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Building political economic literacy in an unexpected place: some curriculum suggestions for communication students

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Abstract

How important is it for journalism, media, public relations and communication studies students more generally to acquire literacy in political economy? How possible is it for this to happen while maintaining now established specialized communication, journalism, media, public relations degrees or at least professional strands within communication degrees? A recent media campaign in Australia over a proposed mining tax throws into relief communication professionals' need for literacy in the orientations and positions of political economy. A recently implemented course gives some indicators of what can be achieved in this area. The article is thus about the spread and purchase of a culturally informed political economy rather than knotty questions within it. The article, first, sets out in brief key aspects of the media campaign in question and one journalist's reflection on the challenges it posed. It discusses what might be involved in equipping students with how to meet those challenges, placing this in the wider context of a course that introduces communication students to a non-reductionist, interdisciplinary political economy.

Keywords Communication studies, political economy, literacy, market populism, economics, governmentality, political economic literacy, media, Resource Super-Profits Tax.

Lessons from a mining tax

In 2010 the Minerals Council of Australia led a 21 million dollar advertising campaign against a proposed Resource Super-Profits Tax (RSPT), devised by the then Rudd Commonwealth Labor Government. The Tax was designed to ensure that the financial benefits of a resources boom of massive size were returned to the nation, rather than flowing offshore as extraordinary profits to transnational mining companies. It was an initiative that was one of many recommendations in Australia's Future Tax System Review, the 2010 report on tax reform in Australia informally known as the Henry Tax Review.¹ The RSPT was announced on 2 May 2010, by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and Treasurer Wayne Swan as part of the 'Stronger, Fairer, Simpler: A Tax Plan for our Future' policy statement. With the broad goal of increasing social equity, 'Stronger, Fairer, Simpler' set out the RSPT alongside other fiscal measures designed to favour Australia's 'working families' and businesses. Distinctive features of the RSPT were its progressiveness (unlike the existing Australian tax arrangements for mining companies, the more profit made, the higher the tax paid) and that it taxed profit rather than production.

While the Minerals Council of Australia, along with other stakeholder organizations, was involved in the Henry Tax Review through submissions and negotiation, the Government's setting of the tax at 40 per cent, and setting the level of profits at which the tax would cut in at 6 per cent, the long-term Government bond rate, produced fury from the large mining companies and was immediately rejected by the Council. Major resource companies BHP, Rio Tinto, the Swiss-based XStrata, Fortescue Metals, the Minerals Council of Australia, and the Association of Mining and Exploration

Companies were quick to respond. Australia was said to be on the road to despotism (Forrest in Hudson 2010),² nationalisation of mining companies was said to be afoot (on the basis of the proposed tax arrangements involving the Government sharing responsibility for risk with mining companies), the tax was said to be out of all proportion with taxes elsewhere in the world and to constitute a sovereign risk to the mining companies,³ the proposed legislation was denounced as overlooking the industry's virtuous contribution to Australia and Australians (which allegedly included saving the national economy in the GFC), and, most insistently, it was claimed the tax would cost Australian jobs and prosperity.

The mining industry's campaign against the proposed tax was concerted, sustained, and conducted via blanket coverage through various media and lobbying.⁴ Fashioned through a populist rhetoric of miners as men of the people, shirt sleeves rolled up and concerned only for the national interest, the campaign bore spectacular fruit: the removal of a first-term Prime Minister (at least in part as a consequence of the campaign), the dumping and renegotiation of the RSPT in terms more favourable to the mining lobby,⁵ and a significant realignment of the fortunes and prospects of political forces in the country—Government, Opposition, and corporations; big business and big media. Particularly telling, from the point of view of levels of political economic literacy, was the campaign's successful deployment of the 'tax' inscription. This worked as if taxation was by definition a threat to 'the economy'. Argument about the detail of the mechanism became apparently unnecessary (and near impossible); denouncing a 'great big new tax' operated by definition and self-sufficiently to damn the RSPT.⁶ While economists were overwhelmingly in favour of the RSPT, and took pains to publicise their stance,⁷ public opinion polls, commercial talk-back hosts, vox pops on television news and current affairs segments,

predominantly conveyed the sense of a ground-swell of anger and fear about a tax on mining companies and about a 'great big new tax' 'the economy' couldn't afford.

