint. Communication studies in general has done a more thorough job of addressing media content and audiences than it has communication labour. The research on labour internationalism expanded in subsequent years and a genuine labour standpoint has begun to emerge. My work with Catherine McKercher demonstrates different dimensions of this expansions (McKercher & Mosco, 2006; McKercher & Mosco, 2007; Mosco & McKercher 2008). For us, while it is important to understand how corporate power, new technology, and conservative governments are changing labour, it is equally important to determine what labour is doing about this phenomenon. We identify two important developments. The first is the creation of labour convergence which brings together trade unions from separate areas of the communication industries into one large union representing journalists, broadcasters, technicians, telephone workers, and those employed in the high tech world. Two major examples are the Communication Workers of America and its Canadian counterpart the Communication Energy and Paperworkers Union. The development of integrated unions that span the converging media and information technology industries provides the resources to better face the power of transnational business. The CWA demonstrated this by carrying out an effective action against the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation when the national broadcaster locked out its workforce because it had refused to accept a shift to part-time labour and contracting out. Believing that a union which brought together high-paid performers and lower-paid technicians would not remain unified, especially one led by a union from the United States, the CBC locked out its workers anticipating a rapid decline in solidarity. Using its financial resources and international networks, the CWA provided the support needed to carry on and the workers not only demonstrated their solidarity across occupational and social class lines, they were also able to enlist audiences to their side. After seven weeks, CBC management backed down. Other cases have not been so successful but enough success has been achieved to see some promise in the return of a One Big Union movement, this time in the communication industry.

A second labour strategy is the formation of worker associations which emerge out of social movements that aim to address a significant problem. In his book *Cyber-Marx*, Nick Dyer-Witheford takes a social movement standpoint to address opposition to capitalism around the

world today (see also Hackett & Carroll, 2006). He is especially focused on how social movements use new media to counter the transnational political economy. In this respect, the growth of what Marx called the General Intellect lives on in information-rich and media-savvy movements that resist and demonstrate alternatives to the status quo. McKercher and I have given attention to this among workers who develop new movements and organizations in the world of informational or knowledge labour. We pay particular attention to workers on either side of a major divide in the communication industry: technical employees, such as those who produce software like new code for computer systems and cultural workers, primarily those who produce media content. The Washington Alliance of Technology Workers or WashTech has built a movement of contract computer workers that has achieved some success at Microsoft and has also been in the forefront of efforts to address the problem of outsourcing high tech jobs to India and to other foreign locations (see also Brophy, 2006; Rodino-Colocino, 2007). Moreover, the Freelancers Union in the United States has grown rapidly from a movement of people who work on a short-time, contract basis for media companies that pay low wages and provide few, if any, benefits.

Organizations like these are redefining the nature of the labour movement by fostering a rethinking of trade unionism and by connecting its activities to wider political and social issues. For political economy, they demonstrate the importance of taking a labour standpoint (see also Kumar, 2007). Focusing on worker self-organization captures an enormous range of activities and problems that are simply not addressed in traditional research that concentrates on how capital exploits workers. Both are important, but it is time to restore the balance by describing the active agency of communication workers. This has political implications because one of the central issues of our time is determining whether technical and cultural workers can come together. More broadly, it is not just about what will be the next new thing (i.e., the latest technological gadget), but rather, whether communication workers of the world will unite.

The Transition from Old to New Media

Some political economists have responded by emphasizing continuities between old and new media. For them, old media issues endure in the world of new media. For others, the emphasis is on discontinuities or the new connections that the networked media make possible. Still others have focused a sceptical eye on the promises that new media experts and gurus promote, while some concentrate on newer issues that today's media raise. To understand how political economists approach the shift from older to newer media, it is useful to consider each of these points.

Political economy has tended to give considerable attention to describing and analyzing capitalism, a system which, in short, turns resources like workers, raw materials, land, and information, into marketable commodities that earn a profit for those who invest capital into the system. Political economists of communication have focused on media, information, and audiences as resources and charted the ways in which they are packaged into products for sale. Many who make the shift from the study of old to new media emphasize the continuities between old and new media capitalism. For them, new media deepen and extend tendencies within earlier forms of capitalism by opening new possibilities to turn media and audiences into saleable commodities. As a result, media concentration, commercialism, rich nation dominance over the global economy, divisions between information rich and poor, and militarism persist and grow (McChesney, 2007; Murdock & Golding, 2000, 2004; Schiller, 1999, 2007a; Sparks, 2007;

Wasko, 2003). To paraphrase the title of one of Dan Schiller's books, new media may lead us to call it "digital capitalism," but it is still capitalism and there is no doubt about which is the more important term.

