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## **Introduction**

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This book is about the political economy of communication and culture at the start of a new millennium. It can be read as a status report on an important research tradition that explains the role played by the means of communication in the modern world. As in many other areas of inquiry in the human sciences, the boundaries of political economy shift over time, due to both historical transformations in the object of study—the institutions and technologies we know as “the media”—and the intellectual developments that are characteristic of any lively research tradition. The chapters in this volume are a testimony to the vitality of that tradition.

What is “political economy,” and what is the nature of its relationship to communication and culture? These questions have captured the attention of many scholars, several of whom are contributors to this volume. Perhaps the most detailed and accessible introduction to the subject is Vincent Mosco’s aptly titled *The Political Economy of Communication* (1996). In answering the question “What is political economy?” Mosco provides an extended and enlightening introduction to the heritage of modern political economy by examining the contributions of many key thinkers, including Adam Smith, David Ricardo, Thomas Malthus, Karl Marx, Jeremy Bentham, J. S. Mill, Alfred Marshall, John Maynard Keynes, and numerous others. Mosco’s account is not a neutral catalog; instead, it focuses primarily on what we might generally refer to as a “critical political economy,” emphasizing Marxian or materialist

thought in particular. Of more importance at this historical moment is the attention Mosco pays to the *political* in political economy, noting how the discipline and language of contemporary economics have evolved to profess value neutrality. Unlike political economy, contemporary economics tends not to explicitly engage with moral considerations and political questions that have historically been central to political economists.

Moving from “political economy” to the “political economy of communication,” Mosco provides a comprehensive review of work in the field that spans several generations and continents, from the pioneering work of Dallas Smythe and Herbert Schiller to that of Nicholas Garnham, Graham Murdock, Dan Schiller, Peter Golding, Janet Wasko, Armand Mattelart, Bernard Miège, Jill Hills, Manjunath Pendakur, Robin Mansell, Robert McChesney, and numerous others. In one way or another, all of these authors have been preoccupied with how the dynamics of capital accumulation and class power manifest themselves in the capitalist mode of production, particularly the institutional structure, organization, and production processes of the media industries.

Another writer who has reflected at length and in depth on the political economy of communication is Nicholas Garnham. Over the course of more than three decades, Garnham has been influential in British media politics and academic circles through a body of theory and research that goes far beyond Britain in defining the field. Garnham defines political economy across a number of his books and essays, emphasizing first and foremost that “it is always concerned with analyzing a structure of social relations and of social power. But it is particularly concerned to analyze the peculiarities of that system of social power called capitalism” (Garnham 1990a, 7). He notes a starting assumption of political economy: “the historically observable unequal distribution of the surplus product, from an essentially collaborative enterprise, as between capital and labor requires explanation, is historically contingent and is the result of the specific structure of the mode of production” (8). Elsewhere, he characterizes this inequality, as it applies to communication, in the following way:

A delimited social group, pursuing economic or political ends, determines which meanings circulate and which do not, which stories are told about what, which arguments are given prominence and what cultural resources are made available and to whom. The analysis of this process is vital to an understanding of the power relationships involved in culture and their relationship to wider structures of domination. (Garnham 1995, 65)

It is worth noting that Garnham and others tend to interchange the phrases “political economy of communication” and “political economy of communication and *culture*” (e.g., Garnham 1990a, 8). The explicit attention that this book’s title brings to the latter term is meant both to take into account where the field has in fact already been and where it must focus more intensively

in the future. The degree to which the media constitute, define, or otherwise influence what we take to be the realm of the “cultural” in the modern world is certainly a matter for dispute. What is indisputable is that no conception of culture in the modern world is complete if it fails to account for the space occupied by “the media”—the institutional and technological means of communication and information. Although the media do not offer sufficient grounds for outlining the domain of a political economy of culture, they are a necessary and central aspect of that field. To the extent that this book aims to stay true to its agenda—*toward a political economy of culture*—it does so by demonstrating where some of that necessity lies: in examining the material foundations of what we have come to call the “public sphere,” in understanding our news and entertainment industries as capitalist enterprises, in media policy and regulation, and on the frontiers of “new media” development. Before moving to the following chapters that address these subjects, we should consider some of the unique features that shape the context of a critical political economy of communication and culture in the first years of the new millennium.

