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<RHR>Critical political economy of communications</RHR>

<CTL>**Critical political economy of communications: A**

**mid-term review</CTL>**

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<AH>**Abstract</AH>**

<AUIP>If we take the late 1960s as a starting point, an explicitly defined ‘critical political economy of communications’ is nearly 50 years old. How salient today are the core concerns that shaped this tradition? What are the emergent themes in contemporary critical media studies? While critical political economy’s attention to

the way media industries are organized and financed has become a more central

consideration across the field of media and communication studies, this

mainstreaming has been accompanied by disconnection from the critical political

economy tradition. Reviewing that paradox, the article identifies emergent research

themes and argues for the relevance of critical political economy approaches for

contemporary investigations into the problems of the media.</AUIP>

<KDH>Keywords</KDH>

<KD>critical political economy

media industries

media systems

convergence

information capitalism

media ownership</KD>

<UIP>The study of media industries has been influenced by a 50-year-old tradition of critical scholarship that was catalysed by 1960s radicalism. The interests of this critical political economy of communications approach have become more central to the entire field of media studies over the last decade. The ways media industries are organized and financed and the implications this has for communication activities are no longer avoidable concerns. Yet this mainstreaming has been accompanied by disconnection from the critical political economy tradition, its arguments and evolving analysis. Making sense of that paradox takes us some way to understanding the current configuration and can guide thinking for the future.</UIP>

<IP>If the critical political economy (CPE) tradition has been ignored and displaced in recent work on media industries, convergence culture, policy and comparative media systems, does it indicate that CPE represents a residual paradigm, superseded by more advanced contemporary theory and analysis? I would join a swelling chorus who say no. This has been a decade of flourishing output, exciting synthesis and developments that leave the caricature image of CPE far in the shade. The range and quality of work shows CPE in good health and indeed revitalized. </IP>

<IP>The self-described tradition of a critical political economy of media (or communications) is internally diverse but displays some common features. It is not characterized by the objects of enquiry, or research methods used, but rather by the questions asked and the orientation of scholars. It is galvanized by the interaction of two main influences – Marxist thought and democratic politics – and it asks questions about power in communications and the conditions for realizing democracy. Critical political economy of the media is a critical realist approach that investigates problems connected with the political and economic organization of communication resources.

CPE advances a central claim: different ways of organizing and financing communications have implications for the range and nature of media content, and the

ways in which these are consumed and used. Recognizing that the goods produced by media industries are at once economic and cultural, this approach calls for attention to the interplay between the symbolic and economic dimensions of the production of meaning. This requires careful study of how communications industries work addressing media ownership, finance and support mechanisms (such as advertising); labour and the social organization of cultural production; and how governance arrangements affect media markets, media behaviour and content. This opens onto the second main topic, the influence of different ways of organizing the media: commercial, state, public and their complex combinations. In turn, this connects with the third main concern: the relationships between media and communication systems and the ways social systems are organized. </IP>

<IP>The CPE approach that developed from the 1970s had as its core ‘the recognition that the mass media are first and foremost industrial and commercial organizations which produce and distribute commodities’ (Murdock and Golding 1974: 205–06). That core remains salient for contemporary convergent media. Yet the mass media paradigm must be replaced by one that attends to public-facing media,

communications services and the various hybridizations of online communications and social media.</IP>

## <H1>Political economy and ‘new’ approaches to media industries</H1>

<UIP>The disconnect from critical political economy is complexly configured across the two main strands of media and communications studies. The field remains divided between culturalist and more social scientific approaches, and while there is increasing convergence around objects of analysis, divisions persist in the governing paradigms, approaches and literature. During the early institutionalization phase of media studies in the 1970s a critical tradition, influenced by Marxism and growing in conjunction with radical politics and new social movements, had a shaping influence on the framing of research and pedagogic agendas, and has persisted since. During the period of expansion of media studies in the 1980s, a culturalist framing became ascendant in Euro-American studies (though it never eclipsed the sheer volume of system-supporting communications research output). Culturalism shifted the focus of attention from media production to consumption and located power and agency over meaning-making with textual readers and more recently digital (co)producers (Jenkins 1992, 2006). Since the heated divisions of the 1990s between ‘political economy’ and

