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Past the Posts

Rethinking Change, Retrieving Critique

■ *Graham Murdock*

ABSTRACT

■ This article takes issue with three central ideas in contemporary writing on communications and change – postmodernity, the 'digital revolution' and cultural globalization – arguing that they overvalue the 'new' and take insufficient account of historical continuities, structural inequalities and the scale and scope of economic restructuring. It suggests that analysis needs to start from the globalization of capitalist imperatives and its shifting relations to state logics and go on to explore the variable and contradictory ways this process is reconstructing communications systems as industries, cultural formations and everyday resources. ■

Key Words capitalism, cultural commons, globalization, modernity, new media

The embrace of the new

Our world is changing, and communications are central to this change. (Byers and Smith, 2000: 1)

Something very new is happening in the world. . . . A number of overlapping trends are involved [but] the first, and in my opinion in some ways the most important one, is the world-wide communications revolution. . . . 'Gee-whiz' types . . . see a world breaking quite radically with the

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past. . . . On the whole I tend to agree with the Gee-whizzers. (Giddens and Hutton, 2000: 1-3)

These quotations, the first from the introduction to a British government White Paper proposing root-and-branch changes to the regulatory system governing broadcasting and telecommunications, the second from Britain's best known social theorist, Anthony Giddens, speak to an account of change that commands increasing currency. For media scholars, used to being confined to the sidelines of theoretical fields dominated by the interests of the established social sciences, or derided by cultural elites for wasting time investigating soap operas, it is a shock to find that communications systems – as industries, cultural formations and sites of everyday social practice – are now seen as central to the reorganization of economic and imaginative life. This new-found prominence presents media specialists with a major opportunity to contribute to core intellectual and political debates, but only if we refuse to be seduced by two central tendencies in contemporary talk about communications and change: the overvaluation of the 'new', and media centrism.

While many of his contemporaries saw the French Revolution as a total break with the old order, the conservative Edmund Burke counselled against being swept along by events. Observing the turbulence in the streets he accepted that, 'The wild gas, the fixed air, is plainly broken loose' but argued that 'we ought to suspend our judgement . . . until we see something deeper than the agitation of a troubled and frothy surface' (quoted in Wilhelm, 2000: 13). Much writing on contemporary change over the last two decades has disregarded this advice and taken surface events as markers of fundamental breaks. This pervasive sense of leaving the past behind has been written into everyday debate by adding the prefix 'post' to the labels used to characterize the defining formations of the contemporary world; modernity, industrialism, capitalism, nation and colonialism. Going past these 'posts' is an essential precondition for a more adequate account of the interplay between shifts in communication and 'broader' patterns of contemporary change. Accordingly the perspective advanced here seeks 'to uncover some of the deeper transformations occurring beneath all the surface turbulence and volatility' in order to open up debate 'as to how we might best interpret and react to our present situation' (Harvey, 2003: 1). More specifically, I want to argue that an analysis of the transformations currently taking place in the organization of capitalism and the contradictions it is generating offer the most productive starting point for this enterprise.

Technologies

This may seem a perverse choice for a specialist in communications. Why not begin with the changes in the organization of the media system set in motion by the transition from analogue to digital technologies? Let me offer some reasons.

First, notions of a 'digital revolution' and the rise of 'new media' suggest a decisive break with past communications systems. For many commentators this is defined by the dismantling of vertical networks of political and economic power and the return of control to users and consumers. This is overly optimistic. Machines may proliferate but institutions and systems are proving more resilient. The last half decade has seen an unprecedented concentration of corporate power in the cultural industries. Current shifts in media production reveal a story of continuity of . . . format and platform in which 'new media' support, revive and amplify the possibilities of old media' (O'Regan and Goldsmith, 2002: 93) including the extensive use of interactivity and peer-to-peer networks for promotion and marketing (Murdock, 2000a). Designating 'new media' studies as a distinctive, self-contained domain, with its own publications and scholarly networks, while commercially productive for journal publishers and helpful in advancing careers within the academy, makes constructing a detailed empirical account of reproduction and transition within communications system more difficult. More than ever, contemporary conditions require us to read and research across boundaries, looking to synthesize rather than specialize.

Second, focusing on digitalization reproduces the media-centrism that has limited communication scholars' ability to build bridges with disciplines beyond the social sciences and humanities. It is unhelpful even as an approach to technological innovation. There are two other major sites of innovation that need to be included in an analysis of contemporary change; biotechnologies and materials. The possible links between advances in these areas and developments in information and communications systems are now being explored (see, for example, Anton et al., 2001) but with some exceptions (e.g. Braman, forthcoming) not, so far, within media and communications studies. This is a gap that needs to be addressed.

