

Critical Crossroads or Parallel Routes? Political Economy and New Approaches to Studying Media Industries and Cultural Products

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The study of media industries may be relatively new to the Society for Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS), but focus on this area has a long history and, in the United States, has included research on the interconnected industries of telephony, radio, film, journalism, and television. Much of this work can be divided into two perspectives: the first celebrates the individuals, working cohorts, companies, and markets constituting the entertainment-information sector of the US economy; the second contextualizes those individuals, working cohorts, companies, and markets within the ongoing development of capitalism. The celebratory approach has often been called media economics, whereas the contextual approach is generally called political economy of the media.

As supporters of the contextual approach, we are accustomed to being denounced, accused, and misrepresented: denounced as economic reductionists; accused of ignoring media workers, artifacts, and audiences; and misrepresented as latter-day members of the Frankfurt School who blame “evil capitalists” for the media’s content and operations.¹ In this commentary, we respond to the recent round of misrepresentations of political economy with illustrations of research within a contextual tradition.

“New” Approaches to Studying Media Industries. During the 1990s, a number of approaches emerged in Media Studies building on the work of a few film scholars while asking questions similar to those explored by political economists.² These “new” approaches have fallen under various rubrics, including creative industries, convergence

1 Roberta Pearson, “What Will You Learn That You Don’t Already Know? An Interrogation of Industrial Television Studies,” panel presentation at the conference of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies, Boston, March 24, 2012.

2 Political economists focusing on the film industry in the past have included Thomas Guback, Manjunath Pendakur, Michael Nielsen, and a handful of others, and film scholars such as Thomas Schatz and Douglas Gomery (among a few others) have also examined issues relating to industrial structure and policies.

culture, production culture, production studies, cultural economy, and media industry studies.³ These developments are well represented by the growth of Media Industry Studies and the founding of the SCMS Media Industries Studies Scholarly Interest Group, which has continued to rapidly increase in popularity.

The explications of these “new” approaches have often included a rejection of political economy as a viable framework for studying the media. Certainly, the choice of a theoretical framework is up to the researcher. However, these discussions have also presented a number of misrepresentations of a political economic approach that we feel compelled to discuss. We note here that we do not necessarily speak for other researchers who may embrace a political economic perspective, sometimes as only one of the lenses they use to understand media.

We focus in the following pages on the discussions of a Media Industry Studies approach. For instance, in their edited collection devoted to Media Industry Studies, Holt and Perren state that they intend to provide a framework for the “new field”: “While the world does not necessarily need another field of study, one has indeed emerged.”⁴ Although that may have some validity in terms of SCMS, it ignores celebratory research on media industries published in journals such as those supported by the Broadcast Education Association, the International Communication Association, and the National Communication Association (previously the Speech Communication Association). Holt and Perren’s collection covers a range of perspectives, including calls for an integrative approach,⁵ as well as those who argue that the study of political economy—specifically, the North American version—is problematic.

In another example, Havens, Lotz, and Tinic have outlined an approach called Critical Media Industries Studies. They argue that this was part of Cultural Studies from its very beginning but was eclipsed by textual analysis and reception studies. Consequently, scholars have used various phrases to describe middle-range studies of the managerial and production employees working in media operations. They seek to unify these various scholars under the umbrella of Critical Media Industries.

We appreciate the increased attention to institutional and economic dimensions of the media. We also note that these “new” approaches claim to draw on existing theoretical frameworks, such as cultural studies and political economy. However, most often, the theories, methods, and findings of political economy are ultimately rejected. Some of the accusations have to do with the level of analysis and which media are

3 Some examples include John Hartley, ed., *Creative Industries* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005); Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006); John Thornton Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008); Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John Thornton Caldwell, eds., *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Paul du Gay and Michael Pryke, eds., *Cultural Economy* (London: Sage Publications, 2002). We also note that some Cultural Studies scholars have recently discovered economics. See Lawrence Grossberg, “Standing on a Bridge: Rescuing Economies from Economists,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 34, no. 4 (2010): 316–336.

4 Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren, “Does the World Really Need One More Field of Study?,” introduction to *Media Industries: History, Theory, and Method*, eds. Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 2.

