# Political Economy of Communication: A Critique

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**ABSTRACT**    This chapter outlines an agenda for political economy of communication by identifying dominant trends and arguments in contemporary studies; providing a critique of those arguments; and outlining necessary theoretical and methodological elements for future research in the area. The chapter provides a history of political economy of communication; what a political economy of communication means in the current context; and the implications of these for a more general political economic praxis in the current environment.

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## Overview

The broad range of studies that fall under the heading of "political economy of communication" has been growing and diversifying these past fifty years or so in much the same way as classical political economy did from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. For some, it is an area of study that focuses on mass media industry structures, emphasising the effects of ownership on political systems. For others, it is a study of various moments in what might be called the "commodity" cycle in mass media: production, distribution, exchange, and consumption. For others, it is only one or two of these moments, the most prominent of those being distribution and consumption. Some studies emphasise content, others technology. Some emphasise flows of information within various econometric frameworks. In this chapter, I proceed firstly by tracing the historical development of "political economy of communication" as a recognisable field of scholarship. I then identify the various approaches that characterise this relatively young field and offer a critique of these. Finally, I suggest a theoretical and methodological synthesis for the development of a robust political economy of communication and some directions for future research.

## Key definitions and a brief history

I define political economy here as the study of how values of all kinds are produced, distributed, exchanged, and consumed (the economic); how power is produced, distributed, exchanged, and exercised (the political); and how these aspects of the social world are related at any given place and time in history. A political economy of communication is therefore concerned with understanding how communication figures in

political economic formations more generally. Although I understand "communication" as the movement of meanings between people and "communications" (or communication technologies) as the means by which those meanings are moved, for the purposes of this chapter I am conflating these two definitions in the term "communication". I am aware that such a definition may be criticised for confounding two very distinct perspectives on how we make, move, and exchange meanings by collapsing the "content" and "technologies" of human communication, but such a terminological move is not altogether a matter of convenience in the thoroughly technologised communication environments in which we live. Further, the perspective it implies can be understood in terms of Silverstone's mediation approach and has the advantage of not separating meaning from its means of movement (Silverstone, 1999). The only exception I make to this act of terminological conflation is in reference to "new media", by which I mean periods in time during which new technologies become prominent and widespread means of communication. I use the term "new media" in a technological sense to denote new means of movement for communication.

Roots

As a recognised field of study, political economy of communication has its most obvious roots in the concept of 'knowledge monopolies' as developed by Canadian economist Harold Innis (1942, 1944, 1950, 1951a, 1951b). Innis coined this term to illustrate the fact that throughout history certain privileged groups (priests, kings, bureaucrats, soldiers, scientists, etc) have enjoyed a monopoly of access to certain kinds of knowledge. Innis therefore tends to appear as the pioneer of all political contemporary economic studies in the field of media. Of course even from the period during which Innis wrote we must also acknowledge Horkheimer and Adorno (1947/1998) whose essay on

the 'culture industry' continues to have relevance for current circumstances (Silverstone, 1999). But I believe we cannot stop here in identifying the historical development of the field. Political economy of communication becomes visible during the second decade of the twentieth century, when such figures as Harold Lasswell (1927, 1941) and Edward Bernays (1928, 1945) appear as significant scholars in the study of mass communication strategies. Both clearly understand the political economic implications of new media and their attendant capabilities to change the character and functioning of societies. At this time, we see a concern with 'propaganda', a term that did not have the automatically negative connotations it carries today.

> According to Lasswell,
>
> Propaganda is the management of collective attitudes by the manipulation of significant symbols. The word attitude is taken to mean a tendency to act according to certain <u>patterns of evaluation</u>. The existence of an attitude is not a direct datum of experience, but an inference from science which have a <u>conventionalised significance</u>. … The <u>valuational patterns</u> upon which this inference is founded may be primitive gestures of the face and body, or more sophisticated gestures of the pen and voice. Taken together, these objects which have a standard meaning in a group are called <u>significant symbols</u>. The elevated eyebrow, the clenched fist, the sharp voice, the pungent phrase, have their references established within the web of a particular culture. Such significant symbols are paraphernalia employed in expressing the attitudes, and they are also capable of being employed to reaffirm or redefine attitudes. (Lasswell, 1927: 627, my emphasis)

