

Studying the political economy of media and information¹

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Abstract

Studying the political economy of communications is no longer a marginal approach in media/communication studies in North America and some parts of Europe. Increasingly, the study of political economy is crucial to understanding the growth and global expansion of media and information industries. Thus, more researchers have turned to this perspective as a necessary and logical way to study these developments. This article will discuss the foundations and some of the major works in the study of the political economy of media and communications (PE/C). The focus is mostly on North American and Britain, with some European references. The discussion is intended to present an overview of the development of this approach, as well as providing a few examples of research representing the perspective. A brief discussion of the approach's relationship to media economics and cultural studies also will be included.

Key words: political economy, communications, information, cultural industries, United States

The historical/theoretical foundations of political economy

To fully understand a political economic approach to studying media and communication, it is necessary to trace the foundations of political economy itself. The general study of political economy draws on 18th century Scottish enlightenment thinking and its critique in the 19th century. For Adam Smith, David Ricardo and others, the study of economic issues was called political economy and was grounded in social theory. Smith defined

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political economy as the study of “wealth” (material goods) or the allocation of resources, and was concerned with “... how mankind arranges to allocate scarce resources with a view toward satisfying certain needs and not others.” (Smith, 1776) Further, political economy focused on the production, distribution, exchange and consumption of wealth and the consequences for the welfare of individuals and society. More specifically, they studied one arrangement for the allocation of resources – they studied capitalism as a system of social production. Classical political economy evolved as capitalism evolved, adding Karl Marx and Frederick Engels’ historical materialism and class analysis in the 19th century, emphasizing a radical critique of the evolving capitalist system through a moral stance in opposition to the unjust characteristics of that system.

During the last half of the 19th century, however, there was a fundamental shift in the study of economic issues, as the focus changed from macro to microanalysis. Emphasis was placed on individual rather than societal concerns, and methods were drawn from the social sciences rather than from moral philosophy. These basic changes were represented in a shift in the name of the discipline – from political economy to economics. The person often receiving credit for the name change, William Jevons, suggested that economics was the study of “the mechanics of utility and self interest... to satisfy our wants to the utmost with the least effort... to maximize pleasure is the problem of economics.” (Jevons, 1970) As a more recent economist has explained: the “neo-classical economists made a sharper distinction than their predecessors had done between the explanation of What Is, in an economic system and the consideration of What Ought To Be...” (R. D. Collison Black in Jevons, 1970)

Although neo-classical economics prevails today, political economy has continued in different forms. Several conservative versions have emerged including a corporatist approach and public choice theory (also known as the new or positive political economy). These approaches generally argue that individual freedom can be expanded by applying neo-classical principles to a wider range of issues than other economists.

Meanwhile, institutional political economy represents an approach that focuses on technological and institutional factors that influence markets. While some work in communication studies draws on institutional analysis, a radical, critical or Marxian political economy is likely to be the tradition that is represented when one refers to “the political economy of communication.”

In *The Political Economy of Communication*, Vincent Mosco defined this version of political economy as “the study of the social relations, particularly power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution and consumption of resources.” (Mosco, 1996: 25) He explains that political economy is about survival and control, or how societies are organized to produce what is necessary to survive, and how order is maintained to meet societal goals. Mosco further delineates four central characteristics of critical political economy, which are helpful in understanding this approach:

1. *Social change and history*: Political economy continues the tradition of classic theorists, uncovering the dynamics of capitalism – its cyclical nature, the growth of monopoly capital, the state apparatus, etc.

2. *Social totality*: Political economy is a holistic approach, or, in concrete terms, explores the relationship among commodities, institutions, social relations and hegemony, and explores the determination among these elements, although some elements are stressed more than others.

3. *Moral philosophy*: Critical political economy also follows the classical theorists' emphasis on moral philosophy, including not only analysis of the economic system, but discussion of the policy problems and moral issues which arise from it. For some contemporary scholars, this is the distinguishing characteristic of political economy.

4. *Praxis*: Finally, political economists attempt to transcend the distinction between research and policy, orienting their work towards actual social change and practice or as Marx pointed out: "Philosophers have sought to understand the system, the point is to change it."

Mosco's model is similar to the formulation developed by British political economists Graham Murdock and Peter Golding, who have distinguished critical political economy from mainstream economics: it is holistic, historical, centrally concerned with the balance between capitalist enterprise and public intervention, and "goes beyond technical issues of efficiency to engage with basic moral questions of justice, equity and the public good." (Golding and Murdock, 1991)

In summary, a primary concern of political economists is with the allocation of resources (material concerns) within capitalist societies. Through studies of ownership and control, political economists document and analyze relations of power, a class system, and other structural inequalities. Critical political economists analyze contradictions and suggest strategies for resistance and intervention. The approach includes both economic and political analysis, with methods drawn from history, economics, sociology and political science. These explanations set the stage or provide the groundwork for applying political economy to the study of communication.