Third, and most obviously, nominating digitalization as the driving force of change necessarily privileges some variant or other of technological determinism. In common with the promotional material that surrounds new consumer devices, it invites us to start from the possibilities presented by new machines and systems (mobile phones, the

Internet, interactive television) and to project attention forward to the everyday practices and pleasures of use. In the process it silences or marginalizes questions about how the device came to be constructed in that particular way and at what cost. Take the case of the mobile phone. There is now a growing cross-cultural ethnographic literature on how people use their mobile phones as styled artefacts in struggles over self-presentation and subcultural membership, as devices for reaffirming and repairing family and peer group ties (see, for example, Katz and Aakhus, 2002), and as sites for a new popular cultural practice, text messaging, coming up from below rather than being managed from above. Detailed work on the everyday ways media technologies are regarded, appropriated and deployed is absolutely indispensable to a full account of change but unless it is properly contextualized it can all too easily overestimate the degrees of freedom accorded to users.

This tendency reaches its terminal point in the more radical forms of constructionism that see technologies produced entirely through discourse. Against this, Ian Hutchby has pointedly reminded us that 'there are features of artefacts that are not constructed through accounts' and that when 'people interact through, around and with technologies, it is necessary for them to find ways of managing the constraints on their possibilities for action' inscribed into the design of the technology (Hutchby, 2001a: 29–30). For him, relations between users and technologies are 'bounded not so much by the politics of representation' as by the interplay between grounded practices and the array of 'material enablements and constraints' presented by the machine (Hutchby, 2001b: 453). Nor are these 'affordances', as he calls them, simply the properties of machines. They are also constituted by the organization of networks. The efficiency and flexibility of personal Internet use, for example, increasingly depends first on domestic access to broadband (as opposed to dial-up) connections, and second on having a laptop configured to take advantage of wireless (wi-fi) 'hot spots' in public places. Both these infrastructures are unequally distributed. Broadband networks are likely to pass poorer housing areas or to be priced at a level that excludes those on low incomes. Wi-fi nodes are more likely to be concentrated in airport lounges and leisure hubs in business and entertainment districts than in bus shelters and hostels.

Media scholars have tended to ignore the analysis of networks. For most, telecommunications policy, a long-standing and extensive area of research and debate, has remained a far away enclave of which they knew little and cared to know less. In a context where popular telecommunications traffic was monopolized by voice telephony from fixed

points and access was underwritten by principles of universal service, this did not matter so much. But in a commercialized communications environment where telecommunication links carry the full range of expressive forms, from images, to video and music, the political economy of connectivity is increasingly central to a full analysis of the social organization of access and use.

Once we embark on constructing a critical political economy of networks and artefacts, however, we find that the links take us in unexpected directions. The most efficient material for making the capacitors that store electric charges in mobile phones is coltan, a form of tantalum, which is found in only a few places. One of the largest concentrations is in the Democratic Republic of Congo (Agar, 2003: 13). Since 1999, a bloody civil war in the region has killed thousands of people and displaced almost a quarter of a million more from their homes. A United Nations investigation recently concluded that foreign interests have sustained the war by illegally subsidizing militias in return for supplies of scarce raw materials, including coltan (Hunt and King, 2003: 23).

Qualitative research in affluent societies has given us multiple snapshots of the mobile phone as a new necessity, a mundane extension of intimacy and interaction. In a shopping mall in Seoul a group of teenage girls stand in a circle, laughing and chatting, looking at the screen of the mobile phone of the girl in the centre as she receives and sends messages and 'sometimes reads them aloud' (Yoon, 2003: 337). A 25-year-old English woman working in retailing, tells a researcher: 'I love my phone because it means that anyone can get hold of me wherever I am ... I have to go home if I leave it at home' (Harkin, 2003: 17). Meanwhile, in the Congo, the war has left '18 million people with no access to services of any kind – no clean water, health, education, transport, or housing' (Hunt and King, 2003: 23). Our responsibility as critical analysts is to build an explanatory framework that will hold these stark contrasts together in the same conceptual space and tease out the links between them. As C. Wright Mills famously argued in his manifesto for critical social enquiry, 'the biographies of [individual] men and women cannot be understood without reference to the historical structures in which the milieux of their everyday life are organised' (Mills, 1970: 175). Equally, analysis of the repercussions of structural forces of change needs to be grounded in detailed ethnographic work on everyday action (Murphy and Kraidy, 2003). Mills' challenge to us, to look for ways of ranging 'from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self ... to see the relations between the two' remains as

pertinent now as when he first issued it. Indeed, it is more valid since arguably contemporary relations are even more difficult to untangle. One of the reasons for this is that they are systematically obscured by the dominant academic discourses that have grown up around two key areas in contemporary debates about change; the transformations of modernity and the advent of globalization.