Lasswell's is a political economic understanding of communication. 'Patterns of evaluation' and 'valuational patterns' are other ways to say "value", which is both an abstract and a concrete term. When it functions as a noun, "value" is a huge abstraction, a generality that incorporates many aspects of human experience. However as a verb it can become very concrete and particular—particular people actively <u>value</u> particular ways of being, seeing, and acting; particular types of food, entertainment, and politics; particular

codes of morality and traditions of kinship; and so on. By recognising that 'patterns of evaluation' within 'the web of a particular culture' are the primary objects of propaganda, Lasswell does not separate the economic from the political. People evaluating aspects of the world in historically and culturally particular ways, and then acting upon those evaluations in negative or positive ways, is how specific cultural values get produced. An important point Lasswell makes here is that, to be effective objects of propaganda, 'symbols' must first enjoy a degree of culturally shared significance. Communication therefore plays a central role in what people do because it is through communication that symbols gain significance within a culture. Similarly, communication is the means by which significant symbols are attributed with positive and negative attributes, thus altering patterns of evaluation towards particular cultural objects. In turn, actions towards "symbols"—which in Lasswell's definition can include persons, whole countries, religions, ethnic groups, and political roles—change (Lasswell, 1941).

This is not as abstract or idealist as it might seem. Lasswell's 'collective attitude' is not on a 'plane apart from individual actions' (1927: 628). Rather, he sees 'the collective attitude' as a 'pattern' which designates 'standard uniformities of conduct at a given time and place' (1927: 628). The 'collective attitude' is a 'distribution of individual acts and not an indwelling spirit which has achieved transitory realization in the rough, coarse facts of the world of sense' (1927: 628). Lasswell differentiates the techniques of attitude change by psychological means from means of propaganda. Psychological means require having 'access to the individual's private stock of meanings', whereas propaganda is based on 'the standard meanings of the groups of which the individual is a member' and therefore requires anthropological and sociological understandings (1927: 628). Lasswell's is not a crude structuralist understanding of group behaviour. He sees that the

individual moves through what are now known as multiple 'discourse communities', and that each of these groups has its own peculiar <u>attitudinal patterns</u> that can be manipulated (cf. Lemke, 1995). Attitudinal patterns are typical but not universal within a given group (Lemke, 1998). They are materially formed and enacted.

For Lasswell, propaganda may be positive <u>or</u> negative, but its object is always cultural values:

> Every cultural group has its vested values … An object toward which it is hoped to arouse hostility must be presented as a menace to as many of these values as possible. There are always ambitious hopes of increasing values, and the object must be made to appear as a stumbling block to their realization. There are patterns of right and wrong, and the object must be made to flout the good. There are standards of propriety, and the object must appear ridiculous and gauche. If the plan is to draw out positive attitudes toward an object, it must be presented, not as a menace and an obstruction, nor as despicable or absurd, but as a protector of our values, a champion of our dreams, and a model of virtue and propriety. (1927: 630)

The means by which desirable or undesirable attitudes are organised towards the objects of propaganda are not oriented towards making people accept 'an idea without reflection', nor are they even concrete "suggestions"; they are, rather, the manipulation of 'cultural material with a recognizable meaning' (1927: 631). Moreover, all means of propaganda are a 'form of words', whether 'spoken, written, pictorial, or musical, and the number of stimulus carriers is infinite' (1927: 631). Because of 'technological changes', especially the new medium of radio, increased literacy, and because most of what could 'formerly be done by violence and coercion must now be done by argument and persuasion', Lasswell asserts that propaganda is in fact <u>necessary</u> for the operation of democracy (1927: 631). His view is that because of advances in communication technologies, increased literacy, and the widespread 'ventilation of opinions and the taking of votes', democracy 'has proclaimed the dictatorship of palaver, and the technique of dictating to the dictator is

named propaganda' (1927: 631). There is an inseparable and concrete link between the political and the economic here: the production and manipulation of attitudinal patterns ("values") is the means by which political outcomes are achieved in democracy.

For Edward Bernays (1928), generally considered by the modern Public Relations industry as its pioneer, propaganda is primarily psychological but still oriented towards the formation of attitudinal meaning: 'from the broadest standpoint, [propaganda] is the power of the [ruling] group to sway the larger public in its attitude' (1928: 958). The technique of propaganda is 'the psychology of public persuasion' (1928: 959). But, he notes, sociological techniques are just as important to successful propaganda as those of psychology (1928: 961). The process of 'manipulating public opinion' begins with 'statistics' and 'field-surveying' (1928: 961). Knowledge of 'group cleavages of society, the importance of group leaders, and the habits of their followers' are essential knowledge for the successful propagandist (1928: 961). Armed with such knowledge, the propagandist must learn how, within given groups, to make 'an old principle apply to a new idea'; to substitute 'ideas by changing clichés'; to overcome prejudices, to make 'a part stand for the whole'; and to create 'events and circumstances that stand for his ideas' (1928: 961). Bernays considers that 'a circumstance or circumstances of dramatic moment' are events that change and establish the 'functioning of given attitudes toward given subjects, such as religion, sex, race, morality, nationalism, internationalism, and so forth' (1928: 961). Whether the object is attitudes towards hats, sexuality, or God, Bernays argues that, in the 'age of mass production', there must be a corresponding 'technique for the mass distribution of ideas' and attitudes, and thus for the mass production of public attitudes (1928: 971). Whether 'salad dressing' or a US 'presidential

candidate', means of production oriented towards the formation of attitudinal meaning are entirely a matter of understanding and manipulating socially shared attitudes (1928: 971).

