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## **Creative Imagination: A Post neo-liberal order in media and communication regulation?**

Bart Cammaerts and Andrew Calabrese

The near collapse of the financial system in 2008 and the urgent need for states – and by extension taxpayers – to bail out capitalism, led at first to a questioning of some of the principles of neoliberalism. The idea of self-regulating markets appeared in a very blatant way not to be such a good one, and concerted actions by states and national banks were essential in avoiding a financial meltdown with global consequences. It was clear for all to see that the self-correcting powers attributed to the market by neoliberal ideology failed massively. Confident claims by US Federal Reserve president Bernanke (2004) of permanent stable growth and the 'Great Moderation' sounded suddenly very hollow and complicit. As Manne (2010: 29) succinctly puts it:

At the moment of truth, the idea central to the neo-liberal faith – the superiority of the invisible hand of the market to the economic intervention of government – was understood by virtually by everyone who mattered to be a myth.

It could very well be that a paradigm shift is afoot in the long run, as Manne suggests, but three years onwards neoliberalism proves to be more resilient than initially thought and hoped for by many.

Critical theory has always articulated neo-liberalism as an ideology which has over the last decades managed to establish itself as the new unquestionable meta-narrative. Peters (2001, 119) asserts in this regard that '[n]eoliberals have harnessed a project of postmodernity as the master narrative to legitimate an extreme form of economic rationalism'.

This was in many ways further consolidated by third way politics, theorized by Giddens (1994), but put into political practice by Clinton, Blair, and many other social democrats across Europe and beyond. They all claimed to negotiate a position in-between socialism and neo-liberalism – 'beyond ideology', but ended-up legitimating and deepening many of the values and discursive logics of neo-liberalism while denouncing collective socialist core-values and legacies. Hall's (2003, 22) account of New Labour in the UK, echoed by Mouffe (2005, 60) and Žižek (2008, 189), is useful in this regard:

It delivers what Philip Bobbit calls 'the market state', or, more simply, a '*social democratic variant of neo-liberalism*' (in exactly the same way that Thatcherism delivered a 'neo-liberal variant' of classic Conservatism).

The great irony of the recent three years is that saving our societies from the disastrous effects of neo-liberal deregulation might lead to another crucial part of the neo-liberal agenda becoming a distinct reality; namely a drastic shrinkage of the social safety nets provided by states and an even greater involvement of the private sector through the outsourcing of 'public' services, manifested by a shrinkage of rights and, consequently, higher costs for citizens.

As a result of the enormous resources poured into the financial system by states and the ensuing economic crisis in some of the leading world economies, many states are now pushed to sanitize their public finances by drastically cutting their budgets, which inevitably has serious implications for the extent and nature of their welfare and education provisions. Through saving the capitalist structures and financial architecture we risk ending up with a truly minimal and thus neo-liberal state (Harvey, 2005).

The question central in this special issue is related to this broader debate outlined above and asks what the consequences are of calls for more regulation of the financial sector and the increased role and responsibility of the state in the banking system for the position of the state and regulation in other sectors, specifically, in media and communication. In this regard a mixed picture emerges, but at the same time the different contributions confirm the analysis above, namely, that neo-liberalism – understood as promoting deregulation, a withdrawal of the state and advocating the primacy of the market – is still very much alive and by no means weakened by the events of the last three years. It is in other words too early to herald the beginning of a post-liberal order.

Marco Briziarelli examines what arguably is a worst-case scenario for neoliberal media, the near-total monopolization of a national media system in the hands of one powerful figure. Silvio Berlusconi has a stranglehold on the television system of Italy through his ownership of the media conglomerate Mediaset and through his influence over the board of directors of RAI, the Italian public broadcasting system. Through his influence over the making of media policy, and the flouting of it when it suits him, Berlusconi embodies the logical extremes that fulfill the worst possible fears from neoliberal media: the near-absolute concentration of national media power and near-total disregard for any semblance of democratic governance of the media.

Robin Mansell's contribution focuses on the prevalence of the discourse of individualism in neo-liberal argument. In an Internet age, the discourse of consumer empowerment justifies deregulation and marketization, resulting in the continued favoring of the interests of large corporations and some (Western) states, to the detriment of citizens' interests, public goods and public services. These imbalances are exposed through a discussion of the oligopolistic nature of media and communication industries, changes in regulatory frameworks in relation to spectrum allocation and attempts to quantify 'public value' in the context of public service broadcasting. Mansell does see little evidence of the passing of neoliberalism.

In an essay that effectively bridges the preoccupations of political economy and cultural studies, Haiqing Yu explores the content, audience reception, neoliberal values embedded in a popular 33-episode Chinese television drama called *Dwelling Narrowness*. In the series, the lives of characters are circumscribed by economic hardship and a limited social safety net within a context of rapid urbanization. As a growing number of scholars indicate, although neoliberalism has its own peculiar inflections within the Chinese national context, it is an ideology and set of political and economic practices

that are alive and well in China. Yu refers to neoliberalism as “a type of economic policy, a cultural structure, a set of particular attitudes toward individual responsibility, entrepreneurship and self-improvement.” Her account of *Dwelling Narrowness* illustrates in microcosm the malaise of class politics and struggle in neoliberal China.

The piece by Bart Cammaerts examines rejections of the commodity exchange and property regimes in a digital context through disruptive sharing practices. This also brings to the fore older cultural exchange models based on gift-economies. Through an analysis of the sharing of code, digital content and (wifi-)access, Cammaerts shows that altruism is often not the main impetus of these types of immaterial sharing. Furthermore, market actors and states continuously develop strategies to co-opt, neutralize or repress such disruptive sharing practices and re-instate market principles. This is obvious amongst others through the massive involvement of part of the corporate sector and many public administrations in the Free and Open Source Movement, by the attempts to coerce the sharers of digital content back into the commodity exchange model and the appropriation of rural community wifi by companies.

In the article by Natalie Fenton, the consequences of a neoliberal agenda for the provision of news and information are assessed on the basis of a four-year program of research into new media and news. Fenton documents how news media and journalists are experiencing difficulties in coping with a context of ubiquitous 24/7 news brought to consumers through an ever increasing number of platforms, channels and formats. Her conclusions are dim. The market model on which commercial news media operate is not producing varied, pluralistic, critical and quality news, essential for democracy. Fenton argues that the increased homogenization and trivialization of content, the concentration in cross-ownership, combined with pressures on networked journalists to be multifaceted and -functional, has in effect led to market failure from a democratic perspective, which requires creative public responses.

The role of public/organic intellectuals in all this cannot be underestimated. However, as Gramsci (1971: 10) points out, this role cannot be limited to eloquence. Intellectuals should go beyond the pessimism of the intellect and act ‘as constructor and organiser, "permanent persuader," and not just a simple orator’. Permeating all contributions in this special issue is a desire and need to creatively imagine and advocate for another world in which market interests and capitalistic relations do not dominate all walks of life.

I think they [neoliberals] are going to find a solution for the capitalist class and if the rest of us get screwed, too bad. The only thing they would care about is if we rose up in revolt. And until we rise up in revolt they are going to redesign the system according to their own class interests. (Harvey, 2009: np)

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