Theoretical discussions of political economy of communications

The academic study of communication has not always embraced economic analysis, much less a political economic approach. During the 1940s and 1950s, US communication scholars focused primarily on individual effects and psychologically-oriented research, with little concern for the economic context in which media are produced, distributed and consumed. Although there are examples of studies representing a radical critique or an institutional analysis of media structures and practices, explicit references to political economy were lacking.²

In the 1950s and early 1960s, former FCC economist and University of Illinois professor, Dallas Smythe urged scholars to consider communication as an important component of the economy and to understand it as an economic entity. In addition to

² For instance, Danielian's (1939) classic study of AT&T and several critical analyses of the US film industry, such as Huettig (1944), Klingender and Legg (1937).

offering a course at the University of Illinois as early as 1948, Smythe presented one of the first explications of a political economy of communications in 1960, defining the approach as the study of political policies and economic processes, their interrelations and their mutual influence on social institutions. (Smythe, 1960) He argued that the central purpose of applying political economy to communication was to evaluate the effects of communication agencies in terms of the policies by which they are organized and operated, or in other words, to study the structure and policies of communication institutions in their societal settings. Smythe further delineated research questions emanating from policies that related to production, allocation, capital, organization and control, concluding that the studies that might evolve from these areas were practically endless. While Smythe's discussion at this point did not employ radical or Marxist terminology, it was a major departure from the kind of research that dominated the study of mass communications at that time.

Smythe and a few other US scholars, notably Herbert Schiller, and later, Thomas Guback, continued to focus their research and teaching around the political economy of communication during the 1960s, influenced by institutional economics, but inspired as well as by the general political and economic developments of the period. Dan Schiller has pointed out that these scholars drew upon the work of economist, Robert Brady, who critiqued developments in the political and economic climate of the 1930s and 1940s from the vantage point of an emerging anti-fascist movement in the US. Schiller concludes that

... the gestation of a political economic approach, in the United States at least, did not take the form of a direct carryover of analytical priorities from the established field of Marxian political economy – elements of which were indeed incorporated at a later stage. Nor, to be sure, was it a product of abstract academicism. Rather, the conceptual problematic that was elaborated by early political economic communications study was generally rooted in what Denning (1996) called 'the cultural front' of the 1930s and 1940s and, specifically, in the antifascist intellectual synthesis that was the period's hallmark. (Schiller, 1999, p. 90)

It wasn't until the 1970s that PE/C was explicitly defined again, but this time, within a more explicitly Marxist framework. In 1974, Graham Murdock and Peter Golding offered their formulation of the political economy of communication, stating that "the mass media are first and foremost industrial and commercial organizations which produce and distribute commodities." (1974: 205-206) Thus, PE/C is fundamentally interested in studying communication and media as commodities produced by capitalist industries (Murdock and Golding, 1974). The article established a basic model for PE/C by focusing on the consolidation, concentration (including integration and diversification), and internationalization of media institutions, and represented "a ground-breaking exercise... a conceptual map for a political economic analysis of the media where none existed in British literature." (Mosco, 1996: 102) A later piece by Murdock and Golding placed political economy within the broader framework of

critical and Marxian theory, with links to the Frankfurt School, as well as to other critical theorists. (Murdock and Golding, 1979)

Nicholas Garnham further outlined the approach in 1979, also drawing connections to the Frankfurt School and noting that the political economy of communication involves analyzing “the modes of cultural production and consumption developed within capitalist societies.” (Garnham, 1979: 123) He further explained that media must be seen “first as economic entities with both a direct economic role as creators of surplus value through commodity production and exchange and an indirect role, through advertising, in the creation of surplus value within other sectors of commodity production.” (p. 132) An important point emphasized by Murdock, Golding and Garnham related to the contradictions inherent in this process. More specifically, as Garnham states, despite capital’s control of the means of cultural production, “... it does not follow that these cultural commodities will necessarily support... the dominant ideology.” (p. 136)³

Meanwhile, also in 1979, Armand Mattelart, a Belgian scholar working in France, outlined a Marxist approach to the study of media and communication in “For a Class Analysis of Communication.” Mattelart drew directly on Marx’s *Capital* in outlining the mode of production of communication, including production instruments, working methods and relations of production, adding special attention to issues relating to the global extension of media and communication or what he and others have termed cultural imperialism.

As PE/C has grown and developed over the years a number of debates have emerged. One of the most interesting has been called “The Blindspot Debate,” which was initiated by Dallas Smythe in 1977. In an article intended to spark such a debate, Smythe pointed out that communication had been overlooked by Western Marxists, who were mostly interested in issues relating to ideology. He further argued that the main product of media was audiences which were sold by media to advertisers. In other words, Smythe argued that media programming was a “free lunch” and of little significance. Furthermore, he maintained that audiences’ exposure to advertising should be considered labour which added value to the audience commodity.

Smythe’s article prompted a series of replies, first from Graham Murdock (1978), who cautioned that the audience commodity was limited to advertising-dependent media and that dismissing programme content was far too drastic. The debate raged on, with Smythe responding (1979), as well as Bill Livant (1979), Sut Jhally (1990) and Eileen Meehan (1993) entering into the fray. More recently, with the increasing spread of privatized, advertiser-supported media, the audience commodity concept has been accepted by many political economists, as well as other communication theorists.

³ Recently, James Curran has labeled the work done by Garnham and those at the University of Westminster and associated with the journal, *Media, Culture & Society*, as the Westminster School or Tradition. Curran explains that the Westminster School represents an approach to the media and a body of work analogous to the Birmingham School’s contribution to cultural studies. Briefly, the Westminster School has produced empirical and historical studies of different media, as well as work on the evolution of the public sphere and public policy. Curran notes, however, that the tradition is not necessarily identified with PE/C, which has a broader scope than the Westminster School. See Calabrese and Sparks, 2004.

During the 1990s, a few political economists directed special attention to “rethinking” political economy, especially in light of global political and economic restructuring (see Meehan, Mosco, Wasko, 1994; Sussman, 1999). Mosco’s book-length overview of PE/C is subtitled: “Rethinking and Renewal,” and presents a rethinking of political economy in the broad terms of commodification, spatialization and structuration. In addition, he examines political economy’s relation to cultural studies and policy studies. Mosco emphasizes that political economy is just one “entry point” to the study of communications, which must be studied within a wider social totality.