In the propagandists' work we see an increasing emphasis on the role of communication in the production of values and power. We also see a strong emphasis on the relationship between economic and political power. Merely a decade after Bernays and Lasswell wrote on the manipulation of public opinion, there is already widespread concern about the amounts of money being spent on US election campaigns (Poole, 1939: 371). But this is merely a quantitative aspect of a qualitative change in the way patterns of evaluation are produced within the public sphere. Elections and opinion polls are ways of arriving at 'value judgements' (1939: 371). Poole claims that at the most fundamental level 'there is a choice between divine and human judgement', and that having given God short shrift we must now rely solely on human judgement (1939: 372). Poole reduces the 'determination of values' by humans to two 'principles' of judgement, one based in 'the qualitative or heroic', the other, 'quantitative and statistical' (p. 372). Here we see an antecedent of Innis's approach to political economy of communication and a reiteration of Marx's emphasis on space and time. Judgements

> by either the qualitative or quantitative principle may take place in two dimensions. These dimensions may be called conveniently time and space. The dimension of time is historical and its use opens up the store of human judgements found in the records of history and the enduring monuments of literature and art. The other dimension is simply that which we are more accustomed to think of in this ordinary connection, running at right angles to time (1939: 374).

Poole sees the possibility of what we now call "direct democracy" destroying representative government because of a tendency towards 'laziness or moral cowardice' on the part of 'legislators and executive leaders' (1939: 374):

> They are honestly disposed to believe that the "voice of the people" (that is a majority) is the voice of God or Truth; or, to state the matter less theologically, that in a human world the best value judgement is the judgement of the greatest number of humans on any given problem at any given time. This is the quantitative or statistical, as opposed to the solely qualitative, idea. We have come to be so committed to it in our political philosophy that the cost and fuss and noise of the elections and polls are taken for granted—even welcomed, as adornments of our political life, which perhaps they are. (1939: 374).

The historical search for 'judgements in the dimension of time' is firstly based on 'the qualitative or heroic principle', a kind of '"Gallup poll" taken in the dimension of time'. (1939: 375). Thus with the introduction of Gallup's (1938) techniques, 'value judgements in the domain of public affairs are come to, apparently, by an interesting, and rather reassuring, interaction and cross-control between the qualitative and quantitative principles operating in the two dimensions of time and space' (Poole, 1939: 375). Poole appeals to an apparently static set of value judgements set in past and based on the 'heroic' quality of past judgements, and the 'statistical' judgements of the great mass of people as measured by techniques such as those of Gallup (1938) and Bernays (1928).

Gallup (1938) held no such conceptions of historical balance in matters of judgement, preferring to think of the perfect democracy as an immediate relationship between political action and ongoing measurements of public opinion:

> James Bryce said that the next and final stage in our democracy would be reached if the will of the majority of citizens were to be ascertainable at all times.
>
> With the development of the science of measuring public opinion, it can be stated with but few qualifications, that this stage in our democracy is rapidly being reached. It is now possible to ascertain, with a high degree of accuracy, the views of the people on all national issues. (Gallup, 1938: 9)

For Gallup, the usefulness of polling is not to be confined to government or politics. It can be 'equally useful in the field of social problems' (1938: 13). Once sufficient is known

about specific attitudes - opinions about welfare, religious prejudice, venereal disease, and any problem of attitude whatsoever - they can be addressed 'with equal success' (1938: 13-14). Therefore 'with many of our leading psychologists and social scientists' interested in the problem of measuring public opinion, 'it will not be long before the final stage in the development of our democracy, as described by Bryce, has been reached— that the will of the majority of citizens can be ascertained at all times' (1938: 14). Questions about the relationship between the "facts" of public opinion research, the possibility of centralised control of mass communication, and the quality of government and its organs appear to elude Gallup in his enthusiasm for an early end to the history of democracy. These questions, muted and blurred by Gallup's enthusiasms for direct democracy, were answered with a resounding blast from Western Europe, the shockwaves of which are still being felt today.

