

Political Economy and Media Production: A Reply to Dwyer

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In a recent contribution to this journal Paul Dwyer (2015, pp. 988-1004) argues that political economy approaches to the media have signally failed to contribute to understanding the changing organisation of media as systems of meaning making. In advancing this charge he invokes the supposed authority of a former political economy 'insider', Nicholas Garnham, who, before moving to academia, had been a producer at the BBC and collaborated on a pioneering collection of interviews detailing the organisational and working lives of broadcast executives and programme makers (Bakewell and Garnham, 1970). Garnham's early academic work made a major contribution to developing a political economy of communication in Britain, but in recent reflections on that experience he has argued that its practitioners have had 'a tendency to regard the system of media production as a 'black box' which they have no interest in opening (Garnham, 2011, p.51). The same basic case has been made elsewhere, by proponents of 'new' media industry and 'new' production studies as a necessary support for claims for the novelty and centrality of their work. Erecting fences is a familiar move in projects to stake out new academic territory (see Wasko and Meehan 2013). These arguments fundamentally misunderstand the core project of political economy and ignore its central role in explaining the dynamics of production.

Since Dwyer begins and ends his essay with a quote from one of our early essays outlining the case for a political economy of communications, which he presents as emblematic of the problem as he defines it, we will focus here on unpacking the immediate intellectual history he chooses to ignore. A fuller account would of course have to range much more widely since both the political economy of communications and the study of cultural production have been, from

the outset, international ventures (for some illustration of this see Wasko, Murdock and Sousa, 2014; Cao, Mosco and Shade, 2015).

The quotation of ours that Dwyer selects argues that “the obvious starting point for a political economy of mass communication is the recognition that the mass media are first and foremost industrial and commercial organisations which produce and distribute commodities” (Murdock and Golding, 1973.p.205). He concludes that this is ‘unduly limiting’ and that a theory of media production needs to break with it. We would argue exactly the opposite. The key phrase in the sentence is ‘starting point’. In capitalist societies where the majority of major producers of public communications are privately owned and dedicated to generating maximum returns to shareholders, either by crafting symbolic goods for direct sale or by assembling audiences to market to advertisers, understanding how they are integrated into general processes of accumulation, how they exercise power, and how their strategies shape the communications landscape in fundamental ways, both institutionally and ideologically, is the inescapable place to begin an analysis. This is even more so now than when we originally wrote, since the crisis of accumulation in the mid-1970s opened the way for a raft of interventions that have allowed private corporations to enter markets they were previously excluded from (most notably telecommunications), significantly loosened the regulatory controls governing their activities (facilitating a major escalation in concentration of ownership), weakened or removed the rights of organised labour (accelerating casualization), pressurised public institutions to think and behave like commercial corporations, and insistently celebrated the contribution of the ‘creative industries’ to the post-industrial economy.

The economy of commodities, though central to the operation of capitalism, has never been and is not now exclusive however. There are two other cultural economies in play; the economy of public goods made up of institutions paid for out of taxation – museums, libraries, and public service broadcasting - and the economy of gifts generated by voluntary collaborative activity by civil society groups (see Murdock, 2011). Political economy has always refused the dominant orthodoxy of professional economics that sees the ‘economy’ as a separate and

bounded domain of activity, and insisted on placing relations between states and markets at the centre of analysis. This focus has generated substantial bodies of research and debate examining the organisation and future of public service broadcasting, investigating the role of advertising in structuring priorities for commercial television and radio production, and exploring the case for public subsidy of investigative print journalism. Dwyer rightly points out that Hollywood cannot be seen as a paradigmatic point of reference for studies of media production, but arguably this is mainly because of its relative independence from direct state subsidy and regulation and from advertising finance, two key contexts of contemporary media work that he fails to explore.

