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# The study of the political economy of the media in the twenty-first century

## ABSTRACT

*This discussion presents a brief overview of the establishment and expansion of the study of the political economy of media and communications, followed by attention to some of current directions of this approach. Themes and concepts developed by political economists of the media are reviewed, as well as internal and external critiques of the approach. Recent developments are discussed, including the growth of integrated studies, the return to classic Marxist themes, integration of digital technologies, and attention to policy and activism.*

## KEYWORDS

political economy  
marketization  
Marxist theory  
digital capitalism  
concentration  
commodification

As I write this article, I am also working on a syllabus for a graduate class on the study of the political economy of the media. This reminds me that Dallas Smythe's syllabi at the University of Illinois for two semester-long courses on the political economy of communications in the early 1950s were chock full of stimulating and relevant readings that were important for an understanding of political economy and its application to media and communication. These days, the amount of material written from this perspective is even more plentiful. Not only are there more and more academics working in this area, but the significance of understanding the political economy of media and communications is increasingly recognized outside academe. Thus, more interesting and important publications are available to use in university courses.

1. PEM will be used here to signify various approaches for the study of media, communication and information that draw on the theories and methods utilized in the study of critical political economy.

All of this is not surprising in light of developments in media and communications worldwide that demand the kind of analysis offered by a political economic perspective. Despite enhanced opportunities for communication offered by new media technologies, the media world is still often characterized by corporatization, commercialization, commodification and concentration. Thus, an analysis of these developments is an important (and, I would argue, necessary) context for understanding the meanings and impact of media products.

This discussion will present a brief overview of the establishment and expansion of the study of the political economy of media and communications (PEM<sup>1</sup>), followed by attention to some of current directions of this approach.

## PEM FOUNDATIONS

The study of the PEM certainly did not begin in the twenty-first century, but emerged with the evolution of mass media in the twentieth century with roots in the work of classic political economists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Most often, those working within a political economic approach in media and communication studies have adopted a Marxist/neo-Marxist theoretical framework and thus a critical perspective. However, the classic political economists, such as Adam Smith, David Ricardo and others, set the stage for the study of economic issues and grounded their work in social theory. Classical political economy evolved as capitalism evolved, adding Karl Marx and Frederick Engels's historical materialism and class analysis in the nineteenth century, which offered a radical critique of the evolving capitalist system through moral opposition to the unjust characteristics of that system. Other ideas and concepts have contributed over the years, including arguments from the Frankfurt School and other critical theorists.

Although neoclassical economics prevails today, a radical, critical or Marxian political economy continues to grow, especially in the study of media. Briefly, the primary concern of critical political economists is with the allocation of resources within capitalist societies. Through studies of ownership and control, political economists document and analyse relations of power, class systems and other structural inequalities. Critical political economists analyse contradictions and suggest strategies for resistance and intervention using methods drawn from history, economics, sociology and political science.

The academic study of communication has not always embraced economic analysis, much less a political economic approach. During the 1940s and 1950s, US communication scholars focused primarily on individual effects and psychologically oriented research, with little concern for the economic context in which media are produced, distributed and consumed. PEM emerged as a distinct approach in the 1950s and early 1960s, when Dallas Smythe and Herbert Schiller focused their research and teaching around the political economy of communication. They were influenced by institutional economics, but inspired as well as by the general political and economic developments of the period. In the 1970s, PEM was explicitly addressed in the work of Graham Murdock, Peter Golding, Nicholas Garnham and Armand Mattelart. In the midst of increasing interest in cultural studies, Murdock and Golding insisted that, 'The mass media are first and foremost industrial and commercial organizations which produce and distribute commodities' (1974: 205–06). Thus, PEM is fundamentally interested in studying communication and media as commodities produced by capitalist industries. Meanwhile, Mattelart outlined

a Marxist approach to the study of media and communication drawing directly on Marx's *Capital* (1867) in outlining the mode of production of communication, including production instruments, working methods and relations of production, adding special attention to issues relating to the global extension of media and communication or what he and others called cultural imperialism (Mattelart and Siegelau 1979).