Modernities

The more militant versions of 'postmodernity' theory argued that the present era marked a decisive break with the ensemble of institutions, cultural forms and everyday practices that had constituted the conditions of modernity assembled and cemented in the decades between the 1840s and the 1970s. This insistence on the cancellation of modernity has now given way to arguments proposing that deep structural transformations are currently taking place *within* modernity. These shifts are characterized in a series of recurrent metaphors, as movements, from heavy to weightless, from fixed to fluid and mobile, and from place to space and flow.

In one of the most quoted passages in 19th-century European literature, Marx and Engels, writing in 1848, famously celebrated capitalism's creative destruction of established structures, as a process through which 'all fixed, fast frozen relations are swept away' and 'all that is solid melts into air' (Marx and Engels, 1968: 38). Zygmunt Bauman sees the same process being repeated now, as the institutional solids forged then – factories, bureaucracies and nation-states – are thrown into the melting pot in their turn, ushering in an era which he variously calls 'fluid modernity', 'liquid modernity' or 'light modernity' (Bauman, 2000). Whereas industrial modernity was 'an epoch of weighty and ever more cumbersome machines' and 'of ever longer factory walls enclosing ever wider factory floors' (Bauman, 2000: 113–14), 'the arrival of the "weightless economy"' (Giddens and Hutton, 2000: 1), built around transactions in services and information and symbolic goods, is seen to usher in an era of unprecedented fluidity and mobility. The laptop computer replaces the conveyor belt as the key site of production.

This picture of liberation from industrial servitude studiously ignores the new sites of work discipline and compulsion. The serried rows of workers sitting at answering stations in call centres look remarkably like the massed ranks of industrial workers standing by their machines. Factories may have been converted into loft apartments and power stations into art galleries, but the systematic ir(y)atives of capitalism –

profit-maximization and accumulation – continue to shape the contemporary world in fundamental ways. Indeed, their reach is more extensive now than it has ever been. However, even some of the most creative commentators on modernity, like Ulrich Beck, somehow miss this simple truth.

For Beck, the arrival of 'liquid modernity' signals not just a new fluidity of conditions but a fundamental crisis in the taken-for-granted premises that have sustained modernity's core structures. He sees the multiple side-effects of modernity's attempts to sustain progress and manage crisis, putting its touchstone ideas into question and accelerating the movement from the 'simple' or 'first' modernity of the 19th and 20th centuries to a 'second' or 'reflexive' modernity marked by continuous 'argument over the meaning and worth of modernization' (Beck et al., 2003: 8). He characterizes this shift as a 'meta-change' since 'the experiential and theoretical coordinates are changing at the same time as the basic institutions' (Beck et al., 2003: 13). As he rightly points out, whereas 'post' thinking focuses on shifts within particular bounded spheres (most notably culture and the economy) he is offering a comprehensive framework for analysing contemporary change. This is a laudable aim but fails on two counts. First, it sees 'second' modernity as produced by the intersection of multiple forces, all of which are accorded more or less equal weight. Beck nominates 'the boundary shattering force of market expansion, legal universalism and technical revolution' as particularly important levers of change but refuses to rank them (Beck et al., 2003: 2). There are good reasons to prioritize 'market expansion' as the key driving force of contemporary transformation, particularly if we want to build a framework that can make sense of global interconnections and repercussions. But this is not Beck's project. On the contrary, with disarming candour he admits that his framework 'is completely *Euro-centric*' (emphasis in the original) since 'it takes for granted that the institutions that second modernity dissolves or transforms are there in the first place' (Beck et al., 2003: 7). As he notes, it therefore has no relevance to low-income countries except insofar as impacts ripple out from the European metropolises to what he calls, 'the distorted constellations of postcolonialism' (Beck et al., 2003: 7).