‘cultural studies’ there have been calls for, and demonstrations of, more integrative, synthesizing perspectives (see Hardy 2014; Hesmondhalgh 2013). CPE scholars have excavated the shared roots of both approaches in the cultural materialism of Raymond Williams, and advocated a synthesis of CPE with ‘critical cultural studies’ (Babe 2008). Others have identified deeper impediments around essentialism/complexity, critical realism/postmodernism and above all between Marxian and post-Marxian or non-Marxian perspectives (Gilpin 2006; Grossberg 2010).

There have certainly been valuable engagements and syntheses amidst common efforts to move beyond mass media presumptions. For instance, Mirrlees’ (2013) recent study of global entertainment media weaves together the cultural imperialism and cultural globalization approaches. However, a stronger tendency than synthesis has been the displacement of CPE. A culturalist tradition that dismissed CPE as reductive has continued to shed its own critical positionality and move if not always to cultural populism (McGuigan 1992) then towards an accommodation that is increasingly administrative, rather than critical, in Lazarsfeld’s (1941) still resonant terms.

<IP>The ‘new’ study of media industries, creative economy and cultural convergence does offer very welcome attention to media business and to the institutional and economic dimensions of media that have been the focus of the CPE tradition (Holt and Perren 2009; Jenkins 2006; Mayer, Banks and Caldwell 2009). This is informed by a culturalist rediscovery of the economic (Grossberg 2010) but is also largely a pursuit of cultural practices that themselves merge and transform mass and self communications (Castells 2009). The organization of communication services has returned to prominence. Most of the questions we may ask of modern communications require at least some engagement with the industries that provide these services and the conditions in which they do so. </IP>

<IP>Yet the ‘new’ approaches to media industries present a variety of problems. CPE tends to be displaced from research reports and where discussed tends to be dismissed as simplistic, inadequate and outdated (Hesmondhalgh 2009; McNair 2006). In addition to ignoring CPE work, this displacement relies on misrepresentation and caricature to clear the ground for accounts that variously reject or delimit adopting critical perspectives towards convergent media industries and practices. One trajectory is the repositioning of media scholar–industry relations towards a more conciliatory

partnership, offering the insights of cultural convergence and creative industries research for business (Hartley 2005; Jenkins 2006). Another is a broader celebratory account of digital capitalism as generator of resources for a more open, democratic communication environment involving co-creation, participation and empowerment (Hartley 2012). As one review cautions, 'Are these recent proposals mostly attempts to create a stripped-down, more acceptable, apolitical political economy or a meaner, broader, more relevant cultural studies?' (Wasco and Meehan 2013: 156).

## **Reviewing and revising media political economy**

In the caricature version, CPE tells a drearily iterative tale of corporate concentration and control against more nimble alternative accounts that highlight risk, uncertainty, complexity and contradiction. Neglected in this framing is the extent of debate and revision within critical scholarship, not least in assessing evidence of media concentration, questioning control and influence, and debating policy goals (Baker 2007; Garnham 2011). Above all, ownership has been reframed beyond a mass media paradigm towards convergent communication service industries. Political economists have examined the ongoing processes of consolidation in content industries and the continuing salience of 'economies of synergy' (Arsenault and Castells 2008). Yet, if



tendencies towards integration are clear, corporate strategies and market processes have also involved disintegration, demergers, fragmentation and the creation of new kinds of networks and interdependencies between firms ([Arsenault 2012](#); Winseck and Jin 2012). All these processes must also be understood in the context of uncertainties and risks, the unpredictability and high levels of failure of ideas, products, firms and operations. </UIP>

<IP>There are complex patterns of corporate convergence and de-convergence yet concentration of media ownership remains a persistent feature and pervasive critical issue. Google, now the largest media company by revenue, accounted for 49 per cent of internet ad revenue worldwide and 65 per cent of search in December 2012, with an estimated 82 per cent share of paid search expenditure (Zenith Optimedia 2013).