It is also important to note that there are different approaches to PE/C. In his overview in 1996, Mosco points out that British/European political economists have generally attempted to “integrate communication research within various neo-Marxian theoretical traditions.” On the other hand, North American political economy, drawing on both Marxian and institutional approaches, “has been driven more explicitly by a sense of injustice that the communication industry has become an integral part of a wider corporate order which is both exploitative and undemocratic.” (p. 19). Mosco also describes another variation that might be called Third World PE/C research, which relies on dependency and world systems theory, as well as other neo-Marxist traditions. This type of research has focused on challenging the modernization paradigm and analyzing various aspects of globalization processes. (p. 20)

Recently, even more attention has been given to the distinctions between PE/C approaches. Hesmondhalgh (2002) discusses the differences between a “Schiller-McChesney tradition” and a “cultural industries approach.” He is referring here to the criticism of US media systems, especially media concentration, as developed by Herbert Schiller and continued in the 1990s by Robert McChesney and others (including Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky). Hesmondhalgh argues that the tradition represented by Schiller-McChesney has provided invaluable documentation and analysis of the cultural industries. However, Hesmondhalgh feels that this version of PE/C has some shortcomings: it still “underestimates” contradiction in the system, fails to explain specific conditions of cultural industries, pays less attention to consumption than production, and mostly ignores “symbol creators,” while focusing most often on information-based media than entertainment-oriented media. Hesmondhalgh finds solutions to these problems in a cultural industries approach – as outlined by Bernard Miège (1989) – but also draws on Raymond Williams (especially 1980), and thus is more sympathetic to a cultural studies tradition.

Early on in his book, Hesmondhalgh identifies the cultural industries approach as “European” and the Schiller-McChesney approach as “a distinctive US tradition.” (p. 8) While a case can be made that the characteristics which Hesmondhalgh ascribes to the Schiller-McChesney tradition do indeed apply to some US scholars, the wide range of PE/C work that has been done in North America has unfortunately been overlooked in this formulation.

Ultimately, Mosco concludes that even though there are variations, all of these explications of PE/C at least attempt to decenter the media and emphasize capital, class, contradiction, conflict, and oppositional struggles. He further emphasizes that,

‘... the political economy of communication covers a wide intellectual expanse including diverse standpoints, emphases, and interests which belie charges of essentialism that, in the extreme, dismiss the approach as economic. The approach brings together an international collection of scholars who share not so much a singular theoretical perspective or even sense of community, but an approach to intellectual activity and a conception of the relationship between the scholarly imagination and social intervention. Moreover, it suggests that political economy faces numerous challenges that grow out of global social and cultural transformations as well as developments on its intellectual borders...’ (Mosco, 1996, pp. 20-21)

Exemplars of political economy of communications

To further understand PE/C, it is useful to consider specific examples of the issues that political economists examine, as well as examples of research that has been influenced by this approach. A wide range of themes pertaining to communication and media have been analyzed and thus it is nearly impossible to completely trace the rich history and wide range of communication scholarship that draws on a political economic tradition. While there are any number of ways to organize this discussion, the presentation that follows discusses some of the general themes that are fundamental to PE/C and provides some examples of research that exemplify these themes.⁴ (See Mosco, 1996 for a more extensive and detailed overview.)

Historical studies

Most PE/C research incorporates historical analysis, for it is essential to document change as well as continuity. However, many notable historical studies have traced the development of specific media. The commercialization of the press has been documented in the US by Schiller (1981) and Eisenstein (1979), while in Britain, emphasis on class relations and the press has characterized historical studies by Curran (1979) and Sparks (1985). Ewen’s historical work (1976, 1988) presents the historical evolution of advertising and public relations, tracing the development of mass consumption and mind management.

Historical studies of broadcasting in the US and Canada often have focused also on commercialization, as well as the relationship between corporate power and the state, for instance, Kellner (1990), Downing (1990), and McChesney (1993). Meanwhile, Attali (1985) has presented an historical overview of the music industry, while Flichy (1991) has discussed the history of media in Europe and North America.

The historical evolution of telecommunications also has received attention from political economists, who again have traced the growth and change of corporate power and state relations. Beyond Danielian’s (1939) classic work on AT&T, more recent research includes Duboff’s (1984) historical analysis of the telegraph, and Becker’s (1993) work on the telephone.

⁴ The work of researchers who do not refer directly to the PE tradition also is included in this discussion.

Historical work on the film industry also has been the focus of political economists, who have countered the typical emphasis by film scholars on texts and genres by focusing on the commercial and industrial aspects of film. Examples of work that includes an historical emphasis include Guback's (1969) research on the international film industry, Wasko's (1982) study of financial institutions and the film industry and Pendakur's (1990) work on the historical dominance of the US film industry in Canada.

The Media/Communications Business

A good deal of PE/C research has focused on the evolution of mass communications as commodities that are produced and distributed by profit-seeking organizations in capitalist industries. The trends that Murdock and Golding identified in 1974 have expanded and intensified, not only within traditional media industries, but across industrial divisions and into new converged businesses, as well. In addition, more and more public media organizations have been privatized, with a market model now dominating much of the media landscape.