As well as the populist virulence of the campaign, the serious limitations of journalists covering the issue were noted, in this case by Laura Tingle, Chief Political correspondent for the *Australian Financial Review*:⁸

'I think they didn't serve the public well because they allowed themselves to be too much engaged in what others have called 'He said', 'She said', journalism, largely because it was such a complicated issue they couldn't form an independent view, if you like, or a sceptical view of the issue because they just didn't understand it. So they would just repeat the claims, or report the claims, unverified, if you like, of both sides, or at worst, simply just report the fight at the political level, about the mining tax without actually trying to write enough about 'Well, what's the idea behind this tax? What are the various ways it could go about it? What are the various issues here that can be resolved? Why has the Henry Tax Panel gone for such a complicated model? Why is it that they think that this is the best thing that they can do?' I think it was in that area where I know a lot of people would say to me, 'Look, I just want to understand what the issue is here', and that information just wasn't readily available to them.'

(Correy 2011)

Tingle has elsewhere diagnosed the disjunction between 'political reporting and the financial business journalists [who] tend to operate in separate spheres of influence' as part of the reason for this inability to adequately report the RSPT issue:

political journalists in Canberra were seeing the issue very much in political terms. They were seeing that it was causing the government trouble, that there was angst within the government about it; the opposition was on the attack.

Business journalists were reporting the increasing waves of information being fed out by the mining companies about what impact it would have on their operations about these complexities, and very legitimate questions which were very hard to get answers to. (Tingle 2010)

In the face of the complexity of a novel financial instrument, the political economic literacy of most journalists, let alone most of their audiences, was overwhelmed by the market populism of the mining lobby's advertising and public relations offensive, with the simplicity of its claims about what 'the economy' couldn't afford.

A place to learn from these lessons

My interest in outlining this recent history is the state of available useful knowledge for making sense of public policy concerning government financing and my focus is on how to intervene in a situation in Australia of arguably parlous limits to that knowledge. One thing that could help change this scenario for future policy struggles is providing communication studies students with a workable map of political economy. Tingle's focus is on the journalism profession, but other communication workers were faced with similar challenges – public relations and communication strategists working for the government and public sector and business economists or for the mining lobby, media producers in news and current affairs, and creatives in advertising campaigns on both sides.

While current affairs is a focus in journalism and public relations university programs, for many students economic issues may be recognised in the abstract as highly important but are viewed as something at a considerable remove from their own interests and fields of professional and academic knowledge. At most, they are seen as

areas they may have to cover through the demands of their job, but not intrinsically relevant to their own professional training. But it is precisely so that they are not ‘covering’, or trying to intervene in, these issues from the ‘outside’, as it were—with the results that Tingle documents in the case of the RSPT coverage—that communication students need to familiarise themselves with economic realities that are at the same time political realities. This means becoming familiar with the economic assumptions and arguments which both subtend these realities and which claim to describe and analyse them.

Familiarity with economic issues and frameworks is the aim of a new course, *Economies Communicated*,⁹ that has been purpose built for communication students. I want to outline its rationale and operation, not with the thought of presenting original theoretical or empirical advances—this paper reports none—but to describe a practical effort to extend cultural economy’s reach in ways that may matter. *Economies Communicated* is part of a Bachelor of Communication at RMIT University and has been taught since 2010. It and associated prerequisite and co-requisite courses tackle head on the need to show students how their chosen professions matter in economic terms, and that this can mean more than the number of jobs in their industry or the size of the profits of media companies. This involves introducing economic issues and considerations to communication students as something integrally bound up with, in part made possible by, and reliant on communication technologies, practices and diverse forms of sense-making they entail and circulate, rather than as a separate ‘context’ for their professional knowledge in their chosen communication and media fields. The course draws on resources that recognize and foreground the cultural and communicative aspects of economies. Over the last dozen or so years, a range of contemporary debates and research has charted

this kind of perspective, in and across the fields of economics and finance (for example, Best 2005; Callon 1998; Gibson-Graham 1996; MacKenzie 2006; McCloskey 1985; Stretton 2000), international political economy (for example, Langley 2002; Langley 2008; Leyshon and Thrift 1997; Thrift 1998; Thrift 2001; Williams 2000), and cultural economy (for example, Amin & Thrift 2004; de Goede 2005; Martin 2002). While this literature does not proceed from a communication studies standpoint,¹⁰ it does utilise an understanding of the constitutive (or ‘performative’)¹¹ role of rhetorics, discourses, frameworks and of communication technologies such as writing, lists, the financial press, business media, ubiquitous computing, the Internet. In addition, this literature is, in the first place, characterised by a rebuttal of orthodox economic abstraction of economic activity from politics and the political. On two counts then, it provides resources for a non-reductive literacy about economic matters, a socially and culturally informed political economy.