In contrast, other commentators on the transformations of modernity have placed global reach at the centre of their arguments. For John Urry, one of Britain's leading social theorists, sociology will become increasingly irrelevant unless it breaks decisively with its convenient conflation of 'society' with the 'nation-state' and repositions itself as the study of 'those diverse mobilities, th... are materially reconstructing

the "social as society" into the "social as mobility" (Urry, 2000: 2). Given the apparently declining powers of national societies, he argues, we have no choice but to follow the main action into its new sites 'organised around networks, mobility and horizontal fluidities' (Urry, 2000: 3) and to focus on emerging 'global fluids', exploring the 'uneven and fragmented flows of people, information, money images and risks across regions' (Urry, 2000: 38). Accounts of this vision of a 'borderless world' built around multiple, intersecting mobilities, command increasing support across the social sciences. They are unhelpful on two counts.

First, it is simply not the case empirically that nation-states are declining in importance as the core units of political and administrative organization. On the contrary, as Ellen Meiksins Wood has persuasively argued, the sustainability of the current internationalization of capitalist imperatives depends fundamentally on a network of stable states able and willing to guarantee a favourable operating environment (Wood, 2003). Second, by mapping the space of flows as a horizontal plane the champions of mobility conveniently ignore the continuing concentration of economic and political power within the global system and its vertical, top-down, operations. Ironically, the differential regulation of mobility is a particularly good example of this process in action.

As Manuel Castells notes, 'if globalisation is widely acknowledged as a fundamental feature of our time, it is essentially because of the emergence of global financial markets' (Castells, 2000: 53). Capital moves with ease around the new global circuits and overwhelmingly under conditions chosen by itself, finding multiple means of evading national restrictions. In contrast, labour moves with difficulty or not at all and mostly under conditions determined elsewhere. In 1994, Mexico, Canada and the US entered into a free trade agreement (NAFTA). That same year Operation Gatekeeper turned the US-Mexican border 'into a militarised war zone' with batteries of infrared rays, mobile floodlights and seismic and magnetic sensors to hunt down illegal immigrants trying to cross (Shome, 2003: 45-6). To the numbers of, often desperate, 'economic migrants' clustered on the borders of the advanced capitalist economies we need to add the more than 20 million global refugees and the over 20 million more internally displaced persons, forced to flee their homes, dispossessed by wars, famines and development projects (Castles, 2003). Forced migrations, and the processes that produce them, have conventionally slipped off the maps drawn by the enthusiasts of the new global flows. This absence is one aspect of the more general failure of theories of

'globalization' to provide an adequate starting point for critical analysis.

Globalizations

If, as I argue, the unprecedented globalization of capitalist imperatives over the last two decades is the central motor of change in the contemporary world, then the variants of cultural globalization theory that have dominated debate on this shift in media and cultural studies are singularly ill-equipped either to chart its dynamics or to understand its full implications for communicative structures and practices. They fail because they take insufficient account of: relevant histories, persistent structural inequalities and the scale and scope of economic restructuring.

Whereas earlier theories of global transformation, built around notions of 'modernization' and 'westernization', operated with a strong time line, models of cultural globalization see the world as an increasingly unified space marked by 'simultaneity, overlap [and] coherencies incoherently superimposed' (Buck-Morss, 2003: 5). As a consequence there 'is no historical depth. It is as if what is "now" is new' (Butaway, 2000: 339). This disinterest in the long loops of historical change disables analysis by detaching it from the prior histories that have constructed the variable grounds on which the current internationalization of capitalism is taking place. Between 1840 and 1980, nations and regions engaged with western modernity by a variety of routes. Alongside colonial modernities we find 'reactive modernities' orientated to catching up with the West (as in Meiji Japan); 'revolutionary modernities' which sought to develop industrialism without capitalism (as in China and the Soviet Union); and 'developmental modernities' based on strong state direction of 'modernization' projects. Grasping these histories and their structural and cultural legacies is an essential precondition for a full understanding of the dynamics of contemporary change and the new contradictions it is generating.

The second problem with cultural globalization models arises from the centrality of the local/global couplet as an organizing framework for analysing transnational encounters and reactions. As with all binary constructions, there is a tendency to essentialize both terms, constructing the 'local' as a sphere of authenticity and self-creation and the 'global' as the domain of the prepackaged and inauthentic. Here again retrieving concrete histories provides a salutary corrective. As Robert Foster (2002) has shown in his style analysis of everyday media in Papua New Guinea,

in a situation where a deeply fractured state is unable to construct a durable 'national imaginary', people look to other symbolic sites to express their sense of being citizens of a nation in the making. Ironically, one readily available resource is provided by local advertisements promoting Coca-Cola and other products of the global corporations who are in the vanguard of constructing a transnational consumerism that displaces the identity of citizen. Clearly, attempts to commercially reconstruct 'new' nations do not always work in the way that corporations desire or theories of cultural imperialism predict.

