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**Citation:** Iosifidis, P. (2016). Media Industries as Structure: Objectivism and the Societal Context - Case Study: The Political Economy of Television Sports Rights. In: Freeman, M. (Ed.), *Industrial Approaches to Media: A Methodological Gateway to Industry Studies*. (pp. 89-107). London: Palgrave Macmillan. ISBN 9781137551764

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**Chapter author and title:** Iosifidis, Petros (2016) 'Media Industries as Structure: Objectivism and the Societal Context: Case Study - The Political Economy of Television Sports Rights', pp. 89-107, in M. Freeman (ed.) *Industrial Approaches to Media: A Methodological Gateway to Industry Studies* London: Palgrave Macmillan.

The chapter as a whole will offer an outline how political economy has come to operate across different aspects of media, cultural and communication studies, and attempt to outline a methodology for how best to implement this approach for research. My contribution sits alongside this, offering a case study where I reflect quite openly about how I myself use political economy in my research, how exactly I went about doing this from a methodological standpoint, and also how effective it was as a method of research. I therefore frame my contribution around a piece of my research that I have actually done where I took a political economy approach. More specifically, readers will find below a piece that thinks about the how's and why's of using this approach for television sports rights. I have also used a political economy theory for the analysis of public service broadcasting (see Iosifidis, 2007, 2010), media ownership (see Iosifidis, 1997, 2011) and social media (see Iosifidis and Wheeler, 2016).

### **Political economy paradigm**

Let me start by summarising the main aspects of the political economy paradigm. Within the domain of political economy, *critical political economy* is taking a different stance than *classical political economy*, with the former providing a critique of the impact of market mechanisms and the economy on society and the latter considering market forces as a positive trend, offering enhanced choice for consumers (Harrison, 2006). Since its inception in the 1970s, the critical political economy approach has been concerned with the structural development of the media under capitalism. It focuses on themes such as media growth and power, the expansion of corporate reach and influence, and the trends toward media privatization, commercialization and reregulation. The central thesis of the theory is that there exist economic structures of dominance in the media and communication sectors that impact

negatively on the range of views and opinions disseminated by the media. As a result, what prevails in a given society is a hegemonic set of ideas, or a 'dominant ideology'.

Critical political economy asserts that privately owned media can be viewed as instruments of class domination in order to maintain the status quo. A key text illustrating the arguments for this stance is Herman and Chomsky's *Manufacturing Consent* (1988), which discusses a 'propaganda model' in the American news media, incorporating five filters that determine news content, ownership, funding, flak, sources and ideologies. Some scholars have criticized this model on grounds that ownership, as a dominant factor, does not necessarily determine news content as

owners, advertisers, and key political personnel [...] cannot always do as they wish (because) they operate within structures which constrain as well as facilitate, imposing limits as well as offering opportunities (and) analyzing the nature and sources of these limits is a key task for a critical political economy of the future (Golding and Murdock, 1991: 16).

Herman and Chomsky have defended the validity of their model by arguing that it focuses on media *behavior*, rather than media *effects*. On a broader perspective, critical political economy attempts to incorporate historical and contextual aspects, without however underestimating the significance of vested interests and other commercial considerations in media production and consumption. According to Flew (2007: 31), the political economy critique to mass communication theory relates to the rediscovery of the Marxist stance of capitalism, which connected this critique of media in liberal democratic societies to a wider conceptual understanding of the bases of social order in class-divided societies. From this perspective, the theory asserts that developments in global media could be understood as one dimension of the transformation of contemporary capitalism.

In his classic study in the field *The Political Economy of Communication* Mosco (1996) argues that the tradition of political economy pays emphasis on three aspects: an analysis of the historical transformation and social shifts; an examination of the social world as a whole, in which the media occupy a large part; and a critical interest in promoting social values and the democratization of media systems. Thus from a critical political economy perspective, the role

of the media in global capitalism needs to be viewed from an angle which combines historical, structural, political and cultural criticism.

First, the media could be assessed in the context of broad developments and processes of capitalism – systemic crises (for example, the recession of the mid-1970s or the 2008-09 economic slowdown); the production of new types of commodities and endless commercialization; the growth of multinational corporations; advances in technology, marketing and advertising which reduce the time between production and consumption.

Second, a structural analysis of the media – the political economy's core theme – is needed to get a grasp of the changing institutional arrangements of the media sectors as a result of mergers, acquisitions, joint ventures, and other types of integration and amalgamation that could lead to high levels of concentration of media ownership and a threat to political pluralism and cultural diversity. Garnham (1990) referred to structures of domination based upon class relations and argued that political economy views class (the structure of access to the means of production and distribution) as the main reason to the structure of domination. Political economists called for a transformation of the media and their underlying structures to make them more open and accountable. Murdock and Golding (2000) provided a critique of the changing balance between public and commercial media, the reduction of government regulation, and the 1980s/1990s privatization of state-owned media and telecommunications enterprises.

