

# IN DEFENCE OF A POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE MEDIA

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## Abstract

This essay addresses recent misrepresentations of the study of political economy of the media. The discussion is grounded in some historical background, including a brief sketch of some of the history of critical communications research in the US, which flourished within the global profusion of critical research in the 1960s and 1970s. Part of this history is the emergence of organisational support for critical scholarship as well as the long-term employment of individual scholars by specific universities that made critical classes part of both graduate and undergraduate curricula. That process of institutionalisation provided the basis for the next generations of critical scholars from the 1980s through the present – generations whose research address a broad range of communications phenomena, use a wide range of research methods, and draw from a wide array of critical theories. This overview sets the stage for a critique of the current attack on radical political economy specifically. That attack is considered in terms of two key texts that caricature political economic research as an enterprise dependent on theories imported from the Frankfurt School, limited to a macroscopic approach, only interested in journalism, and ignoring both media workers and media audiences.

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As every political economist knows, the field of political economy has many traditions, schools, and debates. To put it in colloquial terms: the fact that Adam Smith, Karl Marx, Joseph Schumpeter, Alfred Marshall, and John Maynard Keynes were all political economists does not mean they agreed on what theories and research methods were most useful in studying capitalism (Gandy 1992). We begin with this point for four reasons. First, in the United States, scholars who identify as political economists of the media are generally assumed to take a critical approach and to work within Marxist traditions. Second, to our knowledge, that assumption is true. Third, non-Marxist scholars researching media markets, industries, regulation, or employment seem to prefer terms like media industry studies, media economics, screen industry studies, production studies, or creative industry studies. Finally, these non-Marxist approaches share a common perspective: they celebrate “the genius of the system” (Schatz 1988), “the microsocial cultural practices of worker groups” (Caldwell 2009), “midlevel field work ... on particular organisations, agents, and practices,” (Havens, Lotz and Tinic 2009), and “converging media/converging scholarship” (Holt and Perren 2009). Despite an occasional reference to post-Fordism or neoliberalism, these scholars erase the larger context within which media industries, corporations, production, employment, audiences, fans, and artefacts exist: capitalism. Rather than celebrate the status quo or ignore capitalism, political economists take on the task of “ruthless criticism” (Marx 1843) and, with our colleagues in materialist cultural studies, constitute the Marxist tradition in mass communication and media research, i.e., critical communications research.

Clearly, critical research and celebratory research exist in opposition to each other. As one would expect, critical researchers and celebratory scholars disagree regarding the value of each other’s position. That is normal and to be welcomed by both groups: scholars of any type must expect their work to be criticised. That is how we all grow as theorists, researchers, and methodologists. But criticism is not the same as caricature. It is one thing to investigate the differences between the knowledge revealed in studies taking either a macroscopic, mesoscopic, or microscopic approach. Each type of focus illuminates different elements of the phenomenon under study. It is quite another to celebrate one’s preferred focus by caricaturing the others to the point of strawmen. Such misrepresentations of political economy have become increasingly common (cf. Holt and Perren 2009; Havens, Lotz, and Tinic 2009; Hartley 2009; Hesmondalgh 2002, 2009 and some parts/aspects of Graham 2006; Wittel 2004).

In this essay, we reply to such misrepresentations. To do so, we provide some historical background. We first sketch very briefly some of the history of critical communications research in the US, which flourished within the global profusion of critical research in the 1960s and 1970s. We then note the emergence of organisational support for critical scholarship as well as the long-term employments of individual scholars by specific universities that made critical classes part of both graduate and undergraduate curricula. That process of institutionalisation provided the basis for the next generations of critical scholars from the 1980s to now – generations whose research addresses a broad range of communications phenomena, uses a wide range of research methods, and draws from a wide array of critical theories. We do this in order to set the stage for a critique of the current attack on radical political economy specifically. We will discuss that attack in terms of two

key texts that caricature political economic research as an enterprise dependent on theories imported from the Frankfurt School, limited to a macroscopic approach, only interested in journalism, and ignoring both media workers and media audiences. Thus, we move next to a brief overview of some inconvenient facts about critical political economy.