One reason for this is that current interventions are immediately caught up in a web of entanglements inherited from past encounters. In postcolonial societies in particular, they are constructed on ground already marked out by 'the manifold and problematic engagements of various classes of Europeans, North Americans [and Japanese] with various colonised peoples, and the equally asymmetrical contacts and combats between Third World nation-states and tribal peoples within their borders' (Thomas, 1991: 3). Göran Therborn's recent attempt to construct a typology of entanglements provides a particularly productive starting point for work on the global passage of media structures and artefacts originating in the main centres of production (Therborn, 2003). His schema is compiled from the answers to two questions; 'what is being entangled?' – finances, corporations, technologies, people, ideologies, or symbolic forms; and 'on what sites are these entanglements taking place?' – institutions, artefacts, or everyday routines of production and consumption.

Models of cultural globalization do offer an account of entanglement but it is one constructed almost exclusively around the notion of 'hybridity' seen as a continuously productive generation of novel combinations opening new spaces for expression and identity. By casting this process as mainly or wholly positive, many accounts avoid exploring either the pain of loss or the deep ambivalences it generates. They assume that attempts to remake the self are freely chosen rather than the outcome of material and cultural dispossession. They ignore the world-wide resurgence of national and religious fundamentalisms, which are based precisely on the defence of the boundaries separating 'us' (the righteous, the 'real' nationals) from 'them' (the unbelievers, latecomers and asylum seekers). To understand these contradictory reactions to global entanglement we need to move from the flat landscape of multiple difference to the vertical structures of class (Murdock, 2000b).

The current globalization of capitalism has not only deepened class inequalities, both within and between nations and regions, it has

internationalized class relations, creating an expanded transnational capitalist class, a new commercial middle class who have gained from marketization, and a new international reserve army of labour who have lost. As current arguments over differential access to personal computing resources illustrate all too clearly, class position remains the indispensable starting point for analysis for two reasons. First, in marketized economies where access to communicative resources is increasingly mediated through the price system, command over disposable income becomes more not less important in regulating choice. Second, economic location remains the prime determinant of access to the range of social and cultural resources required for self-chosen use (see Murdock and Golding, forthcoming).

Cultural globalization theorists' reluctance to engage with questions of class is part of a more general aversion to political economic analysis. As James Curran has noted, their accounts repeatedly fail to 'engage critically with economic power' (Curran, 2002: 174). Stuart Hall has lodged the same reservation against postcolonial theory, arguing that instead of generating 'alternative ways of thinking questions about economic relations and their "effects", as the "conditions of existence" of other practices', rejecting the deterministic economism that supposedly underpinned theories of cultural imperialism has led instead to 'a massive, gigantic and eloquent *dissavowal*' (Hall, 1996: 258; emphasis in original). Faced with the scale and comprehensiveness of the current globalization of capitalism this simply will not do. As Arif Dirlik notes, 'if globalization means anything, it is the incorporation of societies into a capitalist modernity' (Dirlik, 2003: 275). This process has been unfolding for at least a century but never before has it achieved global reach. It is this push towards universality that constitutes the central structuring principle of contemporary change. For Anthony Giddens, 'the new capitalism that is one of the driving forces of globalisation to some extent is a mystery' (Giddens and Hurton, 2000: 10). This conveniently conflates underlying logic and consequences. The impacts of global capitalism and the reactions to them are complex, and often contradictory, and can only be fully grasped on the basis of detailed ethnographies, but the central logic driving the process is brutally transparent.

Capitalisms

It is the product of two intersecting dynamics: the increasing problems of overaccumulation experienced by leading capitalist economies since

1973 (Harvey, 2003: 149), and the deepening crisis of state-managed modernization in Communist, postcolonial and welfare states. The first led to a concerted search for new markets and investment opportunities, the second provided them by opening a range of additional territories, sectors and resources to business. The opening up of the world's three most populous economic regions, the Soviet bloc, China and India, all of which had been closed off or relatively insulated from the global capitalist system since the end of the Second World War, was particularly significant. The collapse of the Soviet Union, and the more general loss of faith in socialist solutions, was also a major ideological moment. By removing the major alternative vision of 'development' it 'eliminated the possibility of an outside to capitalism' (Dirlik, 2003: 282). These shifts were propelled by a concerted push towards marketization (see Murdock and Golding, 2001) across four main fronts.