Political economy of communication in Nazi Germany

No political economy of communication can exclude the remarkable efforts of the Nazi Germany propagandists to produce new cultural patterns of evaluation, and therefore new politics, on a massive scale. For the Nazis, like Bernays and Lasswell, propaganda is qualitatively different from advertising; it is a matter of moral obligation to the public, a value and public good in itself:

> Political propaganda may not be confused with advertising. Advertising changes its target as needed. … Advertising agencies push one thing today, another tomorrow, each time making it sound as if nothing else in the world is worth mentioning. There is no thought of moral or national values. "Ballyhoo" is advertising at any price, with no moral content, no moral thought or responsibility. The Americans made "ballyhoo" against Germany during the World War until the American public finally believed that the Germans were cannibals whose elimination would be a godly deed. "Ballyhoo" is unlimited, arbitrary exaggeration. In a political sense, it is incitement, distortion, and it is all immoral.

When we talk about the necessity of political propaganda, we seek powerful moral goals. We want to make our people a united nation that confidently and clearly understands National Socialism's policies, quickly and correctly. We cannot change our political principles as we would a consumer good, becoming random, irresponsible and immoral. We do not want to distort, confuse or incite, rather clarify, unify, and tell the truth. Political propaganda is the highest responsibility, it is a moral duty, a national duty. We may never think there is too much of it, or that it is superfluous. (Wells, 1936)

Moral and national values are conflated in Nazi political economy of communication. The following summarises the position: 'For us, gold is not a measure of the value of money. Our foundation is German labor and confidence in the Führer' (Lange, in NSDAP, 1939). "Attitude" and "value" are also synonymous for the Nazi propagandists. These are testable aspects of human experience which are open to profitable manipulation:

The National Socialist worldview is an attitude, an attitude that must show a courageous face to the outside, but domestically be infused with camaraderie. If the people are to continue to believe in the National Socialist movement, the movement must maintain and guard this camaraderie and pass it on to the future. The struggle behind us is unique. Future generations will be spared such a struggle. It must be replaced by a firm attitude, which can only be tested in every day life. Our task is to reawaken the old values of courage and pride in our people, and to do all that we see as necessary.

… world history today must be rewritten, and that we will do the rewriting. It would be a mistake to delegate the task to the teachers and professors who wrote previous histories, for they grew up under the old world and were educated in it. The 2000 year old Christian age is dying and a new national Socialist world under Adolf Hitler is being born. The youth are growing up in this new world. Our task is to serve these ideas and to lead the struggle. Then we will be able to look confidently into the future. (Rosenberg, 1939, in NSDAP, 1939).

The paranoid values of eugenics, social Darwinism, and the natural state of an all-pervasive competition for survival were propagated throughout Germany, through film (Hippler, 1937); radio (Goebbels, 1933); printed materials, and by every means and available to the propagandists, including cultural gatherings, mass marches, 'stickers',

and <u>especially</u> through the spoken and written word (Stark, 1930). Children were not to be excluded from the logic that inheres in seeing our world as a manifestation of the competition of every living thing against every other. A fifth-grade text-book 'for young girls' from the Nazi era is instructive here:

> We have established that all creatures, plants as well as animals, are in a continual battle for survival. Plants crowd into the area they need to grow. Every plant that fails to secure enough room and light must necessarily die. Every animal that does not secure sufficient territory and guard it against other predators, or lacks the necessary strength and speed or caution and cleverness will fall prey to its enemies. The army of plant eaters threatens the plant kingdom. Plant eaters are prey for carnivores. The battle for existence is hard and unforgiving, but is the only way to maintain life. This struggle eliminates everything that is unfit for life, and selects everything that is able to survive. (Harm and Wiehle, 1942, p. 168)

A pattern of valuing and corollary imperatives for action were produced in the mass propagation of such understandings. Appeals to fear; immutable laws of nature; a traumatised mass psychology; doctrines of scarce resources; work as the highest good; the necessity of being <u>the</u> dominant nation; racial "hygiene" and superiority; the utilitarian view of science, technology, and truth—these formed the basis of Nazi propaganda. The comprehensive range of the Nazis' appeals, combined with the centralised control of public communication, had intense, widespread, and vicious effects. The sole objective of Nazi propaganda was quite simple: to change the nation's "patterns of evaluation"—put abstractly, to produce new "values" on a national scale to achieve particular political ends. The task of Nazi propaganda

> is to free those who today still are rooted and anchored in the foreign ideas of liberalism and Marxism, to make them feel, think and act according to National Socialism, to bring them to <u>the point where they judge and evaluate everything according to National Socialist principles</u>. (Dietz, 1934, my emphasis)

The nation's patterns of evaluation <u>were</u> successfully manipulated by the Party, and the rest, as they say, is history. It may seem reductionist and cold to say that Nazi Germany owed its short-lived "successes" to a sophisticated understanding of political economy of communication, but it is difficult to deny that the regime successfully set out to achieve the production of an entirely new set of values for German people, that its communication strategies were oriented towards the production of those values, and that in achieving its objectives, the Nazi regime produced a literal explosion of activity that moved according to the patterns of evaluation that were produced.

