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# Critical Media and Communication Studies Today. A Conversation

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**Abstract:** This article documents a conversation between us that was first published in parallel on our two blogs <http://dwmw.wordpress.com> and <http://fuchs.uti.at/blog>. The conversation deals with our assessments of the status of Critical Media and Communication Studies today. We discuss the work of Dallas Smythe, how to study and assess Google, research dimensions of Critical Political Economy of the Media, how important each of these dimensions should be, the role of ideology critique for Critical Political Economy of the Media, the commonalities and differences between Political Economies of the Media and Critical Political Economy of the Media/Critique of the Political Economy of the Media, the role of Karl Marx for Political Economies of the Media, Nicholas Garnham's recent comments on the field of Critical Political Economy of the Media, neoliberalism and capitalist crisis as contexts for Political Economies of the Media. Comments are very welcome on our blogs, URLs to the specific blog postings can be found in the article sections.

**Keywords:** Keyword, keyword, keyword, keyword, keyword, keyword, keyword, keyword, keyword, keyword, keyword, keyword, keyword, keyword, keyword, keyword, keyword, keyword, keyword, keyword

## Introduction

<http://fuchs.uti.at/596/>

<http://dwmw.wordpress.com/2011/08/06/critical-media-and-communication-studies-today-a-conversation-between-dwayne-winseck-and-christian-fuchs-part-1/>

We met for the first time at the International Association of Media and Communication Researchers (IAMCR) in Istanbul, Turkey in July. We already knew each other through some collaboration in one another's projects and our knowledge of one another's work.

Following the conference, we exchanged some emails and Christian put Dwayne in contact with two authors of an excellent paper at the conference, Peter Jakobsson and Fredrik Stiernstedt, two doctoral candidates at Södertörns University in Sweden. Having recently moved to Uppsala University in Sweden, Christian had organized a speakers' symposium where Peter and Frederik recently gave a talk.

Our discussion turned into a bigger conversation about different political economies of communication, media and the Internet. Christian, as many readers may know, is one of the foremost Marxist critical communication and media scholars today. If ever there was a case to demonstrate the decisive importance of Marxist analysis today, he provides it – in spades. Marx, as he says, is back, and not a moment too soon.

Dwayne, on the other, is no stranger to Marxian Political Economy, but argues that we must draw from a wider range of sources than the Marxian pantheon. Other notions held dearly must be handled with greater precision – i.e. consolidation within the Telecom-Media-Internet (TMI) industries – and more attention given to the specificity of market processes and forces, evidence and the strategies of particular firms. Other notions need to be refined drastically or abandoned, i.e.

ideology. The fact that media, information and cultural goods are fundamentally different – i.e. they are immaterial commodities – than other goods should also be kept front and centre.

After stitching the conversation together and adding a few links here and there to some of the people and sources we refer to, we thought it might be a good idea to post the conversation on each of our blogs ([Christian's blog](#), [Dwayne's blog](#)). As the wreckage of the global financial crisis (2007/8ff) continues to unfold and the information sectors – as industries, sets of technological capabilities, and vehicles of pleasure and for increasing the range of market forces – continue to be in a heightened state of flux, the ideas raised in debates over what constitutes a critical political economy approach to the field are arguably more important than ever. The main lines of our conversation follow:

**Discussion Turn 1 (Dwayne Winseck): "A conversation about different political economies of communication, media and the Internet..."**

<http://dwmw.wordpress.com/2011/08/06/critical-media-and-communication-studies-today-a-conversation-between-dwayne-winseck-and-christian-fuchs-part-1/>  
<http://fuchs.uti.at/596/>

Christian, as always I hope that you're well.

I was impressed by the work of Peter Jakobsson and Fredrik Stiernstedt on data centres (Jakobsson and Stiernstedt 2011a). It is a nice crystallization of geography, materiality, data and 'cyberspace'. The recent [acknowledgement by Microsoft](#) that neither it nor any other major US-based ICT/ Internet company – think Amazon, Apple, Google, Facebook, to name just a few – are beyond the reach of the US *Patriot Act* shows the global reach of US [national security power](#), but also the importance of place. Jakobsson and Stiernstaedt (2011a) illustrated the ties between security, the physicality and locations of 'cyberspace', even the geological underpinning of data centres, by examining, among other things, how Google is building a new data centre in Finland, with local government support through tax abatements and other enticements, out of the hulk of a retrofitted Cold War bunker buried deep in the ground. Proximity to Russia, where Internet markets are currently dominated by two Russian behemoths – Yandex and VKontakte – also means that the bunker-cum-secure-data centre could serve as a launchpad for Google's future forays into Russia as well.

Peter and Fredrik's [paper](#) certainly deserved the Dallas Smythe prize for best Graduate Student paper.

Cheers, Dwayne

**Discussion Turn 2 (Christian Fuchs): "The circumstance that the IAMCR has a Dallas Smythe and a Herbert Schiller award brings up the question of what Critical Media and Communication Studies are all about today..."**

<http://fuchs.uti.at/596/>  
<http://dwmw.wordpress.com/2011/08/06/critical-media-and-communication-studies-today-a-conversation-between-dwayne-winseck-and-christian-fuchs-part-1/>

Hi Dwayne.

Fredrik and Peter's paper is very good. Indeed, all of their papers that I have read are.

The circumstance that the IAMCR has a Dallas Smythe and a Herbert Schiller award brings up the question of what Critical Media and Communication Studies are all about today, how important it is to be critical, what it means to be critical and what the role of Marx's works is for Critical Media

and Communication Studies, i.e. what the role class and the critique of capitalism should play in this field.

Let's exchange some thoughts on these questions.

Best wishes, Christian

### Discussion Turn 3 (Dwayne Winseck): "I do not believe that Critical Political Economy is synonymous with Marxist Political Economy..."

<http://dwmw.wordpress.com/2011/08/06/critical-media-and-communication-studies-today-a-conversation-between-dwayne-winseck-and-christian-fuchs-part-1/>  
<http://fuchs.uti.at/596/>

Thanks a bunch for Peter and Fredrik's email addresses.

I also just read their abstract for the talk they gave at [media@UU](mailto:media@UU) (Jakobsson and Stiernstedt 2011b). That paper also looks impressive. I like the way they capture the materiality and sociality of media, and how they see certain elements of media — technology, commodities, juridical forms — being periodically unstable, then forming recurring institutional patterns. They seem to have a deft touch.

Smythe's (1977, 1981) concept of the audience commodity (here's [one example](#) of its recent use (Napoli 2008), Christian's own use of this concept and the introduction of the notion of the Internet prosumer commodity is documented [here](#) (Fuchs 2010)), and more importantly, his injunction that communication and media studies were not materialist enough — i.e. they didn't study the communication and media as industries, markets, and linchpins in the capitalist economy overall — are maybe even more valuable now than when Smythe began to unfold them 40-50 years ago.

Other ideas of his, however, can be obstacles, and a commodity analysis, while essential, only goes so far. It is precisely the tension between the real fact that communication and media are essential to capitalist economies — and to all command, control and decision-making structures — versus the fact that they don't conform to the standards of normal economics at all that makes them so interesting. I mean, they produce immaterial things, from immaterial labour, for uncertain markets, fickle tastes, people just being people.

The latter point brings me to the idea that the belief that media and communication can be reduced to instruments of domination — a stance all-too-evident in the work of Smythe, Schiller and too many to name other political economists who have carried the 'critical Marxist' banner — has far too often obliterated the intimate links of communication and media to pleasure and joy. One-sided portraits of domination, in my view, also obscure gradations in the severity of pain, suffering and lack of recognition suffered by marginal and otherwise disenfranchised groups (Honneth 1995) — a set of classes of people that is, as you well know, becoming larger and larger.

Smythe and this kind of political economy, I believe, offers much, and I won't part way for a moment with what I understand critical political economy to be. However, I do not believe that critical political economy is synonymous with Marxist political economy. To think otherwise, I believe, constrains our vision too much and leaves a shallow well from which to drink.

A good concrete example is the question of how to study Google. Jarvis (2009) (in *What Would Google Do?*) reveres Google, while Vaidhyanathan (2011) (in *Googlization of Everything*) reviles it, but in so doing misses the positive generativity that Google creates: e.g. efficient searching, linking, indexing, navigability, storage, a digital Alexandria, etc. These are without a doubt immensely valuable resources conjured up out of our resources and we need to make sense of them. In simple terms, Google provides without a doubt a significant spur to research, development, innovation and, undoubtedly, military security. Fredrik and Peter (Jakobsson and Stiernstedt 2011a) grasp this kind of subtler, textured interplay between power, place and pleasure in interesting ways.

Long weekend here, and friends from out of town, so should be enjoyable. Time to go. Hope you enjoy yours.

Cheers, Dwayne

**Discussion Turn 4 (Christian Fuchs): "Smythe reminds us of the need to engage with Marx and the critique of capitalism when we analyse the media today..."**

<http://fuchs.uti.at/596/>

<http://dwmw.wordpress.com/2011/08/06/critical-media-and-communication-studies-today-a-conversation-between-dwayne-winseck-and-christian-fuchs-part-1/>

Hello Dwayne,

No doubt, Fredrik and Peter are very talented writers. You will like their papers (e.g. Jakobsson and Stiernstedt 2011a, 2011b).