## The Politics of Nomenclature in the US

Our understanding is that the avoidance of “Marxist” and the embrace of “critical” have multiple causes in the US. Among them is a history of state persecution of leftists generally, and Marxists specifically, that dates back at least to U.S. labour struggles in the 1880s. That persecution grew stronger after the Bolshevik Revolution and even stronger from the launch of the Cold War and up to the fall of the Soviet Union. Even after the USSR’s collapse, the far right continued accusing the rest of the political spectrum of being “un-American,” that is, of simultaneously being communists, socialists, fascists, and anticolonialists (e.g., D’Souza 2007, 2012).

From this historical perspective, the emergence and persistence of any critical traditions of scholarship in the United States is noteworthy indeed. Yet, critical scholarship did emerge in multiple fields with progressive or radical scholars addressing a wide range of topics including the role of class interests in the American Revolution (Becker 1909; Beard 1913), the need for a critical approach in microscopic as well as macroscopic economics (Cooley 1918); the role of journalism in building community and democracy (Dewey 1927); the monopolisation of telephony (Danielian 1939) and telegraphy (Thompson 1947); and economic control in the film industry (Huettig 1944). As Dan Schiller demonstrates, such scholarship grew out of national debates over increasingly stringent forms of capitalism and the relationship of labour to communication (D. Schiller 1996).

In the 1950s, McCarthyism – the witch-hunt for, and black listing of, “Reds and fellow-travellers” – tamped down those debates (D. Schiller 1996; Maxwell 2003; H. Schiller 2000). But they re-emerged in the 1960s as citizens organised protest movements, undertook direct political actions, and questioned the political economy of the status quo (Gitlin 1980, 1987). Criticism was also levelled at the media particularly at news organisations’ propagandistic coverage of the Vietnam War. However, in the field of mass communication research, administrative researchers stayed focused on mid-range theories and making the media system work better.

The obvious question – better for whom, for what vested interests, and for what purpose? – was posed in the work of Dallas Smythe (1960), John A. Lent (1966), Herbert I. Schiller (1969), Thomas H. Guback (1969), Hanno Hardt (1972a,b,c), and Stuart Ewen (1976), among others in the US. These scholars were part of a global network of critical scholars, including Michelle and Armand Mattelart (Chile/France/Belgium), Graham Murdock, Peter Golding, and Nicholas Garnham (UK), Giovanni Ceseareo (Italy), Jan Ekecrantz (Sweden), Roque Farone (Uruguay), and many others. For many critical scholars, the International Association for Mass Communication Research (IAMCR) served as a significant forum for networking, discussion, debate, research presentations, and professional service.

Of course, the political activism and socio-economic critiques that emerged in the 1960s had an impact on academe. In the US, that impact included student protests, teach-ins, and courses where teachers and students engaged in “ruthless

criticism” (Marx 1843). The responses of university administrations varied from calling in the police to negotiating with student representatives, from starting ethnic studies programs to denying tenure, and so on.

In the field of mass communications, the mainstream was still constituted by administrative researchers, but some critical scholars found employment at US institutions like Hunter College CUNY (H. Schiller, Ewen), University of Illinois (Smythe, H. Schiller, Guback), University of Iowa (Hardt), University of California, San Diego (H. Schiller), and Temple University (Lent). Long term commitments by Ewen to Hunter, Guback to Illinois, Hardt to Iowa, Lent to Temple, and Schiller to San Diego helped establish critical approaches as alternatives to administrative research and provided the stability necessary to attract generations of graduate students.

Further institutional recognition was won in 1978 with the founding of the Political Economy Section at the IAMCR conference in Warsaw, Poland. While critical scholars from the US had long been active in IAMCR, the organisation’s formal recognition of critical political economy provided a modicum of legitimation for that approach to research. That same year, doctoral students at Illinois who had attended the Warsaw conference—Janet Wasko, Eileen R. Meehan, Jennifer Daryl Slack, Fred Fejes, and Martin Allor – started an international newsletter reporting on political economy and critical cultural studies (*Communication Perspectives*, 1978-1985), which was supported by the Institute for Communications Research and by Guback. This helped generate an organising effort spearheaded by the *Communication Perspectives* collective and others (especially a group of graduate students from Stanford that included Oscar Gandy, Tim Haight and Noreene Janus), which produced the Union for Democratic Communications (UDC) in 1981. That organisation sought to bring together independent media makers, policy analysts, media activists, and critical scholars working in any area of media and communication – and still does so at its conferences, which occur roughly every 15 months. Two years later, Janet Wasko and Vincent Mosco launched *The Critical Communications Review* as a recurring series of edited books in which each volume addressed a specific theme. The first volume was subtitled: *Labor, the Working Class, and the Media* (Mosco and Wasko 1983). The ethos that undergirded these developments was rooted in activism, in ruthless criticism, and in building a critical community that valued its members and their work as artists, scholars, activists, and analysts. Next, we briefly sketch how the proverbial “next generations” of political economists built upon these institutional supports and that ethos of activism, ruthless criticism, and community.