Students preparing themselves for work in journalism, media, public relations, advertising, and allied fields should reasonably have the opportunity to acquire literacy in such an interdisciplinary political economy. If pursued, such an initiative would see political economic literacy join current emphases broadly in place in communication degree programs on literacy in technological and industry domains. The broad perspective on current workplace and citizen environments provided by such an interdisciplinary political economic literacy would also offset the instrumentality of business studies orientations, explicit or de facto, in communication degrees.¹² And while fostering skills of description and analysis appropriate to a world increasingly constructed by business, an interdisciplinary political economy literacy could provide the particular orientation such a world demands: as Thrift puts

it, '[s]imple condemnation of this tendency, as if from some putative outside, or, alternatively, embracing it...will not do' (2006, 301-2).

In *Economies Communicated*, my aim has been to focus on a political economic literacy that will enable students to deal with what are most usually classified as *economic* issues. By this I mean things such as the current turmoil in financial capitalism, the challenges entailed in transforming carbon economies into green economies, the economic frameworks underpinning creative economies, arguments over government fiscal policies which abound in current 'austerity' regimes, and so on. This diverges from (but of course could be connected to) the kind of political economy of media that students may more usually encounter within their courses. Students learn that the reason for this focus is the dominance of economic affairs and what has been called the 'economic politics' that has prevailed in many countries over the past two or more decades. One take on this is that in neoliberal regimes of government politics has been sidelined (at least in terms of the activity and policy jurisdiction of States) in favour of economic criteria and rationales (du Gay 2004).¹³ This state of affairs—and the fact that they are 'second nature' to current generations of students—requires a literacy that can join these apparently free-standing economic rationales to the politics and power relations of which they are an integral part. In other words, it requires a literacy that can tackle the normalized common sense of (Bill) Clinton campaign fame – 'It's the economy, stupid', where politics is relegated by the magisterial rule of economic truths. My argument is that this normalized world of 'the economy' as essentially separate from politics, and moreover led by the finance sector, needs to be brought inside the frame of communication studies. Communication studies needs the perspectives and tools of political economy and cultural economy. Endeavoring to do this through the *Economies Communicated*

course is an attempt to help students better grasp their present situation and that of the organizations and industries they will work in, be adequately equipped to report and communicate economic realities in their various professional capacities, and also understand the role that various communication practices, technologies, and artifacts have had and continue to play in the formation of these same economic arrangements. As communicators, they are not approaching foreign territory, however this may seem to them.¹⁴

At this point, the breadth with which I am attributing the term ‘literacy’ deserves mention. By literacy I mean a know-how which includes the *ability to be interested in*—the acquired sense-making tools and habits (recognition of vocabulary, forms of attention, repertoire of questions, practices of observation, knowledge of institutional sites and categories of actors) involved in following, in this instance, media coverage of economic events, or if not ‘following’, noticing this ongoing arena of activity and thereby opening up the possibility of reflecting on it. These sense-making habits and tools, for example, enable a person to first notice, and then, take an interest in, what the head of a central bank or other widely reported authority says about a country’s sovereign debt and, next, to pose a question about the claims made about that debt. As in, obviously to *JCE* readers and their like, the by-now well known history of various national governments’ responding to the 2008 GFC with large stimulus packages which became the subject of subsequent political debate and attack, and the currently topical handling of potential debt default in EU member nations. So, by literacy, I mean both ‘aware of’, knowing where to look, one’s attention having been drawn to, as well as a more developed level of sense-making, capable of reflection and intervention.

The course *Economies Communicated* uses an interdisciplinary pedagogy, teaching political economy in a form purpose-built for students of communication studies. It seeks thereby to overcome the disconnect often experienced by these students when they supplement their core courses with electives or majors outside their communication degree (eg, in the form of disciplinary and empiricist political science or economics courses which ignore the constitutive role of cultural sense-making). It also entails a strong claim for communication studies to find space, alongside its more media-centric concerns, for substantive socio-political-economic bodies of knowledge.¹⁵ Its main pedagogic strategies and propositions have to date consisted of broadening students' existing notions of economic activity, tackling two key rhetorical figures of neo-classical economics and its offshoots,¹⁶ presenting and practicing recognition of key economic frameworks understood as rhetorically powerful doctrines—part of a discipline which has been persuasively deployed to assist economic realities into being (Mitchell 2008)—and considering the governing of areas of economic life¹⁷ which are currently topical and the subject of dispute.