The good thing about the awards at IAMCR is that they remind us of the need for Critical Media and Communication Studies and the relevance of Smythe's, Schiller's (and other scholars') works today.

The great thing about Smythe is that for him the Political Economy of the Media was Marxist Political Economy, so he was clear on the need to abolish capitalism and class and to analyse media communication in the context of class. I think we need much of this insight today. On the one hand Smythe was opposed to ideology critique, which is problematic. At the same time he spoke of the consciousness industry, so there was some ideology critique in his own work. He did not focus extensively on alternative media, but there are such elements in his works, like the alternative broadcasting system he suggested to the Chinese (pretty much the same idea like Brecht and Enzensberger), documented in the paper "After Bicycles, What?" (Smythe 1994). So I do think that there is a lot in Smythe's works to engage with today. Dallas Smythe reminds us of the need to be critical and to think about class when studying the media.

Today we need to go somewhat beyond Smythe and see more of the positive potentials of media. However, if we stress the positive potentials too much, then we end up with the Cultural Studies celebration of commodity culture, so we have to be careful and also take a look at the political economy of positive and negative potentials, the distribution of resources between them, etc. Alternative forms of communication that transcend market, capitalism and ideology are not impossible, but more likely to be precarious, tend to have less visibility, resources, people etc. Political action is needed in order to channel resources towards alternative media so that that they become more \ powerful, less precarious, etc.

Smythe reminds us of the need to engage with Marx and the critique of capitalism when we analyse the media today. After the rise of neoliberalism, postmodernism and the cultural turn, it has since the 1980s become ever more uncommon to engage with Marx. The engagement with Marx and Marxism has increasingly been replaced in universities. And by saying Marx, I do not mean the fetishization of Marx as a person or politician, but I do mean the importance of engaging with the concepts of class and capitalism. Ironically, while culturalists claimed that class and Marx are dead and that we need to focus on identity politics, local reforms, etc., the antagonisms between capital and the proletariat was becoming ever more intense (the rise of precarious labour, the increase of unemployment, the explosion of socio-economic inequality, the differences between profits and wages, etc.). The rise of the movement for democratic globalization showed that it is a movement galvanizing around the topic of class. In the 1980s and 1990s new social movements were quite separated around topics like gender, racism, peace, nature, etc. – the rise of neoliberalism resulted since the late 1990s in a movement of movements (the anti-corporate movement/movement for democratic globalization), class issues have been binding all the other issues together in this movement. The result of the cumulating antagonisms of capitalism was the new global economic crisis, which has shown the importance of the economy, class and capitalism and has brought back an interest in Marx. Marx (i.e. the analysis of class and capitalism) was always important, but now we are in a time in which his work has regained much of its salience.

Enjoy the weekend. Best wishes, Christian

**Discussion Turn 5 (Dwayne Winseck): "Google produces a vast range of 'public goods' [...] Focusing on what people do with technologies, not to celebrate, but to study the dialectic between exploitation and joy, is more compelling to me than focusing on consciousness and ideology..."**

<http://dwmw.wordpress.com/2011/08/06/critical-media-and-communication-studies-today-a-conversation-between-dwayne-winseck-and-christian-fuchs-part-2/>  
<http://fuchs.uti.at/600/>

Hi Christian,

If one thinks of Google as a general public utility (or performing such public utility like functions in search, linking, indexing, creating the navigable web), although of course as a private company, private in the sense that it is the extension of a few men (Brin, Page, Schmidt, through their controlling ownership stake) and private venture capital markets, then Google produces a vast range of "public goods" — information itself is a public good, so that Google does this is not so surprising. This is what I always appreciated about heterodox and critical Marxian Political Economies of communication: namely, that they did not only look at commodities and exchange within markets, but those things in life — public goods, common sense, gifts, free time, the sociality of everyday life — that give value to what it means to be human.

Vaidhyanathan's [Googlization of Everything](#) (2011), by and large, only gives a negative critique of Google. Moreover, the argument is mostly rhetorical rather than empirically-based and well theorized, i.e. it often appears to be more like random thoughts strung together over the course of a year about Google than a systematic critique of the political economy of Google. He hardly discusses what Google generates in terms of public goods, under private control of course, although he does lay out his grand 'public goods' proposal in the last chapter.

I heard the really smart American critical legal scholar Pamela Samuelson (2011) speak about the [Google Book Settlement Agreement](#) (BSA) last year (and a podcast of her views [here](#)). She raved about the audacity of the project and what it meant in terms of getting more books in print, faster, more easily accessible and affordable than ever at a time when the public sector — universities in particular, especially as the situation in the UK shows — is in crisis, being pared back and forced to tighten the purse in light of the evaporation of public funds on account of the Global Financial Crisis, 2007/8ff. The one big problem in all this is that Google's Book Settlement Agreement essentially let Google rewrite the terms of trade and copyright law for the US in the digital media age. Quite a coup if you could get it, eh? Funny thing is that, in this case what was good for Google was in fact good for us, if we measured things solely in terms of being able to deliver the goods while ignoring the consequences for the rule of law. This would be technocracy, and it is this that Siva (Vaidhyanathan 2011) rightfully and powerfully draws out for critique. Sure, it delivers the goods, but does democracy and rule of law by citizens take a beating as a result?

While these elements are core to Vaidhyanathan's (2011) discourse on Google, I can't help but feel that it all doesn't stack up as well as it should. The economic and legal treatment is not up to the standards set by his earlier work.

So, back to the main point regarding critical theory, Marxian Political Economy, and then a few more words about Smythe. I like Marcuse because I think he always demonstrated the dialectic between domination and liberation. The ultimate triumph of instrumental reason (capital, calculability, hierarchy, organization, control) in Marcuse's work is always kept at bay by hopes for pleasure, eros, love, play, aesthetic appreciation, etc. Peter and Fredrik's papers remind me of this sensibility (see Marcuse's [Eros and Civilization](#) 1955). Their use of the Italian autonomist Marxist stuff impressed me a lot, although I don't know enough about this perspective as I probably should.

I'm a big fan of Smythe, as I said yesterday. I called him at home one day in 1988, and while he was outside washing the car he took my call and we talked about the allocation of spectrum and orbital slots for satellites as part of my master's thesis for over an hour. He was an economist, albeit a heterodox one, maybe even a Marxian one, and his insistence on thinking about the communication and media as industries was an important injunction. So too was his and Schiller's insistence that these industries are part of the C3I assemblage, or the Military Information Media Entertainment (MIME) complex as some people now refer to it (see [der Derian](#) (2009) and [here](#) (Geer Jr. 2011)).

However, I also think his ideas about dependency theory, nation, communication policy, China, consciousness and many other things are very problematic. The Smythe and Schiller view of communication and consciousness is classic, one-sided Marxism: "those who own the means of production also own the means of mental production". Well, yes, and no. His dim view of the capacity of the audience commodity to do much meaningful with either media or their lives was miserable, and stupor inducing.

One of the real advances of the Frankfurt School three or four decades before them was to surpass this ham-fisted notion of ideology and the control of consciousness. The fact that Smythe, Schiller and many other Critical Marxian Political Economy types still make it the centrepiece of their analysis (or at least their tacit assumptions) is an embarrassment to the standards of what we need to know, and indeed what many other fields do know about learning, social life, being, and mind.

Focusing on what people do with technologies, not to celebrate, but to study the dialectic between exploitation and joy is more compelling to me than focusing on consciousness and ideology. I think it is also implicit in the dialectic that Marcuse sets up between instrumental reason and pleasure, etc.

And you, what do you think?

Thanks and cheers, Dwayne

**Discussion Turn 6 (Christian Fuchs): "We need a synthesis of everything that is on the 'left' side of the spectrum in Media and Communication Studies. [...] Google has created the real conditions of its own transcendence..."**

<http://fuchs.uti.at/600/>

<http://dwmw.wordpress.com/2011/08/06/critical-media-and-communication-studies-today-a-conversation-between-dwayne-winseck-and-christian-fuchs-part-2/>

Hello Dwayne. Thank you for sharing your thoughts.

I can subscribe to a lot of what you are saying. My personal thought is probably most influenced by Hegel, Marx and Marcuse. What I think we need is a synthesis of everything that is on the "left" side of the spectrum in Media and Communication Studies. This entails a synthesis of the critique of media as:

- a) capital accumulation organizations,
- b) advertising institutions,
- c) ideology producers and disseminators, and a connection to
- d) alternative media, their potentials and limits +
- e) political struggles and their relations to the media +
- f) media and their use in the context of domination and liberation.

I think that's a broad spectrum. I try to set this out in a more systematic scheme in chapters 3+4 of "Foundations of Critical Media and Information Studies" (Fuchs 2011a).