Within such a framework, social and technological change does take place, as new technologies expand the market and global governance becomes necessary, but it also creates problems for capitalism. What was once a largely national market for film and video products and audiences is now a global one, posing serious challenges for coordination. In such markets, what was once a largely national system of governance and government regulation has proven to be inadequate. Global systems of governance are necessary if only to insure the coordination of something as complex as the Internet address system. As a result, we have a new alphabet soup of international organizations such as the ICANN (Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers) which provides Internet addresses. However, such solutions create new problems as the U.S. tries to protect its interests by controlling the ICANN and many of the world's nations protest because they view it as little more than an extension of American power. Nevertheless, amid the changes, contradictions, opposition, and conflict, there is a consistency in the central tendency to deepen and expand the capitalist market system.

For other political economists, the emphasis is on discontinuity and departure from these tendencies in capitalism. Hardt and Negri (2001, 2004), Lazzarato (1997) and Dyer-Witheford (1999) remain political economists because they are concerned about the power relations that mutually constitute the production, distribute and exchange of resources. However, as a result of the growth of new media, they view those power relations differently than do those who focus on continuity in capitalist relations. Their autonomist perspective, so named because it starts from the autonomy of the working class, maintains that capitalism is propelled by the energy and activity of those who work within it. From this perspective, the focus needs to be placed on the self-activity and self-organization of what Hardt and Negri refer to as "the mass," the vast majority of people typically viewed as exploited from other critical perspectives. Furthermore, the growth of communication and information technology does not just serve capitalism, it significantly disrupts it. There are three major ways this happens.

Capitalism is based on the market and a system of private property. Both require legal controls that set limits on what people can do. Copyright, trademark, and patent law constrain people's use of information and ideas that others own. Markets establish the value of products including the information products that are increasingly prominent today. According to autonomists, the widespread availability of information and communication technology makes it very difficult for capitalism to preserve the legal regime of private property that historically limited flows of communication and information. It is now more difficult than ever to figure out what capitalism is doing when technologies challenge traditional ideas of production and consumption, use and exchange value. The ease of freely downloading music and video, of sharing files containing data, audio, and video, and of copying material of all sorts, challenges the ability of capitalism to maintain and police its property and market regimes. Like the common lands that were once widely available to all until capitalism made them private property, cyberspace was once available to all. But in order to make money it too needs to be turned into property, in this case the intellectual property of Microsoft, Google, Disney and the other commercial giants (Terranova, 2000). But unlike the commons of old, cyberspace is difficult to fence in because it is a fundamentally immaterial resource.

For the autonomists, capitalism faces a second challenge. Although communication and information technologies provide it with the tools to manage and control large numbers of people

from anywhere on the globe, these tools are also available to the masses of people and at relatively low cost. For the autonomist, not only does technology challenge property and market rules, it enables people to disrupt the system just at a time when capitalism requires careful global coordination. For example, electronic social networking permits social movements to mobilize and coordinate as never before. The vast expansion in the number of people skilled at producing disruptive software, who can hack and crack open seemingly secure programs, creates critical problems for private property, markets and the overall ability of capitalism to maintain authority.

Finally, the autonomist concludes that the very immaterial labour that capitalism requires to carry out more and more of its work presents serious problems for maintaining control and discipline. Capitalism needs a highly educated workforce but such a workforce is less likely to cede control over thought and ideas to management than did its blue collar predecessors. Whether employed in developing software or working at a call centre, knowledge workers are less likely to submit to rigid time and motion controls. And the very attempts to loosen rules and introduce a more playful atmosphere into the workplace lead to more questioning of the need for any rules, including those that determine who profits from labour. How do you manage a "no-collar" workforce (Ross, 2004)?