Third, critical political economy is informed by an understanding of the cultural issues that result from the economic logic of media commercialization. This, according to Ampuja (2004: 73-4) requires a renewed focus on commodification and consumerism, two phenomena that formed the main target of the Frankfurt School's critique of the culture industry. Strange (1988) and Flew (2007: 32) have added another element – critical political economy must be *global*, as the insistence upon a global perspective has been central to the development of the theory.

There are limitations to the political economy approach, expressed mainly by cultural studies scholars. In fact, cultural studies and political economy have frequently considered each other as a competitor, rather than an ally. The differences between the two paradigms have evolved around the question of articulating developments in the economic and cultural spheres. The debates between scholars representing the two disciplines have been fierce and focused on

whether one theory overemphasize the economic sphere (cultural studies' criticism on political economy) or there is instead an extensive focus on the cultural sphere (political economy's criticism on cultural studies) (see Grossberg, 1991, 1996; Garnham, 1990).

### **The political economy of television sports rights**

I now turn to the rationale of using political economy for analysing television sports rights. There is a symbiotic relationship between media and sports organisations. On the one hand, sport provides a valuable source of content for media organisations. Whilst on the other, the media (mainly television broadcasters) provide an increasingly important source of revenue for sports organisations (either directly from the purchase of broadcast rights, or indirectly via exposure for sponsors). As with actual sporting contests, however, within the bounds of this relationship, all of the participants are 'playing to win'. Broadcasters compete against one another for lucrative sports rights contracts, as well as against sporting organisations in a contest to secure the 'best' price for the rights on offer. Sports organisations also compete to promote their sport in a contest for public attention with other sporting events and organisations. And finally, at risk of stretching the analogy, there is also an on- going contest between politicians, regulators, sporting organisations and broadcasters over the legal and regulatory framework for sports broadcasting. My co-authored book "The Political Economy of Television Sports Rights" (see Evens, Iosifidis and Smith, 2013) and subsequent article (Evens, Iosifidis and Smith, 2015) were concerned with understanding how these contests and, in particular, the relationship between media and sports organisations has been (and is) shaped by a combination of economic, political, socio- cultural and technological forces.

The focus of the above publications was on market and regulatory issues (rather than issues of representation and/or audience behaviour) and as a result it adopted an analytical approach focused on what is often termed the "political economy of the media". As already mentioned, the political economy approach to understanding the media is concerned with how the way that media organisations behave (and the content they provide) is shaped by the economic and political context in which they operate. More specifically, my analysis of the relationship between media and sports organisations took place against the backdrop of two key developments. First, the last couple of decades have witnessed a period of almost constant technological change within the media industries, which has seen the development of new broadcast delivery technologies, such as satellite and digital television, as well as the growth

of new media technologies, chiefly the internet. To date at least, the former has had a more significant impact on sports broadcasting than the latter and therefore the book serves to highlight the continued primacy of television broadcasting. Whilst not seeking to understate the potential impact of new media technologies on sports broadcasting markets and their regulation, the book emphasises the unrivalled capacity of live television broadcasting to provide a focal point for national and global audiences (for example, the Olympic Games; FIFA World Cup finals; the NFL Superbowl), as well as a major source of revenue for both broadcasters and sports organisations (for example, rights to English Premier League football, US Major League Baseball rights, Indian Premier League cricket).

Secondly, digital technologies and market developments have also been shaped by a general shift towards the 'marketisation' of broadcasting, particularly in Europe and the US, but also throughout much of the rest of the world (Murdock, 2000; Murdock and Wasko, 2007; Freedman, 2008: 50-2; Hesmondhalgh, 2007: 105-36). Inspired by neoliberal ideas, over the last three decades, marketisation has been pursued through four major policy and/or regulatory interventions, employed in various combinations (Evens, Iosifidis and Smith, 2013: 5-6):

- Privatisation (the sale of public assets to private investors). Whereas in the US there were relatively few public assets to be sold in the first place, numerous European governments have overseen the complete or partial privatisation of publicly owned broadcasters (for example, TF1 in France) and telecommunications operators (for example, Deutsch Telekom in Germany).
- Liberalisation (opening previously restricted markets to new entrants). For example, the 1996 US Telecommunications Act allowed for cable and telecommunications companies to enter each-others' markets and relaxed restrictions on cross-media ownership. Similarly, during the late 1980s and 1990s, EU directives facilitated the opening up to competition of both European broadcasting (Television without Frontiers, renamed Audiovisual Media Services) and telecommunications markets.
- Reorienting of regulation (away from the defence of the public interest, to the promotion of 'fair' competition). In Europe, this trend is best illustrated by the increased influence of the European Commission's Competition directorate over key areas of media regulation, such as mergers and the definition of 'state aid' with

regards to public service broadcasters (Wheeler, 2004). In the US, the removal of long- standing public interest regulations during the late 1980s and 1990s, such as the Fairness Doctrine and Financial Interest and Syndication (Fin-Syn) rules, could also be seen to represent the prioritisation of competition (and free speech) concerns over any wider interpretation of the public interest.

