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Media and the Economic Crisis

Introduction

Laboring the Academy: New Directions for Communications Studies in the Economic Crisis

Brian Dolber

This collection of essays originated from a pre-conference at the 2009 National Communication Association (NCA) meeting in Chicago, “The ‘New’ New Economy: Media and the Economic Crisis,” which Mark Hayward and I co-chaired. The financial collapse of Fall 2008 had laid to bare what critical scholars of communications are always cognizant of-- that capitalism, and particularly neoliberal capitalism, is an unsustainable system. No longer a fringe area of inquiry, understanding the relationships between media and economies is now becoming central to making sense of, and hopefully addressing, problems in our social and cultural environment.

This work is not the exclusive domain of what traditionally has been called political economy. Bob McChesney (2007), who acted as a respondent at the pre-conference, argues that we are now in a “critical juncture.” The proliferation of new technologies, the deterioration of journalism, and the persistence of advertising coincide with the financialization of our economy, the growth of unemployment and under employment, and the limited role for a democratic voice in governance. In this context, the underpinning principles upon our media system and the political system are being called into question, in North America and globally.

This demands a scholarly-- but not an academic-- response. As McChesney (2009) has noted, the long standing battles within communications studies between political economy and cultural studies are now seemingly irrelevant (p. 47). The latest crisis highlights the ways in which various facets of our social totality intersect with each other, and demand critical analysis in order to develop strategies for change. As evidenced by the essays here, our moment of rupture opens up new possibilities for theories and praxis, particularly among emerging scholars-- graduate students and junior faculty. The scholars sharing their work here rise to the challenge to embark on such a project, thinking through how media and economy mutually constitute each other, and identify points of contradiction and tension that I believe can help us in the ongoing “war of position.”

In the first essay, Mark Hayward examines the intersections of media/financial networks, technology and regulation through a critical analysis of the “scandal” at the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) where federal regulators were found to have been

downloading large quantities of pornography during work hours. He argues that this illuminates the central role that media play in the management of the neoliberal economy. While dominant media discourses indicated that the incident justified deregulation on moral grounds, Hayward's analysis demonstrates that it also points to crises that emerge in all workplaces in the relationship between labor and technology, and the complex relationships between public and private under neoliberalism. By drawing attention to the uses of screen media at regulatory agencies, he works to broaden the potential for media studies scholarship to address the functioning of the neoliberal system.

Sindhu Zagoren also takes up the relationships between public and private, and media/economic networks in a different context. Her essay combines history, policy studies, and cultural approaches to technology in order to explore cable's emergence in the United States as a standard method of television transmission in the early 1970s-- interestingly, the moment in which neoliberal policies emerged as a response to capitalism's crises. Community antenna television (CATV) and media activists, she argues, presented a challenge to broadcasters and telecommunications providers. The result of the contestation between private interests, the state, and citizens help construct new relationships between public and private, and led to a "rearticulation of space." Zagoren's work offers insights into current debates about network neutrality and internet regulation as activists seek to preserve a commons against corporate enclosure.

Through discourse and textual analysis, Grant Bollmer also prompts us to think about the importance of community and its relationship to media/economic networks in the third essay. Bollmer discusses the contemporary relationship between debt and community through a reading of Frank Capra's Christmas classic, *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) in order to understand the contemporary foreclosure crisis. He argues that mortgages and homeownership are central to the maintenance of morality in Bedford Falls, where ethical banking keeps citizens indebted to each other through a financial network. Similar articulations of community were recently found in the financial sector, particularly in Wells Fargo's promotional materials and reports, as they responded to the burst of the housing bubble. Much as Hayward demonstrates, morality discourses once again function to preserve the neoliberal agenda, linking Main Street and Wall Street. Banking, Bollmer argues, must therefore become de-centered from notions of community in order to build an economy that considers the needs of those disconnected from the financial network.