<u>Contemporary concerns</u>

Starting with Harold Innis (1942, 1944, 1950, 1951a, 1951b) political economy of communication became a recognisable field, probably because of Innis's disciplinary background as an economic historian. While it might be said that Innis is responsible to some significant degree for the straw man that separates communication technologies from communication, by focusing on the relationship between communication technologies and forms of civilization, Innis provided an historical materialist method for studying political economies of communication, a method that has proved invaluable scholars that followed. By separating communication "content" from technological form, Innis provides a means for seeing how new media can sustain, erode, or otherwise transform various kinds of civilisations throughout history based on the types of technologies used to maintain 'knowledge monopolies' (1950, 1951a, 1951b). He also helpfully expanded conceptions of media, just as the term was becoming singular and monolithic: "<u>The Media</u>". Innis helped show that myth, prayer, alphabet, architecture, libraries, transport systems, weaponry, and many other technologies as means of

communication, and therefore as means of producing, sustaining, and destroying

knowledge monopolies, civilizations, and their associated cultures (1951b).

Innis's colleague, Marshall McLuhan (1964), extended the technology-as-medium

perspective to the point at which people felt impelled to deploy "technological

determinism" as a negative epithet to describe McLuhan's work and anything that

resembled it. Such criticisms notwithstanding, McLuhan remains a key figure in the

development of political economy of communication, emphasising the human sensory

apparatus, its relation to various values that, for example, oral- and visually-oriented

media produce, and to the political and cultural effects that technological transformations

entail. In many ways, McLuhan and Innis opened the way for the work of social

historians of technology, such as Lynne White Jr (1940, 1965, 1974), Lewis Mumford

(1961, 1964), Langdon Winner (1986), and David F. Noble (1997), to be included in

political economies of communication. Their inclusion in the field recognises the fact that

technologies have a communicative dimension and play a significant role in political

economic formations: as much of means of production for capitalism or whichever system

of political economy in which specific technologies appear, they are also means of

producing culturally and historically specific systems of meaning. While such inclusions

sometimes threaten to place too much emphasis on the "purely" technological, the

foregrounding of the technological and its social character has been an important

development in political economies of communication, one that has yet to be fully

incorporated into the field. Perhaps that is because what has become "mainstream" in the

field takes as its definition of "value" the purely monetary dimension, and a seeming

monolith, "The Media", as its primary object of study. This is akin to the emergence of

what has become mainstream 'economics', after economics broke away from the

remnants of late-nineteenth classical political economy, approximately between the years of 1916-1920 (Graham, 2003).

<u>Contemporary "mainstream" approaches</u>

By "mainstream" I mean those scholars who are most influential in the field of political economy of communication and who, through scholarly political economies of communication, define the field. Most of these studies focus on mass media ownership and its broad societal effects (eg Garnham, 1990; Schiller, 1996; McChesney, 2000; McChesney & Schiller, 2003, Bagdikian, 1997; Mansell, 2004; Wasko, 2001; Mosco, 1996; Mosco & Foster, 2001).

McChesney (2000) identifies two main dimensions in 'the political economy of communication'

> First, it addresses the nature of the relationship between media and communication systems on the one hand and the broader social structure of society. In other words, it examines how media and communication systems and content reinforce, challenge or influence existing class and social relations. It does this with a particular interest in <u>how economic factors influence politics and social relations</u>. Second, the political economy of communication looks specifically at <u>how ownership, support mechanisms (e.g. advertising) and government policies influence media behavior and content</u>. This line of inquiry emphasizes structural factors and the labor process in the production, distribution and consumption of communication. (McChesney, 2000: 109)

In McChesney's definition, the focus is on how 'media and communication systems and content' <u>do</u> certain things ('reinforce', 'influence') to 'existing class and social relations', with a special focus on the role of 'economic factors'; and, second, how 'ownership, support mechanisms, and government policies influence media behaviour and content'. The main difficulty I have with McChesney's definition is that it appears to lack a theory of value, or at the very least appears to presuppose one. This is most apparent when

'economic factors' are taken for granted and are entirely separated from 'politics and social relations' by being placed in subjective relation to them. That is to say: 'economic factors' (the subject) act upon 'politics and social relations' (the object). In the second part of the definition, this relation is reversed to some degree. Here, 'ownership' (an economic factor), 'support systems' such as 'advertising' (another economic factor: revenue) and policies (the primary product of 'politics') are subject and 'media behaviour and content' are object. Value is sidelined, politics, social structure, social relations, and economic factors are separated, only to be placed in apparently arbitrary transitive relationships with each other.