In the last decade of the twentieth century, we witnessed many profound changes that have in various ways shaped the political economy of communication and culture, including the “velvet revolutions” that brought an end to communist governments in Central and Eastern Europe and thus an end to the Cold War; the ascent of neoliberal economic theory and, related to this, the declining influence of Keynesian economic theory and the sharp erosion of the post–World War II social policy settlements of many affluent capitalist democracies; massive industrial reorganization in most capitalist countries, especially in mass media, information technology, and telecommunications; the formation of new regional trading blocs (e.g., the European Union, NAFTA, Mercosul); and the intensive expansion and consolidation of Western (particularly U.S.) control over global trade and investment policy and regulation. At the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, we witnessed a “global contagion”—the domino effect of failing currencies in many countries in Asia, Eastern Europe, and South America—marking the beginning of a world economic recession; the September 11 suicide attacks on American targets in New York City and Washington, D.C., followed by the U.S.-led military invasion of the Taliban regime and al Qaeda bases in Afghanistan; and a “preemptive war” waged by the United States and Great Britain against Iraq. This is far from an exhaustive list of key events over the past decade or so, but it gives a sense of the major geopolitical events at the dawn of the new millennium.

It is impossible to calculate the number of new risks that have arisen in the wake of these developments, but some specific doubts, with particular reference to the United States, are worth highlighting. During most of the “go-go” years of the 1990s, the triumph of Western-dominated global capitalism and the principles of liberal democracy that undergird it seemed to many to

be irreversible. Economic crises occurred in Russia, Brazil, Thailand, Indonesia, Argentina, and elsewhere in what appeared to be a domino effect, or what the *New York Times* termed “global contagion” (Kristof et al. 1999). For many journalists, academics, and politicians, these events called into question the economic foundation of the triumphalist mantra that had been resounding in the business and political press in the United States and elsewhere. When the American new economy’s “dot-com bubble” burst, Wall Street traders couldn’t dump their Internet shares fast enough, as they discovered that telecommunications and information services could not meet the unrealistic earnings expectations that had been placed on them. This downturn happened just as the Clinton presidency was winding down. When George W. Bush became president, he found himself in a much less secure economic situation than his predecessor. Clinton rode the wave of unprecedented stock market growth just long enough to see it wash ashore as his presidency ended. Seeing that whoever followed Clinton would inherit a troubled economy, Bush emphasized in his election campaign that the key to economic recovery and long-term prosperity lay in stimulating investor confidence, which he proposed to accomplish mainly through a program of radical tax cuts. A short time after taking office, Bush fulfilled his promise and got the Congress to approve a modified version of his plan. In June 2001 he signed into law a \$1.35 trillion, ten-year tax cut. Meanwhile, the stock market continued to slide as unemployment continued to rise in the United States while consumer confidence declined. Only a few months later, the dramatic and tragic events of September 11, 2001, drew the eyes of the world toward the United States. Shortly after, Bush declared that his presidency would be dedicated to leading a “war on terrorism,” and his first front would be a conventional attack against the Taliban regime and al Qaeda forces based in Afghanistan.

Although arguably these two events—the worldwide recession and the terrorist attack on the United States—have no direct connection, they are related in the sense that they both signal in different ways a change of status for the last remaining superpower in the eyes of the world, and they raise new questions about the future of global leadership. The Bush presidency began with an economic plan that was generally premised on the continuity of a world safe for American capitalism. That premise was threatened by a direct assault on symbols of American financial and military power—the spaces and occupants of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. For the Bush administration, 9/11 became the basis on which some of its most controversial policy ambitions found popular support, including radically intensified domestic surveillance of American citizens and foreign nationals living in the United States (Chang 2002; American Civil Liberties Union 2003) and, with the support of the British government, the unilateral invasion of Iraq in March 2003. It is too soon to say what the long-term consequences of these actions will be, although predictions range widely.