Most critical media scholars focus just on one dimension. I think we need a combination of many. That being said, I think we need a focus on the radical critique of capitalism, and thereby take inspiration from Marx. And I do think that Cultural Studies after Raymond Williams and E.P. Thompson (who knew Marx very well), starting with Stuart Hall, has ever more given up the critique of capitalism. Therefore I would make early Cultural Studies part of the approaches that I want to bring together, but not automatically all contemporary Cultural Studies (which are to a certain extent too far away from a critique of capitalism), only Critical Cultural Studies. If one wants to focus on pleasure+media, then I think Marcuse's (1955) interpretation of Freud's pleasure principle is a good place to start and one can think about how this relates to the media. This is especially important for discussions about the relation of pleasure/play and labour (digital play labour/playbour) that we find today in relation to discussions about digital labour (for an application of Marcuse's pleasure principle for analysing Facebook playbour, see a recent paper by me [here](#) (Fuchs 2011b)). Marcuse's principle of pleasure was a radical concept opposed to capitalism. In contrast, in much celebratory Cultural Studies, there is a simplistic notion of pleasure related to the concept of the active, creative audience.

So one has to be careful not to celebrate commodity culture. The Autonomist Marxist tradition is really interesting, I try also to draw on it, but one has to criticize their fetishization of the multitude. They see struggles automatically emerging everywhere. It is a kind of determinism of the subject. Nonetheless the class concept of Hardt and Negri (2000, 2004) goes in the right direction can help us to conceptualize media+class (see a book I wrote together with a colleague about Negri's philosophy [here](#) (Fuchs and Zimmermann 2009)).

It is also crucial to theorize how knowledge labour relates to class. Almost all approaches are failures, either conceiving of knowledge work as defining a new dominant class or new proletariat. The positive aspect of Italian Autonomist Marxist theory is that it allows us to conceive of non-wage labour (like unemployment, house work, use of corporate Internet platforms, etc) as a form of exploitation and as part of class antagonism. But Italian Autonomist Marxist theory is like Cultural Studies to a certain extent. That is, it can be a deterministic and reductionist approach, it fetishizes the subject, sees the multitude as always and automatically revolting, it generalizes Italian experiences of struggles incorrectly to the whole world, it completely ignores ideology (there is no space of ideology critique in this theory).

The ignorance of ideology and ideology critique partly stems from the non-engagement with Hegel because there is no space for the concept of the dialectic of essence and existence (Hegel 1812, 1874) in Autonomist Marxism. At the same time, to a certain extent Hardt and Negri are more Hegelian than they think they are (see chapter 8 in my book "Foundations of Critical Media and Information Studies" (Fuchs 2011a)).

I do think that ideology critique, critique of capital accumulation models, media concentration, alternative media studies, social movement media studies, critical theory/philosophy of the media, etc. has to be combined and guided by Marxist theory. I feel that most single critical approaches (like Smythe, Frankfurt School, alternative media theory, Garnham, etc.) are not encompassing enough and that we now need a new critical synthesis. That's one of my basic tasks . . .

I fully agree that Google produces a lot of things that are nearly public. It is like when Lenin spoke about central banks that are private, but which assume quasi-public status. The thing one needs to do is to expropriate Google and use it as a good foundation for a public Internet. In a paper forthcoming in [Fast Capitalism](#) (see the full paper [here](#) (Fuchs 2011c)), I try to grasp the dialectic of Google in terms of a contradiction between networked productive forces and class relations of media production.

Many popular science accounts of Google are celebratory, whereas a lot of social science analyses point out the dangers of the company. One should go beyond one-sided assessments of Google and think dialectically: Google is at the same time the best and the worst that has ever happened on the Internet. Google is evil like the figure of Satan and good like the figure of God. It is the dialectical Good Evil.

Google is part of the best Internet practices because its services can enhance and support the everyday life of humans. It can help us to find and organize information, to access public information, to communicate and co-operate with others. Google has the potential to greatly advance the cognition, communication and co-operation capabilities of humans in society. It is a manifestation of the productive and socializing forces of the Internet.

The problem is not the technologies provided by Google, but the capitalist relations of production, in which these technologies are organized. The problem is that to provide these services Google necessarily has to exploit users and to engage in the surveillance and commodification of user-oriented data. This is the foundation – the internal core in its commodity form, if you will – upon which Google rests. Marx spoke in this context of the antagonism of the productive forces and the relations of production. Google is a prototypical example for the antagonisms between networked productive forces and capitalist relations of production of the information economy. Google has created the real conditions of its own transcendence. It is a mistake to argue that Google should be dissolved or to say that alternatives to Google are needed or to say that its services are a danger to humanity. Rather, Google would lose its antagonistic character if it were expropriated and transformed into a public, non-profit, non-commercial organization that serves the common good.

I think there is indeed a dialectic of exploitation and joy today, but an unequal one, in which joy becomes the new principle of exploitation (play labour, playbour). So joy tends to become subsumed under capital accumulation as a new management strategy and it becomes more difficult to resist. Certainly not impossible, but joy and play are antagonistically entangled with capital accumulation. My personal take is that political movements are the only way for making society more democratic and that struggles for democratic media must be connected to larger struggles in society that struggle against the commodification of the commons. At the same time, right-wing extremism is on the rise as effect of the crisis (especially in Europe, see Norway etc. now).

So much for today.

Best wishes, Christian

### **Discussion Turn 7 (Dwayne Winseck): "The critique of Political Economies of Communication that Nicholas Garnham offers is no holds barred..."**

<http://dwmw.wordpress.com/2011/08/06/critical-media-and-communication-studies-today-a-conversation-between-dwayne-winseck-and-christian-fuchs-part-3/>  
<http://fuchs.uti.at/602/>

Christian, fascinating response to our on-going riposte here. Must say I enjoy it very much, and am learning a lot too.

I agree that we are on the same page on a lot of things. Thanks also for helping me recall some things about Marcuse by referring to his links to Freud's notion of pleasure (Marcuse 1955). I have not read this material for some time and you've inspired me to jump back into it. Same with respect to the Italian Autonomist Marxists, and I think I'm in agreement here with you about how that school turns every act of the subject into a potentially revolutionary one. Perhaps that's pleasing to the 'digerati' and young guys hanging out around their Internet connections all the time, but it too easily celebrates 'net culture' and is not the basis for anything politically effective.

I'm fascinated too by your reference to Lenin and the idea of banks fulfilling central public functions. This is not a Leninist idea, as you well know, but rather a principle of modern banking from the creation of the Bank of England (founded in 1694 but only nationalized in 1946) and an absolute mainstay in John Maynard Keynes ideas. Of course, it is also anathema to ultra conservative economists. Do you have the Lenin source on this point ready-to-hand? Anyway, this broad 'infra-structural background concept of public goods' works well with understanding the idea that search



engines (Google), Social Network Companies (Facebook), ISPs, etc. provide no small range of generalized public utility like functions.

Now here's where the differences between us, I think, start to emerge. You make a long list of things that need to be combined to serve as an encompassing approach for all those on the left of communication and media studies. I'm not sure that can be accomplished, nor am I confident that striving to achieve such a thing is either viable or desirable. We must be able to talk but not necessarily expect that we're going to agree, and not just among those who self-identify with the left but anyone who has a voice in the things that we are talking about.

In the list of substantive areas that you suggest we should study, I would put ideology either off the list or much further down the list to the point that it plays a bit role in things. Instead, I would focus on 'users', what they do, say, think, without recourse to ideology and it's typical functionalist 'glue like' notions. Ideology is dead, like Marcuse said.

That's maybe too strong, but just to get the point out crisply. Have you seen Nicholas Garnham's (2011) new piece in the book by Wasko, Murdock, Sousa (eds): [Handbook on the Political Economy of Communication](#)? I'm only half way done, but he is scathing about the orthodoxy of what passes as PEC (Political Economy of Communication), biting saying that adherents have "forgotten nothing, and learnt nothing". The way he puts his case is way too strong, but throughout the paper he goes through a list of grievances that I have some sympathy for (Garnham 2011):

- (1) that Marxian analysis are disconnected from reality and empirical analysis;
- (2) that a fundamental aspect of this reality is the communication, information and cultural goods are immaterial and thus not like 'normal commodities' and that this has enormous implications for how markets are structured and work, the hits and miss character of media economies, media labour, policy, etc.;
- (3) that Marxian ideology and political projects are trumped up as political economic analysis, when they are not, and moreover likely to be all the more ineffectual because of their disconnection from an intimate understanding of the telecom-media-Internet industries that they are purportedly analyzing;
- (4) that dead notions — ideology, cultural imperialism, cultural homogenization, etc. — should be given up and given a decent funeral;
- (5) that Marxist political economy has to recognize that it is far from the only game in town and open itself up to more open-ended discussions with other schools of thought.

The critique of PEC that Garnham offers is no holds barred. I would part way with him in tone, and subsequently on some of the substantive claims that he makes. Here's an even bigger issue: Capitalism. I'm all for many of the things that you put on the research agenda, so please don't get me wrong, but I worry that focusing on such a large whole, and to putting one's political priorities at the front end of the process of inquiry risks obscuring too much empirical detail. I think [Zygmunt Bauman](#) (2000) and [Luc Botanski](#) (2011) represent my position well when they critique the idea that sociology today can take the 'whole' as its starting point. The fragmentation of societies, social institutions, individual life trajectories/biographies, etc. is key to understanding the complexity and instability that not only defines capitalism but the texture, fabric, structure and feel of our everyday lives.

This last point is way to big to pursue any further here for now. Besides, I have to go wash the car and play hockey.