The new digital giants demonstrate the significance of network effects, whereby, according to Metcalfe's law, the value of a network increases in proportion to the square of connections. In the ensuing 'winner-takes-all' markets, the gap between the number one and number two players is typically large and growing, generating new concentrations. Apple's iTunes has some 70 per cent of the music download market; YouTube has 73 per cent of online video market; Facebook has 52 per cent of social

networking traffic. Network effects result in demand-side economies of scale (capture of customers) as opposed to supply-side economies of scale prevalent in traditional media industries (McChesney 2013). </IP>

<IP>Networked communications have transformed the capacity for messages to be exchanged. Yet problems of scarcity and control remain evident. Scarcity of supply issues remains critical in markets like news media (Fenton 2009; McChesney and Pickard 2011). In other markets the problems are less those surrounding supply and more those of access and consumption, leading to a policy reform focus on problems of ‘exposure diversity’ (Napoli 2011). Against a variety of presumptions of market expansion and digital pluralism – political economists have provided explanations for the patterns of old and new concentration that persists in many media markets (Kunz 2007; McChesney 2013; Winseck and Jin 2012). </IP>

<IP>For a powerful range of interests from liberal academic commentators to transnational corporations, the market can be trusted to realize digital plenitude and create an equitable environment for cultural and democratic exchange. A more pluralistic media is emerging, enabled by commercial media, social networking and new communication tools (McNair 2006). There is undeniably increased digital

communication but claims for media pluralism need to be carefully qualified and assessed across media systems in regard to such aspects as the continuing dominance of ‘vertical’ media content provision and consumption, contractions in public service media and the scarcity and resource limitations of alternatives. The myth of digital abundance is problematic less because it is overstated and more because it is mobilized to suggest that market mechanisms can secure by themselves what was formerly recognized as goals for public policy – balancing private and public interests in communications; fostering and safeguarding media pluralism. Political economists explore *how* ownership matters, recognizing that this requires attention to production and work, texts and people’s engagements with texts, as shown in the synthesizing work on trans-media storytelling and corporate intertextuality (Proffitt, Yune Tchoi and McAllister 2007; see Hardy 2010). </IP>

<IP>Media ownership matters but CPE has always been broader in emphasizing the need to connect communications arrangements to the political and economic organization of societies. With capitalism now the dominant political economic system, albeit with important variations, understanding information capitalism, or digital capitalism, is the foundation for analysis (Schiller 2007). CPE examines the

relationships between capitalism, communication and democracy (McChesney 2013).

At its core, media political economy is concerned with communication and power. It

is concerned with democratic life in its broadest sense, in efforts to distribute power

more equitably in the world and to make communication arrangements democratic

and sustainable. </IP>

<IP>An increasingly important theme over the last decade has been the analysis of

labour, redressing the surprising neglect of this topic in political economy as well as in

the wider field. Schiller (1996) traces the formation of communications studies to a

structured neglect of labour and recent work has begun to remedy this, with a strong

lead from political economists (Mosco and McKercher 2008). Attention to media

labour has been belated but diverse, ranging from celebrations of liquid modernity and

self-fashioning to more critical analyses of exploitation. Analysts have engaged with

transformations in working practice and arrangements, de-professionalism,

professional–amateur hybridizations and so addressed the patterns of paid, unpaid and

precarious labour (Deuze 2007, 2011). Studies of precarity (Standing 2011) help us to

trace both the erosion of conditions in some formerly highly unionized sectors such as