It is clear that the general process of marketization has moved rapidly over the last few decades. (see Philo and Miller, 2000) Communication and information have become key components of this marketization process, but have also developed as significant industries, as well. In many countries, public media institutions have been privatized, along with other public institutions, opening additional markets for growing transnational media and entertainment conglomerates. In addition, new communication and information systems, such as the Internet, are developing as commercialized space, contrary to promises of public access and control. This commercialization process (including the growth of advertising and public relations) has been accompanied by an ever-expanding consumer culture, thus prompting the term "cultural capitalism" as a descriptor for the current period. (See Murdock and Wasko, forthcoming)

Analysis of media as commodity and industry has involved various concepts and levels of analysis. First, we will discuss examples of these various tendencies, exemplified by the US market and Time Warner (formerly, AOL Time Warner), followed by research examples of the different levels of analysis. (Internationalization or a global level of analysis will be discussed in a separate section below.)

Commodification/Commercialization. Increasingly, media and communication resources have become commodities – products and services that are sold by profit-seeking companies to buyers or consumers. An example that seems obvious is the development of various forms of "pay" television since the 1980s (see Mosco, 1989). In addition, more and more of the media/communication landscape is filled with commercial messages. Numerous examples come to mind, but perhaps the evolution of product placement in Hollywood feature films is one of the most blatant (see Wasko, 1994).

Diversification. As media companies have expanded, new lines of business have been added in a process of diversification. While most of the media industries in the US began with a relatively large number of different companies, these industries today are dominated by huge media/entertainment conglomerates, such as Time Warner, that are involved in a wide range of diversified activities. For instance, Time Warner includes the following:

- publishing (Time Inc., Little Brown & Co., DC Comics)
- film (Warner Bros., New Line Cinema, Castle Rock Entertainment, Warner International Theatres)
- television production and distribution (Warner Television, WB Network, Turner Broadcasting)
- home video (Warner Home Video)
- music (Warner Music Group, including Atlantic, Elektra, Rhino, Warner Bros., Columbia House Co.)
- cable networks (HBO, Cinemax, CNN, Cartoon Network, Turner Classic Movies, etc.)
- cable systems (Time Warner Cable, Time Warner Telecom)
- computer services (America Online, CompuServe, Netscape, etc.)
- professional sports (Atlanta Braves, Atlanta Hawks)

Horizontal integration. As media corporations have grown larger and more profitable, they often have added companies that are in the same line of business, thus integrating horizontally. Time Warner, for instance, has added to its already sizable list of magazines that were owned by Time Inc. and currently publishes over 140 magazines.

Vertical integration. Not only have companies such as Time Warner expanded their range of businesses, but with new distribution technologies and deregulated markets, media companies have integrated vertically by adding companies in the same supply chain or at different stages of production. For instance, at Time Warner, Warner Bros. and New Line Cinema produce and distribute motion pictures that are shown on the company's cable networks (HBO, Cinemax), television network (Warner Television network). As clearly stated on Time Warner's website at the end of 2002:

Warner Bros. has evolved into a fully integrated global entertainment company, standing at the forefront of feature films, television, home video, animation, product and brand licensing, interactive media and international theaters.

New Line's programming refreshes AOL Time Warner's libraries and provides valuable programming for its cable networks, in particular TNT, TBS and HBO.

Synergy. There is also the potential for the various businesses owned by these large diversified conglomerates to work together to more effectively market products, thus producing a synergy that maximizes profits. For instance, Warner films can be promoted via AOL as well as other company-owned media outlets, as well as serving as the basis for other media products (TV programs, books, etc.). Another example cited on Time Warner's website:

Time Inc. has taken advantage of extensive cross-promotion with America Online. Promotions of Time Inc. magazines on the AOL services generated 1.5 million subscriptions in 2001 – about 100,000 a month. AOL discs poly-bagged with Time Inc. magazines and distributed at retail outlets led to some 800,000 AOL registrations.

It might be noted, however, that Time Warner has been criticized for not taking full advantage of such strategies. In fact, some discussions in the popular and financial press during 2002 focused on whether or not Time Warner (as well as a few other media conglomerates) had actually become too large to function efficiently at all. Indeed, some observers have even suggested that some mergers create corporations that are too large and unwieldy, thus arguing for more streamlined companies that can concentrate their efforts. However, other arguments have been made that synergies take time to develop and ultimately are advantageous for media and information companies such as Time Warner.

Market Concentration. Of course, one of the major issues is the level of competition in various media markets. While a competitive marketplace is the avowed goal of capitalism, there is an inevitable tendency for markets to become concentrated, due to any number of factors (see Murdock and Golding, 1974). By documenting the actual level of competition (or lack of competition), PE/C challenges the myth of the competitive marketplace under late capitalism.

Indeed, Time Warner holds a dominant share of the market in a number of different media industries. The company controlled over 18% of US cable systems in 2001 (which, together with AT&T Comcast, represented 55% of the industry), while most of these cable systems represent a monopoly in their local cable service markets. In addition, with 31.5 million subscribers, AOL and its affiliated Internet service providers (ISPs), represents 21.1% of the online business in the US, a considerable advantage over the next largest competitor (MSN) at 5.2%.

Essentially, most of the media industries or sectors in the US are dominated by oligopolies. For instance, in 2001, Warner Bros. Pictures was the top film distributor in the US, receiving \$1.24 billion at the domestic box office. However, an oligopoly that includes Warner, Disney, Universal, Paramount, and Fox (all owned by giant media conglomerates) regularly receives between 80-90% of the total theatrical film box office, not only in the US, but many other countries around the world.

General Media Analysis. These trends have been investigated by political economists of communications at various levels of analysis, including national media systems, specific media industries and corporations. In addition, an international level of analysis has been an important component of political economy research and will be discussed in the next section.