These are not uncommon moves in defining political economy of communication, especially given dominant understandings of what "economics" means, a point that McChesney readily acknowledges when he says media

> 'economics' often provides microanalysis of how media firms and markets operate but, like the field of mainstream economics, it assumes the existing social and class relations are a given, and a benevolent one at that. Likewise, communication policy studies examine the influence of government policies on media performance, but the work generally presupposes the necessary existence of the market and the broader social situation as the best of all possible worlds. The dominant form of communication research in the USA is drawn from quantitative behavioral social science. This work tends to be the polar opposite of the political economy of communication: it presupposes capitalist society as a given and then discounts structural factors in explaining media behavior. (McChesney, 2000)

Much of this can be explained through a history of intellectual history. Economics, politics, and sociology, along with the totality of social sciences, have been slowly "disciplined"—separated from each other in theory—from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards (Graham, 2003). This, even though they are now more closely intertwined than ever in their application. As McChesney points out, government policies

are shaped by quantitative microeconomic analyses, sociologically informed opinion polls, and often Darwinian behaviourist accounts of humanity. Political economy of communication differs from media economics' allegedly Panglossian view of the world by including the effects of political economic formations.

However, if the primary goal of political economies of communication is to comprehend and change social inequalities created by communication practices for the better—as most political economists of communication claim it is—then the field requires a comprehensive theory of value at its foundation. Not only can the many sub-disciplines of social science today be seen as "fractured" social theory, but as social theory fractured along the lines of specific aspects of value; or, as society evaluated, conceived of, and reconstrued according to certain categories and methods of measurement which are peculiar to the sub-disciplines of social science. Such measurements are an intrinsic part of political economies of communication in the current context and they appear as powerful facts in the development of mainstream political economies of communication (Graham, 2004). Any critical theory integrates fractured aspects of social science (Marcuse and Neumann, 1942/1998: 95) and must therefore begin with an integrated formulation of value (Marx 1973: 259).

Where communication is concerned, the evaluative dimension extends far beyond the "purely economic", which is to say the pecuniary dimension of value, or more commonly, money (Graham, 2001). The exercise of power and the production of values are inextricable, and power is merely one form of value translated into another (Graham, 2002). This is quite overt where money values are concerned: wealth clearly translates into political and social power. But where less quantifiable aspects of value are concerned—for example, moral, cognitive, aesthetic, ethnic, cultural, and technical

values—the task of political economies of communication becomes oriented towards making these values explicit and showing them in their full connection with political economy more generally.

To such an end Robin Mansell (2004) argues that 'a revitalization of the political economy of media and communications' is required 'in order to achieve a more holistic account of the dynamics of new media production and consumption' (2004: 97). The core of the argument is that

> any political economy of new media must be as concerned with symbolic form, meaning and action as it is with structures of power and institutions. If resources are scarce, and if power is unequally distributed in society, then the key issue is how these scarce resources are allocated and controlled, and with what consequences for human action. Distinctions between the older and newer media relate to how and why scarcity conditions emerge and the extent to which they contribute to the reproduction of unequal social conditions. Without research that gives a central place to power as a 'headline' issue in new media studies, we can only speculate about how inequality may be reproduced and then seen as the 'natural' outcome of innovations in new media technologies. (2004: 97)

Again, though, it is difficult to link 'symbolic form, meaning and action' with 'structures of power and institutions' without a relatively sophisticated theory of value in communication. How do specific symbolic forms, along with their specific meaning, impact upon our power structures and institutions? How should we research these links? Mansell suggests particular sites for research, such as the 'open source software movement' (2004: 101), and identifies 'the need to construct not only an interdisciplinary research agenda for the study of new media, but an explicitly critical (in contrast to a mainstream) research agenda' in order to make 'issues of power explicit in the analysis of mediated experience' (2004: 102). However, Mansell neglects to note that 'power' is merely a translation of one form of value into another, explicitly separating the two by asking the question: 'What dominant principles, values and perceptions of power are

being embedded in our technologically-mediated interactions?' (2004: 103). "Power" can be a manifestation of prestige, or strength, or wealth, or institutional standing, or various combinations of these values, along with many others (Graham, 2002).

There are other difficulties with Mansell's argument, not the least of which is the assumption that effective power in political economies of communication operates on the principle of 'scarce' resources when it seems the opposite is most likely to be true. This can be seen if we take the propagandists' work into account, or the work of the Creel Committee (Graham & Luke, 2003). The more resources for communication that are made available in a political economic system, the more effectively political economies of communication can operate in significant ways to produce new values. To make mass networks of mediation effective, and to weave masses of people into networks of mediation, both means and content must be produced and distributed in abundance. That is how new evaluative patterns are produced in a given social system. Questions of value in political economies of communication are not therefore concerned with what is scarce, but rather with what is produced, exchanged, distributed, and "consumed" in abundance. Of course the products of mediation are rarely (if ever) consumed, even though they might certainly be "used". Moreover, whether "technologies" or "contents", they gain in values the more they are used, entirely in contradiction to laws of value for most other commodity forms. This is all the more so in digital networks, where digitised symbolic artefacts never (in theory) deteriorate with age.