Euro-American film, television and news journalism, but also the diversity of labour

and labour conditions today including casualization, zero hours contracts and unpaid student internships (Huws 2011). Miller et al.'s (2005) study traces the international division of cultural labour in Hollywood audio-visual production. The macro contradictions of information capitalism relate to the contradictions lived out by individuals, caught between the perils and pleasures of precarious creative labour and self-commodification, as a study of new media workers in the Netherlands neatly illustrates (Gill 2011). Labour has also been one focus for feminist scholarship that has reformulated political economy analysis by reintegrating problems of gender and power, challenging their neglect and expanding the ways in which media power, labour, policy-making, technology and movements for social change are theorized and examined (Lee 2011; Sarikakis 2012). Building on earlier efforts to develop feminist political economic perspectives (Meehan and Riordan 2002), Sarikakis and Shade's (2008) collection addresses and integrates work examining gender and media content, women's employment in the cultural industries and policy issues across international communications. Analysts have traced information capitalism from the mining of coltan in the Congo to the health-sapping labours of hardware workers in China and software workers in India, with attention to gender, divisions of labour and exploitation that counter the evasive celebrations of 'friction free' capitalism (Schiller 2007; Upadhyaya and Vasavi 2008).

Another major theme has emerged around digital labour and 'free labour', some

of which engages with feminist critiques of the displacement of domestic, reproductive, emotional and other labour from the 'objective' categories of labour advanced within both patriarchal orderings and within Marx's writings. Drawing partly on Dallas Smythe's CPE analysis of the audience commodity, this [new research](#) examines the monetization of social media users' profiles and activities by marketers and digital companies (Fuchs 2014). The extent to which Marxian labour theory is appropriate for analysing social media activity is hotly debated but the attention to processes of commodification and profit-making connects a rich [tradition of](#) North American exploration of audience commodification with contemporary salience. This work also connects with another core theme of CPE work, the examination of advertising as a system of finance and the implications of [changes in](#) media – advertising relationships for communication services. Contemporary studies of behavioural advertising, profiling, native advertising and product placement examine the economic and cultural aspects of media–advertising relationship. From the economic consequences of the disaggregation of advertising from media to the cultural consequences of advertising integration into media content, critical scholars have addressed a host of societal problems (Hardy 2014; Turow 2011)</IP>

<IP>CPE work over the last decade illustrates two major tendencies whose tensions inform scholarship. First, there has been renewed attention to Marxism. Marx is back, and this time he is digital. For scholars such as Christian Fuchs (2014: 8), Marx's writings and Marxist theory 'provide a rich category system that can be applied for critically understanding digital labour and other forms of labour'. Marxism provides the attention to class, exploitation, value and labour required for critical communications studies. Marxism has also been reasserted as an important explanatory framework to analyse information capitalism and digital media. Dyer-Witheford (1999: 2) set an agenda in his analysis that the information age, 'far from transcending the historic conflict between capital and its laboring subjects constitutes the latest battleground in their encounter'. A growing number of authors have applied Marxist approaches to theorizing the internet (Fuchs 2011, 2014, Fuchs et al. 2012; Mosco, McKercher and Huws 2010; Wittel 2012).</IP>

<IP>The other main tendency has been to shift from radical functionalism towards greater appreciation of complexity, contestation and contradiction. For instance, CPE analysis of digital communications has been critical of both techno-optimism and pessimism arguing that the hopes and fears they engage requires a broader analysis

that CPE provides (McChesney 2013). This approach is neatly crystallized in Murdock's (2003: 29) call to attend to the modalities of power shaping the net and the struggle among three cultural economies: commercial transactions, the 'free' distribution of public cultural goods, and gift relations based on the reciprocal exchange and pooling of services. Some work has developed this by Marxian-inspired elaboration of contradiction (Fuchs 2011, 2014) while others have drawn on a more ecumenical 'cultural industries' research tradition (Hesmondhalgh 2013). Engaging with Marx yet resisting the rigidities and reductionism of radical functionalism in explaining social processes remains a collective pursuit and challenge. </IP>