Considering these developments across media/communication industries, it is not difficult to conclude that Time Warner, together with a handful of other conglomerates, dominate the US media landscape. Ben Bagdikian's on-going countdown of the top media corporations is instructive here.

In 1983, fifty corporations dominated most of every mass medium and the biggest media merger in history was a \$340 million deal... . [I]n 1987, the fifty companies had shrunk to twenty-nine... . [I]n 1990, the twenty-nine had shrunk to twenty three... . [I]n 1997, the biggest firms numbered ten and involved the \$19 billion Disney-ABC deal, at the time the biggest media merger ever... . [In 2000] AOL Time Warner's \$350 billion merged corporation [was] more than 1,000 times larger [than the biggest deal of 1983]. (Bagdikian, 2000: xx – xxi)

Political economists are especially interested in the consequences of such media concentration. For instance, much attention has been focused on the influence of concentration on the availability and quality of news, as well as the tabloidization of news. In addition, researchers have documented the “blockbuster complex” and the homogenization of the content in cultural industries. More generally, political economists have analyzed these trends in relation to capitalism and power, confirming a class system, inherent structural inequalities, as well as representing serious challenges to democracy.

As noted previously, media concentration obviously has been a major focus of political economists in media studies for many years. However, the issue has become so blatant and intense over the last few decades that it is not only a theme for political economists, but has attracted the attention of other media researchers and activists, as well as some policy makers and journalists. Media economists also have paid special attention to this issue, however, the type of analysis and the conclusions drawn are often quite different, as discussed below.

Examples of PE/C research in this area are abundant. Murdock (1990) has continued to provide keen analysis of these general trends especially in Britain, while US researchers have included (among many others) Herman and Chomsky (1988), Barnouw and Gitlin (1998), McChesney (1999), and Miller (1996).

Industry Studies. Political economists also have examined specific media and communications industries, describing industry structure and policies and looking more deeply into the trends described above, especially commercialization, commodification and integration within these industries. Even though some of these industries are merging and converging, the analysis of industrial sectors is still often quite relevant.⁵

Meanwhile, other researchers within a political economic tradition have done research on the cultural industries, with Bernard Miège's (1999) work setting the foundations for work by other researchers, such as Sinclair (1999) and Hesmondhalgh (2002).

Telecommunication and information technologies have received extensive analysis in PE studies, as issues such as technological determinism and state support of technological development have been examined. Special attention has been directed at the un-

⁵ The television industry was dissected early on by Bunce (1976) and Collins, Garnham and Locksley (1988) and later by Meehan (1984), Downing (1990) and Streeter (1996). Specific studies have analyzed the film industry, including Guback (1969), Garnham, (1990), Pendakur (1990), Aksoy and Robins (1992) and Wasko (1994). Meanwhile, advertising has been examined by Janus (1984), Sinclair (1987), Jhally (1990) and Mattelart (1991) and public relations by Ewen (1998).

equal distribution of such resources, with analysis of issues such as access and equity, including discussions of “the information poor” or “the digital divide.” Representative studies include H. I. Schiller (1981), Mosco (1989), D. Schiller (1986), Wilson (1988), Mosco and Wasko (1988), Hills (1991), Gandy (1993), Mansell (1993), and McChesney, Wood and Foster (1998).

Corporate studies. The examples thus far examine patterns of ownership within and across media sectors. Meanwhile, other work in PE/C has focused more specifically on issues relating to ownership and control of specific media organizations. Closer, more in-depth analysis of media and communication organizations is necessary to assess the precise mechanisms of corporate ownership and control, but also to examine trends of commodification, integration and diversification. This analysis often considers these developments in light of issues such as cultural creativity, diversity, equity, access and democratic ideals.

The Walt Disney Company, for instance, provides a good example for such analysis (Wasko 2001). Although the company has been known for producing children’s or family-oriented entertainment – thus, gaining a somewhat sacred or pure image – it is important to analyze the company’s business orientation and strategies. The Walt Disney Company was incorporated by Walt and Roy Disney in 1923, first as the Disney Brothers Cartoon Studio, then as the Walt Disney Studio. Based in Los Angeles, California, the company produced short animated films that were distributed by other film companies and appeared before feature-length films in movie theaters around the world.

Never one of the major studios, the company grew gradually, always with financial difficulties, and established itself as an independent production company in Hollywood. The Disney brothers built a reputation for quality animation, utilizing cutting-edge technological developments such as sound and color, and producing feature-length animated films. The popularity of Disney’s products, which included merchandise based on their animated characters was instantaneous and unmistakable, not only in the United States but in other countries.

Setting the foundations for the diversification that emerged in the ensuing decades, during the 1950s Disney expanded to include television production and live-action feature films. In 1953 the company opened Disneyland, the first of many theme parks. During this period, the company also started distributing its own films. By the mid-1970s, however, the company appeared to be stagnating until a management and ownership shuffle rejuvenated its established businesses and developed new investments.

At the end of the twentieth century, the Walt Disney Company was the second largest media conglomerate in the world (behind AOL Time Warner), with a wide array of domestic and international investments. The company’s revenues for 2000 were over \$25 billion. Disney owned the American Broadcasting Company (ABC) television network, broadcast TV stations, and radio stations and networks, and maintained partial ownership of several cable networks, including 80 percent of ESPN and 38 percent of A&E and Lifetime. Walt Disney Studios produced films under the Touchstone,

Hollywood Pictures, and Miramax labels. In addition, the company was also involved in home video, recorded music, theatrical productions, and consumer products, which were sold at over 600 Disney Stores around the world.