What was happening in the communication and information industries during the past two decades? In the 1990s, the U.S. government was busily re-vamping and consolidating the regulatory reforms that had reached a crescendo with the breakup of AT&T in the early 1980s.<sup>1</sup> This momentous event was a watershed in U.S. policy making that also became a model for telecommunications deregulation, privatization, and liberalization in many countries. Industries and policy makers began to tout the benefits of “open networks” as they labored to reconfigure the emerging new media environment, aiming toward the convergence of previously separated industries. During this time, telephone companies, newspaper chains, cable television systems, satellite services, data communication companies, television and radio broadcasters, research and development firms, hardware suppliers, pundits, media researchers, and policy makers shared in imagining an information age that could reinvigorate the spirit of capitalism. Despite continued growth in the size and penetrating influence of the U.S. government, regulators in several industries, especially in media and telecommunications, belligerently ratified the article of faith that the “public interest” is best served by the market. Government is at best a necessary evil, a damaging force, the presence of which must be minimized. In terms of media policy, government’s role should be limited to advancing the movement of the means of communication as central to the mode of production, particularly by intervening in the realm of ownership policies. A pressing concern is to eliminate barriers to cross-media ownership and promote the global expansion of corporate property rights within the reconfiguring industries. By the end of the 1980s, the collective will was widely in place to reinvent the new and emerging means of communication to meet the specifications of flexible accumulation by deeply embedding their uses into the worlds of work, politics, finance, culture, and our most intimate spheres of everyday life. In many ways, media and telecommunications developments and policies of the 1980s and 1990s have shaped and also reflect the prevailing market, or neoliberal, conception of what the information society should look like.

By the early 1990s, two globally significant patterns of media development were under way: the Internet “revolution,” that is, rapid diffusion in the use of digital networks for work and leisure, and the transnational “harmonization” of telecommunications regulatory policy. The Uruguay Round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), concluded by the end of 1993, established much of the framework for what became the World Trade Organization (WTO). In 1993 the director general of the WTO, Renato Ruggiero, said in a speech, “We are writing the constitution for a single global economy.”<sup>2</sup> The WTO has become a powerful force in the transnational enforcement of intellectual property rights (IPR) and the arbitration of IPR disputes. Today the WTO, together with other multilateral organizations, exercises broad powers to secure the shareholder interests of the world’s largest corporations, wherever they operate. Sweeping national and international regulatory reform in

the communications and information industries underlie much of what globalization theorists point to as change at the structural level, and the national player that by most accounts has had the greatest influence in these developments is the United States. Through direct pressure on many foreign governments and by example the U.S. government has exercised a forceful foreign policy in shaping the new global media environment, which can hardly be called a level playing field.<sup>3</sup>

Concurrent with powerful efforts to globalize and harmonize trade and investment policies affecting the media, the early 1990s saw the prospect of a commercially viable form of digital communication (the Internet) emerge. The World Wide Web and user-friendly graphic displays on web browsers made the corporate world sit up and take notice of a business opportunity in what previously had been viewed as an arcane realm that only computer nerds and egg-headed academics could navigate. Within a short period of time, the celebrated “information superhighway,” as U.S. Vice President Al Gore famously (or infamously) called it, came to be viewed as a new Athenian agora. Soon word began to spread that not everyone would be able to afford the technology, and among those who could many would lack the education to use it effectively. Thus was born what is now treated as a worldwide social policy issue: the digital divide. Convergences of previously separate media and telecommunications industries led to new thinking about what sorts of communication needs would have to be met among the have-nots in a global information society. The old industry models for public service broadcasting and universal telephone service would require rethinking.