Cheers, Dwayne

**Discussion Turn 8 (Christian Fuchs): "The rise of social media as a new capital accumulation model was accompanied by a social media ideology..."**

<http://fuchs.uti.at/602/>

<http://dwmw.wordpress.com/2011/08/06/critical-media-and-communication-studies-today-a-conversation-between-dwayne-winseck-and-christian-fuchs-part-3/>

Dear Dwayne,

Thank you for the discussion, I enjoy it very much.

I've attached my paper [here](#), A Contribution to the Critique of the Political Economy of Google; it should be online at Fast Capitalism's site soon (Fuchs 2011c). Any comments are very welcome.

The question, which critical approaches and theories we employ or combine, is also a question about our own work because we are influenced by certain traditions, thinkers, approaches and draw on them for creating new critical knowledge. It is also mainly about the question, which topics we find worth studying and how we study them. I do think that we need to bring together the critical analysis of capital accumulation (including the role of advertising), ideology, audiences/users and alternatives/struggles when we study media communication critically. I have no reasons to privilege one of these dimensions of study, why should one? They are all important.

I do not see your point about why you find studying ideology least important. You were quite critical of Dallas Smythe in one of your previous contributions in our conversation, saying that he is too economic reductionistic (an argument, with which I disagree because I think his thoughts and works were much more manifold than many see/say today), but both Smythe and Garnham have argued that ideology critique (as mainly advanced by the Frankfurt School within Marxism) is unnecessary, unimportant, idealistic, etc. This is a topic that not only concerns capital as base of capitalism, because ideologies are sturdily anchored in the capitalist economy, but also because they concern the economy's and the political system's interaction with culture and the world of ideas. So ideology is a crucial topic of analysis for avoiding crude economic reductionism.

By saying that ideology critique has least importance, you now sound more like Dallas Smythe and the economism you say you are so weary of. Why should ideology be less important than capital accumulation when we study the media? I do not agree and am curious what arguments you have in this respect. Marcuse, by the way, did not say that ideology is dead. People like Daniel Bell (1960) were talking about the "end of ideology" and Marcuse countered that late capitalism in the 1960s and 1970s was a hyper-ideological age.

Let's take a simple contemporary example: what is now called "social media" by some. After the dot.com crisis in 2000, there was a need for establishing new capital accumulation strategies for the capitalist Internet economy. So the discourse on "social media" became all about new capital accumulation models for the Internet economy. At the same time, investors were reluctant to invest finance capital after the crisis as venture capital into digital media companies. Nobody knew if the users were interested in microblogs, social networking sites, etc.

The rise of social media as a new capital accumulation model was accompanied by a social media ideology: that social media are new ("web 2.0"), pose new opportunities for participation, will bring about an "economic democracy", enable new forms of political struggle ("Twitter revolution"), etc. The rise of new media once more was accompanied by a techno-deterministic techno-optimistic ideology. This ideology was necessary for convincing investors and users to support the social media capital accumulation model. The political economy of surplus value generation on social media and ideology have heavily interacted here in order to enable the rise of "social media". So why should ideology here be rather unimportant? It is just as crucial as surplus value generation. The ideology of techno-determinism and techno-optimism were in this case (as in other cases of the introduction of new technologies) mainly spread by management gurus, uncritical academics and new media company managers. Isn't it the task of critical academics to understand and criticize this ideology just like to understand and criticize media capital accumulation models?

You say one should be critical of focusing on society as a whole. But doing so is not lacking complexity, it is based on the insight that it is possible to understand, conceptualize, analyse, criticize and transform the societal totality and to see how class interacts in this whole with other forms and lines of stratification, i.e. how exploitation interacts with domination and what role the class antagonism and non-class antagonisms play. Of course this is complex, it is necessarily complex,

complex, but the problem today is that the culturalist turn has resulted in simplistic/cultural reductionistic analyses that neglect class and the economy. Why analysing the totality is important is also the prospect of changing the whole and replacing capitalism by democracy and equality. What are the alternatives to that? Are we not again in the situation of facing the potential futures of socialism or barbarism(s)?

I have read Nicholas Garnham's (2011) contribution in the *Handbook of Political Economy of Communication*. Here are three observations from my reading:

1. Garnham(2011) suggests using the term "Political Economy of Information" instead of "Political Economy of Media/Communication/Culture". I think that information-communication-culture-media are so interlinked, that it is really just a question of choice, which name we employ.
2. Garnham (2011) says that Political Economy is often a gestural, self-satisfied, paranoid radical Marxism and is often based on a crude and romantic Marxist rejection of the market. He also speaks about the alienated nature of all human relations and alienation as aspect of human species-being. I could not disagree more. Critical Media and Communication Studies is not strongly shaped by Marxism today because the engagement with Marx has had an institutional setback in the past three decades due to the rise of neoliberalism, postmodernism and culturalism. At the same time, socio-economic inequality and the crisis-proneness of capitalism has intensified, culminating in the 2008ff crisis, which is the reason why the interest in Marx's thought is coming back. So I would say that Critical Media and Communication Studies is not Marxist enough and should become more Marxist, the historical opportunity and analytical necessity (the objective necessity of the need of analysing class, capitalism, exploitation and crisis now) is here now.
3. I found it surprising, given this context, that Garnham (2011) to a certain extent seems to be turning away from Marxist analysis. Many of his passages are quite unclear, so more clarifications were indeed needed from him on these points. When he says that alienation is part of the nature of humans and society, then he either uses a non-Marxist concept of alienation (he gives no definition) or he makes a fetishistic argument that naturalizes class relations. For Marx, alienation is at the heart of class relations, not only for the young Marx, but the very same notion can be found in the works of the older Marx (the notion of "double-free wage labour" in "Capital"). And why is it crude and romantic when Marxists reject the market? Exchange value is the heart of each market, and Marx was clear on the necessity to sublimate exchange value economies in order to create a just society. Everywhere we find exchange value, we find inequality. Has Garnham given up the basic assumptions of Marxist theory? And if so, what are the alternatives for him today?

These are my thoughts for today.

Best, Christian

### **Discussion Turn 9 (Dwayne Winseck): "So, this is why I speak of Political Economies of Communication..."**

<http://dwmw.wordpress.com/2011/08/08/critical-media-and-communication-studies-today-a-conversation-between-dwayne-winseck-and-christian-fuchs-part-4/>  
<http://fuchs.uti.at/628/>

Christian, as always I hope that you're well.

Wow, you've certainly put a lot out there for consideration. Let me do my best to respond to some of what you've said about ideology, alienation and Garnham's critique of what he sees as the Critical Marxian Political Economy of Communication School.

First of all I need to clarify that I have not criticized Smythe for being too reductionist but actually praised him for his point that traditional communication and media studies' focus on ideology, texts and effects has distracted us from two fundamental elements that help to constitute a critical materialist (Marxist or otherwise) political economy of media and communication: first, the economic importance of media industries and specific firms in their own right and, second, the provision of communication infrastructure, news and information flows, and advertising, that serve as central coordinating mechanisms in the capitalist economy as a whole. So, the critique here is that so-called ideology critique has too often served – past and present – to divert our attention from these economics realities.

Based on this, I'm afraid that I have to disagree with the example that you offer using social media in an attempt to illustrate why ideology is as important as economic considerations to a political economy approach. You say that a "techno-deterministic techno-optimistic ideology" has been necessary to turn social media into a new site of capital investment and accumulation, in other words, to turn things like Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, LinkedIn, etc. into hot new markets and sites for investment. Given that, you say that our task is as much to understand and critique this ideology as it is to focus on economic arrangements and media capital accumulation models?

I do not agree that ideology has been essential to the emergence of social media as significant new markets and sources of financial investment. Indeed, the notion that techno-optimistic ideology serves as the handmaiden of capitalism and is behind speculative booms followed by, first, the dot.com crisis and then the Global Financial Crisis is misguided in my view. I think that several of our colleagues have done extremely impressive work that helps shed light on how ideas, knowledge circulation and, if you will, a more modest conception of ideology that goes by some other name works. I have in mind the work of Peter Thompson, Aeron Davis, Wayne Hope and Marc-Andre Pigeon (see Winseck and Jin 2011).

Each of them have focused closely on knowledge flows and the role of very specialized, high end financial market and business news services and databases among a trilogy of groups – institutional and high end financial investors/traders/analysts, corporate insiders and financial journalists. In its most basic of outlines, knowledge and data flows among the first two groups far more quickly before it ever reaches mass media channels such as CNN, MSNBC, Wall Street Journal, Your Hometown Daily News Outlet, etc. Financial journalists play the role of switching nodes here, but the differences in who is speaking to whom, the narrow vs. mass audience, and vast differences in temporality (ie. insiders get stuff in milliseconds and zero time delay and trades are executed in a flash) mean that it is what is happening inside the elite groups and the narrow conventions that they share and subscribe too rather than techno-optimistic hyperbole/ideology that gets attached to *all* new media.

Instead of ideology, then, I think we need to pay attention to specialized, elite knowledge and channels of communication, on the one hand. The rhetoric, language, myths and uses of media and ICTs are important in their own right, and are structured by class, primarily greasing the slide of new media from novelty to part of the furniture. This is similar to the [Abercrombie, Hill and Turner](#) (1984) critique of the 'dominant ideology' thesis in 1980. It is not the ideology is irrelevant, but rather that its grip is mostly present among elites and diffuse across other social classes as a whole (a point that C. Wright Mills also made). Much more could be said along these lines, but my basic point is that vast flows of capital investment into media doesn't involve ideology but rather 'fast circuits' of data and knowledge production, which, from analysts and consultants of the dot.com era (analysts/snake-oil sales reps, H. Blodget, M. Meeker, etc.) and standards and rating agencies (Fitch, Standard and Poor, Moodys), have systematically torqued their data and sold investors (and the political class) a bill of goods that later turned out to be little more than Ponzi-like schemes.

