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Editorial

The political economy of communication is a long-established research field that deserves wider recognition. Historically, it represents the confluence of two major intellectual developments. First, overlapping debates within philosophy, aesthetics, art history, literary studies, and the social sciences were drawn toward a common focus of concern—the extraordinary growth of mass communications since the early 20th Century. From the multiplicity of approaches one could make a basic distinction between administrative and critical conceptions of media influence (Katz, 1987). Second, the growth of mass communications attracted the attention of political economy in general and critical political economy in particular. Within 18th-century European thought, political economists such as Adam Smith combined analyses of states, markets, and public policy with moral concerns about the constitution of the good society (Wasko, Murdock, & Sousa, 2011, pp. 1–2).

Subsequently, Karl Marx and other socialist writers attacked this tradition of political economy as part of their overarching critique of modernising capitalism. One gets a retrospective sense of this vast, intellectual, and political landscape in Tom Bottomore’s A Dictionary of Marxist Thought (1998). It is important here to acknowledge that all traditions of political economy invoke some conception of the social whole. Economics is thereby seen, not as an ensemble of scientific theorems or hypotheses, but as a complex of practices embedded within institutional frameworks, civil society, and the social lifeworld. Critical political economy, broadly speaking, analyses the structural interdependencies of economic, political, and social power from an explicit, normative standpoint. Such a standpoint may elicit a diagnosis of societal ills and/or a prognosis for political action. Political economy, however conceived, became a major perspective in communication research after World War II. An overview of the unfolding schools of thought, in the developed and developing world, cannot be detailed here. Interested readers may consult Peter Golding and Graham Murdock’s The Political Economy of Media (1997) and Vincent Mosco’s The Political Economy of Communication (2009).

A more recent historical backdrop informs the articles in this issue. Since about 1990, the world has experienced a deepening symbiosis between capitalism and communication. Digital convergences across mass media, telecommunications, and computer technologies have opened up new sectors of production and profit realisation. These same technologies also shape the networks of finance, production,
symbolic representation, and consumer culture. Such developments have generated concerns about regulation, cultural expression, and communication rights. Evolving information and communication technologies have also facilitated local-global activism against transnational corporations, supra-national policy institutions, and national governments.

Meanwhile, the collapse of the Soviet Union, third-world liberation movements, and national Keynesianism accentuated the worldwide proliferation of neoliberalism. National governments and supra-national institutions devised policy regimes that required financial deregulation, public expenditure cuts, de-unionisation, tariff removal, and the privatisation of state assets. Neoliberalism also constituted a pattern of discourse premised on the supposed complementarities of market freedom, individual liberty, and the minimalist state. During the 1990s, these precepts became a commonsense doxa among government and public sector elites, political parties, educational institutions, and the news media domain.

Ten of the eleven articles here were originally presented to the Political Economy of Communication conference held at the Auckland University of Technology in September 2011. This international event was organised by Journalism, Media and Democracy (JMAD), a research centre co-founded by Martin Hirst and Wayne Hope in May 2010. The founding objectives were to foster individual research projects for members; develop opportunities for collaborative, funded research projects; and arrange interdisciplinary media conferences. In September 2010, JMAD launched an inaugural one-day conference: Media, Democracy and the Public Sphere. The success of this undertaking encouraged the centre to plan for a second, two-day conference in 2011. The invited keynote speakers, Professors Graham Murdock, Dwayne Winseck, and Janet Wasko were, and are, distinguished scholars in the political economy of communication. They have also given identity and purpose to their field within the annual International Association of Communication Research (IAMCR) conference, which includes a longstanding political economy of communication section. Contributors to this section are featured in the book reviewed for this issue, Wasko, J., Murdock, G., & Sousa, H. (2011). The handbook of political economy of communications.