## The Next Generations

While appreciative of the research done by Ewen, Guback, Hardt, Lent, Schiller and Smythe, the next generations of political economists in the U.S. asked a wide range of research questions, investigated traditional and emerging areas of inquiry, utilised various critical theories, and often integrated political economy with either materialist cultural studies or critical social research. Our purpose here is to communicate the extent of political economic work, its engagement with traditional and new topics, and the variety of approaches and emphases within critical political economy. Given the volume of work, we will be very brief indeed and limit our remarks to only some of the work done in the U.S. Here our attention is mainly on

political economy but we also note that critical scholars found much in the work of Ewen and Hardt. Ewen's work on advertising inspired further research addressing the political, economic, and cultural dynamics undergirding the commercialisation of mediated culture (Andersen 1995; McAllister 1996). The phenomenon of "compassionate consumption" has also been addressed with studies on the Product RED campaign specifically (Kuehn 2009) and cause marketing generally (Stole 2008). Hardt's alternative to mainstream definitions of communication facilitated expansion of critical media theory to deal with technology, gender, and power (Jansen 2002).

For example, Schiller's articulation of media imperialism was much debated with re-examinations of the concept undertaken through historical research (Fejes 1986; Schwach 1990) and critical assessments (Fejes 1981; Roach 1997). Working from Schiller's concern that news flows tend to be dominated by vested interests and from theories of enculturation regarding the putative effects of media exposure, researchers like McChesney (1999) and Bagdikian (1983) continue to pose questions regarding newspaper ownership, overall media ownership, the political interests of media owners, and party politics in the US.

The original "Blindspot Debate" (Smythe 1977, 1978; Murdock 1978) demonstrated the ability of critical scholars to think critically about each other's work. It also spurred further work. Smythe's theoretical claims were reconceptualised in terms of valorisation (Jhally 1982; Jhally and Livant 1986) and clarified through analyses of broadcasting's market for a national commodity audience (Meehan 1984, 1990). With the new media technologies of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the commodity audience remains a useful concept for understanding the political economy of newer forms of media including smart phones (Manzerolle 2010), interactive television (Carlson 2006; McGuigan forthcoming), Facebook (Cohen 2008), Google (Lee 2010; Kang and McAllister 2011), and video games (Nichols 2010, 2011).

Guback's work on international film, the Hollywood industry, and corporate structures and alliances provided a base upon which much research has been built including work on film finance and new technology (Wasko, respectively, 1982, 1995), on the political economy of intellectual property (Bettig 1996), the business of children's entertainment (Pecora 1998), the integration of film and television (Kunz 2007), and the financing of digital projection technology (Birkinbine 2011), among other works. Smythe's work on dependency inspired research ranging from work on the U.S. film industry's influence on Canadian films (Pendakur 1990) to an examination of telecommunications and network-based services (Mansell 1993).

Labour remains a concern in contemporary critical communications research. Political economist Mike Nielsen teamed up with Gene Mailes, film worker and union organiser, to interweave Mailes' personal account of workers' struggle for democratic and independent unions with Nielsen's account of the larger industrial and political contexts in which film workers, Mafiosi, studio moguls, and politicians lived (Nielsen and Mailes 1995). Denise Hartsough examined the International Alliance of Theatrical and Stage Employees's attempts to organise workers in the emerging industry of broadcast television (Hartsough 1992). Critical scholars also examine contemporary labour issues and media coverage of such struggles. Among many such studies we note two. Deepa Kumar documented the Teamsters Union's successful use of corporate media in its strike against UPS and the union's

resistance to globalisation (Kumar 2007). James F. Tracy tracked news coverage of union struggles in the newspaper industry during the 2008 economic crisis, uncovering how corporations used the media to promote anti-labour neoliberal policies (Tracy 2011.)