To move on to the points you made about social totality, I think we may be closer on this than might initially appear. I think that the ambition of trying to make the connections between media and ICTs and capitalist modernity as a whole is one that gives political economy some of its impressive reach and allows it to provide compelling accounts of our times, sometimes. I agree with

you that the Culturalist Turn has resulted in simplistic/cultural reductionistic analyses that neglect class and the economy, and lead to fragmented portraits of the contemporary condition that then recursively feed into, and reproduce, the fragmentary character of contemporary societies that are our objects/subjects of study to begin with.

Again though, I think the thrust of my work is more towards, lets say, a better sense of the interplay between top-down macro-level, deductive approaches that aim to synthesize complexity into a portrait of the social totality based on propositions derived from Marx versus a bottom-up examination of what Boltanski (2011) calls 'situations', or 'contexts of action', where emergent properties and how people actually think, act and so on arises out of empirical observation. Discovering such emergent properties through empirical observation means that you have to bracket aside, at least for the moment, your own politics and agendas, lest you superimpose that on the conditions and 'subjects' (people) at hand.

Time and again I've discovered this to be true when I observe what people do with the media/Internet, or pay close attention to what others who study such things have to say. That is, I'll discover that people actually employ elaborate, even if unreflective, practices that tell us about how they feel about others with whom they communicate, privacy and surveillance, etc. People can tell you about these experiences too, reflexively. The expressions that emerge from what people are actually doing often clash with the reigning practices and strategies of Facebook, ISPs, Google, etc., as one can see in their Acceptable User Agreements/Policies, etc. The fact that you spend a lot of time looking at these things all the time in your work is one, among many things, that has impressed me so much with your work.

So, key point on this? We need to focus more on textured interplay between macro and micro level analysis, theoretico-deductive approaches versus inductive but still theory-grounded empirical observation. There are too many ungrounded analyses that regurgitate politico-theoretical propositions in light of each new round of communications media (Internet, web 2.0, etc.) as if that constitutes analysis.

Let me turn, quickly because this is becoming far too long, to some points you raise about Garnham (2011). First, you say that you want to insist on a "Critique of the Political Economy of X" or "the Critical Political Economy of X", and do not personally want to be associated with Neoliberal Political Economy of X.

While I want to consider what I do as fitting within the 'critique of the political economy of communication', I do not have the same qualms as you do with respect to other strands of political economy on offer. I put this out in more elaborate form in a long introductory essay (Winseck 2011) to our new edited collection to which you contributed, [The Political Economies of Media](#) (Winseck & Jin 2011), which just came out last month.

The key point that Garnham (2011) is making, it seems to me, is that critical Marxist political economists have spent more time denouncing markets and commercialization than studying how they actually work, are structured, change over time, etc. Of course, there are exceptions to this, and your work is among such exceptions. However, the rule remains . . . .

One thing that I've done recently is joined with Eli Noam, a Professor of Finance and Economics at Columbia University, and also an expert from within the mainstream of economics in all aspects of telecom, media and Internet economics. He's also recently published the authoritative [Media Ownership and Concentration in America](#) (2009). I've learned a great deal from the work that I've done with him on the [International Media Concentration Research Project](#). I've produced reams of evidence on all manner of the telecom-media-Internet industries in Canada covering the past 25 years as part of this project. Simply gathering, organizing and trying to make sense of this data, from the bottom, over such a long span of time, has allowed things aplenty to emerge that I could not have anticipated or derived from propositions drawn from Marxist political economy.

I can't go any further here into this, but on this point let me just say that there are others who you and I also know well and I think respect as heterodox, if not Marxist political economists, such as Paschal Preston, Guillermo Mastrini and Martin Becerra. They are also part of this project. Even Robert McChesney and Eli Noam, from what I understand, are on the phone or sharing emails

once in a while to compare notes and update data for both of their purposes, and in particular the important work that McChesney spearheads by way of his powerful advocacy organization in the US, [Free Press](#).

And we must remember too that it was others such as the institutionalist Joseph Schumpeter (1942) in [Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy](#) (see part I) as well as the radical American sociologist C. Wright Mills (1962), in [The Marxists](#), who argued that the point when it comes to Marx, is that first and foremost we need to know our Marx. They both, each in their own way, praise Marx the sociologist and economist, but condemn him, again for their own reasons, as political theorist and prophet. We must each have our Marx, so to speak, carefully and judiciously selecting the things from him that we think still apply – expansionary and dynamic tendencies of capitalism, pressures toward consolidation, congenital instability and crisis tendencies, power and class distinctions – while rejecting other elements that we don't believe work: e.g. base/superstructure model of society, ideology, labour theory of value, etc.

So, this is why I speak of political economies of communication. It is meant to (1) prise away this approach from its conflation with a Marxist analysis in many circles, (2) to reflect that there are several schools of thought (e.g. Marxian, liberal, institutional, heterodox, etc.), (3) that rather than the whole of society being subordinated to the universal rule of exchange value (the market), we still see multiple economies (as Aristotle said) where we produce things for ourselves (DIY, self-sufficiency, Wikipedia, YouTube videos), for others and our neighbours (gifts, social economy) and for the market (exchange); (4) that communication, media and information goods are atypical commodities, as Garnham but also the Cultural Industries School never fails to stress, that can only be forcefit into the commodity mold by force of the state, law and intellectual tyranny of conservative Chicago School economics that works to achieve in the realm of thought (ideology) what cannot be achieved in the 'real world': the sublimation of *everything* to the principles of market exchange.

Whilst I am aware of the power of Chicago School thought and how it has buttressed the imposition of a neoliberal template on many areas of life and the world (and dictatorships throughout Latin America), we have not yet seen the universalization of the market as the measure of all things, as Marx felt, and as those who still subscribe to his views and speak uniformly of neoliberalism tend to think.

I agree with you about the globalization of capitalism generating increased socio-economic inequality, especially in the heartlands of capitalist modernity (Europe and North America). However, elsewhere – China, India, Russia, Turkey, Brazil, South Africa, etc. – the embrace of capitalism has not just aggravated social economic inequality, but fuelled incredible levels of growth and development to the extent that what used to be the periphery now serves as the outposts of new, in many cases, authoritarian, unbridled capitalist states that increasingly look to one another for 'models of development' and inspiration rather than the liberal ideals of capitalist modernity. This can be seen especially with respect to China and how it is viewed now in Africa and Latin America. It was also clear at our conference in Istanbul, where the speakers on the plenary made it absolutely clear that the political masters in that city and Turkey's political capital of Ankara no longer kowtow to the west and sing from the hymn sheets of liberal democracy that go along with capitalist modernity but reject that in favour of some new mélange of politico-religious-hyper-technologized iron-state view of capitalism.

So, this points to one other thing that I have found problematic with the main lines of Critical Marxian Political Economies of Communication, and that is the notion that neoliberalism constitutes a uniform horizon in which nations around the world are simply folded into capitalism. I don't think that there is one capitalism but rather a variety of capitalisms with their own specific characteristics that need to be understood and, once again, studied at two levels: first, in terms of distinctive qualities but also, and second, in relation to the common fundamentals that harmonize things.

Again, it is the interplay between the two dimensions that is key, and it is the uniform preoccupation with the generic characteristics of capitalism that those who invoke notions of neoliberalism lay all their stress that seems like an overly easy short hand for real observations. It also struck me as

odd too that whilst neoliberalism was supposedly remaking the world in the singular image of Anglo-American capitalism, the number of regulatory institutions within just our field alone exploded worldwide, from something like 14 in 1990 to 90 a decade later and around 150 or so today. Regulators translate the general 'logics' of markets, technology and rule-making in specialized domains into the specific rules and procedures that compose the local political economy to which they are being adapted, as [Saskia Sassen](#) (2006) puts it. There's a lot of 'translation' work that goes on in this and I think it belies the overly generic notions implied by the rhetoric of neoliberalism.

And besides, just as neoliberalism was seen to be triumphant circa 2000, what happened? A decade of crises, that's what, starting with the collapse of the dot.com bubble in 2000 and instability ever since, coming to a head once again since the Global Financial Crisis of 2007/8ff. And unlike what David Harvey says, the crisis didn't start on the margins, or get displaced there, but in the core and wreaked its havoc in Europe and the U.S.

So Marx should be back in light of Global Financial Crisis. Indeed, the instabilities of capitalism are visible all around us and sharp jolts and crisis tendencies emerge one day, disappear the next, and reassert themselves the day after that. This is crazy instability, precarity. However, the underlying universalist notion that many interpret as leading to economic, social and cultural homogeneity does not follow. This is another one of the key points that Garnham (2011) makes when he likewise advises that we reject notions that the media are bound up with forces of cultural homogenization, cultural imperialism, etc.