First, the operating space allocated to capitalist enterprise was rapidly enlarged by opening up previously protected markets (liberalization) and appropriating resources and markets previously managed by public institutions or held in common (privatization). This process of 'accumulation through dispossession' (Harvey, 2003) extended the logic of enclosure that had begun with the clearing of the agricultural commons in the era of mercantile capitalism (Murdock, 2001).

Second, these structural shifts were accompanied by a fundamental reorientation of regulatory regimes in which established conceptions of the 'public good' were effectively dismantled and redefined as primarily about open markets, unimpeded competition and consumer protection.

Third, market rhetorics and criteria of evaluation were established as the measures against which all organizations were judged, including those still formally in the public sector. The recent history of the BBC is a perfect example of the contradictions set in motion by this process of corporatization.

Finally, these shifts were legitimated by a reinvented master ideology of consumerism, which invited people to think of themselves first and last as individual actors in the marketplace with a sovereign right (even a duty) to remake themselves and realize their aspirations by purchasing goods and services.

This process of marketization is still ongoing and poses two major challenges to media and cultural analysis. Most obviously it requires us to develop a comprehensive comparative account of its variable impacts on the organization and ethos of public communications and cultural institutions as it has unfolded across contrasting national sites grounded in different prior histories. We have fragment of such an ? yunt, most

notably in relation to the global transformation of public service broadcasting, but we urgently need to fill in the gaps. We also need to pay much more sustained attention than we have to the central role of promotional culture in legitimating change.

Given that advertising is simultaneously both a core cultural formation in its own right and a major source of finance for commercial media, its relative neglect by media scholars is both remarkable and regrettable. But the study of advertising is now no longer enough. Promotional discourse has long since escaped from the confines of the outdoor poster, press display ad and 15-second broadcast slot. It is ubiquitous, ambient and integrated into an ever-proliferating range of everyday artefacts and environments. Mapping this landscape and understanding the ways people navigate their way through it requires us to reorientate research on both cultural texts and media audiences.

Analysis needs to unpack not texts but the inter-texts compiled from the multiple objects and discourses that accrete around cultural artefacts and sites. We know something about how these clusters of meanings are assembled, from studies of iconic figures (such as Elvis, Princess Diana and David Beckham) and from the multi-sited marketing strategies pioneered by Disney, but given that intertextuality has become the modal form of representation we need to range more widely. This, in turn, requires work on media audiences to see reading, movie going, logging on, music listening and television viewing as points of entry into a more generalized world of goods. We urgently need to engage with current research in consumption studies, material culture and visual culture, and to be prepared to accompany our subjects out of the home and into the mall (Murdock, 2000c).

Empires

Alongside the consolidation of corporate power and the proliferation of promotional culture, the end of the Cold War has also seen a fundamental shift in the global organization of political and military power generating new tensions between the logics of states on the one hand and capital on the other.

State logics are rooted in the necessity for states (or some collection of states operating as a power bloc) to defend the integrity of their borders, maintain their sovereignty over internal administration and promote their interests in the world at large. In contrast, as Marx and Engels noted, capitalism's need for uninterrupted access to key productive resources and new markets impels to continuously move across borders,

chasing 'over the whole surface of the globe' and 'establishing connections everywhere' (see Marx and Engels, 1968: 38). In the era of high colonialism, this project was underwritten by physical occupation backed by military force. However, as Ellen Meiskins Wood reminds us, colonial empires were preceded by empires of commerce and have been superseded by a new empire of capital 'in which market imperatives, manipulated by the dominant capitalist powers, are made to do the work no longer done by imperial states or colonial settlers' (Wood, 2003: 153).