- Corporatisation (urging or obliging publicly financed organisations to seek additional sources of income and to maximise their market value). For example, successive British governments have urged the BBC to pursue commercial opportunities (mostly overseas) via its commercial arm, BBC Worldwide, and also to reduce its operating costs (Born, 2004). Alongside new developments in broadcasting technology, such as encryption and digitalisation, these political initiatives have facilitated the growing 'commodification' of broadcasting. Perhaps most notably, throughout Europe the universality of broadcasting traditionally offered by public service broadcasters has been eroded by the growth of pay- TV, and even in the US the main free- to- air commercial networks face increased competitive pressure from pay- TV services available via cable and satellite. All of which means that 'more and more television services are offered for sale at a price and [are] available only to those who can afford to pay' (Murdock, 2007: 43).

By adopting a political economy approach my work has highlighted how professional sport has developed into a highly valuable global industry. The main focus has been on the role played by the media, and particularly television broadcasting, in the development of sport in both economic and cultural terms. Specifically, on the one hand, sports organisations and television broadcasters have built a synergetic relationship that has allowed both to further their commercial interests. In this sense, it could be argued that the commodification of sport has served the interests of all the main participants within the sports– media– business complex, including media conglomerates, marketing agencies, brands and sponsors, sports event organisers, sports associations and even professional athletes (although perhaps not always sports fans). Just as significantly, on the other hand, in many countries free- to- air television coverage of sports events and competitions, most notably by public service broadcasters and terrestrial commercial networks, has facilitated shared viewing experiences, which have fostered a sense of national identity and cultural citizenship. To begin with at least, the broadcasting of major sporting events played a key role in the development of sport

into a key part of popular culture. Paradoxically then, free- to- air sports broadcasting provided the foundations on which the highly commercialised sports industry of today is built. Following the marketisation of broadcasting from around the 1980s onwards, in many countries the availability of at least some key sports competitions and events on free- to- air television has been eroded and as a result the contribution of sports broadcasting to cultural citizenship has been partially undermined. Policy intervention is therefore required to preserve live free- to- air television coverage of major sporting events. At the same time, across the world, pay- TV broadcasters have used exclusive deals for the television rights to premium sporting events as a means to establish a dominant market position. In such cases, regulatory intervention is also required to ensure improved competition in the broadcasting market.

One of the key parts of my research examined how the contrasting perspectives on television and sport – economic and cultural – have been reflected in different approaches to the regulation of sports broadcasting. First, competition policy aims to facilitate free, fair and effective competition (both the upstream and downstream) in the sports broadcasting market. And, secondly, sector- specific media regulation, in this case, major events legislation (also commonly referred to as ‘listed events’ or ‘anti- siphoning’ legislation), aims to guarantee the public’s right to information and preserve free access to television coverage of major national or international sporting events. There have been repeated calls from pay- TV broadcasters and some sports organisations to relax both of these strands of regulation. In the book we have made the case for a regulatory approach that seeks to balance the commercial priorities of broadcasters and sports organisations with the wider social and cultural benefits citizens gain from free- to- air sports broadcasting. Based on the findings presented in eight country reports, we concluded that in many cases the balance between commerce and culture in sports broadcasting has shifted too far in favour of the commercial interests of dominant pay- TV broadcasters and sports organisations seeking to maximise their income from the sale of broadcast rights. As a result, citizens often face either the loss of access to television coverage of key sporting events and competitions and/or rising bills from pay- TV and pay- per- view services. Against this background, we contend that national governments, as well as supranational regulatory bodies (such as the EU) should: first, resist pressure from pay- TV broadcasters and/or sporting organisations to relax or abolish existing legislation designed to preserve free- to- air coverage of major sporting events; and secondly, apply the



existing competition rules more vigorously and with more emphasis on the economic and cultural specificities of the sports broadcasting markets.

To summarise, my research adopted a political economy approach which provided a comparative analysis of the regulation of television sports broadcasting. I examined how contrasting perspectives on television and sport – economic and sociocultural – have been reflected in two main approaches to the regulation of sports broadcasting, namely competition law and major events legislation. The results of this analysis suggest that in many cases, the balance between commerce and culture in sports broadcasting has shifted too far in favour of the commercial interests of dominant pay-TV operators and sports organisations. In effect, I made a case for the pursuit of an approach to sports broadcasting regulation that seeks to balance the commercial priorities of broadcasters and sports organisations with the wider sociocultural benefits citizens gain from free-to-air sports broadcasting.

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