The expansion of the internet has drawn renewed attention to the third cultural economy, of gifting and collaboration. Whereas previously the reach of self-organised and voluntary cultural production, from community choirs to alternative magazines, had been mostly confined to particular localities or interest groups, digital distribution offers the potential for more generalised circulation, access and appropriation. This in turn has raised major new questions about the organisation of voluntary digital labour, the changing relations between amateur and professional activity, and the corporate push to annex user contributions in the service of commodity production (see e.g. Scholtz, 2012)

The critical political economy approach we have advocated has been centrally concerned with the shifting relations between these three cultural economies. But it has also insisted on restoring the articulation between economic and social investigation and moral philosophy which was integral to political economy's foundational project. Under contemporary conditions this requires a normative perspective that sees the symbolic resources provided by cultural institutions as essential supports for the effective exercise of informed citizenship, defined as the right and capacity to participate fully in social life and to contribute to determining its future forms. A critical political economy of communication then seeks to answer two fundamental sets of questions. Firstly, how is public culture produced and how far are particular modes of production equitable rather than exploitative and ecologically sustainable rather than destructive? Secondly, how far does what is produced deliver the diversity of information, analysis, debate and

insight into the lives of others required for effective participatory citizenship on a basis of respect and tolerance and are these resources available on an equitable basis without significant social exclusions?

We have always insisted that "we can think of economic dynamics as defining the key features of the general environment within which communication activity takes place, but not as a complete explanation of the nature of that activity". Demonstrating how general processes impact on situated activity by "analysing the way that meaning is made and re-made through the concrete activities of producers and consumers " is not optional but "essential to the perspective we are proposing" (Golding, P. and Murdock, G. 1991. p.19) Tackling these relations requires research at a series of levels that "should not be seen as self-enclosed domains of study", but as a set of interlocking Chinese boxes (Murdock, 2003, p.18).

The first, and most general level of necessary analysis, requires engagement with debates around the shifting organisation of contemporary capitalism and the interactions between key drivers of change: financialization, marketization, globalization , and digitalization. This work is essential to any full critical analysis of media production for two reasons. Firstly, as the currency of terms like 'digital capitalism', 'cognitive capitalism' and 'communicative capitalism' indicates, propelled by the meta-technology of digitalisation communication systems are becoming ever more securely integrated into the general operation of contemporary capitalism at every level. Secondly, against a background of escalating climate instability and widening inequalities of income and wealth it is imperative to situate cultural labour within the global production and distribution chains in which it is embedded, stretching from resource and materials exploitation, through energy use, to issue of waste and disposal (see Fuchs, 2013).

Analysis at the next level down examines how these general processes are impacting on and reconstructing particular sectors of the communications system. Dwyer acknowledges that political economy's

“ability to enlighten by comparing the media to other industries” has been a ‘strength’, and the bulk of his essay offers a provocative rereading of attempts to apply general theories of the transition from mass to flexible production to the development of Hollywood. Rejecting claims that Hollywood provides models that can be applied more generally he calls for an alternative approach that thinks of “media production processes as responses both to common economic and organisational challenges and to media-specific creative and cultural influences” (op. cit. p. 990). Our approach to a political economy of communications has always advocated exactly this. In a later piece, which Dwyer does not cite, we again insist that “The political economy of cultural production is concerned with the concrete consequences for the work of making media goods of the broad patterns of power and ownership that are their backdrop” and that illuminating these connections necessarily requires research “to go beyond broad structural features to assess the consequences for daily practice” linking “what industrial sociologists have traditionally characterised as market situation and work situation” (Golding, P. and Murdock, G. 2000, p 84)

This proposal was never simply programmatic. In teasing out the connections between the concrete practices of production and the wider organisational and economic shifts that shape them, critical political economy analysis has been able to draw on the evidence generated by three indispensable traditions of research that Dwyer pays little or no attention to ; detailed studies of media corporations and institutions; interview and survey studies of particular media occupations ; and situated ethnographies of specific sites of production (such as newsrooms or recording studios) or particular cultural projects (such as a television drama series).