In this way, resources of the kind identified above, as well as a plethora of more ephemeral media material have been used to develop often resistive students' interest in, and descriptive and analytical capacities around, economic life. Results—in terms of a developing literacy, as defined above—have been generally very rewarding. Students starting with not a whiff of interest or confidence in attending to economic matters have finished the course sourcing and analysing media items pertaining to areas such as financial capitalism, digital and creative economies, and economy—ecology relations,¹⁸ informed by literature setting out the rival political economic programs in these areas.

‘Policy relevant’: what could be made of teaching the RSPT¹⁹

Within Economies Communicated, the debate described above around the resource super-profits tax has been used as an example of market populism. In this powerfully mobilizing rhetoric of the last 30 years (du Gay 2008),

[t]he market and the people – both of them understood as grand principles of social life rather than particulars – [are] essentially one and the same. By its very nature the market [is] democratic, perfectly expressing the popular will through the machinery of supply and demand, poll and focus group, superstore and Internet. In fact, the market [is] *more* democratic than any of the formal institutions of democracy – elections, legislatures, government. (Frank 2001, p. 29)

The anti-mining tax campaign was an exemplary case of market populism, with the mining lobby speaking at once in the name of ‘the global market’, ‘the national interest’ and ‘the Australian people’. With an established rhetoric at its disposal in which markets ‘are seen as the source of legitimacy as well as efficiency’ (du Gay 2008, p. 99), the mining lobby trumped the ability of an elected Australian Government to represent the public interest, instead finding itself presented as a government bent on imposing a tax that ran counter to public opinion and heading towards despotism.

As a pedagogic example, dealing with the campaign waged against the RSPT crystallizes the role of rhetoric in economic life and pays off students’ work in learning to step out from under concepts of ‘the economy’ and its concentrated neo-liberal reduction ‘the market’ (Mitchell 2005, p. 95). That is, the power relations involved in utilising these rhetorical alibis are made clearly visible. But there are some underlying matters, more intimately connected with the specific economic framework in play, which may also be integral to the success of the market populist

rhetoric in this instance. To put it in another way, how did this rhetoric root itself so thoroughly and thus persuasively *in* the detail of this issue?

To date, the kind of full staging of the debate around the RSPT that might deal with matters of policy detail has not been attempted within *Economics Communicated*.

While the final weeks of the course are set up to enable and require students to consider broad policy debates – or contestations between rival projects aimed at governing financial capitalism,²⁰ climate change,²¹ and digital economies²² – these have been presented in ways that have ranged rather widely, seeking to establish the different rationalities available for formulating organizational and public policy within these areas, rather than being focused around a specific policy proposal already in play. Teaching the RSPT episode in Australian political, economic and media history, is perhaps tailor-made to extend communication students’ political-economic literacy in relation to a particular policy debate and the assumptions mobilised in it. Bryan et al note that ‘most academics are not obliged to be policy relevant’ (2012, p. 302), but as my opening sketch indicates, journalists and media advisers assigned to dealing with stories such as the RSPT find themselves necessarily dealing with policy matters—or ducking them, with the consequences Tingle notes. How could students make use of the knowledge and perspectives gained in the course to consider the RSPT more fully? What would be involved in an engagement with the details of the policy?

‘Well, what’s the idea behind this tax?’ (Correy 2010)

Tingle’s questions about what was called for but missing in coverage of the RSPT is a good place to start. What contribution to the nation was the RSPT calculated to make—what was its point?

While the national broadcaster could present it as a taxation reform ‘the Government says is fairer for all’—‘not apply[ing on individual mining projects] until they start making a profit’, ‘credit[ing] mining companies if they have a loss on projects’, and with ‘workers...expected to be the big winners...with the increases in super predicted to give an average worker aged 30 now, an extra \$108,000 when they retire’; along with benefits also flowing to low income earners, to business (through cuts to the company tax rate), and to regions ‘around the country’ (through funds for resource-related infrastructure) (Andersen 2010) —this message of social equity was only half of the framing argument for the RSPT. The other half was a message of neoclassical efficiency. This was clear, for instance, in the open letter mentioned earlier, by twenty-two prominent economists and academics supporting the RSPT. Endorsing the desirability of a return on the use and depletion of natural resources flowing ‘to the Australian public’, the statement noted ‘a tax on economic rent of non-renewable resources is a more efficient way of raising revenue than taxing mining production (royalties)’ and rejected claims the tax would lead to ‘a net contraction in mining over the longer term’. The new tax regime would be ‘a more efficient and equitable system’ (Argy et al 2010).