As it is defined in the mainstream, political economy of communication

cannot provide a comprehensive explanation of all communication activity, but it can explain certain issues extremely well and it provides a necessary context for most other research questions in communication. Although the political economy of communication can be applied to the study of precapitalist and postcapitalist societies and communication

systems, it is primarily concerned with capitalist societies and commercial media systems, as these models dominate across the world (Mosco, 1996).

While I agree that it is necessary to consider the political economy of communication as a context for most questions pertaining to communication, I disagree with Mosco's assertion that the capitalist system dominates the world. It ignores the emergence and triumph of corporatism throughout the course of the twentieth century (Saul, 1997; Graham & Luke 2003). Most political economic formations of communication have emerged under corporatist principles, from the mass mediations of the Creel Committee in 1916; to Hitlerism, Fascism, Stalinist Sovietism, and the many "new-deal" public radio initiatives in the 1930s; to the massive state-approved "monopolies" that have emerged in the late-twentieth to early twenty-first centuries. In France, for instance, 'a total of 70 % of national newspapers are the property of two armament manufacturers' (Le Monde, 2004). Political economies of communication must at least comprehend the organising principles of their political contexts. Capitalism, which assumes relatively free markets, relatively free trade, relatively diverse ownership, and steadily lower labour costs over time, is not the model that characterises the development of political economies of communication over the last century. It is a principle of political economy of communication that trade follows lines of communication rather than the reverse (Carey, 1989). The East India Company of the mercantilist era was no more able to function without its ships than is the Hughes Electronics media corporation able to function without its satellites. Mercantilism, advances in navigation and shipping, the emergence of a general credit system, and the rise of the merchant class as a political force are mutually defining phenomena in history (Nace, 2003: 22-4). The elements of political economy cannot be separated and understood at the same time.

McChesney and Schiller (2003) express the confusions that confront political economists of communication when they ignore this fact:

> The conventional explanation of globalized communication centres on technology: that radical improvements in communication technology make global media flows and global business operations feasible and that, in general, this is all to the good. However, this is a misleading account. Underlying new communication technology has been a political force: the shift to neoliberal orthodoxy, which relaxed or eliminated barriers to commercial exploitation of media, foreign investment in communication systems, and concentrated media ownership. There is nothing inherent in the technology that required neoliberalism; new digital communications could have been used, for example, simply to enhance public service provision had a society elected to do so. Encased in a framework of neoliberal practice and policy, however, communications instead suddenly became subject to transnational corporate-commercial development. (2003: 6)

The authors attribute to 'neoliberalism' the ways in which global political economies of communication have formed around new media. To say that, except for 'neoliberalism', 'new digital communications could have been used … simply to enhance public service provision' is similar to saying that, "except for fascism, radio could have been used to promote peace and understanding in the mid-twentieth century"—that is to say, it ignores the "economic" part of political economies. The corporations that produce new media are the same corporations that have most benefited from them. New media are not produced according to the needs and wants of a social totality, a 'society' that chooses to use them in one way or another. Rather, new media are produced within specific contexts according to particular interests and particular values, precisely to increase and expand those values. As Silverstone points out, '[g]lobal economies and global finance cannot work without a global information infrastructure'; they are in fact the basis of 'globalisation' (1999: 144). Yet, he says, global corporations 'are threatened by the same media technologies' they rely upon to operate, again because of the values they promote: 'speed can kill and undo

reason as well as facilitate transactions and speculations' (1999: 144). This appears to be happening as I write.

<u>Towards a coherent theory and method for political economies of communication</u>

Four writers stand out to me as providing the basic elements from which to synthesise a coherent approach to political economy of communication: Dallas Smythe (1981), Karl Marx (1973), Roger Silverstone (1999), and Jay Lemke (1995). This (perhaps unlikely) combination of authors provides four elements that are of direct relevance to understanding political economy of communication: Smythe for his theory of <u>consciousness</u>; Marx for his theory of <u>value</u>; Silverstone for his theory of <u>mediation</u>; and Lemke for his theory of <u>meaning</u>. I only have space here to quote a key passage from each. But these elements I believe are essential to developing a coherent political economy of communication:

> Smythe defines 'consciousness' as
>
> the total awareness of life which people have. It includes their understanding of themselves as individuals and of their relations with other individuals in a variety of forms of organization, as well as with their natural environment. Consciousness is a dynamic process. It grows and decays with the interaction of doing (or practice) and cognition over the life cycle of the individual in the family and other social formations. It draws on emotions, ideas, instincts, memory and all the other sensory apparatus. (1981: 270-1)