Later, in the 1990s, Vincent Mosco offered an overview of the theories and research related to PEM, defining political economy as 'the study of the social relations, particularly power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution and consumption of resources', including communication resources (1996: 25). Mosco further delineated four central characteristics of critical political economy, which are helpful in understanding this approach: social change and history; social totality; moral philosophy; and praxis.

## **EXPANSION OF PEM**

Studying the political economy of communications is no longer a marginal approach to media and communication studies in many parts of the world. For instance, the Political Economy Section of the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) has grown dramatically over the last decade or so, attracting numerous scholars from all over the world. Increasingly, this approach is crucial to understanding the growth and global expansion of media and information industries. As noted previously, more researchers have turned to this perspective as a necessary and logical way to study these developments.

However, it is certainly not the case, as argued by some mainstream researchers, that PEM is narrowly interested in media ownership; nor is PEM research primarily focused on journalism, as claimed by other media researchers. Indeed, a wide range of themes pertaining to media and communication have been addressed by PEM scholars, as well as analyses of various forms of media, communication, culture and information. And as new scholars direct their attention to studying PEM, an even broader range of issues and themes have emerged. Some of the general themes that are fundamental to this approach are offered here, with a sample of research that exemplifies these themes.

### **General themes**

It is clear that the general process of marketization has moved rapidly around the world during the last few decades. Communication and information have become key components of this marketization process but have also developed as significant industries. In many countries, public media institutions have been privatized, along with other public institutions, opening additional markets for growing transnational media and entertainment conglomerates. In addition, new communication and information systems, such as the Internet, are developing as commercialized space, contrary to promises of public access and control. This commercialization process – including the growth of advertising and public relations – has been accompanied by an ever-expanding consumer culture, thus prompting the term 'cultural capitalism' as a descriptor for the current period (see Murdock and Wasko 2007).

A good deal of PEM research has focused on the evolution of mass communications/media as commodities that are produced and distributed by profit-seeking organizations in capitalist industries, or in other words, media

as business. The trends that Murdock and Golding identified in 1974 have expanded and intensified, not only within traditional media industries but also across industrial divisions into newly converged businesses. Analysis of media as business has involved various concepts, including but not limited to the following:

*Commodification/commercialization.* Increasingly, media and communication resources have become commodities – products and services that are sold by profit-seeking companies to buyers or consumers. In addition, more and more of the media landscape is filled with commercial messages and the privatization of media outlets continues.

*Diversification/synergy.* As media companies have expanded, new lines of business have been added in a process of diversification. While media industries often begin with a relatively large number of differentiated companies, these industries today are typically dominated by huge media-entertainment conglomerates that are involved in a wide range of diversified activities. There is also the potential for the various businesses owned by these large diversified conglomerates to work together to more effectively market products, thus producing a *synergy* that maximizes profits and decreases risk.

*Horizontal/vertical integration.* As media corporations have grown larger and more profitable, they often have added companies that are in the same line of business, thus integrating horizontally. Not only have such companies expanded their range of businesses, but with new distribution technologies and deregulated markets, media companies have integrated vertically by adding companies in the same supply chain or at different stages of production.

*Concentration.* Of course, one of the major issues pertaining to the media business is the level of competition in various markets. While a competitive market is the avowed goal of capitalism, there is an inevitable tendency for markets to become concentrated, due to any number of factors (as identified by Murdock and Golding (1974), and elsewhere). This is especially significant for media markets, where the provision of news and public information is vital for informed citizenship and where the provision of diversified entertainment can facilitate cultural and personal development. It is obvious that in many situations (such as in the United States or in the global market for blockbuster films), a handful of conglomerates dominate the media landscape. By documenting the actual level of competition (or lack of competition), PEM challenges the myth of the competitive marketplace under late capitalism. Political economists also are keenly interested in the consequences of such media concentration. For example, much attention has been focused on the influence of concentration on the availability and quality of news, as well as the ‘blockbuster complex’ and the homogenization of content in cultural industries.