In the United States, as new Internet companies began to sprout, policy makers and the corporate lobbies that supported them began to recognize the remaining myriad legal and regulatory obstacles that interfered with the realization of shared dreams of a technologically and industrially converged digital media environment. Thus fresh efforts were made to fulfill a widely held dream of comprehensively rewriting the patchwork of U.S. communications law, particularly in the wake of the breakup of AT&T. The dream became reality when President Bill Clinton signed the Telecommunications Act of 1996 into law. It has done much to accelerate the already dizzying pace of industry concentration, vertical integration, and conglomeration among previously separate telecommunications and mass media behemoths. Concerns that further unrestricted industry concentration would mean greater shrinkage in the number of voices in news, public affairs, and entertainment and that market censorship would impede public awareness and stifle public debate had little chance to be aired. The companies that were in the best positions to relay concerns about foul play in policy making to the public, and to offer forums to consider the consequences, were also frontrunners in the race to achieve the blissful state of “synergy” that the new policies promised. The prospect of coupling massive technological innovation to a bonanza of mergers and acquisitions and the promise of untold profits far outweighed

what nay-sayers were claiming about threats to the health of the public sphere. Today, the U.S. Federal Communications Commission (FCC), the primary domestic regulatory body for enforcing telecommunications and mass media policy at the national level, endorses industry rhetoric that media concentration is a path to not only greater economies of scale but also greater editorial diversity. In classic doublespeak, the prevailing view emanating from the FCC is that media concentration is good for America and, of course, for the world (Calabrese, in press).

What risks are associated with the declining number of independent voices? Historically, antitrust law has been based on the reasoning that the public is disserved by a lack of competition for price and quality of service. Moreover, the realm of public communication has had a unique status in regard to industry regulation. "Pure" economic competition arguments have always been balanced in liberal legal theory against concerns about such general interests as freedom of expression and the public's "right to know." Media concentration has been subject to prophylactic regulation based on the belief that a lack of editorial diversity threatens to undermine the breadth, depth, and overall quality of public knowledge and discussion about issues of vital importance, including matters of war and peace, public health and safety, and social and economic well-being.<sup>4</sup> Such risks reflect the sort of inequality in which a "delimited social group, pursuing economic or political ends, determines which meanings circulate and which do not" (Garnham 1990a, 8). Indeed, the possibility of an autonomous political culture or the autonomy of culture in general is called into question.

Garnham has emphasized the link between the political economy of the means of communication on the one hand, and the political culture it enables on the other. Like others who have advanced the ideals of a rational public sphere, however, he neglected, in his initial treatment of the public-private dichotomy, the high barriers that exist for many who seek to establish the legitimacy of their interests and their moral claims. Like Habermas's initial treatment of the public sphere, Garnham in "The Media and the Public Sphere" (1990b) said little about how or why vernacular rhetoric can or should be heard within the hallowed and idealized public sphere of rational deliberation among privileged elites. For this reason, among others, a rationalist and patriarchal concept of the public sphere has been found lacking by numerous critics (e.g., Calhoun 1992; White 1995; Young 2000). Not surprisingly, the terms of this debate are played out across the human sciences. In a subsequent but much different essay by the same title, Garnham (1992) advanced his position as he contributed to the sharper criticism of Habermas by responding to the increasingly acknowledged need to think about the public sphere in more ecumenical terms. More recently, in appealing to a "nonfoundational" concept of reason, Garnham (2000, 8) pits the "overweening rational subject" against "doubt," the latter being identified with what he characterizes as the true spirit of the Enlightenment project. He identifies his concept of reason as Kantian,



based on ideals of “open debate among free citizens,” as opposed to a Cartesian concept (180). Garnham argues that Habermas seeks to wed Kant’s view of public reason with “a “search for foundationalism in the basic structure of communicative action which is both unnecessary and probably unsustainable” (181). Whether Habermas lacks an intersubjective concept of reason is arguable, which is evident in his sustained treatment of the subject in his later work. Regarding his views on the media, in various publications, Habermas has conceded much to criticism of his early work, and in his underdeveloped references to the subject he has generally departed from the concept of an undifferentiated mass society by acknowledging that politics and popular culture are more intimately connected than perhaps he had previously recognized (e.g., Habermas 1992, 438–39).