I agree, and think it is important to remember the other side of Marx, who stated that, in the face of the tumultuous, disruptive dynamism of capitalism, "all that is solid melts into air", by which he meant the break down of traditional societies and ossified ways of life and thinking. The upshot of that, however, is not the superimposition of a higher level of homogenous integration (again, contra what notions of ideology often suggest) but greater levels of sociological differentiation, as sociologists from Tarde, to Parsons, to Habermas, Giddens, Bauman and many others in between have insisted upon. And that is mirrored in the domain of media and ICTs because it seems to me what we are seeing is not total integration and convergence under an ever smaller number of corporate rulers, but simultaneously and paradoxically, both consolidation in some dimensions, generally those with general utility like functions (Google, Facebook, etc.) and where economies of scale (but not scope) are strong, ie. integration between TV and film, but not TV, film and Carriers/Internet, to wit the misfortunes/calamities of AOL Time Warner, News Corp/MySpace, Vivendi Universal, etc. (with exception of recent Comcast NBC-Universal merger). Garnham in his school marmy way is admonishing us to understand this reality and seems to believe that until we reject our dogmatic ways, we won't even be able to see things clearly, let alone understand them. I have some sympathy but . . . .

Finally, I do not agree with you that alienation is a unique pathology of capitalism. Of course, it was the task of Critical Theory, in particular Eric Fromm (1961) and Herbert Marcuse (1964) to lay out a theory of alienation combining Freud with Marx to understand alienation under capitalism. That bore some fruit, but try raising it with most feminists today. It ain't gonna go anywhere, as far as I know. The bottom line on this for me is that alienation is not a capitalist problem, but an existential one. Here, Marx does not offer much of value. We must read our Soren Kierkegaard, J. P. Satre, Lu Xun, and Albert Camus for insights on that.

That, in my view, is not an indictment of Marx, but rather a marker of the scope and limits of his thoughts. I hope that the above ideas clearly indicate that I am no turn-coat enemy of Marx and some of the many important thinkers who have translated his ideas into central pillars in the Critical Marxian Approach to the Political Economy of Media and Communication. I continue to be interested in this work and draw on it often and extensively, while still hoping that I may make some modest contributions to it. However, I do not believe that such an approach holds the magic key to understanding our times, and in fact believe that adhering too closely to a Marxian view of Political Economy will only impoverish us.

Well, Christian, this has really gotten out of hand. It's dragged up a whole ton of ideas that I've been thinking about for a long time now. There's obviously much more to say, but I think I'll leave it

here for now and await your response. I'd say that we wrap it up after that, perhaps returning some time in the future to pick up where we leave off.

Cheers and all the best, Dwayne

**Discussion Turn 10 (Christian Fuchs): "To talk about Political Economies of Media must mean to talk at the same time about the political economy of the Political Economies of Media..."**

<http://fuchs.uti.at/634/>

<http://dwmw.wordpress.com/2011/08/08/critical-media-and-communication-studies-today-a-conversation-between-dwayne-winseck-and-christian-fuchs-part-5/>

Hello Dwayne,

Thank you for your detailed and interesting response. I will try to answer on a more general level by (1) taking up some points about ideology, (2) making 7 thematic sets of hypotheses about Critical Media and Communication Studies today, and (3) commenting on the status of the field of Political Economy/Economies of the Media. Except for some comments about ideology critique (1), I do not come back to every single unresolved question that relates to our previous conversation, but rather focus on the larger context of our discussion – the status of Critical Media and Communication Studies today (2+3).

**(1) The Concept of Ideology**

Allow me to note that I did not say that ideology is "behind the dot.com crisis and then the Global Financial Crisis", but that crisis results and expresses itself in an intensified presence of certain ideologies. I think that your positive assessment of Smythe's and Garnham's assumption that ideology critique diverts "our attention from economic realities" risks economism, neglecting how culture and the world of ideas always interacts with the economy. But you also talk about the role of "elite knowledge" and ICT/media myths in capitalism. But that is exactly part of the domain of ideology. What we have to add is that there are also attempts to make everyday citizens follow ideologies and that ideology can be (and often is, but not automatically) a site of struggle. If dominant ideas are ideas of the dominant, then it is likely that they do use media to reproduce their hegemony. This does not mean that they always are successful in doing so, but that it is likely that we find hegemonic ideas in mainstream media. This is contradicted by the possibility (and reality) of alternative interpretations and alternative media, which are ways of challenging hegemonic ideas. But of course counter-hegemonic projects are facing power asymmetries. I would also add that academia is a site of ideological struggle. Isn't it also the task of Critical Political economy to question myths about media and capitalism that are advanced in Media and Communication Studies? If we understand ourselves as critical scholars, then our critique has an object within academia and in society and we are the subjects conducting this critique. All of this is part of struggles relating to ideology.

Ideology critique tries to show differences between essence and existence and between claims about reality and reality itself. Take as example for ideology critique your analysis in the introduction to the [book](#) "The Political Economies of Media", pp. 43f (Winseck and Jin 2011)) that shows with statistics that the music industry is growing and not in decline, whereas the International Federation of Phonographic Industries continues to state the lack of profitability of the recording industry due to file sharing. What we have here is the empirical testing of the correspondence or difference of claim and reality that as a result shows the falseness of the claims. Add to this an analysis of the linguistic ways that the recording industry employs for making its claims about its dwindling profits and how it identifies file sharers as enemies in order to criminalize them so to make even more profits, then you have an excellent ideology critique. Dwayne, you are more into ideology critique than you think you are, so there is no need to understate the importance of this



dimension of Critical Media and Communication Studies. The question to which extent the public believes the industry claims or not is another task of ideology critique.

You can of course interpose to my arguments that ideology is a philosophical idealistic phenomenon and that the field of Political Economy/Economies of Media should focus on studying materialistic phenomena. But this is a crude separation of base and superstructure, and does not take into account that the base and superstructure always interact, put pressures on each other, are dialectically interconnected. The German philosopher Hans Heinz Holz speaks of dialectics as *Übergreifen* of categories (encroaching). The economy and the world of ideas necessarily dialectically encroach upon one another in complex ways. You cannot split the world of ideas off from the economy (the role of ideology, cultural industry as the collapse between the boundaries of base and superstructure, knowledge work as interconnection between the two, etc.).

Allow me to note that for Marx ideology certainly was a dimension of Political Economy. The chapter, "The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof" in *Capital, Volume 1* (Marx 1867), which is probably one of the most difficult chapters in the book, makes this clear. Marx points out the logical mistake of taking historical circumstances as natural for all societies (naturalization), stresses that the thinkers of the Classical Political Economy frequently make this mistake, that the same mode of thinking can also be found in everyday thinking, that this fetishistic thinking stems from the very structure of capitalist production itself, i.e. has a material grounding, that ideologies are not just ideas, but at the same time social and material practices grounded in the economy, and that overcoming fetishism requires a fundamental transformation of society. I think this chapter is, where we should start the discussion when we talk about the role of ideology for Political Economy/Economies of the Media.

We will not be able to go into it in any more detail on these questions now, but we can see from our discussion that the question of ideology in capitalism is a hotly debated issue within Critical Media and Communication Studies. We should also note that when discussing ideology, we need an understanding of what ideology is. And there is no consensus on this. Terry Eagleton (1991) has noted six core understandings of the concept of ideology:

- a) The general material process of production of ideas, beliefs and values in social life.
- b) Ideas coherently symbolize the conditions and life-experiences of a specific group or class.
- c) The promotion and legitimatization of the interests of a group or class in the face of opposing interests.
- d) The promotion and legitimatization of the interests of a dominant social group in order to unify a social formation.
- e) Ideas and beliefs which help to legitimate the interests of a ruling group/class with the help of distortion and dissimulation.
- f) False and deceptive beliefs arising from the material structure of society as a whole.

There are differences in the ideology concepts of say e.g. *Georg Lukács* (and based on him the *Frankfurt School*), *Karl Mannheim*, *Antonio Gramsci* or *Louis Althusser* and these differences are based on specific interpretations of Marx.

We can think about Eagleton's six concepts of ideology as variously interlinked levels of ideology. The differentiation between levels allows us also to see that false consciousness is not a necessary element of ideology; it may be just one outcome of ideological strategies, but can also be resisted (although there is no automatism of resistance and the means for producing hegemonic ideology and counter-hegemony are unequally distributed). Ideology is not necessarily a state of consciousness of dominated groups. It can be, but it is more a process, in which dominant groups communicate dominant ideas, to which others react in certain ways or do not react. Dominant ideas impact the culture of the dominant itself (e.g. neoliberal work norms – the new spirit of networked capitalism – that impact not only what is expected of the behaviour of workers, but also managers).

## **(2) 7 Sets of Hypotheses about Critical Media and Communication Studies Today**

### **(H1) The Task of Critical Media and Communication Studies**

The task for Critical Media and Communication Studies is to focus on the critique and analysis of the role of communication, culture, information and the media in society in the context of

- a) processes of capital accumulation (including the analysis of capital, markets, commodity logic, competition, exchange value, the antagonisms of the mode of production, productive forces, crises, advertising, etc.),
- b) The promotion and legitimatization of the interests of a group or class in the face of opposing interests.
- c) class relations (with a focus on work, labour, the mode of the exploitation of surplus value, etc),
- d) domination in general,
- e) ideology (both in academia and everyday life) as well as the analysis of and engagement in
- f) struggles against the dominant order, which includes the analysis and advancement of
- g) social movement struggles and
- h) social movement media that
- i) establishing a democratic socialist society that is based on communication commons as part of structures of commonly-owned means of production. The approach thereby realizes that in capitalism all forms of domination are connected to forms of exploitation.