Tough marketizing conditions attached to loans and international trade regimes geared to the interests of the major players may secure access to target markets and resources; but they do not, in themselves, guarantee secure operating conditions on the ground. Consequently, as Wood notes, 'the more universal capitalism has become, the more it has needed an equally universal system of reliable local state' to ensure a favourable environment for accumulation (Wood, 2003: 152). But what if some states are unable to provide these conditions while others are openly antagonistic? Faced with 'failed' and 'rogue' states, transnational corporations readily fall back on the military power of the core capitalist states to implement regime change and impose discipline. If the US, and by extension western capitalism, sees itself facing a variety of enemies, dispersed across myriad locations, waging 'perpetual war for perpetual peace' (Vidal, 2002) appears both logical and necessary. The result is that capital's desire for 'boundless domination of a global economy, and of the multiple states that administer it, requires military action without end' (Wood, 2003: 144). Legitimizing this enterprise, with its substantial costs for domestic public provision, entails a fundamental ideological move in which established principles of a just war are replaced by an insistence on rights to anticipatory retaliation and pre-emptive strikes. This tendency, embodied in its strongest form by the recent military adventurism of the US and Britain in Afghanistan and Iraq, points to another major blindspot in contemporary media and communication enquiry.

We have a substantial research literature on the way recent wars and insurgencies have been reported and represented in the public media and solid analysis of the power plays between governments, journalists and their sources that shape these accounts, but only a very thin literature on the role of information systems in the organization of warfare. As media scholars, we know how wars are constructed on the television screen and we can explain why they look as they do, but we are able to say very little about how they are planned, organized and executed. This lacuna is particularly disabling at the present time when command control and

communications systems have become ever more central to the organization of coercion and military force. The mobilization of advanced information systems is increasingly seen by military strategists as the key to enabling weapons and troops to be deployed rapidly and with maximum effect across the whole range of possible theatres of conflict (see Downey and Murdock, 2003). As media scholars we need to take a long hard look at this emerging military-information complex and ask two questions. First, how is intensive military investment in advanced information and communications facilities likely to change the organization of warfare and internal security? Second, what are the implications of this development, and the assumption of ever-present threat that underpins it, for the future of public culture and communications? How might it affect priorities for technological innovation, or the allocation of core communications resources (such as spectrum space and satellite slots), or the degrees of censorship imposed on public expression?

One key area within this complex that is now beginning to be better mapped is the restructuring of surveillance. Security services across the capitalist world witnessed the destruction of the World Trade Center, carried out by operatives most of whom had been living in the US for some time, and concluded that established modes of surveillance and classifications of 'dangerousness' were no longer effective against insurgents who melted into the flow of everyday life. Surveillance had to be extended across every possible domain of mundane action where traces of intention might be left, from library borrowings to supermarket bills, and it had to be 'anticipatory', reaching out well beyond the standard membership lists of targeted organizations to embrace anyone who might possibly pose a threat at any time in the future. The Total Information Awareness project established in the US in the wake of 9/11 is only the most obvious instance of a general growth in ensembles of surveillance that incorporate the whole range of everyday cultural and media activity. We need to build on the pioneering work of Oscar Gandy and others, and investigate the interpenetration of commercial and state surveillance networks within these new ensembles, and follow David Lyon (2003: 26) in seeing the ways that people experience and react to the surveillance of their everyday media activities, from logging on to a website to receiving a targeted promotional appeal on a mobile phone, as a prime task for future research.

Looking at the massive coercive and commercial armoury of the new empire of capital it is tempting to see it as an unbreachable wall of solid power. However, as Linda Colley reminds us, a comprehensive account of empire also needs to take account of the many occasions when

imperialists 'got caught and caught out' and to investigate 'the powerlessness of the powerful' (Colley, 2003: 31). George Bush's war on terror' is a classic instance of this. On the streets and in cafes, clubs and hotels, counterattacks are waged with the conventional weapons of insurgency, suicide bombing, car bombs and readily available small arms, rendering overwhelming superiority in high-technology weaponry redundant.

Mobilizations

The current low-intensity skirmishes in Iraq are part of a more generalized global resurgence of guerrilla warfare responding to a variety of fissures in the logic of states. Some movements contest existing territorial borders and demand that suppressed ethnicities and collective histories be represented by new states. Others are reacting to the failure of developing states to deliver on their promises. Others again are protesting what they see as colonial occupations. Alongside these armed responses, however, we are also witnessing a range of other movements challenging the logic of capital and the advance of promotional culture.

Both the recent resurgence of fundamentalist movements within Christianity, Judaism and Islam and the revival of Confucianism are, in part at least, reactions to marketization's translation of value and community into the secular litany of salvation through purchase and the promotion of individual market choices over collective obligations. After a long period of neglect, interest in the role of religion in animating everyday practices, world views and mediated experience has begun to gather increasing momentum among communications researchers, opening up a range of new questions for investigation (Murdock, 1997). At the same time, the fact that scholars raised in the chilly, deritualized and rationalized, climes of Protestant Europe should have taken so long to grasp the centrality of religion in the cultural life of almost everywhere else in the world, illustrates once again how the development of more comprehensive accounts of continuity and change have been held back by ethnocentrism.