Of more immediate importance is an aporia in Garnham’s own non-foundational epistemology, which seems to run against the grain of the argument he makes elsewhere in claiming that cultural studies rejects the notion of false consciousness and treats it as the “temporary effect of discourse” (Garnham 1995, 69). Whether it is true that this is a view generally held within the multiperspective field of cultural studies, Garnham further argues that “without some notion of grounded truth the ideas of emancipation, resistance, and progressiveness become meaningless” (69). How do we reconcile this compelling claim with Garnham’s appeal to the contingent, which is ever present in a nonfoundational, intersubjective conception of reason? We cannot have it both ways. And although intersubjective reason was never at odds with Enlightenment ideals, with Kant being the most notable exponent of the principle (and Habermas arguably being his closest contemporary exponent), Garnham does not instruct us on how his own nonfoundational epistemology should be distinguished from the nonfoundational frameworks he rejects for being postmodern. At one extreme, we have been duly cautioned against embracing the negative ideal of the overweening rational subject, but at the other boundary, like so many other cautions against postmodern relativism, Garnham’s is fuzzy. On the one hand, he tells us we should distinguish a critique of false consciousness that is founded on the negative rationalist ideal from one based on intersubjective reason. On the other, how do we defend an intersubjective position that critiques “false consciousness” from the charge that such a position is simply the product of an overweening rational subject? A sympathetic reading might be that his appeal to “grounded truth” is more dialectical, more grounded in a historical materialist theory of power, than his comments here suggest. In any case, is it the question of false consciousness that divides political economy and cultural studies? Equally important, is there a unified view of ideology within critical political economy? And if so, what might that be?

Whatever one concludes, Garnham’s provocative views on the media and the public sphere deserve close attention, particularly because they represent



an intelligent and sustained appeal to the Enlightenment project, an uncomfortable position to take while prevailing winds have been blowing in the opposite direction for many years. This has been done mainly through a career-long project to contribute to a historical materialist political economy of communication and culture. But much remains to be done in advancing this tradition, particularly if it is to engage with the idea of the “cultural” in ways that go beyond aging debates with cultural studies. Has common ground been discovered between these two fields? An increasingly common interest is policy analysis, criticism, and intervention, long a preoccupation of political economists and more recently an area in which cultural theorists have demonstrated interest (e.g., Bennett 1998; Miller 1998). A key area of shared concern centers on the *meaning of citizenship*, not only in terms of rights and responsibilities associated with government but also with respect to the rightfully contested terrain of “civil society,” and of “culture” within it.

Another area of common interest, which overlaps with the shared concerns about citizenship, entails questions about media audiences, including questions of continued importance about how audiences are commodified (e.g., Meehan 1990, 1993; Wasko and Hagen 1999). Oscar Gandy’s innovative work on audiences, including his essay in this book, demonstrates the significance of understanding the range of implications of audience surveillance and market segmentation, as a means of not only commodification but also inclusion and exclusion. Perhaps this growing interest in the audience will establish the common empirical ground that is lacking and needed in efforts to develop more fruitful dialogue, and even collaboration, between practitioners of political economy and cultural studies. Equally important for political economists is that a focus on the audience makes it possible to respond more effectively to the types of issues raised by Garnham about how a political economy of culture can claim to know which meanings do or do not circulate, which stories are told, and which arguments are most prominent as a result of inequality in the social relations of production. In short, audience research enables us to answer empirical questions about what we think we know regarding *the production and circulation of meaning*, which is not of negligible importance, given claims on which the work of political economists rest. To address such issues, political economists must respond to research that attempts to answer these empirical questions, as well as make a more active contribution. Such a move necessitates not only that we view the means of communication as the means of production, but also that we understand the mode of production in terms that extend beyond a narrow industrial focus. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx’s introduction to the critique of political economy, he implicitly counsels against an undialectical tendency to treat production and consumption as a binary pairing:

Production, then is also immediately consumption, consumption is also immediately production. Each is immediately its opposite. But at the same time

a mediating movement takes place between the two. Production mediates consumption; it creates the latter's material; without it consumption would lack an object. But consumption also mediates production, in that it alone creates for the products the subject for whom they are products. The product only obtains its "last finish" in consumption. . . . Consumption produces production in a double way, (1) because a product becomes a real product only by being consumed; (2) because consumption creates the need for *new* production, that is it creates the ideal, internally impelling cause for production, which is its presupposition. (Marx 1973, 91)

Applied to media audiences, these words underscore the need to avoid seeing the audience as being on the "other side" of production. Real and meaningful differences do not just disappear when we recognize shared interests between political economy and cultural studies, nor should this be the goal. Highlighting common empirical ground is not a call for false consensus on important substantive questions about determination, the autonomy of culture, and human agency, or about the relationships among class, race, gender, and other bases of inequality. But the broad field of critical media and cultural studies is too small, and the domain it professes to explain is too vast, to afford the luxury of divisive misunderstanding and indifference where interested and respectful engagement would prove far more fruitful. As Graham Murdock wisely counsels, "The aim must be to work toward the construction of a more complete account of the central dynamics of contemporary culture and to mobilize these insights to defend the symbolic resources required to extend the rights and duties of citizenship in the service of revitalizing democracy" (1995, 94). These are worthy aspirations for a coherent critical theory of communication and culture.

Critical research about the political economy of communication and culture has made important contributions to a wide range of theory and practice related to media industries and policies, technology studies, and political and cultural theories about the institutional pressures and constraints on public discourse and the public sphere. The chapters in this volume offer a snapshot of that legacy as it continues to thrive. The contributors include several of the leading political economists of communication working today. The authors have varied backgrounds of education and research experience, and they represent a wide range of career stages. They turn their attention to a rich mix of topics and issues that link to the heritage of political economy work, policy studies, and research and theory about the public sphere. Familiar but still exceedingly important topics in critical political economy studies are well represented here: market structures and media concentration, regulation and policy, technological impacts on particular media sectors, information poverty, and media access. New and important contributions for political economy research are charted, and relatively unexplored but fruitful lines of inquiry are presented, including work on racism in audience research, the value and need for feminist approaches to political

economy studies, and the relationship between the discourse of media finance and the behavior of markets.

The idea for this project originated amid efforts to plan a conference in honor of the work of Professor Nicholas Garnham. Garnham's work is unique in the set of concerns he has brought to bear in political economy studies. He has steadfastly contributed to important interdisciplinary dialogues about the relationships among political communication, cultural practices, industry structures, technological innovation, state power, and the logic of capital accumulation. Chapter 2, by James Curran, pays homage to the Westminster School of political economy work, behind which Garnham's work is a primary force. Curran thoughtfully outlines the important influence of that legacy in contemporary work on the political economy of culture. The other chapters focus on various issues and topics of importance in the contemporary political economy of communication and culture. Most, but not all, of the contributors offer explicitly critical perspectives on how capitalism has shaped and been shaped by the public and private media institutions of the twenty-first century.

## NOTES

1. The best chronicle of this history is Horwitz 1989.
2. Renato Ruggiero, director general of the World Trade Organization, in a speech presented to the UCTAD Trade and Development Board on October 8, 1996. Quoted on the Public Citizen Global Trade Watch website: [www.citizen.org](http://www.citizen.org).
3. For an overview of the sources of U.S. influence in media-related trade negotiations through the Uruguay Round, see Calabrese and Redal 1995. See O'Siochru, Girard, and Mahan 2002 for an excellent overview of "global media governance," with historically informed introductions to all major governance bodies.
4. A competitive media environment, not just a highly concentrated one, is also prey to the harms of market censorship, as industry pressures to safely define and conform to prevailing audience tastes can lead to homogeneity.

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