In this, the economists echoed the Executive Summary of *The Resource Super Profits Tax: a Fair Return to the Nation* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010). At the same time that the RSPT ‘will ensure all Australians share in the returns from our non-renewable resources’, ‘[i]t will also provide a more efficient mechanism for collecting a share of these returns and remove impediments to mining investment and production’. Underpinning this claim, the Summary presents the RSPT as ‘a new benchmark for resource taxation’, operating as ‘a relatively neutral tax, with minimal distortions to investment and production decisions’ (p. v).

The Henry Tax Review's 'Key directions' which informed the Commonwealth Government's policy are organized around the criterion of efficiency: 'Revenue raising should be concentrated on four robust and efficient tax bases'. Part of a rent-based tax's efficiency is that it 'would ensure the right levels of exploration and extraction and provide sufficient encouragement for private sector participation...and over time likely raise higher revenues than existing output-based royalties' (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011, Executive Summary).

Neutrality, efficiency, and economic rent. These assumptions and terms were central to the rhetoric of the RSPT. Garnaut, an eminent Australian orthodox economist whose work in the 1980s (*The Taxation of Mineral Rents*, 1983) fed into the introduction of an Australian Petroleum Resource Rent Tax (PRRT) in 1987, provides a painstaking account, part of a public lecture a month after the Government's announcement of the RSPT:

[E]fficient outcomes require governments to tax or to regulate the external costs of various activities. 'Neutral' taxation then allows efficient allocation of resources after private participants in markets have taken the constraints on externalities into account...the quest for neutrality in taxation reduces itself to finding ways of extracting no more and no less than what is called the 'economic rent'. Economic rent is the excess of total revenue derived from some activity over the sum of the supply prices of all capital, labour, and other 'sacrificial' inputs necessary to undertake the activity. The rent can be extracted by the owner of the resource, or the taxation authority, without affecting the amount of investment or production. (2010, pp.4-5)

A rent-based tax will constitute an efficient tax base because it is cheap to collect and will not adversely affect the activity of mining. The right balance between tax and private investment will have been achieved. In fact, Garnaut argues that 'we have a strong basis for efficient resource rent taxation without going into the distributional issues' – that is, 'a move to more equitable distribution of income' (2010, p. 6).

So, along with equity (that is, an initiative to benefit, variously, 'all Australians', 'the public' or 'the community'), the proponents and supporters of the RSPT (though with

some qualifications about the details of implementation, about which more later) claimed that the tax answered also to the talisman of efficiency, or optimum allocation and outcomes,²³ central to common-sense or dominant understandings of a market economy. It was on this point that KPMG's *Potential Financial Impacts of the Resource Super Profits Tax on New Mining Projects in Australia* (2010), commissioned by the Minerals Council of Australia, pressed. Recognizing that '[p]rofits taxes are widely seen as more efficient than other taxes applied to the mining industry, such as royalties' (2010, p.12), KPMG's key finding is that implementation issues and 'other risk factors' mean that 'the "no economic inefficiency" assumption supported by economic theory, will not hold up in practice, particularly in the short to medium term' and the 'large scale and long life investments' characteristics of the mining sector mean that 'the introduction of the RSPT at 40% means that it will take a long time for the sector to recover' (p. 6). This is the message the Minerals Council took to the Australian population, presenting the RSPT as risking the goose that laid the golden egg—a mining boom helping the Australian economy through the vicissitudes of a global downturn—and fundamentally misunderstanding the workings of capital markets and debt markets. Garnaut, supporting the broad direction of the RSPT while arguing the need for variations to achieve its objectives through 'related but different means' (2010, p.18), in essence concurred with the Minerals Council's KPMG findings. If efficient markets theory pertained, capital raising would occur undeterred by the RSPT: but '[t]his may or may or not be the world in which the finance has to be raised [and to this extent the particularities of the tax] would introduce a disincentive to investment' (Garnaut 2010, p. 10). As the KPMG report puts it, having established a variety of factors injecting uncertainty into investor calculation concerning the operation of the RSPT, 'Whether an efficient market for RSPT Debt can grow is uncertain' (2010, p.40). (Here 'RSPT Debt' identified mining companies' perception of the Government's

guarantee to provide a tax credit for all mining project expenditure—‘deferred through depreciation and loss carry forward arrangements’ (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010, p.23) and with the deferral being compensated through an allowance rate set at the long-term government bond rate—as the companies’ need to take a ‘de facto loan from the Government for the Government’s 40% share of the project cost’ (KPMG 2010, p. 36). The KPMG report cites concerns about whether there would be ‘sufficient appetite and capacity for the RSPT Debt in debt markets’ (p. 36).) Thus, beyond the full-page advertisements, television and radio advertising and sloganeering by CEOs at rallies and press conferences, the mining lobby provided a more detailed account of the problems with the RSPT that offered a compelling sense of it as something that broke with economic commonsense, the realities of markets, and the mechanisms of rational financial calculation.