In addition to approaches emphasizing continuity and disjunction, the political economy of communication has responded to new media in a third way, by taking a skeptical view of the enthusiasm that inevitably accompanies it. This has been particularly important in historical work which demonstrates that much of what is considered new and revolutionary in new media was actually associated with every communication technology when old media were new. For example, Winseck and Pike (2007) address the concept of convergence which has become a popular notion in contemporary discussions of what is new about computer communication. Convergence denotes the technological integration that powers new media technologies (Jenkins, 2006). It also refers to the integration of big companies that make use of new media. In essence interconnected technologies and large integrated companies create the convergence it takes to make a revolution. Skeptical of the view that convergence is unique to new media, Winseck and Pike demonstrate that convergence is as old as the telegraph and that the promises and challenges we associate with the Internet were anticipated by that mid-nineteenth century technology (see also Standage, 1998).

It is not just the social relations of capitalism that retain continuity, there also is nothing new about the hyperbole or mythologies that accompany today's media. Martin (1991) has described the promises associated with the telephone in much the same way. Whereas the telegraph was expected to bring about world peace, she documents the expectation that the telephone would end the exploitation of women because it would permit them to run a household *and* participate fully in society. Similar research has examined the Internet. Flichy's work on *l'internet imaginaire* (2007) views the Internet as more than just a tool or a social force. It also embodies a myth, by which he means a narrative containing both utopian visions of alternative realities and ideological discourses about how we should conduct our lives and organize society in a period marked by proliferating computer and communication networks.

This work is also important because it reflects a stepped-up interest among political economists to demonstrate the continuity between old and new media by engaging with culture, something that I called for in the first edition of *The Political Economy of Communication* and which was exemplified in *The Digital Sublime* (2004). Drawing on the work of Martin and others, *The Digital Sublime* demonstrates that the same promises made about the Internet have

been made when old technologies, like the telegraph, telephone, radio, and television, were new. World peace, gender equality, online education, racial harmony- all of these were once viewed as the inevitable consequences of these once new media. For believers, the Internet will realize all of these promises and more, including, in the work of MIT professor Raymond Kurzweil, an end to death as we know it. Ultimately, digital technologies imagine the end of history, the end of geography, and the end of politics. Those who advance these views, I maintain, are doing something prominent throughout the history of "new" media. They are invoking technology as an opportunity to achieve the sublime or the experience of transcending the constraints of everyday life (including time, space, and social relations) to achieve a utopia beyond language. Once the province of art and literature (the sublime painting or poem), and of nature (e.g., the sublime Grand Canyon), the sublime is now to be achieved through technology and, increasingly, through communication technology.

Demonstrating continuity and a link to culture are important. But it also is important to return to political economy and to document how all of this matters for the study of power. First, those who have made important contributions to studying the sublime do not give enough attention to the connections between constructing the sublime and marketing, whether selling the latest computer, video game, or political candidate. Visions of transcendence make for great advertising. Second, connecting new media to the end of history, geography and politics freezes into near inevitability and permanence the current political economy. The message is simple and powerful: There is no sense struggling over the control of transnational capital if there is no likelihood of ever creating an alternative. Finally, the sublime can mask the often banal world of everyday politics. New York's World Trade Centre was to embody the sublime new world of informational capitalism that transcended old political relations founded in an industrial era, until the cataclysm of 9/11 when history returned with a vengeance. The seductive lure of the sublime can blind its seekers from the banal and terrible politics that lurk just around the corner.

The fourth response of political economy to new media is to address problem areas that are particularly significant in this cycle of development in communication and information technology. One should be hesitant to call them new issues because there are really no significant problems that political economy has neglected to address. Rather, there are issues that are particularly important today and, among the major ones, copyright/intellectual property issues, surveillance, and the tendency toward what some call a network economy are worth some comment.

From the time of Charles Dickens, who railed against what he considered the failure of the U.S. to pay royalties for his novels when they were distributed in the United States in the nineteenth century, copyright has been a hot topic in debates around media. For media scholars today, including political economists, the debate has stepped up because new media make it easier to copy and share work under copyright. Bettig (1996; see also Bettig & Hall, 2003) has written about how business uses copyright to tighten its control and Schiller (2007a) and Zhao (2008) have studied the intellectual property challenge from China and other developing nations. Who will control intellectual property is one of the central questions facing political economy today.

So too is the threat of electronic surveillance. As Lyon (2003) and others have demonstrated, new media make it possible for governments and companies to monitor our activities on an unprecedented scale. The so-called war on terror has accelerated the spread of surveillance and legitimized activities that were once considered unacceptable violations of

personal privacy. Political economists have addressed the extent of the problem and have also begun to document what can be done about it (Kiss & Mosco, 2006).