## <H1>Media systems research</H1>

<UIP>In media and communications studies, the culturalist tradition has focused on content, use and meaning-making while a social scientific tradition has examined structures, institutions and policy. CPE analysis insists on engaging with both and, while not unique in that claim, nevertheless offers a vital resource for analysts seeking to examine the connections between communication arrangements and processes, culture and society. It is ten years since Hallin and Mancini's (2004) *Comparing Media Systems* revitalized studies in the historical co-evolution and differentiation of media



systems with particular emphasis on the state, governance, media–politics relations and news media. Here too, the contribution of CPE scholars is recognized but peripheral. Comparative media systems draw more heavily on mainstream political science, criticized for its blind spots toward such issues as the exceptionalism within Western systems of America’s informal empire, extreme social inequality and marketized corporate media system (Curran 2011; Hardy [2008](#), 2012). </UIP>

<IP>Yet CPE scholars have certainly contributed to this sub-field and productive dialogues have emerged on issues such as the nation state and governance, and globalization and media and cultural flows (Chakravartty and Zhao 2008; Morris and Waisbord 2001). So comparative media systems analysis might be regarded as the successor to the political economy tradition, but on the contrary I would argue that CPE makes a necessary contribution to strengthen this important work. One illustration is Zhao’s (2012: 145) critique of the downplaying of imperialism in regional and nation-centric analyses and her call for analysis of ‘[the](#) world’s media systems in their structural relationships – not simply in comparative terms, which tend to flatten asymmetric power relations between the systems under comparison’. Zhao (2012: 145) also argues that extending a Western-generated comparative framework

to the rest of the world may still engender ethnocentric mode of analysis and she asks how 'Western-based theoretical categories may be engaged without reproducing the subalternity of non-Western media studies'. I think that sets a vital, challenging agenda, not least for a CPE tradition whose own normativity can occlude the differentiation required for situated analysis and policy prescriptions alike. The broader call to internationalize media studies is also integral to contemporary political economy research that tries, of necessity, to assess variable patterns in capitalisms, states and communications systems, building on the anti-imperialism and commitment to communicative reciprocity amongst such founding figures as Herbert Schiller and Dallas Smythe (Chakravartty and Zhao 2008; Mosco 2009; Thussu 2009).

## <H1>Challenges and synthesis</H1>

<UIP>Some leading CPE figures offered downbeat assessments of the tradition a decade ago. Curran (2002: 165) described a 'mid-life crisis' whereby the radical tradition was 'weakened by self-referential revisionist argument, while the liberal tradition expanded relatively unchecked by criticism'. McChesney (2004, 2007) reflected on the increasingly hostile institutional environment for CPE scholarship in

the United States against a backdrop of the collapse of communism, a weakened left and ascendant neoliberalism. However, recent assessments have been more upbeat. Political economy, argues Miller (2011), has ‘roared back into town’ as its concerns with communications industries, intellectual property, media work and precarity return to prominence. Indicators of contemporary relevance and vitality include recent edited collections of international scholarship such as *The Handbook of Political Economy of Communications* (Wasco, Murdock and Sousa 2011), Winseck and Jin (2012) and Chakravartty and Zhao (2008).

The rise of critical studies also reflects the contemporary critical juncture (McChesney 2007) with renewed criticism of capitalism and rising socio-economic inequality in the wake of the financial crisis and great recession, anti-neoliberal governments and movements in Latin America and the various nation and regional struggles for democracy across authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and Asia.

Alongside this has been the revived interest in Marxism after some three decades in which postmodernism, neoliberalism and culturalism prevailed in the academy.