Political economists of communications have investigated these trends through theoretical discussions as well as at various levels of analysis with studies of specific commodities, individual corporations and media industries, as well as national and global media systems. Political economists in parts of the world other than North America and Europe have also explored different regional dynamics. In addition, PEM has concentrated special attention to issues relating to international communication, transnationalization and (more recently) globalization.

Again, there is a wide range of political economic studies related to media, communications and information. Not every study is devoted to documenting media concentration or ownership, as some outside the approach have claimed. A few of those areas are briefly mentioned here.

### ***Historical studies***

Most PEM research incorporates historical analysis, for it is essential to document change as well as continuity. Certainly, tendencies and trends have been observed across media, but also many notable historical studies have traced the development of specific media. Some examples would include Duboff's (1984) historical analysis of the telegraph, Becker's (1993) work on the telephone, Dan Schiller's examination of the infrastructure of cellular telephony (2007), and Winseck and Pike's (2007) research on the rise of global media. Historical work on the film industry has included Guback's (1969) research on the international film industry and Pendakur's (1990) work on the historical dominance of the US film industry in Canada.

### ***Media and labour***

Since the 1970s and 1980s, there has been a steadily growing body of work aimed at understanding the role of labour in the media. This area is fundamental to PEM, as relations of production and class issues are key theoretical foundations for this approach and essential for assessing media power. Again, despite critiques that claim PEM ignores labour issues, the research has been consistent. Numerous examples could be cited, but only a few of the most recent include Miller et al. (2001/2008), McKercher (2002), Fones-Wolf (2006), Kumar (2008), McKercher and Mosco (2007), and Mosco and McKercher (2008).

### ***Media and state relations***

Even though studies of ownership patterns and the dynamics of corporate control are essential, political economic analysis is much more than merely identifying and then condemning those who control media and communication resources. To understand the media's role in society, it is essential to understand relationships between media power and state power, as well as the media's relationships with other economic sectors. Interrelationships between media and communication industries and sites of power in society are necessary for the complete analysis of communications. This process of 'myth-busting' challenges many common assumptions about economic and political systems, especially the notions of pluralism, free enterprise, competition and so forth. Work in this area has included analysis of the state's role in allocating communication resources and protecting corporate interests, as well as corporate efforts to lobby for such support. Other work has focused on regulation, policy and intellectual property (e.g. Streeter 1996; Calabrese and Burgelman 1999; Bettig 1997), as well as governments' use of communication resources, especially for military purposes (for instance, Schiller 2011).

### ***Media and democracy***

Political economists also have discussed media and communications specifically in relation to the public sphere, public citizenship and democracy. While acknowledging the powerful role that capital plays in media, researchers have argued that this relationship has a direct bearing on citizenship and public participation. These themes have characterized some of the work of Murdock, Golding and Garnham, as well as many, many others, such as Robert McChesney, Robert Hackett, Andrew Calabrese and Cinzia Padovani.

## THE EVOLUTION AND CRITIQUE OF PEM

As PEM has grown and evolved over the years, there has been lively debate within the tradition as well as critiques from other scholars. One of the most well-known discussions has been dubbed 'The Blindspot Debate' and was initiated by Dallas Smythe in 1977 when he pointed out that the main product of media was audiences, which were sold by media to advertisers. Furthermore, he maintained that audiences' exposure to advertising should be considered labour that added value to the audience commodity. A lively debate ensued, however, more recently, with the increasing spread of privatized, advertiser-supported media, the audience commodity concept has been accepted by communication theorists other than political economists and developed further by new PEM researchers (see McGuigan and Manzerolle 2014).