In our first article, Peter Thompson identifies recent tensions between critics of neo-Marxist approaches to the communications research field and those who insist on the indispensability of a Marxist-inspired
framework. He argues for a synthesis between macro-structural critiques of capitalism and institutionalist explications of media policy development. From this perspective, his article analyses how New Zealand’s National-led government dismantled Labour’s 1999–2008 public broadcasting reforms. However, the idea that National simply reverted to neoliberal policy precepts, it is argued, overlooks how specific inter-ministerial tensions played out within available policy parameters. Next, Gavin Ellis reprises a traditional theme within the political economy of communication literature, news media ownership. His article outlines how proliferating digital environments fragment the news domain just as corporate media owners abandon important but unprofitable areas of news coverage. He argues that public shareholding models of media ownership, as a democratic alternative to corporate structures, must adapt to digital cultures of news dissemination and reception. Blayne Haggart provides a political-economic critique of certain developments within the digital domain itself; specifically, he considers the impact of International Copyright Treaties on digital works across the major content industries: music, motion pictures, computer software, and publishing. His article explains how U.S. favoritism toward copyright owners, at the expense of users’ and creators’ works, potentially threatens the copyright policy autonomy of Canada and Mexico, as well as that of other countries. The next two articles reveal the interplay between the neoliberal ideology and political economies of communication. Paschal Preston and Henry Silke argue that neoliberal ideological assumptions structure economic news stories and financial journalism. This tendency, in turn, affects economic and financial processes. Their theoretical argument is illustrated by an overview of Irish Press coverage during the domestic property bubble and subsequent crash from 2000 to 2007. Robert Neubauer draws upon neo-Gramscian analyses of hegemony to delineate the ideological project of (anthropogenic) climate change denialism in North America. This project, advanced by think tanks, advocacy groups, and a sympathetic media equates climate change denialism with well-informed scepticism and labels verifiable climate change research as ‘junk science’.

Brice Nixon succinctly reminds us that critical political economy is more than a defence of democratic principles against the power of capitalism. His discussions of U.S. communication policy history reject the liberal mythology of publicly expanding communication networks and the radical-democratic mythology whereby a (potentially) public communications system in the telegraph era was captured by business interests. Truly incisive accounts of such developments, Nixon suggests,
must be grounded in the realisation that capitalism as a social totality artificially demarcates the economic from the political.

The next three articles (alongside Peter Thompson’s contribution) provide a fascinating snapshot of the New Zealand communications landscape subsequent to the replacement of national Keynesianism by a neoliberal policy regime. In this context, Rosser Johnson reveals how government ministries such as Health, Transport and Social Development advertise their services not as social entitlements but as opportunities for co-operative engagement. Sue Abel indicates how a political-economic critique of communication might be embodied within a cultural-political project, namely the establishment of a Māori Television service. She points out that, in a thoroughly commercialised broadcasting environment, Māori Television programs serve as a resource for sustaining Māori language and customs and as a nostalgic reminder of New Zealand national identity. These objectives are deemed to be incompatible, the success of Māori Television notwithstanding. Nick Perry asks whether the recent controversy provoked by the proposal to erect a ‘Wellywood sign’ near Wellington Airport indicates cultural resistance to a post-Lord-of-the-Rings regime that equates New Zealand with ‘Wellywood’ and Wellington with ‘Hobbitown’.

The last two articles in this issue represent an extension of our field. In a world pervaded by converging digital realms, critical political economy perspectives must incorporate all forms of communication, not just those associated with mass media, advertising, telecoms, and the Internet. Accordingly, Sean Sturm and Stephen Turner explain how certain architectural design imperatives for ‘innovative’ universities reinforce technicist measures of pedagogy, research, and knowledge acquisition. In this regard, New Zealand universities are held up as exemplars of ‘knowledge-based’ discourses within techno-capitalism.

Katie Raso’s article signals an important new direction in the political economy of communication. She explores the temporal dimensions of digitalised social practices, a welcome corrective to spatially focused understandings of communication networks. She argues, on the basis of Canadian research, that young people’s experience of social acceleration, multi-tasking, and busy-ness as performance contributes to individual perceptions of time poverty. The pressure of such perceptions undermines collective understandings of the neoliberal social order.
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References


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