Disney's theme parks and resorts division encompassed six major theme parks in the United States, including Disneyland in Anaheim, California, and the Walt Disney World Resort in Florida (EPCOT, The Animal Kingdom, Disney-MGM Studios). Other theme park sites were Tokyo Disney, Disneyland Paris, and, by 2003, Hong Kong Disneyland. The company also owned extensive hotel and resort properties, a variety of regional entertainment centers, a cruise line, sports investments, and a planned community in Florida called Celebration. The Walt Disney Internet Group included sites such as ABC. Com, Disney Online, and ESPN.com.

The Disney Company represents an example of the diversified, entertainment conglomerates that dominate the media industry, at least in the US. The company's motivations are clearly stated in the following statements:

“Disney's overriding objective is to create shareholder value by continuing to be the world's premier entertainment company from a creative, strategic and financial standpoint.”

– www.disney.com/Investor Relations

“Success tends to make you forget what made you successful... We have no obligation to make art. We have no obligation to make a statement. To make money is our only objective.”

– Michael Eisner, 1981 staff memo, cited in Wasko, 2001

A political economic analysis of the Disney Company would investigate the beneficiaries of these policies (shareholders and managers), as well as the mechanisms of control within the corporation which influence the production and distribution of its products and services. A complete study would look carefully at large stockholders, their relation to managers, as well as the composition of the board of directors. In addition, ties to other companies, financial institutions, etc. would be explored.

At this level of analysis, political economists are able to examine the consequences as well as the contradictions of capitalist ownership of media resources, not just as they relate to media concentration. Unfortunately, there are not as many academic studies that focus on specific corporations as one might expect. Examples would include Banks (1996), Wasko (2001), and various studies by masters and doctoral students that are unpublished. It might be noted that books written by non-academics are often useful in supplying relevant information for this type of analysis (for instance, Grover, 1996).

Internationalization/globalization

Political economy has concentrated especially on analyzing issues relating to international communication, even before the recent emphasis on globalization. This area includes not only the expansion of media corporations internationally, but also the various political and economic issues related to a global communication system.

Of course, corporations such as Time Warner and Disney have extensive global investments and activities. However, a particularly interesting example of the international expansion of media companies is Rupert Murdoch's News Corp. The corporation originated in Australia, where Murdoch owned several newspaper chains and numerous magazines. But over the next decades, the company expanded to include important media outlets on every continent except Africa, with particular strengths in satellite broadcasting systems. The company has holdings in film, television, home video, cable networks, magazines, newspapers, book publishing and sports. The corporation's web site boasts: "Producing and distributing the most compelling news, information and entertainment to the farthest reaches of the globe." Murdoch's global strategies have been varied, but primarily taking advantage of profitable opportunities, whatever and wherever they may exist, as well as focusing on popular, lowest-common denominator media content.⁶

While these issues have been emphasized recently by Herman and McChesney (1997) and others, analysis of transnationalization of communication and media has been a theme for PE/C at least since the 1960s. For instance, Schiller's extensive work (beginning with Schiller, 1969) was important in critiquing the US communication system, its government and military ties, and its international extension.

Other PE/C work specifically embracing global issues includes Guback's studies of the international film industry, as well as his and others' work on international flows of media. Indeed, the discussion of a New World Information Order drew heavily on political economic analysis and became an important focus of research during the 1970s and 80s (for overviews, see Nordenstreng and Schiller, 1993, and Roach, 1993).

Meanwhile, in Latin American and Europe, numerous studies made important contributions to the discussion of international media development and cultural imperialism (see especially Dorfman and Mattelart, 1975). An overview of work done in Latin America is presented in Atwood and McAnany (1986), while Sussman and Lent (1991) gathered research focusing on the Pacific and Southeast Asia. In addition, as PE/C research expands, new and interesting approaches are emerging in various parts of the world. A few examples would include the work of Zhao (1998) and Morris-Suzuki (1998).

Media/state relations

Even though studies of ownership patterns and the dynamics of corporate control are essential, political economic analysis is much more than merely identifying and then condemning those who control media and communication resources. To understand the media's role in society, it is essential to understand relationships between media power and state power, as well as the media's relationships with other economic sec-

⁶ Murdoch's tabloids regularly feature heaps of sex and violence. An example of one of the more famous headlines from one of his tabloids, the New York Post: "Headless Body Found in Topless Bar."

tors. Interrelationships between media and communication industries and sites of power in society are necessary for the complete analysis of communications, and helps to dispel some common myths about our economic and political system, especially the notions of pluralism, free enterprise, competition, etc. Thus, an important theme in political economic research has been tracking the relationships between political power and media power, and especially those relationships that involve the state.

While it is often assumed that corporations simply seek relief from government intrusion, it is crucial to understand how the state supports the economy and corporations in various ways. To cite only one example, the US motion picture industry relies on the US government for clearing barriers to foreign markets, as well as in tracking and punishing copyright offenders, both in the US and elsewhere. This relationship involves the film industry's lobbying arm, the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), which regularly attempts to influence government policies affecting the industry and its members. (For more detail, see Guback, 1979, and Pendakur, 1990.)

Schiller and Smythe's work paved the way for a range of issues and themes that focus on media/state relations. Smythe's (1957) early work on the electromagnetic spectrum pointed to the state's role in allocating communication resources and protecting corporate interests, while Schiller's *Mass Communication and American Empire* (1969/92) provided an important analysis of the US government's use of communication resources, especially for military purposes.