Distinctions also have been made between different perspectives based on world regions. In his 1996 overview, Mosco pointed out that British/European political economists have generally attempted to 'integrate communication research within various neo-Marxian theoretical traditions'. On the other hand, North American political economy, drawing on both Marxian and institutional approaches, 'has been driven more explicitly by a sense of injustice that the communication industry has become an integral part of a wider corporate order which is both exploitative and undemocratic' (1996: 19). Mosco also described another variation that might be called Third-World PEM research, which relies on dependency and world systems theory, as well as other neo-Marxist traditions. This type of research has focused on challenging the modernization paradigm and analysing various aspects of globalization processes (see, for instance, Becerra and Mastrini 2011; Bolaño et al. 2012).

Attention also has been given to the distinctions between PEM approaches by David Hesmondhalgh (2002), who identified the 'Schiller–McChesney tradition' (as opposed to a 'cultural industries approach'). He identified this tradition as the criticism of US media systems, especially media concentration, as presented by Herb Schiller and continued in the 1990s by Robert McChesney and others (e.g., Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky [1988] with their propaganda model). Hesmondhalgh argues that the Schiller–McChesney tradition has provided invaluable documentation and analysis of the cultural industries. However, Hesmondhalgh feels that this version of PEM has shortcomings, in that it still 'underestimates' contradictions in the system, fails to explain specific conditions of cultural industries, pays more attention to production rather than consumption, and mostly ignores 'symbol creators', while focusing most often on information-based media than on entertainment-oriented media.

More recently, Winseck and Jin (2011) have argued that political economists studying the media need to pay more attention to empirical evidence and documentation, and have called for a broader definition of the approach that would include institutional and other types of analysis. Further distinctions and critiques are offered in Wasko et al. (2011) and Fitzgerald (2012).

## POLITICAL ECONOMY AND CULTURAL STUDIES

Special attention may be needed for the relationship between PEM and cultural studies, as these two approaches are often identified (rightly or wrongly) as the primary and sometimes competing ways of critically examining media. Though PEM and cultural studies focus on different areas of enquiry or objects of study, it has been argued that both approaches are needed for a complete critical analysis of culture and media.

However, PEM is sometimes considered by cultural studies scholars to be too narrow, deterministic and economistic, despite the broad definitions and wide range of research outlined above. Similar to Hesmondalgh's critique of the Schiller–McChesney tradition, many have charged that PEM overall is primarily focused on the economic or the production side of the communication process, neglecting texts, discourse, audiences and consumption. In addition, a simplistic notion of ideology is ascribed to political economists, with little room allowed for resistance or subversion by audience members.

Most recently, a number of 'new' approaches have emerged in media/cultural studies, including creative industries, convergence culture, production culture, production studies, cultural economy and media industry studies. Some of these approaches explicitly reject a political economic approach for some of the same reasons that some cultural studies scholars have shunned the approach over the years.

Over the years, political economists have defended and expanded their theoretical positions in light of some of these critiques, clarifying extreme and inaccurate accusations, but also responding to reasonable criticism (for instance, see Murdock and Golding 1974; Golding and Murdock 1991; Wasko and Meehan 2013; Meehan and Wasko 2013). On the other hand, some political economists have found certain cultural studies scholarship to be lacking consistent and strong analysis of the institutional or structural context of cultural consumption, and focusing too narrowly on issues relating to media texts, identity and audience reception. Especially problematic are studies that argue that the audience's alternative interpretations of media texts represent a kind of subversive resistance to and undermining of dominant ideological definitions and thus are politically liberating.

For many, however, there is still a need for an intellectual alliance between political economy and cultural studies. Such an integration of approaches is necessary, not only to fully examine the complexities of mediated communication but also to challenge other celebratory approaches in communication research. As Murdock has argued, 'We need to ... work towards the construction of a more complete account of the central dynamics of contemporary culture and to mobilize those insights to defend the symbolic resources required to extend the rights and duties of citizenship in the service of revitalizing democracy' (1995: 94). Examples of studies that integrate cultural studies and political economy are discussed below.