Smythe's is an historically and culturally specific, materialist definition of human experience that explains how we comprehend our world as a totality. Consciousness—being conscious—is a significant aspect of human activity. It includes how we evaluate our world. As I have said here, perhaps too many times already, the ways in which we evaluate various aspects of our world—what are ordinarily called our "values"—is an

essential inclusion in any political economy of communication. Marx is worth quoting here:

> To develop the concept of capital it is necessary to begin not with labour but with value, and, precisely, with exchange value in an already developed movement of circulation. It is just as impossible to make the transition directly from labour to capital as it is to go from the different human races directly to the banker, or from nature to the steam engine. (Marx, 1973: 259)

While it may start with a theory of exchange values, political economy needs to go beyond traditional understandings of value. As our political economic systems have become technically more sophisticated, more intimate facets of human activity have become subsumed as part of what is broadly called "the economy". They have been incorporated as saleable aspects of human activity, or what is generally called <u>labour</u>. This general tendency is exemplified in terms like "knowledge worker" and "knowledge economy". Terms like these presuppose forms of labour that can be bought and sold in order to produce artefacts of conscious activity, or what might be called 'knowledge commodities' (Graham 1999 2000). These, in turn, can be alienated from their source (conscious human activity), technologically objectified, and then traded within an emergent "global economy".

This emergent economy is organised primarily around the production of symbolic artefacts and is facilitated by proliferating new media. With this progression, new and more abstract forms of <u>value</u> have developed that correspond to the newly-formalised "labours of abstraction" in the knowledge economy. These forms of value are not merely monetary, although they may be traded for money at some stage. They need to be understood, and I have argued elsewhere that language is the way into this system. It is uncontentious to say that money values permeate societies everywhere and that this has

significant impacts on how they operate. But the enthronement of money as the primary evaluative principle cannot be explained by the character of money itself. Somehow it gets to be this way through the promotion of the significance of <u>money as a value</u>. This, I argue, is achieved by the manipulation of other aspects of value, which in turn necessarily requires the movement of meanings from one set of institutional contexts (the commercial) into all other aspects of human experience (Graham, 2001). Consequently political economy of communication requires a theory of movement that incorporates the dimensions of space and time:

> Mediation involves the movement of meaning from one text to another, from one discourse to another, from one event to another. It involves the constant transformation of meanings, both large scale and small, significant and insignificant, as media texts and texts about media circulate in writing, in speech and audiovisual forms, and as we, individually and collectively, directly and indirectly, contribute to their production (Silverstone, 1999: 13)

Mediation moves meanings through and across space and time, linking and delinking spaces, places, and times (1999: 14). The process of mediation 'involves the work of institutions, groups and technologies' and is 'the product of textual unravelling in the words, deeds and experiences of everyday life, as much as by the continuities of broadcasting and narrowcasting' (1999: 15).

With these three concepts, framed in these particular ways, we have the basis for theoretically grasping the basic elements of political economies of communication. Analytically, this leaves us to understand the various dimensions of meaning itself. These can be described within a three-term system as defined by Lemke (1995): the Presentational, or the "aboutness" of meaning; the Attitudinal, or the evaluative aspects of meaning; and the Organisational, or how meanings derive coherence.

Through the synthesis of these authors' theories and methods, the ways in which political economies of communication work can be grasped in relation to political economy more generally and particular instances of communication. There are many sites that need to be understood in the current context, violent, vicious, and destructive as it is. Politics, finance, and military propaganda; resistance, revolution, and technological change; commercial production, distribution, exchange, and consumption; fundamentalisms of all sorts, peace activism, and environmental struggles throughout the world are now conducted largely within the realms of communication. This has become so much the case that it may well be that political economies of communication have become the most important aspect of political economy for understanding global social dynamics.

Conclusion

I have outlined a history of political economy of communication and shown its 20th century roots and theory relevance for understanding what a political economy of communication means in the current context. I have also conducted a brief review of mainstream political economy of communication and offered a brief critique of dominant approaches in pursuit of a coherent theory and method that will provide us with an understanding of how communication figures in the new media environment. Of course, much more could be said on the subject, and I hope this chapter will provide the impetus for such studies.

Political economy of communication in the current context is about the production of values at the most fundamental level—the level of consciousness—and the exercise of power on the broadest possible scale: the totality of human beings now joined in a global system of social relations. New media inevitably lead to new political economic

formations. New political economic formations are new systems that require new understandings. In respect of management, the new political economies of communication require entirely new understandings that can comprehend the ways in which consciousness is produced; ways in which values are produced; the means by which meanings are moved; and the ways in which these aspects are realised in specific meanings. Through the synthesis of these aspects of political economy, we can begin to chart a course through one of the most complex and gigantic systems of social relations that has developed in the history of humanity.

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