Meanwhile, other aspects of state policy have also been explored, particularly pertaining to support of the corporate interests in areas such as regulation, intellectual property, etc. Bettig's (1997) work on intellectual property is an especially good example. Meanwhile, regulation and policy have been the focus of work by many of the previously mentioned researchers, as well as Hills (1986), Streeter (1996), and Calabrese and Burgelman (1999).

Resistance/opposition

Despite the claims that political economy focuses only on the omnipotence of large corporations and a system that is impenetrable, political economists address issues relating to resistance and opposition in a wide range of research.

In 1983, Mattelart and Siegelau's second volume on communication and class struggle presented many early examples of these issues. Around the same time, studies of labor and the working class were gathered by Mosco and Wasko (1983), and later by Sussman and Lent (1998). Meanwhile, Douglas (1986) looked at trade unions in the media industry, while Nielsen (1996) studied labor in the film industry, and Winseck (1993) analyzed telecommunications unions in Canada.

Meanwhile, Miller, *et al.* (2002) have attempted to reframe the discussion of global Hollywood in terms of a new international division of cultural labor (NICL). The authors outline Hollywood's global dominance in political economic terms, analyz-

ing the strategies that the US film industry has used to “Americanize” the production, distribution and exhibition of film. However, they frame their discussion in terms of the implications of this dominance for film workers as well as consumers, arguing that we need to “confront the NICL and imagine alternative, more salutary conditions and possibilities for our own cultural labour and for our brothers and sisters in the culture works everywhere” (p. 216).

Political economists also have discussed media developments specifically in relation to the public sphere, public citizenship, and democracy. While acknowledging the powerful role that capital plays in media developments, researchers have argued that these issues have direct bearing on citizenship and public participation. These themes have characterized some of the work by Garnham, Murdock, McChesney, as well as many others.

Political economy's relationship to other approaches

It also is instructive to consider PE/C's relationship to other approaches that focus on the study of communications and media. It has previously been noted that the application of political economy to communication or media most always indicates a critical approach, compared to what has been called an administrative or mainstream approach in communication research. Meehan (1999) has recently referred to the latter research paradigm as “celebratory” – and concludes,

If we begin with a shared valuation that “although some problems may exist, capitalism is fundamentally good,” our research thereby takes a celebratory stance toward media products, audiences, and institutions. If our shared valuation suggests that “despite some progress, capitalism is fundamentally flawed,” a critical stance is an integral part of our research. Attempts at dialogue across these mutually exclusive valuations seem bound to fail. (p. 150)

Several areas of mainstream research focus on issues similar to PE/C. Mosco has looked closely at policy studies that direct attention to important political influences on media and communications developments that are sometimes neglected by political economists. However, as Mosco observes, such analysis draws strongly on pluralist models, usually overemphasizes the state's role (particularly in legal and regulatory policies) and tends to ignore relations of power and the fundamental dynamics of capitalism.

Here, we will focus on PE/C's relationship with another mainstream or celebratory approach, media economics, and the important relationship between PE/C and cultural studies.

Political economy and media economics

More deliberate attention to economics has been evident in the field of communication and media studies during the last decade or so, with scholars identifying media economics as a distinct focus of research activity. Examples include text books by Picard (1989), Albarran (1996), and Alexander, *et al.* (1993), as well as *The Journal of Media Economics*, which was introduced in 1988. The goal of the journal, as stated in its Contributor Information section, is "... to broaden understanding and discussion of the impact of economic and financial activities on media operations and managerial decisions." Generally, these media economics texts and the journal echo the concerns of mainstream (neo-classical) economics and seldom present serious critique of the capitalist media system. As the journal's first editor explains:

Media economics is concerned with how media operators meet the informational and entertainment wants and needs of audiences, advertisers and society with available resources. It deals with the factors influencing production of media goods and services and the allocation of those products for consumption. (Picard 1989:7)

For the most part, the emphasis of media economics is on microeconomic issues rather than macroanalysis, and focuses primarily on producers and consumers in media markets. Typically, the concern is how media industries and companies can succeed, prosper, or move forward. In other words, they represent a celebratory position vis-a-vis capitalism. While competition may be assessed, little emphasis is placed on issues relating to ownership of media resources or the implications of concentrated ownership and control. For instance, despite the title, *Who Owns the Media?*, the volumes prepared by Compaine (1982 and 2000) represent a form of celebratory media economics and avoid discussion of the actual owners of media corporations or their overall connections to a capitalist system.⁷ These approaches avoid the kind of moral grounding adopted by political economists, as most studies emphasize description (or "what is") rather than critique (or "what ought to be"). A common approach is the industrial organization model, as described by Gomery:

The industrial organization model of structure, conduct, and performance provides a powerful and useful analytical framework for economic analysis. Using it, the analyst seeks to define the size and scope of the structure of an industry and then goes on to examine its economic behavior. Both of these steps require analyzing the status and operations of the industry, not as the analyst wishes it were. Evaluation of its performance is the final step, a careful weighing of 'what is' versus 'what ought to be.' (Gomery, 1989: 58)

"What ought to be," however, is a competitive, democratically responsive and multi-cultural media system. Even though this claim is rarely made overtly, the media economics tradition effectively reinforces and celebrates the status quo media system.