How was it that journalists could not utilize the Henry Tax Review, Government policy documents and media releases to provide the kind of explication of ‘the point’ of the RSPT that Tingle called for, ‘the contribution to the nation...it [was] calculated to make’ (Correy 2010)? Because, in important ways, the Henry Review and Government policy spoke the same language the Minerals Council was loudly using to shape polled opinion. The Henry Review recommended economic rent as an efficient taxation measure that would strike the right balance between government revenue and private economic activity. The tax—a modified Brown tax that handles investors’ negative cash flows in ways that are neutral to the investor and a ‘riskless loan’ to the Commonwealth Government, described as ‘an elegant answer to a complex question’ (Garnaut 2010, p. 9)—can be understood as fitting within and emerging from the neoclassical model of an economy maintained in balance, operating optimally.²⁴ The tax was legitimated in its formulation by its efficiency, its neutrality, by its place in (the model of) the economy as a system in equilibrium; the

kind of tax mandated by what the economy—or its rational calculating actors—will bear. While equity was also part of the Government’s argument, highlighting ‘efficiency’ as a rationale placed the issue on the terrain of ‘the economy’, so understood, and worked against the possibility of comprehensively and effectively owning taxation as a political economic matter of the distributive action of government. ‘Efficiency’ operated as a depoliticizing device—in the sense of economic arrangements being understood as determined by mechanisms internal to markets rather than formed by human decision. The rationale for the RSPT being on the terrain of the economy, the Minerals Council simply needed to convey superior (ie, practical rather than theoretical) grasp of the economy and its workings, rather than win an argument about private and transnational interests coming before a public interest.²⁵

More questions: complexity and implementation

My suggestion above concerning journalists’ difficulty in explaining the RSPT on its ‘own terms’ rather than in the terms proffered by the mining lobby turns out to be not so far removed from considering the rhetoric of market populism after all. If the campaign against the RSPT was populist, it was also *market* populism and its success was anchored not only in repeated address to ‘the people’ but in a particular, commonsense understanding of economic reality, crystallized around notions of ‘efficiency’ and its underpinnings of optimal allocation and rational calculation—and allowing for highly performative contestations of the claimed efficiency of the RSPT. Issues of distribution, equity and fairness could be easily sidelined as getting in the way of investment represented as production, or reconfigured as necessarily a by-product of economic efficiency, rather than governmental objectives that could drive particular economic arrangements.²⁶

Tingle posed two other questions for journalists to answer about the RSPT, one concerning complexity ('Why has the Henry Tax Panel gone for such a complicated model?') and one concerning implementation ('What are the various issues here that can be resolved?'). Some of the issues to do with implementation (chiefly around raising capital) are indicated in passing above. Others include Federal-State financial relations (revolving around the question of who owns the minerals), with the electorally expedient—rather than economically efficient—solution being that companies would be rebated for royalties the States would be allowed to continue to levy.

Concerning the complexity of the model—a modified Brown tax in order to combine the advantages to encouraging production that a Brown tax entails (cash offsets for negative cash flows incurred by a mining project), with a deferral mechanism as a safeguard against instability of the tax at periods of extreme Commonwealth budgetary pressure (the Government unable to make large cash payments in the year offsets are incurred)—the answer to why this had been preferred by the Henry Tax Review lay essentially, again, in the criteria of efficiency and neutrality. For non-economists to navigate these criteria and rationales, the knowledge that they are dealing with 'a system of material production and distribution which is also... a system for organizing and carrying on many social conflicts' (Stretton 2000, p.11) rather than a purified or abstract domain, possessed of objective laws, is central and enabling. It rules back in the questions of 'efficient at what?' and 'efficient for whom?', the value judgements and points of argument required to test 'efficiency' but mystifyingly displaced in the orthodox economic framework. For journalists and media advisers to simplify their presentation of the RSPT and its consequences— that because of a host of detailed considerations about the practicalities of raising capital

in the context of a revised taxation regime, calculating ROI, and (threats to transfer projects to other global destinations aside) the realities of immobile mineral resources, *profitable mining companies would be paying more in tax and taking somewhat less in profits*²⁷ — they needed the confidence to call the orthodox economic framework on its assumptions. This, arguably, might have prevented their being caught in the spotlight of apparently definitive economic argument trumping more evident and familiar political claims and threats.