Finally, Michelle Rondino-Colocino also shows how contemporary promotional discourses act as a response to the organic crisis in capitalism, drawing on Stuart Hall and Gramscian theory. Rondino-Colocino reads Dell's "Treats" ad and its paratext "Making 'Treats'" as part of a larger discourse of the "He-Cession," where gender stands in for anxieties around unemployment. Through her chosen objects of analysis, she not only contributes to our understanding of a media discourse, but draws attention to how media labor masks its own role in the production process, and workers are reduced to fans of the commodities they create. Thus, Rondino-Colocino unpacks the ways in which gender, labor, media and technology constitute our economic downturn, both structurally and ideologically, in order to identify our moment as one of potential social transformation.

These essays reflect our historical moment not only in their subjects and methodologies, but also in their processes of production, distribution, consumption and (hopefully) use. Discussion at the pre-conference not only highlighted the need to conceptualize how communications and the economy are remaking each other, but also ways in which the academy is being remade by both.

For many of us at NCA, these intersections were immediately palpable. A handful of pre-conference participants, including myself, were on the verge of going on strike with our union, the Graduate Employees' Organization (GEO), Local 6300 of the Illinois Federation of Teachers/American Federation of Teachers (IFT/AFT), which then represented approximately 2700 teaching and graduate assistants. Our strike was precipitated by the University of Illinois' refusal to guarantee that they would provide graduate workers with tuition waivers as a term of employment. In essence, we could be asked to pay our employer for the right to work. The notion that we should enjoy our labor as consumers, like the men in "Treats," helps constitute an ideology of individualism and privilege perpetuated by a university system in the throes, globally, of privatization.

As our workplace and our work are being remade, we must consider how academics will respond to the latest economic crisis. In particular, how will communications scholars respond, given the centrality of communications systems to neoliberalism and the uniqueness on our field? How does our own material experience as laborers shape the nature of the commodity we produce-- knowledge? How might we use the tools and technologies of casualization to build new solidarities and intellectual communities? In essence, to paraphrase Michael Denning (1998), might we see the laboring of academic culture?

As former Yale associate professor of English William Deresiewicz recently noted in *The Nation*, over the last several decades, "Good, secure, well-paid positions—tenured appointments in the academy, union jobs on the factory floor—are being replaced by temporary, low-wage employment," mirroring the rest of the U.S. economy. Instead of cutting enrollment into Ph.D. programs, universities are actually increasing enrollment, "maintaining the flow of labor to their domestic sweatshops, the pipeline of graduate students who staff discussion sections and teach introductory and service courses like freshman composition and first-year calculus." In such an environment, myths of meritocracy, individualism and personal responsibility push graduate students, junior faculty and adjuncts to build their CVs through publications and conference presentations in the hopes it will lead to secure employment, as they are saddled with more demanding teaching loads.

Rather than engage in this problem as solitary individuals, critical scholars particularly should consider cooperative approaches to knowledge production and publishing that generate community and make our own labor visible instead of obfuscating it. If we approach the crisis in higher education, the media and the economy as academics we will make our jobs and our field increasingly irrelevant. If we approach it as an intellectual community, we might have a fighting chance. Professional associations, such as the Union for Democratic Communications, can provide a space to develop this community in a variety of ways, including new approaches to academic publishing.

This forum is an attempt to move in that direction. In place of the double-blind peer review process, we shared our work with each other over a wiki, and offered comments in a forum open to all who wanted to participate. The authors featured herein, as well as Vicki Mayer, Associate Professor of Communication at Tulane University, and Rich Potter, Ph.D. candidate at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, contributed to the conversation. The authors then revised their essays, and Mark Hayward and I made final suggestions as editors. The intent here was to begin to build a community of critical scholars through mutual cooperation. This is not a manifesto project, and we are certainly not opposed to more traditional forms of scholarly publication. We all participate in them regularly. But we are also interested in exploring alternatives that allow for new relationships to develop among scholars, and for using emerging technologies in order to share ideas more democratically.

This work, notably, is not appearing in a commercially published journal. The authors and I are excited for this forum to be in *Democratic Communiqué's* debut issue as an online, open access publication. The reasons for this transition are multiple, but I believe it is an asset to furthering UDC's project. Through this effort, I hope we have contributed a small amount to building a commons for the exchange of ideas about issues that matter. I would like to thank Jim Tracy and the editorial board for the opportunity to publish these essays, and for UDC's long-standing vision of a critical academic community. As the following essays demonstrate, we need this vision now more than ever.

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