Critical Media and Communication Studies has the potential for combining all or at least several of these dimensions of analysis and in doing so to bring together Critical Theory, Critical Political Economy, Critical Cultural Studies, Alternative Media Studies, etc. This is again mainly a resource questions and as a result we find a division of labour in Critical Media and Communication Studies. We should draw on the vast history of critical traditions in Critical Media and Communication Studies and bring them together in interdisciplinary research programmes. So there should not be one project of Critical Media and Communication Studies, but a diversity of projects. But they should be networked and their diversity be united (unity in diversity) by the critical outlook and a theoretical and philosophical connection. Critical philosophy and social theory have a particular role in such research programmes and in establishing unity in diversity because due to their operation on a meta-level of analysis and as meta-theory they can help researchers to communicate with each other and allow research to be contextualized in a broader context.

### **(H2) The Form of Critical Media and Communication Studies**

Critical Media and Communication Studies best operate as combination of critical social theory, critical empirical social research and critical ethics. Resource limitations make it frequently not possible to combine theory, empirical research and critical ethics in single projects/papers/research. The result is a division of labour (critical media theorists, critical empirical media researchers, critical information/media ethics). The goal should be to build interdisciplinary teams, research programmes and projects that pool resources and bring together theory, empirical research and ethics in conducting Critical Media and Communication research and that draws on knowledge from various disciplines. Such research structures reflect Max Horkheimer's vision of a critical interdisciplinary research programme formulated in 1930 (see Horkheimer 1931).

### **(H3) Critical Media and Communication Studies and Philosophy**

There is a lack of social philosophical and social theoretical grounding of Critical Media and Communication Studies. One of the reasons is that the division of labour results in institutional limits and a neglect of philosophy. Critical philosophy and social theory can provide systematic guidance

for engaging with questions relating to which society we live in and what role media and communication play in contemporary societies.

#### **(H4) Critical Media and Communication Studies and Dialectical Philosophy**

Dialectical philosophy can provide a strong philosophical and theoretical grounding of Critical Media and Communication Studies (see chapters 2+3 in my [book "Foundations of Critical Media and Information Studies"](#) (Fuchs 2011a)). This type of philosophy can provide us with tools of thought that allow us to systematically conceive, analyze and criticize the contradictions, relations, dynamics, positive and negative potentials, as well as struggles relating to media, communication, culture, information and technology. Dialectical philosophy can be an extremely helpful guide for theoretical, methodological and practical-political aspects of Critical Media and Communication Research.

Frankfurt School Critical Theory is the tradition of Critical Cultural Analysis that has most thoroughly and systematically engaged with dialectical philosophical and theoretical foundations. Such foundations have for example been elaborated in Herbert Marcuse's (1941) "Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory" and Theodor W. Adorno's (1993) "Hegel: Three Studies". The dedication of the Frankfurt School to profound philosophical questions (although not necessarily the content of its theories) can inspire us today to create a dialectical-philosophical foundation of Critical Media and Communication Studies.

Social theories of media and communication in society need to start by providing an understanding of questions like: What is society? How is a society made up? How does social transformation work? What is the role of structures and agency in society? What is the relationship of the human individual and society? Dialectical philosophy is well suited for helping to bridge gaps in the field of Critical Media and Communication Studies (between the focus on structure and agency, subject and object, reason and experience, technology and society, economy and culture, pessimism and optimism, risks and opportunities, work and pleasure/joy, alienation and self-actualization, etc.) and for avoiding one-sided approaches.

#### **(H5) The analysis of capitalism**

Capitalism is a system characterized by the dialectical unity of diversity in its political economy. It has at the same time a unified political economy and diverse political economies; it is at the same time capitalism and many capitalisms. Capitalism is today at the same time to various degrees finance capitalism, hyperindustrial capitalism, crisis capitalism, new imperialistic capitalism, media/informational/communicative capitalism, capitalist patriarchy, a racist mode of production, etc. The danger for analyses of media, information, culture and communication in capitalism today is to overstate the relevance of specific phenomena of informational capitalism and to neglect the other capitalisms as contexts of informational capitalism and the interaction of these dimensions.

Informational/Media/Communicative capitalism is a tendency, and a relative one, in the development of contemporary capitalism. This does not mean that it is the only or the dominant tendency. Capitalism is many things at the same time, it is to a certain degree informational, but at the same time to a certain degree finance, and all the other kinds of capitalisms that I just listed. Capitalism is contradictory, it contains in itself to certain degrees different modes of production, such as pre-modern production forms and voluntary, self-managed, non-commercial, or non-profit projects and organizations, and an articulation of different modes of production. It is the task of research to find out which capitalism is present to which extent in which context.

The unity of all capitalisms is that they are all oriented to capital accumulation by exploiting surplus value in class relations. The diversity of capitalisms is united, capitalism needs to be dynamic, complex, multidimensional and diverse in order to maintain the continuity of capital accumulation and to create ever newer spheres and spaces of commodification, production, circulation, consumption and accumulation. Debates about media in the information society are often stuck in either stressing pure continuity or pure discontinuity of capitalism. We need to grasp and analyse the dialectics of capitalism.

### **(H6) The analysis of media communication in capitalism**

Informational/media/communicative capitalism as one of the dimensions of contemporary capitalism is itself internally shaped by the dialectical unity of diversity. It is many-sided, contradictory, multifaceted, multidimensional. Capitalist media are, in complex and contradictory ways, but to varying historical and changing degrees, connected to non-capitalist media. Analysing media communication in contemporary society requires us to see the dialectics of structure and agency, object and subject, opportunities and risks, work and play/pleasure, continuity and discontinuity, commodity and gift, and other dialectics. At the same time, we should be under no illusion that the dialectic is symmetrical. Instead, we must look for the asymmetries in power relations and strategies in order to politically empower alternative and critical forms of communication where need it most.

### **(H7) The analysis of exploitation and domination in Critical Media and Communication Studies**

The rise of neoliberalism in society and of Postmodernism, Cultural Studies, Post-Marxism and Constructivism in academia have worked on decentering theory from class analysis and focusing on non-class based domination and discrimination. Identity politics tended to be substituted for class politics. The neoliberal phase of capitalism was/has been/is an intensification of class struggle-from-above, at the top of the power hierarchy, by capital. This has resulted in a strong increase of socio-economic inequality and an extension and intensification of precarious living and working conditions. At the same time that academia was saying goodbye to class, material reality brought class back in. The rise of the movement for democratic globalization showed that it is a movement galvanizing around the topic of class, in the 1980s and 1990s new social movements were quite separate around topics like gender, racism, peace, nature, etc. – the rise of neoliberalism resulted since the late 1990s in a movement of movements. The global capitalist crisis has finally brought a return to the economy and class, not only in society, but also in academia.

Class needs to be conceived today in a form that takes non-wage labour (like unemployment, house work, use of corporate Internet platforms, etc.) as forms of exploitation and as part of the class antagonism into account. Theorizing class as a foundation for understanding knowledge work and “digital labour” on the Internet needs to be attuned to the idea of multiple class positions: the flexibilization, dynamization and pluralization of class positions, and the antagonistic class character of knowledge production/producers themselves.

These diversities find their unity in the production and exploitation of value. There is a dialectical unity of diversity in class analysis. If we think dialectically about class, then necessarily the class antagonism is maintained by an internal dynamic change of class positions. Attention needs to be given also to the circumstance that an individual can occupy multiple class positions at the same time and that these positions shift. Knowledge work is today often overstated and it is often conceptualized as being too homogenous, although from a class perspective it is quite heterogeneous, fragmented, and ruptured by internal class antagonisms.

Various forms of domination in capitalism are always articulated with class. Capitalism can in principle be ecologically sustainable, respectful of gender differences, minorities, immigrants, etc as long as capital accumulation is guaranteed, but it can never be socio-economically just. Class is the key to understanding and criticizing domination and exploitation in capitalism. Domination cannot be reduced to class, but exploitation always prefigures, exerts pressure, conditions and sets the context and limits for various forms of domination.

### **(3) The Field of (Critical) Political Economy/Economies of the Media**

You on the one hand use the term political economies for saying that we have multiple economies, i.e. you want to stress the complex and contradictory character of capitalism. To a certain extent I agree (see H5+H6). I would only add that there is a unity in this diversity and a predominance of the capitalist mode of production. On the other hand you use the term Political Economies of the

Media (see Dwayne's introduction (Winseck 2011) in the important collected volume [“The Political Economies of Media”](#) (Winseck & Jin 2011)). You want to stress the importance of the plurality of schools of Political Economy of the Media and to also express that to a certain extent one should leave aside “one's own politics and agendas” in academia and engage in broad academic collaborations. Implicitly you also thereby say or want to warn that being too critical can be a barrier to communication and can advance separation.

I really recommend everyone interested in contemporary Media and Communication Studies to read this introduction and the book. Your introduction is excellent. It is a convincing empirical analysis, deeply informed by knowledge of different theoretical traditions.