## **PEM IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

Mosco concluded in 1996 that even though there are variations, most versions of PEM at least attempt to decentre the media and emphasize capital, class, contradiction, conflict and oppositional struggles (1996: 20–21). That tradition has continued as the approach has moved into the twenty-first century. Beyond the proliferation of PEM studies, other trends might be noted to illustrate the evolution of this approach.

### ***Integrated studies***

The tension between different critical approaches discussed above would seem to be less of a problem these days based on the increasing number of studies that actually succeed in integrating various critical approaches. Many scholars working in cultural studies, international communications, feminism, race-ethnic studies and other forms of social research have produced work

that integrates these perspectives with PEM. In other words, they embrace a political economic perspective as only one of the lenses they use to understand media. This outpouring of research and its recognition of structuration and agency – whether individual, collective, corporate or institutional – have been ongoing for decades. For many contextual scholars, the conceptual or methodological divisions between or among political economy, cultural studies and social research have essentially collapsed, yielding scholarship that synthesizes these areas.

A few studies have combined political economy with other approaches to examine a particular media phenomenon holistically. An excellent earlier example is Gripsrud's (1995) study of *Dynasty*, which traces the programme's production context, discusses its textual elements, as well as examining its distribution and reception. In my own work on the Walt Disney Company, the history and political economy of the company is presented, along with various readings of Disney's texts and people's reception of and resistance to Disney products (Wasko 2001). Increasingly, scholars are successfully integrating political economy and cultural studies to achieve more complete and nuanced analyses. Examples include Babe (2010), Kapur (2005) and Maxwell (2001).

The integration of feminism and political economy is well represented in Meehan and Riordan (2002), in which contributors examined media representations, consumer practices and commoditization. Byerly and Ross's (2006) collection considers how gender is implicated in media industries, among other issues. Meanwhile, Stabile's (2006) study of gender, race and crime news combines historiography with textual, class and industrial analysis.

Collaborative research projects have also brought together researchers from different critical approaches and often from different national settings. For example, in the Global Disney Audiences Project, an international group of researchers using various critical approaches and multiple methodologies documented people's experiences of Disney's products and penetration into local economies (Wasko et al. 2001). Another example of a project that addressed the commonalities and tensions between political economy and audience analysis was the *Lord of the Rings* Project, which examined the distribution of the film as well as fans' reactions (Barker and Mathijs 2007). Meanwhile, Biltrey and Meers (2011) have recently made important contributions to the integration of political economy and audience research.

Most often, these integrated approaches maintain the essence of political economy, in that the research examines the relationships of power that are involved in the production, distribution and consumption of media and communication resources within a wider social context. PEM still privileges issues relating to class power, not to the exclusion of other relationships, however, and emphasizes the complex and contradictory nature of such relationships. Most important, PEM challenges media and communication development that undermines equitable and democratic societies.

### **Back to basics**

Another interesting development within PEM is the return to classic themes and concepts to explain the evolution of media and communications. One of the concepts that has been revived is the idea of the commons – defined by Wikipedia as '... cultural and natural resources accessible to all members of a society, including natural materials such as air, water,



and a habitable earth. These resources are held in common, not owned privately'. The notion of the commons has been revived in various ways. For instance, there is even an International Association for the Study of the Commons (IASC), described as '... a multidisciplinary academic organization focused on building and mobilizing knowledge around many integrated social-economic and environmental issues with a particular focus on how to avoid the "tragedy of the commons"'. One of its founding members was Elinor Ostrom, who won the Nobel Prize in Economics in 2009 for her work that focused on this concept (see, for instance, Hess and Ostrum 2011).

Several media scholars have also integrated the notion of the commons in their analysis of the current media climate. Graham Murdock has written extensively about and '... the long struggle to provide cultural and communicative resources for full citizenship by reclaiming the idea of the commons', and more specifically about the concept of a digital commons. Ben Birkinbine has recently worked on the notion of the commons in relation to the free and open software movement, while Dorothy Kidd has written about independent and grassroots media as an example of media commoning practice.