⁷ For example, some of the differences between political economy and media economics, can be found in the debate on media ownership between McChesney and Compaine (and others) that appears on *opendemocracy.net*. http://www.opendemocracy.net/forum/strand_home.asp?CatID=5

Along these lines, however, a few communication scholars also have contributed valuable organizational studies, which call attention to economic characteristics of media and communication industries, as well as emphasizing policy and regulatory developments, however not necessarily from a political economic perspective (see Turow, 1984 or Tunstall, 1991).

Political economy and cultural studies

It is especially important to look more closely at the relationship between PE/C and cultural studies, as these two approaches are often identified (rightly or wrongly) as the primary and sometimes competing ways of critically examining media. Though PE/C and cultural studies focus on different areas of inquiry or objects of study, both approaches would seem to be needed for a complete critical analysis of culture and media.

Although cultural studies has expanded to the point where any definition is bound to be too limiting, a useful formulation is offered by O'Sullivan, *et al.* (1994): "Cultural studies has focused on the relations between social relations and meanings – or more exactly on the way social divisions are made meaningful." (p. 71) It would seem, therefore, that PE/C and cultural studies would share a common critical analysis, at least, even though the focus of study is directed at different elements of the media process.

However, PE/C is often considered by cultural studies scholars to be too narrow, deterministic, and economic, despite the broad definitions and wide range of research outlined above. Many have charged that PE/C is primarily focused on the economic or the production side of the communication process, neglecting texts, discourse, audiences, and consumption. In addition, a simplistic notion of ideology is ascribed to political economists, with little room allowed for resistance or subversion by audience members.

Over the years, political economists have defended and expanded their theoretical positions in light of some of these critiques, clarifying extreme and inaccurate accusations, but also responding to reasonable criticism (compare Murdock and Golding, 1974, and Golding and Murdock, 1996).

On the other hand, some political economists have found cultural studies to be lacking consistent and strong analysis of the institutional or structural context of cultural consumption, focusing too narrowly on issues relating to media texts, identity and audience reception. Especially problematic are studies that argue that the audience's alternative interpretations of media texts represent a kind of subversive resistance to and undermining of dominant ideological definitions and thus are politically liberating (for instance, Fiske, 1988).

Over the years, numerous discussions and evaluations of this relationship have been offered by one side or the other in individual papers, articles and books. However, the most focused debates have taken place in professional journals, for example in the

“Colloquy” in *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* in 1995. Here, Garnham and Grossberg squared off, in what Meehan (1999) has called a “ritualized debate” based on stereotypes and unproductive posturing. In other words, the “debate” was not based on a constructive and well-mannered engagement, but degenerated into spiteful and negative (sometimes false) characterizations of extreme positions within both approaches.

For many, however, there is still a need for an intellectual alliance (beginning with true dialogue, as Meehan argues) between political economy and cultural studies. Such an integration of approaches is necessary, not only to fully examine the complexities of mediated communication, but also to challenge other celebratory approaches in communication research. As Murdock argues (in the debate cited above), we need to

... work towards the construction of a more complete account of the central dynamics of contemporary culture and to mobilize those insights to defend the symbolic resources required to extend the rights and duties of citizenship in the service of revitalizing democracy. (Murdock, 1995: 94)

The future

Even while the “debates” between PE/C and cultural studies have raged on, a good deal of interesting work has integrated these approaches and may represent the most dynamic direction for future development. Many researchers who have identified primarily with PE/C have also integrated other approaches and disciplines with interesting and important results. More work has been done recently integrating feminism and political economy, represented especially in Meehan and Riordan (2002), as well as in work by Martin (1991), Balka (2000), Meehan and Byars (1995).

On another front, Gandy (1998) offers an important look at race and ethnicity in the evolving systems of information media. As an indication of the integrated nature of such research, the book’s description is exemplary: “It explores the concept of race through three streams of analysis: media systems and institutions, communication frames and symbolic representations; and social constructions. Borrowing insights from behavioral science, political economy, and the more interpretative strands of contemporary cultural studies, the book enters directly into the contemporary debate about structure and agency, and ends by proposing an agenda for the development of critical theory in the area of race and ethnicity.”

In another recent collection (Hagen and Wasko, 1998), various researchers address the commonalities and tensions between political economy and audience or reception analysis. While many of the authors in the volume see that the approaches share some theoretical perspectives, others point to issues relating to methodological and ideological differences.

In another interesting development, several political economists represented in the previously mentioned volume present interesting analysis that integrates other disci-

plines. For instance, Murdock (1998) draws on anthropology to look more carefully at the historical roots of consumption. Elsewhere, Pendakur (1993) has integrated ethnography with political economy, delving more deeply into the impact of media technology in rural villages in India. And Mosco's (1999) recent work on New York draws heavily on geography to map the evolution of commercial space in the city. These researchers have maintained the theoretical foundations of political economy, while expanding their analysis to embrace other relevant disciplines.

Increasingly there are also studies that attempt to use political economy with other approaches to examine a particular media phenomenon holistically. An excellent example is Gripsrud's (1995) study of *Dynasty*, which traces the program's production context, discusses its textual elements, as well as examining its distribution and reception. In my own work on the Walt Disney Company, an attempt has been made to examine the history and political economy of the company, as well as explore various textual readings and the reception of and resistance to Disney products. (Wasko, 2001)

It is important to note that these integrated approaches still (at least attempt to) maintain the essence of political economy, or in other words, research that examines the relationships of power that are involved in the production, distribution and consumption of media and communication resources within a wider social context. PE/C still privileges issues relating to class power, not to the exclusion of other relationships, however, and emphasizes the complex and contradictory nature of such relationships. Most importantly, PE/C challenges media and communication development that undermines the development of equitable and democratic societies.

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