In this respect, at least one remedy for the incapacity Tingle identified in journalists' handling of the Australian RSPT is developing a perspective on the authority of the economic. *Economies Communicated* does this by using Mitchell's account of the multiplicity of calculations entailed in the formation of the electricity industry:

The economic is not a calculus that exists in advance, which then determines the success or failure of different technologies. The economy was not a pre-existing sphere, into which technological innovation introduces changes. Rather, there are different attempts to introduce calculations and persuade others that they are superior to rival models and calculations. The economy is a twentieth-century invention that was built out of such projects. (Mitchell 2008, p.1118)

A political economic literacy that can equip communication students with this kind of perspective may be at least as useful for them in communicating public policy innovation as a thorough socialization in dominant economic frameworks.

Conclusion

This article has indicated some strategies for engaging communication studies students—future journalists, public relations, advertising and media professionals—with economic issues and realities, and with acquiring the tools appropriate for describing these and for participating in them in informed ways. While teaching political economic literacy is usually the province of other university studies, the

wider purchase—or not—of political economic assumptions and arguments depends on their being relayed through a broad range of often ephemeral and more or less serious cultural and media forms. This is important, because the culturally communicated work of persuasion to economic and political dispositions occurs at all levels of a population, helping to shape the calculations, decisions and actions of those forming and implementing policies as much as the calculations, decisions and actions of those on whom policy simply bears. Perhaps more widespread commitment to equipping communication studies students with political economic literacy might join the commitment to equipping them with the technological literacy that we understand is crucial to their working in twenty-first century economies.

¹ After Ken Henry, Secretary of the Department of Treasury and Chair of the Panel conducting the Review.

² ‘[A] capitalist country turning communist’—Andrew ‘Twiggy’ Forrest, chairman of Fortescue Metals Group in Hudson (2010).

³ ‘[M]y number one sovereign risk on a global basis’ – Tom Albanese, chairman of Rio Tinto in Chambers & Tasker (2010).

⁴ Counting just the eleven television commercials commissioned by the Minerals Council of Australia, these were played ‘1011 times across free-to-air TV [in the first month] — an average of 33 times a day’ (Lee 2010). On the coverage, see Gilding et al (2012).

⁵ Following Rudd’s deposal, Prime Minister Gillard negotiated a compromise with Australia’s three largest mining companies. The resulting Minerals Resource Rent Tax, applying to coal and iron ore projects, is set at 22.5% (effective), with new investments given an immediate write-off. The MRRT commenced on 1 July 2012; contrary to the May budget forecast of \$3 billion revenue, it raised only \$126 million in its first six months.

⁶ A phrase prominent in the Opposition Leader, Tony Abbott’s, 2010 Budget Reply speech, for example: “The only way to stop this great big new tax on the people who saved us from the recession is to change the government” (Franklin and Karvelas 2010). ‘Axe the Tax’ rallies were headline news and ‘axe the tax’ Abbott’s preferred way of outlining his party’s policy stance on the issue.

⁷ A statement by twenty-two economists appeared in national broadsheets and was widely reported (Argy 2010).

⁸ The *Australian Financial Review* (est. 1951) is Australia’s foremost newspaper for economic, finance and market news and analysis, as well as serious political journalism and international coverage.

⁹ The third in a group of four making up a Politics Economies Communication major available to students undertaking professional study in Advertising, Journalism, Media, Professional Communication, and Public Relations. Economies Communicated is a purposefully idiosyncratic title; neither ‘Economies and Communication’, nor ‘Economies Communicated’, nor ‘The Economy and Communication’, nor even ‘Communicating the Economy’, all of which assume disciplinary perspectives, separations, or reifications which the course is careful to avoid.

¹⁰ See Flew (2009) for a useful overview of strands of this work from a cognate cultural studies perspective.

¹¹ See Thrift (2008, pp. 128-132) for a useful account of the varied provenance and purpose of performativity. See also Bryan et al (2012, pp. 305-8) for a critical appraisal of performativity and its limits.

¹² Although his focus is more specifically on the teaching of cultural studies, Turner has recently cast a wider eye over 'schools of media studies, communications and Cultural Studies' (2011, p. 687) about which he rues 'how wholeheartedly... applications of convergence culture have articulated humanities' knowledges to what are in significant part business degrees' (p. 688).