As demonstrated by our discussion thus far, new developments fostered new research over the decades. Political economists have engaged new critical theories. We note only a few examples in passing. Mosco (1979) contrasted Althusserian structuralism to the liberal organisational model of US broadcast regulation, arguing that the former generated stronger explanations of regulatory decisions in US broadcasting. Oscar Gandy used Foucault's notion of the panopticon to show how new information technologies were used as tools of surveillance and control (Foucault 1977; Gandy 1993). New critiques of older theories, like Brett Caraway's critique of the commodity audience à la Smythe and of monopoly capitalism à la Baran and Sweezy (Caraway 2011), make strong arguments for focusing on contingencies, accommodations, uncertainties, containments, resistances, contradictions, and creative energies in order to capture the unsettled relationships between structure, structuration, agency, and lived experience.

The emergence of neoliberalism as the new rationale for global and national restructuring triggered a wide range of research. Much research has focused on neoliberal policies that deregulate media (Brown 1991; Blevins 2007), thus encouraging the integration of media industries through transindustrial conglomeration (Kunz 2007) and the global integration of telecommunications (Martinez 2008). Mixing cultural analysis and political economy, critical scholars have probed the contradictions between neoliberal discourses about rugged individualism and neoliberal policies that transfer public funds to private corporations (for instance, Miller and Maxwell 2011). Connections between the US military establishment and the media remain an area of research. The edited collection *Joystick Soldiers* documents the militarisation of video games, tracing the political, economic and cultural significance of electronic war games as well as the ways that people perform or resist them (Hunteman and Payne 2010).

That brings us to critical research on how people take action. Some scholars have focused on struggles at the national level to ensure that media reflect a broad range of people's interests (McChesney 1993). Others have explored tensions between media reform agendas articulated at the national level versus the concerns and media practices of grassroots reformers (Proffitt, Opal, and Gaccione 2009). Social dynamics within reformist organisations have also been of interest. Lisa Brooten and Gabriele Hadl (2010) examined the Independent Media Centre Network in terms of gender and hierarchy. Their use of a feminist perspective reflected the inclusion of feminist theories and methods into a wide range of critical media scholarship.

It should be noted that most American political economists have not been insulated from developments in critical cultural studies or social research. Connections between scholars working in those areas were fostered by IAMCR and UDC conferences, as well as independent conferences like Console-ing Passions, which focuses on feminism, gender, and media. Again, those connections were facilitated by that shared ethos of activism, ruthless criticism, and community. The result has been productive dialogues and collaborations between and among political economists, cultural scholars, and social researchers.

An obvious result of such interactions are edited collections that achieve a multi-perspectival approach through the careful selection of individual essays written by cultural scholars, political economists, and social researchers. Here we mention only three. *Sex and Money: Feminism and Political Economy in the Media* (Meehan and Riordan 2002) addressed connections between gender and media through case studies that drew from political economy, cultural studies, and social research to address issues in the public sphere regarding women's work, use of technology, and law as well as issues in the private sphere regarding consumption, identity, and entertainment. A more global approach to feminist research undergirded *Women and Media: International Perspectives* (Ross and Byerly 2004), which examined portrayals of women in the media, women's interventions to change traditional media, and women's use of alternative and emerging media as a means for expression. A similar eclecticism is seen in *Consuming Audiences? Production and Reception in Media Research* (Hagen and Wasko 2000) which assembled an international group of media ethnographers and political economists. The resulting collection explored different ways to conceptualise media audiences, macroscopic and microscopic approaches, and the complex understandings of audiences that emerge from studies that recognise the interaction between audiences' engagement, generic forms of programming, commercial measurement, and human agency.

Collaborative research projects have also brought together researchers from different critical approaches and often from different national settings. Examples range from the Lifetime Cable project, in which a US textual analyst and US political economist worked together at every level of the project (Byars and Meehan 1995; Meehan and Byars 2000) to the Global Disney Audiences Project involving numerous researchers and multiple methodologies. Twenty-nine scholars in eighteen countries used quantitative and qualitative methods to gather people's memories and impressions of Disney as well as political economic analysis to gauge Disney's corporate presence in each economy (Wasko, Phillips, and Meehan 2001).