Alongside the growth of fundamentalisms, however, we also see a proliferation of secular critiques of marketization and consumerism based on attempts to redefine and extend the core principles of citizenship. The identities of citizen and consumer are continuously in tension since the possessive individualism promoted by consumerism is deeply corrosive of the sense of shared fate and equal entitlement required by a culture of

citizenship (Murdock, 1992). Consumption, as a practical activity, is not always subsumed by the ideology of consumerism however. Providing they have sufficient disposable income to convert living standards into lifestyles, people's decisions in the sphere of consumption may be invested with a sense of effective agency that has increasingly disappeared from their working lives and periodic opportunities to vote in elections. This opens a door to a new kind of politics which begins by inviting people to ask where the commodities they are buying came from and what human and environmental costs were incurred in their production. The calls of promotional culture are met with radicalized consumer responses, launching boycotts of goods and shops that collude with child labour or sweatshop conditions and demonstrations at corporate annual general meetings demanding ethical responsibility in company policies. These actions, small in themselves, are relatively easily translated into unique selling propositions. Even so, as they accumulate, they prepare the ground for a definition of citizenship that moves beyond national borders and insists on the universality of equal entitlement. This cosmopolitan counter-conception is the core mobilizing ideology of the global justice movement and offers the only comprehensive schema to set against the empire of capital's meta ideology of transnational consumerism. The problem, as many observers have noted, is that the global justice movement is made up of myriad actors and groups with widely differing, and sometimes conflicting, agendas. Addressing this dispersal requires the construction of new communal spaces for contact, exchange and deliberation and this, in turn, requires communicative networks that operate outside the market.

The counter-moralities of exchange essential to this project are already in place. On the one hand there is what Pekka Himanen has usefully dubbed the 'hacker ethic' of reciprocity and open exchange, originally developed within the computing community but since generalized and devoured to shattering expertise . . . and facilitating access to information and . . . resources wherever possible' (Himanen, 2001: vii). On the other hand, there are the initiatives now being launched by public cultural institutions in an effort to universalize access to archives and expertise that the public has already paid for through taxation. Academic staff at MIT post their lecture notes on the web. The BBC pledges to make as many of their stored recordings as possible freely available for anyone to download and use as they wish, providing it is not for commercial gain. These counter-principles, of reciprocity and public entitlement, offer a powerful ethical alternative to the pay-per regime of marketization and a potential basis for a global cultural commons.

Contributing to the search for ways of developing and integrating these principles, anchoring them in durable and responsive institutionalized systems of interchange, and ensuring that these are as openly accessible and as globalized as possible, is arguably the most urgent task currently facing media and cultural scholarship.

As Bent Flyvbjerg (2001: 162) has reminded us, investigating where we are going, who gains and who loses, and by what mechanisms of power is not enough. A critical approach worthy of the name must go on to ask, 'Is it desirable?' and 'What should be done?', and frame its answers in ways that contribute to the general flow of public debate on our collective future. This is the scale of the challenge we face. It is also a measure of the opportunities open to us.

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Imagining the Fan Democracy

■ Liesbet van Zoonen

ABSTRACT

In this article, the author takes issue with the common understanding of television as a medium detrimental to the maintenance and encouragement of political citizenship. Starting from the immense popularity of participatory television genres such as *Big Brother* and *Pop Idol*, she examines in the article whether there is any relevance in these zeniths of audience activity for understanding and advancing political activity and involvement. The author argues that there is a three-dimensional similarity between the fan communities around entertainment 'genres' (whether they are stars, programmes or styles) and the political constituencies around candidates, parties or ideologies. The analogy between the two is structural to begin with: both come into being as a result of performance. Second, fan communities and political constituencies resemble each other in terms of activity: both are concerned with knowledge, discussion, participation, imagination of alternatives, and implementation. Finally, both rest on similar emotional investments that are intrinsically linked to rationality, and lead - in concert - to 'affective intelligence'. The representation of politics on television, while generally thought to be dismally and destructively entertaining, can be seen as provoking the 'affective intelligence' that is vital to keep political involvement and activity going. ■

Key Words citizenship, democracy, fandom, politics, popular culture

Over the past five years, television audiences across the industrialized world have massively engaged in discussion, participation, activism and

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