The renewed attention to the analysis and critique of capitalism is very welcome and productive. However, I believe that Marxist approaches should remain a subset of

a broader critical political economy. It was the totalizing frameworks of Marxism that many of the founding figures in political economy such as Garnham, Golding, Murdock and Curran rejected. The CPE tradition has some core characteristics but does not adopt a rigid orthodoxy or specific methods, instead the approach is delineated by attention to political and economic dimensions combined with critical engagement with problems that impede the realization of social justice, equality and democracy and a sustainable ecosystem. The CPE tradition asks critical questions about communications arrangements. I have argued elsewhere that core themes remain salient but CPE must continue to adapt to new conditions and challenges (Hardy 2014). So what are the key issues and concerns for the time ahead?

My first answer would be the continuing internationalization of media studies, and with it a de-centring and questioning of the provenance and salience of any ethnocentric perspective. To extend a critical political economy of media means to examine the constellations of political, economic and cultural power in different contexts and arrangements. In doing so, the explanatory frameworks that have informed analysis, normative critique and policy reform agendas need to be subjected to greater comparative scrutiny. That opens up an agenda that can revitalize theory as

well as empirical investigation. How have processes of marketization, commercialization and liberalization developed and been resisted, in different media systems and cultures? Already there has been considerable work examining evolving forms of state–market relationship across different systems, captured by such terms as party–market corporatism. CPE must make a strong contribution to the analysis of state–media–capital tripartite relationships, from neoliberal states to theocratic and market authoritarian ones. The CPE tradition brings particular attention to *longue durée* historical change and the importance of policies and regulation in shaping media markets.

Political, military and communications power have richly intertwined histories from the ancient world to the present (Mattelart 1994). The state–military–industrial complex was a core theme around which North American media political economy organized in the 1970s through the works of Herbert Schiller and others. Analysis of the military–industrial complex was detailed and revelatory but often overly functionalist, yet the critique made of this work contributed to breaking connections that now need to be reassembled and understood in their complex, evolving forms.

How does the corporatization of military and security activities relate to state–

corporate and military links in communications technologies and services? The close ties between the US military and Silicon Valley in such developments as Google Earth are just one example (McChesney 2013: 100–01). Edward Snowden’s leaks revealed how extensively telecoms giants were willing collaborators with states in surveillance. The digital giants conduct intensive lobbying on behalf of their business interests, such as seeking immunity from prosecution for providing data to the US government. Their business models also largely depend on policy approval of their own invasive economic surveillance – tracking computer users to monetize their profiles and activity online, selling information and access to advertisers. In this state–corporate nexus, the interests of users and citizens are at risk of being squeezed to the margins. </IP>

<IP>Something of a buzzword in 2013, [Big Data](#), nevertheless highlights how the collection and use of digital communications data connects state, corporate and commercial interests. Amongst Intel’s predicted ten-fold increase in total data between 2013 and 2016, data from social media, video streaming and personal communications is subject to surveillance, management and exploitation by providers, mostly commercial companies, offering cloud computing and other services. Such manifestations of ongoing convergence, and the globalization of information capitalism, need an analytically convergent CPE to address issues of control, privacy,

security, environmental damage and labour as well as the dynamics of corporate systems, social usage and community cloud-based initiatives. </IP>

<IP>Mosco (2014) highlights the enormous energy consumption and ecological destruction underpinning 'cloud' server farms. Global media industries involve practices that are highly damaging to the environment, from energy use to waste.

Maxwell (2009) proposes an agenda that includes student research on media industrialization and encompasses non-human biodiversity. This relates to another key problem area, media representations of the ecological crisis and environmentalism.

One recent study found that 96 per cent of extreme weather stories on US nightly news did not discuss the human impact on the climate (Hart 2013). Here, CPE attention to the way governments, corporate, public relations and advertising interests influence coverage remains highly relevant on this and many other issues (Beder 2011), even if more open, and less functionalist, investigation of influences is required.