Integrations of political economy and cultural studies are also achieved in single-authored books. In *Coining for Capital*, Jyotsna Kapur (2005) examines relationships between children's play, corporate media, neoliberalism, and the consumerisation and corporatisation of childhood. Her methods include participant observation, textual analyses, analyses of political supports for policies, and economic pressures on daily life as well as on the articulation of social and political policies. Another example of integrative research is Carole Stabile's *White Victims, Black Villains: Gender, Race, and Crime News in US Culture* (2006). Stabile combines historiography, textual analysis, class analysis, and economic analysis to explicate connections between representations of crime in the news, the business of news publishing, and social distinctions within the class hierarchy in the U.S. that shaped reportage. In these books, Kapur and Stabile, show the intertwining of sociality, culture, lived experience, ideology, economics, and politics that provide the context for "the media."

We are well aware that many other critical scholars who work in political economy, cultural studies, social research, or some combination thereof and who have produced a prodigious amount of research that is worthy of inclusion here. Constraints of space limit whom we cite, but this outpouring of critical research and its wide range of topics, theories, and methods cannot be denied. Further,

for some critical 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 with grace and delicacy. Here we note two relatively recent books.

In *Making Easy Listening: Material Culture and Postwar American Recording* (2006), Tim J. Anderson examines the music industry's political economy, the aesthetics enabled by technologies of recording, labour unions reaction to technological threats to workers' livelihoods, and popular reaction to Warner Bros use of dubbing and rerecording in the 1964 film *My Fair Lady*. Anderson moves seamlessly through his material, clearly understanding that aesthetics, economic structures, intellectual property law, employment practices, workers' expertise, and public tastes all exert influence on actions and outcomes within the specific historical context of post-war capitalism in the US and American hegemony abroad.

In *Vulture Culture: The Politics and Pedagogy of Daytime Television Talk Shows* (2005), Christine Quail, Kathalene A. Razzano, and Loubna H. Skall combine cultural analysis, political economy, and critical pedagogy to show how neoliberal restructuring of economic and regulatory systems reshape people's lives, generating personal tragedies and social problems that can be spun to feed media operations and promote particular views. They adroitly demonstrate how the seemingly abstract notion of neoliberalism has real – and sometimes devastating – effects on our lives. For media corporations, experiences of illness or unemployment, etc., are easily appropriated and spun into tales designed to titillate, shock, and amuse those viewers targeted by advertisers. As a side effect of this media-sation, talk shows provide models for interpreting the world in neoliberal terms: every individual should take care of one's self; consumption is good; the social safety net is unnecessary.

This necessarily brief account of U.S. critical communications generally, and political economy specifically, demonstrates that much of critical communications research has moved beyond the caricatures of political economists as either “knowing the answers before they ask the questions” (Compaine and Gomery 2000) or of critical cultural scholars as naïve devotees of the Frankfurt School looking for “evil capitalists” (Pearson 2012). However, the fact that such caricatures continue to circulate is indeed of interest, as we will discuss below. For us, that fact that critical media research uses multiple theoretical perspectives, multiple methods, and integrates political economy, cultural studies, critical gender studies, etc., means that critical media research remains vibrant and continues to expand. For some scholars, that seems scary enough to forgive attempts at flagrant misrepresentation.

### Some “New” Approaches

We believe that the developments discussed thus far are important and that they contribute to the goal of understanding media as social, cultural, political, and economic phenomena in the context of global capitalism. Of course, not everyone agrees with that claim. Among those colleagues are many of the scholars advocating for media industry studies, critical media industry studies, creative industries, cultural economy, production studies, and other approaches that have emerged in media studies since the 1990s. While we appreciate the increased attention to media as part of the global, transnational, national, regional, and local economies, these



“new” frameworks most often reject political economy’s theoretical foundations, approaches to research, and research findings.