Finally, as the work of the autonomists demonstrates, new media call into question traditional economic categories and the capacities of capitalist economies to control them. But political economists outside the autonomist orbit are also wondering about the challenge of new media to the understanding of economics. Specifically, should we begin to think about the emergence of a network economy and the need for a network economics to address it? Network economics argues that the value of goods shift in a world of electronic networks. In particular, the worth of a product or service increases when others buy the same good or service, especially when the purchase connects people in a network (Mansell, 2004; Melody, 2007). New media are based on networks of cell phone users, Internet users, participants in social networking sites, etc. Traditional economics, it is argued, undervalues additions to the network because it does not take into account the geometrical expansion in the number of potential transactions that an addition to the network makes. The question for political economists is what does this do to its conception of power? In other words, is network economics also political economy?

Media Activism

Praxis, or the unity of research and action, is a fundamental characteristic of a political economy approach. Most political economists of communication have been activists as well as scholars, involved in media democracy, development communication, independent media and universal access work, as well as with labour, feminist, and anti-racist movements. The Union for Democratic Communication, which was created in the early 1980s, continues to bring together activist-scholars and media practitioners. The International Association for Media and Communication provides a global forum for political economists, including those active in public policy work, such as its recent President Robin Mansell. Where once political economists like Herbert Schiller and Armand Mattelart worked to make UNESCO a focal point to build a New World Information and Communication Order, politically active scholars are concentrating on democratizing the Internet through the international project known as the World Summit on the Information Society.

Important as these developments are, one of the most significant advances in political activity has been the creation in 2002 of the Free Press by the political economist Robert W. McChesney (2007). The organization has been a focal point for the remarkably resurgent media reform movement in the United States that has brought together a diverse collection of public interest groups including the Consumers Union, the Center for Digital Democracy, the Media Access Project, and the Consumer Federation of America. These have joined with independent media organizations, such as Democracy Now! a daily, national, independent news program hosted by journalists Amy Goodman and Juan Gonzalez. Free Press has attracted enormous attention including the support of well known people like Bill Moyers, Jane Fonda, and the Reverend Jesse Jackson. It has sponsored an annual conference on media reform that has attracted literally thousands of people including scholars, media activists, politicians, and trade unionists. In the past such meetings might bring together at most hundreds of people, suggesting that we are observing a populist upheaval around the issue of media reform.

The upswell in the media reform movement can be attributed to the widespread view that the elimination of rules restricting media ownership, providing for some measure of content diversity, and limiting the prices that major cable, satellite, and other media firms can charge

consumers, has threatened what remains of media democracy, media quality, and universal access to essential services. The loss of nearly 200,000 media jobs, out of about 1.1 million in the United States over the past five years, demonstrates for many that media concentration is an enormous labour-saving project that is eroding the quality of journalism and what remains of its independence. To counter these tendencies, Free Press mobilizes activists, lobbies politicians, and makes use of the media (including Bill Moyers' own public television show) to press for alternatives. These include ending the concentration of old and new media in the hands of a few giant transnational firms, supporting content diversity and vigorous debate, and creating social policies that guarantee universal access to essential telecommunications and Internet services.

Of particular importance is the fight to preserve "network neutrality." As pressure mounts on large media firms to increase profits, companies are tempted to restructure their networks to make more money. Specifically, they would like to create a system of faster and slower "lanes" on the information highway, reserving the faster lanes for higher paying content providers, such as certain advertisers, or for those linked to the network service provider, such as its own subsidiaries. Traffic would move more slowly for those paying less and for competitors. One important consequence is that the web sites of companies outside the mainstream, including alternative media sites, which do not have the funding to pay the premium for a fast lane, would only be available in lesser quality. Responding to this threat, the media reform movement has fought for legislation and regulations that would preserve what has been the standard practice, with a few exceptions, of treating all content equally- with what amounts to one highway at one speed, delivering one standard of quality. Whatever the outcome of these specific struggles, it is evident that political economists have made a significant contribution to the overall resurgence of activism around major communication issues.

Notes

1   One fruit of her labours is the development of a book series that makes important work in the political economy of communication available in Chinese translation through Peking University Press. This resulted from a collaboration between her, Jin Cao from Fudan University, Zhou Lijin of Peking University Press, Dan Schiller, and me. Another is the production of a two volume collection of major work in the political economy of communication completed with Jin Cao and distributed in China (Cao & Zhao, 2007).

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