One such study (Hmielowski et al. 2013: 13) that addresses the mediating role of trust in scientists, nevertheless concludes that 'the more American use conservative media, the less certain they are that global warming is happening'. </IP>

<IP>Critical studies need to continue to engage with the wider politics of sustainable and ethical life and the way communications contribute to representations, debate and understanding on what good living may mean. For instance, we need to trace connections between how neoliberalism has influenced communication arrangements and discourses, engaging with both CPE and culturalist articulation theories. In the UK the period since 2008 has seen a rise in ‘poverty porn’ TV genres such as *Benefits Street* (Channel Four), *Benefits Britain: Life on the Dole* (Channel Five) and *Gypsies on Benefits and Proud* (Channel Five) that mobilize criticism of social provision in their demonization of welfare recipients and immigrants. To trace these connections across the whole range of communications – public-facing content industries and social media – requires the more integrative, synthesizing perspectives discussed above.</IP>

<IP>A strong tradition of CPE work on surveillance (Gandy 1993) has been extended to examine the implications of digital surveillance mechanisms that collect information on our interactions with media, corporations and state systems (Andrejevic 2012; Fuchs 2014; Turow 2011). The use of data-mining techniques to make commercial use of the information collected from us raises profoundly troubling issues and both the issues and the ways they have been managed in news media and in



policy are likely to remain major concerns connecting CPE research with public

concern and advocacy work by groups such Privacy International. </IP>

<IP>CPE is well placed to address central issues of academic and societal interest.

How will communications services be financed and paid and what are the

implications for the services provided and used? My own particular interests here lie

in exploring the changing nature of media–advertising relationships (Hardy 2010,

2014; McAllister and West 2013), a project that requires consideration of

communications businesses, governance and lobbying but also asks how the

integration of media and marketing becomes normalized amongst professionals, pro-

gram producers, users and publics. </IP>

<IP>This is a selection only and not an attempt to do justice to the full range and

diversification of research that engages with critical political economy (see Fuchs

2014; Hardy 2014; Mosco 2009; Wasco, Murdock and Sousa 2011; Winseck and Jin

2012). For instance, studies of policy and policy-making have examined the framing

of regulatory discourses surrounding convergence and globalization processes, and the

extent to which citizens, users and civil society can act within the asymmetries of

money, power, lobbying and influence (Freedman 2008; Volkmer 2012). Researchers

have also mapped the explosion of radical and alternative media and their attendant politics, as well as excavating the histories of social movement protests over communications (Hackett and Carroll 2006; Pajnik and Downing 2009). </IP>

<IP>Finally, an overarching research theme concerns privatizing the commons. For Zittrain (2008), the open, generative World Wide Web is being eclipsed by the growth of proprietary systems. For Anderson and Wolff (2010) such a pessimistic account is true of commercial content but non-commercial peer production continues to thrive, ‘driven by the nonmonetary incentives of expression, attention, reputation, and the like’. This returns to the larger debates about how to evaluate modern media including ‘the general question of the capitalist mode of production and of the difficult balance to be struck[...]between its genuinely emancipatory and its dominating characteristics’ (Garnham 2000: 41). </IP>

<IP>The purpose of CPE is not to iterate the pessimistic against optimistic speculation. Instead, it tries to investigate the political economic conditions for communications practices, and uses the analysis of existing arrangements to consider the constraints on possible arrangements. We can combine resources for hope in efforts to cultivate alternative media with efforts to analyse constraints and conditions

that shape how they are realized. What remains problematic is less the celebration of prosumer production than an overestimation of its potential to vault the influences of capital and class power. By exploring how communication resources are organized and relating this to how wider aspects of social life are organized and change, CPE provides the foundations for an inclusive, integrative study of media and communications, it connects the study of communication convergence with examination and critique of existing societies. The critical political economy of communications marks out a dynamic tradition that draws on past work, asks vital questions about communications today, and will continue to revisit and reinvigorate the answers given. It is also an interventionist tradition, characterized by the need to attend to problems in the social organization of communications. Its validity and value ultimately resides in contributing to making a difference to people's lives.</IP>

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