We will focus here on two texts as examples of that rejection, paying particular attention to their misunderstandings about, and misrepresentations of, political economy of communication. The first text is by Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren, “Does the World Really Need One More Field of Study?” The second text is by Timothy Havens, Amanda Lotz, and Serra Tinic: “Critical Media Industry Studies: A Research Approach,” from the journal *Communication, Culture, and Critique* (2009). Both groups of authors attack political economy, misrepresenting the range of scholarship within political economy. Both seem ignorant of research (in the U.S. and elsewhere) over the last two decades that integrates political economy and critical cultural studies. While we cannot necessarily speak for other researchers who embrace a political economic perspective – sometimes as only one of the lenses they use to understand media – we feel compelled to point to some of these misrepresentations that often accompany the dismissal of this approach. We discuss Holt and Perren first and briefly, given that their text is itself brief and also because their attack overlaps significantly with the more detailed attack made by Havens et al.

Holt and Perren’s essay introduces their edited book *Media Industries: History, Theory, and Method* (2009). While the essay’s title suggests a willingness to evaluate new approaches based on intellectual necessity and sufficiency, the essay sidesteps its own title as Holt and Perren state that their collection “is a recognition of the fact that, while the world does not necessarily *need* another field of study, one had indeed emerged” (emphasis in original, p. 2). This contrast calls to mind the “bait-and-switch” tactic used in advertisements that make attractive promises in order to lure consumers in but which fail to deliver the promised goods.

Holt and Perren subsequently intersperse their views with summaries of their authors’s chapters. They link the Frankfurt School to post-World War II research on cultural imperialism and news flows given that each endeavour assumed that corporate media were designed to serve the capitalist status quo and exerted strong effects on audiences. They note well that cultural imperialism remains “prominent in the North American strand of critical political economy as forwarded by scholars such as Herbert Schiller, Ben Bagdikian, Robert McChesney, and Edward Herman” (p. 7). We are told that the contributors find the “Schiller-McChesney” approach (as contributor David Hesmondhalgh calls it) to be “reductive, simplistic, and too economistic” (p.8). Holt and Perren note that unnamed political economists have since “taken more nuanced approaches” (p. 8) but they cite no one in their text and, apparently, none are included in the collection. However, on page 14, footnote 32 identifies three: William Kunz and us. In effect, Holt and Perren identify political economy with the study of cultural imperialism and news flows as exemplified in the work of Herbert Schiller and Robert McChesney. Other foci, other methods, and other theories may be pursued by three contemporaries of Schiller and McChesney, but the proverbial mainstream of political economy remains unchanged and unchanging: studies of news flows which assume that media corporations produce and distribute news in order to control media audiences – with theory and research à la Schiller and McChesney.

In their manifesto, Havens et al. state that cultural studies has always been composed of three parts: textual analysis, reception studies, and media industry studies.

The last focused on “micro-level industrial practices” and “midlevel fieldwork,” (both p. 235) but had no generally accepted term to identify it. Havens et al. seek to unify these middle-range studies of managerial and production employees working in media under the term “critical industry studies.” They contrast their midrange approach with political economy’s “consistent focus on the larger level operations of media institutions, general inattention to entertainment programming, and incomplete explanation of the role of human agents (other than those at the pinnacle of conglomerate hierarchies) in interpreting, focusing, and redirecting economic forces that provide for complexity and contradiction within media industries” (p. 236). This claim may be due to a lack of awareness of the wide range of work being done by an increasing number of media and communication researchers in all parts of the world, but especially in their own backyard, which is North America. As evidenced by years of published research and conference presentations, political economic approaches have been employed to understand a wide range of media industries, products and issues. This is obvious from only a quick review of published books and collections, journal articles, publications, and conference papers.

Havens et al. may believe that US political economists only focus on “the larger level of media institutions (and exhibit a) general inattention to entertainment programming,” but even our brief sketch of research demonstrates that belief to be false. Some political economists have addressed such diverse forms of entertainment as films (Guback 1969), made-for-cable movies (Meehan and Byars 2000), Facebook (Cohen 2008), and video games (Nichols 2011). Others have traced the complex interplay of media corporations, advertisers, lived culture, and social relations, in order to address advertisements as simultaneously cultural expression, sales pitch, revenue source, and contested area (Andersen 1995; McAllister 1996; and Kapur 2005). As these examples suggest, political economists focus on much more than news. However, we also want to defend the attention that has been paid to news and public affairs – and the companies or organisations that produce them – as relevant and vital to analysing the role of media in public life and in building open and democratic societies.