You provide a mapping of the landscape of Political Economy research in Media and Communication Studies by identifying four approaches and speaking of Political Economies of Media:

- a) Neoclassical Political Economy of the Media
- b) Radical Political Economy of the Media
- c) Schumpeterian Institutional Political Economy of the Media
- d) The Cultural Industries School.

You stress the diversity of the field that conducts inquiries of the social, political and economic contexts of media communication. Your classification is very helpful for distinguishing Critical Political Economy from other approaches (a distinction that is frequently missing in other accounts and creates a lot of confusion). It is perfectly feasible and welcome that scholars from all four approaches work together on interesting topics and that we should definitely look for and be open to such co-operation.

The methodological differences are probably also not larger between the four approaches than within the approaches. The big difference is that the second approach is the one most likely to ask and engage with philosophical, ethical, political and theoretical questions about power structures, a just society and a just media system, whereas the three others are more likely (of course to varying degrees and depending on contexts) to find such questions and engagements inappropriate, unnecessary, and to argue for value free research — that such questions, essentially, lie outside of academia. The question, however, is what do we want: Good analyses only? Or good analyses that help advance a more just society as context for media communication?

By focusing on the diversity of approaches, your classification risks neglecting the political economy of the Political Economies of Media, i.e. the power structures and power distribution that characterize this field and limits its diversity. Radical and Marxist scholarship is bound up with the second approach. What does it mean to be a Marxist/critical scholar today (especially for younger scholars; I do think we have to stress and take into account that career opportunities and academic work conditions are in many countries today much more precarious than twenty or thirty years ago; and let's assume that by critical we here do not mean Popper's understanding of the term, but the more political notion of the critique of society)?

It means that you are less likely to get your papers accepted in established mainstream journals, that you will have a more difficult time getting funding for your research, for attaining tenure or finding a permanent position; that you are more likely of having to face prejudices, negative prejudgements and demonizations of your work, that you are more likely to lose your job and to be a precarious academic worker; that you are likely to have to engage in permanent discussions about what Marx actually wrote and what others claim he wrote and stands for, etc.

Being a Marxist scholar is the best guarantee for a difficult academic life. Marxists likely have to work more and harder, to be more witty and creative than representatives of the other three approaches and of having to exploit themselves more intensively in order to be recognized, to establish themselves and to be successful academics. The notion of a diverse field obscures the internal power structures of Media and Communication Studies and Political Economy and of what it means to be a critical scholar today. It is luring and structurally feasible to stop (or never start) being critical and to follow mainstream administrative research in order to avoid the stony academic way that

critical scholars frequently have to go. Another strategy is to think that one conducts administrative research first and critical research later once one is established and tenured. The problem of this strategy is that the more one becomes part of institutionalized administrative research, the more difficult it becomes to do something different.

Media and Communication Studies and Political Economies of Media are NOT diverse fields, they are fields shaped by power structures – liberal diversity turns in reality out to be not so liberal at all. And yet going the stony way and conducting critical research as part of the second paradigm is the only way for intellectuals to work towards a truly participatory, democratic, commons-based and public media system and for a just society. Therefore it is politically necessary and academically perfectly feasible to go the stony way and to be critical. One may have to go more difficult ways, but these ways and their outcomes are more meaningful. Networks of critical scholars that can give mutual support are quite important and a power in itself on this way.

What distinguishes the second approach from the other three is the connection of theory and empirical research to normative judgements that are critiques of asymmetric power structures and to the struggle for a just society and a just media system. Under neoliberal capitalism, we are not only facing the privatization and commodification of large parts of the media and rising inequality, it is for various reasons also difficult and a challenge to be critical. The intensification of different inequalities and neoliberal hegemony require a specific focus on the Critical Political Economy/Critique of the Political Economy of Media. The second approach you identify has special relevance today. It needs to be especially nourished and supported, more than all other approaches in your typology.

Neoliberalism has brought about a deep-seated institutional and structural discrimination of scholars, who find Marx's analyses inspiring and use them for formulating contemporary critiques. The 1960s and 1970s were decades that resulted in a relative institutionalization of scholars who were critical of capitalism. The rise of neoliberalism brought a reversal. Not only was it no longer en-vogue to talk about class and capitalism, doing so has — in the era of neoliberalism — not been conducive for an academic career, to say the least. Academics out of fear to lose their jobs or not being promoted adapted to the new neoliberal mainstream and this also impacted the topics and methods of research, the way universities and departments are organized and that especially brought heavy pressures for younger scholars, who have to a large degree been facing precarious employment relations.

Being critical in a neoliberal environment is structurally difficult. Neoliberalism limits the degree and possibilities of being critical by university reforms, cutting of budgets, centralization of bureaucracy, coupling of university to industry, downsizing or elimination of departments and fields that are not considered as being in line with economic interests, etc. So how to be critical in 21<sup>st</sup> century academia? My take is that critical thinking has been marginalized and discriminated for too long and that we have to demand our rights to be heard, to be present, to have resources. And for doing so, we have to challenge the neoliberal mainstream. The project of Political Economies that you suggest must take power relations of the field into account, not bracket out the questions of power and neoliberalism for the sake of being on good terms with scholars from other traditions, and must especially work for strengthening resource allocation (as a form of affirmative action) for critical scholarship and overcome structural discrimination. It needs a true diversity, not a pseudo-diversity. And this question of diversity of a field is crucial and complicated in a largely neoliberal context that shapes academia. To talk about Political Economies of Media must mean to talk at the same time about the political economy of the Political Economies of Media.

The interest in Marx is returning today due to the explosion of inequality and the capitalist crisis. It is a historical moment that needs to be seized and embraced as opportunity. There is a new legitimacy crisis of capitalism, there is tendency that the tide is turning – the tendency is that increasingly you no longer have to explain why you are critical of capitalism and why you talk about class, the need of justification and explanation tends to lie today rather on the side of those who are not critical of capitalism and who refuse to talk about class. It is of crucial importance today to conduct research that is connected to the struggle for a just society.

There is much confusion about how to name the second approach in your typology. Terms that have been used by scholars who share the critical approach for naming their field have for example been Political Economy of Communication, Political Economy of Communications, Political Economy of Culture, Political Economy of Information, Political Economy of Mass Communication, or Political Economy of the Media. "Political Economy" is not necessarily critical. This is also an implication of your mapping of Political Economies of Media. Marx's book was not called "Capital. A Political Economy", but "Capital. A Critique of Political Economy" because he was critical of the classical political economy of Malthus, Mill, Petty, Ricardo, Say, Smith, Ure, etc.

Just like Marx, I think we should engage with the contemporary mainstream of political economy (of the media) – neoliberal political economy – in order to criticize and establish a critique of this political economy and an alternative/critical political economy. I am worried about the circumstance that scholars tend to speak of "Political Economy of X" and not of "Critique of the Political Economy of X/Critical Political Economy of X" when they actually mean the latter. There is also a Neoliberal Political Economy of X. The imprecise usage of terms can easily result in a lack of differentiation and a confusion of Critical Political Economy with Neoliberal Political Economy. In order to avoid confusion and be more precise, I suggest to either use the term Critical Political Economy of Communication/Culture/Information/Internet/Media or the term Critique of the Political Economy of Communication/Culture/Information/Internet/Media. I think that your differentiation of four approaches helps making such distinctions clearer as they sometimes appear. At the same time, I disagree with your stress on a diverse field because what we have is a stratified field characterized by power asymmetries.

One thing we can learn from Marx for Critical Media Studies(?) is his mode of dialectical thinking, which allows looking for the contradictions of media communication in capitalism. I think dialectical philosophy is very worthwhile for our field because it allows us to think beyond gaps, beyond techno-optimism and techno-pessimism, beyond structure and agency, etc. and to analyse media communication in contemporary society as complex, dynamic and contradictory (I stress this especially in my book "[Foundations of Critical Media and Information Studies](#)" (Fuchs 2011a)). But one can apply dialectical thinking also for understanding what (critical) Political Economy of the Media is all about. Dialectics is not only thinking in terms of negations and contradictions, but it is also a mode of thinking and practice oriented on *Aufhebung* (the bad English translation of this Hegelian concept is "sublation"), a German word that has a simultaneous threefold meaning and therefore signifies the threefold process of preservation (1), elimination (2) and uplifting (3).

Marx deeply engaged with Classical Political Economy. As a result, he preserved (1) the best elements of it in his approach, so his approach was also (classical) political economy. The thorough engagement with Classical Political Economy allowed Marx to formulate a Critique of Political Economy, he showed the mistakes and ideological naturalizations of the political economists. This critique was the attempt to eliminate (2) the dominance of classical political economy and to replace its dominance by a new quality of political economy (3) in society and thought. It is this third level of *Aufhebung*, where Marx not only engaged with political economy and established a critique of it, but worked out an alternative/critical political economy that was based on the concepts of surplus value and class.

So Marxian Political Economy is a) engagement with traditional political economy, b) critique of traditional political economy, c) alternative/critical political economy. What is true for a Marxist political economy in general is just as true for a Marxian Political Economy of the Media specifically. This is a thoroughly dialectical process. I think we need to be primarily dialectical and critical today when conducting Political Economy of the Media.

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