The concept of the commons has been integrated into a myriad of media related projects, including media centres, websites, etc. For instance, Wikimedia Commons is '... a media file repository making available public domain and freely-licensed educational media content (images, sound and video clips) to everyone, in their own language'.

In addition, many scholars these days are calling for a reinvigoration of Marxist analysis (see, for instance, Terry Eagleton's *Why Marx Was Right*, 2011). This return to classic Marxist analysis has been a recent trend with some PEM scholars. As noted previously, most critical PEM scholarship draws on Marxist theory and practice, but a few media scholars and/or sociologists have emphasized the need to use Marxist theory more explicitly. Christian Fuchs (2008) has been especially active in these efforts, while John Bellamy Foster represents a sociologist who uses Marxist theory to study environmental and media issues (see McChesney et al. 1998).

### **The digital**

Special attention has also been devoted to the evolution of digital technology, with political economists examining a range of issues. Digital labour has been analysed in a number of studies (e.g. Fuchs 2014), and is the focus of a recent special issue of *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique*. The issue is entitled, 'Philosophers of the World Unite! Theorising Digital Labour and Virtual Work – Definitions, Dimensions and Forms', in which the editors explain that it '... aims to contribute to building a theoretical framework for the critical analysis of digital labour, virtual work, and related concepts that can initiate further debates, inform empirical studies, and inspire social struggles connected to work and labour in and beyond digital capitalism'. Meanwhile, big data and cloud technology have been studied by Mosco (2014), while Burkart (2014) has recently analysed the policies and politics surrounding digitization. Important historical perspectives on the digitization process have been offered as well, with reminders that 'new' media technologies often present a good deal of continuity, especially in terms of corporate involvement, commercialization and commodification. (See, for instance, Wu [2010] for a historical overview of corporate intervention in new media development.)

### **Policy and activism**

A vital component of PEM is praxis, which sometimes may seem to be missing if one only focuses on academic work. Many (if not most) PEM scholars incorporate issues related to policy and activism in their research, as well as working outside academic settings to promote media change, as well as social change generally. One of the best examples in the United States is the Free Press and Free Press Action Fund, co-founded by Robert McChesney, a scholar who works in the PEM tradition. The Free Press is described as follows: 'We are nonpartisan organizations fighting to save the free and open Internet, curb runaway media consolidation, protect press freedom, and ensure diverse voices are represented in our media'. A multitude of other examples from around the world could be cited, from international media projects to local campaigns that resist corporate media and support independent media alternatives.

### **Undeclared political economists**

Some communication scholars have contributed valuable studies that call attention to political economic characteristics of media/communication but do not claim to be political economists or use the same terminology as those more closely associated with the approach. For instance, some international approaches are grounded in political economy or incorporate PEM concepts without declaring a commitment to the perspective (e.g., Joseph Straubhaar, Jeremy Tunstall, Oliver Boyd-Barrett, Ben Bagdikian, Robert White and many, many others). These scholars explore some of the same issues and share a critical perspective with political economists. In other words, they adhere to Mosco's description of critical communications research: they challenge the status quo, analyse media in its social context, and adopt a moral position or work for change (Mosco and Wasko 1983).

### **CONCLUSION**

The study of political economy of the media and communications continues to grow and evolve. Again, this is not so surprising given the growing importance of the media and its industrial development within an expanding international market system. Developments during the last decade need to be viewed historically, a fundamental starting point for PEM. In other words, a careful analysis of capitalism, its structures, the consequences of those structures and the contradictions that abound is more than ever relevant and needed, as the recent reinvigoration of Marxist analysis attests. As Jean Paul Sartre once said, 'Marxism remains the philosophy of our time because we have not gone beyond the circumstances which engendered it' (1963: 30). A similar argument could be made for the study of political economy of the media.

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