¹³ Another index of this is the marketization of electoral politics; see Thrift (2008, pp. 247-252) and Dahlgren (2009, pp.50-52). On finance escaping political control, see Froud et al (2011).

¹⁴ A sense of foreignness captured in Enzensberger's 'Blind-man's buff economics' (1990), and which still resonates with current readers, despite the 'democratization' of finance (Erturk et al 2007).

¹⁵ This claim makes more sense if I mention that this knowledge is also presented in a partner course, Politics Communicated.

¹⁶ Figures of 'the economy' (Mitchell 2007, p.95) and 'homo oeconomicus' (White 1982, Fridman 2010).

¹⁷ The aim is to give students a more heterodox sense of economic life, comprising multifarious economic practices, relations and actors (Miller & Rose 2008), to enable them to step outside dominant economic frameworks.

¹⁸ With one able journalism student reporting in course feedback, 'Who would ever have guessed I could be interested in anything economic?'

¹⁹ My thanks to *JCE*'s editor and anonymous reviewer for their encouragement to develop this direction, and for the reviewer's generous suggestions for dealing with both the pedagogic and mining taxation issues.

²⁰ Identifying the objectives, knowledges and practices of loose alliances of actors involved in financialisation, in projects for the reform of financialisation, and in less-developed and more recent projects for definancialisation (eg, Sassen 2008, Hind 2009).

²¹ For example, identifying governing rationalities of ecological modernization, free-market environmentalism, and low-growth ecological sustainability (Sairinen n.d. c.2000, Carvalho 2005).

²² Covering, for example, the altruism vs signal debate concerning market behavior and digital literacy (Quiggan & Potts 2008) and a Schumpeterian informed Creative Industries rationality involved in remaking Brisbane as a creative city in a Smart State (Cunningham et al 2008, Gregg 2011).

²³ That is, allocative or economic efficiency, where questions of value are at stake, rather than technical or productive efficiency, determined by quantity.

²⁴ One of six forms of mineral rent taxation, what is specific to the Brown Tax (named after a 1948 proposal by U.S. economist Carey Brown who specialized in depreciation allowances) is the way it handles, from the outset of projects, mining companies' deductions for expenses against revenue. A negative cash flow attracts a payment in the year in which it is incurred rather than being carried forward with interest (Garnaut 2010, pp.6-7). The modified version used in the RSPT threw into question a pure Brown Tax's virtue of neutrality for investment ('leaving investment incentives unchanged' (Ergas 2010)) by introducing room for doubt about the full compensation of future negative cash flows.

²⁵ This is not to suggest the mining lobby did not prosecute their case on both fronts; but central to their claims to be companies paying their 'fair share' and doing (more than) their bit for all Australians was their ability to convincingly speak for the Australian economy, in possession of knowledge of its practical mechanisms.

²⁶ Central here is the issue of equity and fairness in regimes of ownership. Bryan (2011) pinpoints this in his history lesson about the West Australian tax fight ‘between royalties, [the Crown’s requirement for mining companies to develop] local processing and national corporate taxation revenue’, describing ‘the terms on which iron ore companies have, for almost 50 years, *accessed publicly-owned wealth*’, ‘a story...of mining industry profits underwritten by governments’ (emphasis added). Such histories are complicated and time-consuming to set out and grasp, requiring attention to particular agreements, disputes and negotiated arrangements and to the empirically various consequences they yield. As Bryan notes, such perspectives have been ‘lost in the analysis’ (analysis of, in the case he deals with, conflict between the West Australian and Federal Governments over the successor tax to the RSPT, the MRRT). It is this losing to view of specific historical arrangements concerning the *sources* of wealth that assists the side-lining of issues of public interest, social equity and fairness as legitimate paths of investigation. The universalizing categories of neoclassicism imported exactly this kind of ‘losing to view’ into the RSPT debate. On this aspect of neoclassical conceptualization, see Fine’s (1982) account of an historical loss of the ability to distinguish between royalties and rent (as *consequential* factor inputs for sources of revenue) in his description of the economic significance of the particular 19th-century arrangements of land ownership for the state of development of the British mining industry. He traces this conceptual loss through the supplanting of earlier marginalist partial equilibrium theory by the general equilibrium model that marks the dominance of neoclassical economics.

²⁷ That is, they would continue to exploit Australia’s non-renewable resources, and pay more than the 14 per cent tax paid in 2008-09, a rate which had ‘more than halved from an average of around 34 per cent over the first half of this decade’ in a period when ‘[r]esource profits were over \$80 billion higher’ (Commonwealth of Australia 2010, p. 10).

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