In addition, PE/C has not neglected analysis of specific industries and companies. Again, the claim that PE/C has remained at the “meta” level cannot be based on a thorough literature search of the field, which would reveal in-depth political economic research on industries such as those named above, plus dominant corporations such as Disney (Wasko 2001), Telefonica (Martinez 2008), News Corp., Time Warner, Bertelsmann (Fitzgerald 2011), and Google (Lee 2010), among many others, as well as smaller, independent, alternative or regional media companies.

As indicated by these examples, it is clear that PE/C has not focused only on theoretical discussions (another claim made in these discussions), but also has contributed empirical studies that draw on a wide range of theoretical positions. We emphasise that there are many political economies – as signaled by Dwayne Winseck and Dal Yong Jin’s new collection *Political Economies of the Media*, that represents the “diverse stream of the schools of thought signified by this tradition” (Winseck and Jin 2011), as well as by the recent *Handbook of Political Economy of Communications*, which also incorporates differing perspectives and positions. (Wasko et al. 2011)

PE/C has not ignored workers or issues of autonomy, creativity, or other “quotidian” practices, as Havens, et al. claim: “How workers function ... is not illuminated

by conventional critical political economy research" (p. 236). As noted previously, there has been a steadily growing amount of work aimed at understanding the role of labour in the media since PE/C blossomed in the 70s and 80s. This work continues with Sussman and Lent (1998) and Miller, et al. (2011), plus recent collections from Vincent Mosco and Cathy McKercher (2008, 2009). Furthermore, while Havens, et al. identify the relevant workers as members of the creative class – directors, producers, cinematographers, etc. – they tend to overlook blue-collar workers in the so-called creative industries. As noted above, political economists have considered a wide range of media workers in a variety of media/communications industries.

Again, we would like to point to the examples previously mentioned as evidence of the willingness of political economic researchers to integrate cultural analysis into their work and/or work with cultural analysts, as well as to suggest that contradiction is not a foreign concept to many (if not, most) of those employing political economic theories to the study of media and culture.

So, before we sit at the "metaphorical table" to "have a conversation about the future" of "critical interventions into the study of media industries" (Havens et al., 242), we would suggest that these scholars do some homework, or perhaps attend some panels of the Political Economy Section at the IAMCR someday, to become more familiar with the wide range of research conducted around the world that employs a political economic analysis.

Obviously, we all know that this is not the first time nor are these the only examples of misrepresentation, misunderstanding, and rejection of Marxism, political economy, and/or the political economy of the media. Despite the fact that many scholars these days are calling for a reinvigoration of Marxist analysis (see, for instance, Terry Eagleton's *Why Marx Was Right*, 2011), this current wave of media industry approaches represents efforts to claim the study of media production in a palatable form for cultural analysts, policy wonks, and the media industry itself. In other words, an approach that isn't necessarily heavily invested in (overtly) neoliberal economics or media economics, nor one that has the taint of Marxism or political economy or a truly critical approach to media industries.

In the end, we are left with a number of questions. For instance:

Is the creation of such a new approach actually necessary when political economy and cultural studies provide ample and strong theoretical/methodological tools?

Are these recent proposals mostly (merely?) attempts to create a stripped down, more acceptable, "apolitical" political economy, or a meaner, broader, more relevant Cultural Studies? Since mostly PE is being demonised in these discussions, we would guess it's probably the latter.

Is this call for middle range studies focused on white collar workers another way to paper over class structure and to erase the ultimate context in which we all work: capitalism?

Yes, the careful analysis of capitalism, its structures and the consequences of those structures (including the contradictions that abound) is more than ever relevant and needed. But what is demanded is truly critical, historical, material analysis at every level, and certainly not (ultimately) celebration and reaffirmation of the status quo.

In this spirit, we would like to conclude with the words of Karl Marx in 1843 in a letter to Arnold Ruge, which seems appropriate to this discussion:

*If we have no business with the construction of the future or with organising it for all time, there can still be no doubt about the task confronting us at present: the ruthless criticism of the existing order, ruthless in that it will shrink neither from its own discoveries, nor from conflict with the powers that be (Marx 1843).*

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