The Leicester Centre for Mass Communication Research, where we were both based when we began work on our political economy approach, also produced a significant body of ethnographic and occupational studies. We were both involved in these initiatives and in thinking through how to move between and integrate different levels of analysis. In 1972, Philip Elliott, one of the Centre’s founding members,

published his pioneering ethnography of the making of a television documentary series tracing the production process, as he put it, from idea to artefact. Having studied Politics, Philosophy and Economics at Oxford before going on to pursue graduate studies in anthropology at Manchester, he stressed that drawing out ‘the implications suggested by the case study for a more general model of mass communication’ required analysis to move ‘from the particular to the general’ and ‘investigate the organisational setting and social context within which programme production took place” (Elliott, 1972. p. 144). The same impetus informs Philip Schlesinger’s path-breaking ethnography of BBC news making, in which he insists that the central questions to be answered are not simply ‘What sort of work processes have to be gone through before a news bulletin hits the air?’ but how is BBC news ‘affected by the state and by competition in the media industries?’, both key concerns of political economy (Schlesinger 1978: 12). Although formally based at the LSE, the study benefitted substantially from Philip Elliott’s advice. A similar example, one of many, is a comparative study of broadcast journalism, which Philip Elliott directed, which sets a detailed ethnography of newsroom practice in the context of public broadcasting, linking news values and occupational ideologies with wider structures of power and resources (Golding and Elliott, 1979).

Questions about the diversity and quality of the information, analysis and deliberation produced by major news and current affairs outlets, both print and broadcast, have been central to debates around how well the media system serves the requirements of democratic citizenship that, as we noted earlier, are at the heart of critical political economy’s core normative project. In another monograph from the Leicester Centre this was empirically demonstrated in relation to public understanding and media construction of welfare and poverty (Golding and Middleton, 1982) .

Social participation on a basis of mutual recognition and respect however also requires access to cultural forms that offer points of entry into the lives of others very different from ourselves and encourage us to walk in their shoes and see their world from their point of view. Fictions offer the most flexible opportunities to develop these capacities. But not all fictions are equal in this respect. As Dwyer argues, it is necessary to

develop a theory 'capable of explaining the differences between media production systems' by grounding those differences in the variable 'relationships between media markets, project organization, creative management and specific media styles and genres' (op. cit.p. 1000).

Unpacking these relations was central to work conducted at the Leicester Center. Adapting Umberto Eco's useful distinction between 'open' and 'closed' texts, a collaborative project investigated the role played by different fictional genres in organising televisual representations of 'terrorism'. On the basis of detailed textual analyses of representative instances it argued that single plays were, on balance, more likely to be 'open' to a diversity of viewpoints and perspectives, including discourses that ran counter to official rhetorics, than either series or serials (Schlesinger P, Elliott P and Murdock G 1983). The changing market and organisational dynamics that were pushing production towards a greater emphasis on long form genres and constricting the resources available for one-off dramas were explored in a parallel project, based on extensive interviews with fiction writers and executives responsible for programming (Murdock 1977, 1993; , Murdock, G. and Halloran, J. 1979). As Dwyer notes, differential costs can play an important role as producers gravitate towards less expensive genres (p 1001) but so can differential returns as broadcasters look for ways of maximising revenues from secondary and overseas markets and capitalising on the cost-benefit opportunities offered by merchandising, co-production and format deals. These strategies have significant consequences for both generic diversity and the organisation of production. (see e.g. Weissmann, 2012, Chalaby, 2015).

The central challenge for theories of media production then is to move between levels of analysis and to integrate them. We are not arguing that the work we have cited offers a satisfactory solution to this challenge, simply that there is already a considerable body of research and conceptualisation that has this as its core aim and that critical political economy has made major contributions to realising it.

Dwyer ends his essay by raising 'the question of whether political economy alone can provide the basis for a theory of media production' (op. cit. p 1000). The emphatic answer is 'no', but we have never

claimed that it could. On the contrary, as we have argued here, we have always insisted on the need to look for ways of integrating the general analysis of shifts in the organisation of capitalism and their consequences for the structure of cultural production with the results of detailed research into how shifting webs of pressure and opportunity impinge on the everyday business of crafting cultural goods in particular settings and working in specific cultural industries. In pursuing this project contemporary analysis has a rich legacy of work to build on. There is no need to reinvent the wheel.

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