5 See Douglas Kellner, “Media Industries, Political Economy, and Media/Cultural Studies: An Articulation,” in Holt and Perren, *Media Industries*, 95–107.

studied: “Critical political economy approaches, which predominantly and consistently focus on the larger level operations of media institutions—and, with few exceptions, emphasize news production—have been a favored paradigm among many media scholars looking to add an industrial dimension to their research.”⁶ A neglect of entertainment and/or cultural media is thus claimed to limit “the usefulness of many political-economic theories and perspectives, which are based on *the industrial analysis of news*.”⁷

The analysis of political economy of the media, according to Havens, Lotz, and Tinic, represents a consistent “focus on the larger level operations of media institutions, general inattention to entertainment programming, and incomplete explanation of the role of human agents (other than those at the pinnacle of conglomerate hierarchies) in interpreting, focusing, and redirecting economic forces that provide for complexity and contradiction within media industries.”⁸ Thus, the new critiques have joined the old ones. Although some political economists (including the authors of this essay) seem to be exempt from some of this criticism, the new critiques typically condemn the tradition of political economy exemplified by Herbert Schiller and Robert McChesney, assuming this to be reductionist and too economic.⁹ Overall, the claim is that political economy is simplistic and inadequate.

The Political Economy of Media as a Contextual Approach. What can we say? Even a cursory review of the literature on political economy of media reveals that most of these claims can be easily dismissed. Political economic research of media in North America involves analysis of a wide range of media industries and different levels of analysis. It is not predominantly focused on news, and there are numerous examples of studies of television, advertising, film, video, video games, recorded music, telecommunications, the Internet, and digital media, as well as studies of issues pertaining (but not limited) to intellectual property, ratings and audience measurement, consumer culture, and privacy and surveillance, to name just a few.¹⁰ Clearly, the claim that political economic research has remained at the “meta” level cannot be based on a thorough literature search, which would reveal in-depth

6 Timothy Havens, Amanda Lotz, and Serra Tinic, “Critical Media Industry Studies: A Research Approach,” *Communication, Culture & Critique* 2, no. 2 (2009), 235 (our emphasis).

7 *Ibid.*, 236 (our emphasis).

8 *Ibid.* (our emphasis).

9 See, for example, David Hesmondalgh, “Politics, Theory, and Method in Media Industries Research,” in Holt and Perren, *Media Industries*, 248–249. Havens, Lotz, and Tinic, “Critical Media Industry Studies,” 237, add Dallas Smythe in their discussion and critique of this tradition.

10 For instance, Thomas H. Guback, *The International Film Industry, Western Europe and America since 1945* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969); Janet Wasko, *How Hollywood Works* (London: Sage Publications, 2003); Eileen R. Meehan, *Why TV Is Not Our Fault: Television Programming, Viewers, and Who's Really in Control* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005); Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter, *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009); William Kunz, *Culture Conglomerates: Consolidation in the Motion Picture and Television Industries* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006). We also want to strongly defend the attention that has been paid to news and public affairs by past and present critical researchers and political economists as relevant and vital to analyzing the role of media in public life and in building open and democratic societies.

analysis of industries such as those named above, in addition to studies of dominant corporations such as Disney, News Corp., Bertelsmann, Time Warner, Telefónica, and Google (among others), as well as smaller, independent, alternative, or regional media companies.¹¹

Accusations of economic determinism and reductionism deserve more attention and bring us back to the differentiation between contextual and celebratory traditions. The notion that everything can be reduced to economic relationships is generally called vulgar Marxism. That position is philosophically and empirically untenable. Thus, researchers in the contextual tradition reject such reductionism.¹² However, the fact that reductionism is untenable does not mean that media scholars can ignore economics. In most countries, the industries constituting the entertainment-information sector are dominated by private corporations seeking to earn profits from advertisers and from buyers of tickets, electronic access, or physical copies. Within those corporations, managerial, creative, technical, and crafts workers are employed as salaried, hourly, or contract workers—just like in any other industry.

But unlike the banking, shoe manufacturing, or fast-food industries, media industries produce commodities that convey narratives, arguments, visions, symbolic worlds, and imagined possibilities. Regardless of the particular technologies for distribution and access, media products are simultaneously artifacts and commodities that are both created by artists and manufactured by workers, and present a vision for interpretation and an ideology for consumption to an active public of interpreters who may also be consumers targeted by advertisers or product placements and a commodity audience that can be measured and sold to advertisers. These complexities of the phenomena under study ensure that economic reductionism has no explanatory power for contextual researchers. Rather, they suggest lines for interdisciplinary thinking and collaborative research. Thus, scholars working in the contextual tradition are keenly aware that research must address not only media corporations and markets but also the people whose collective labor creates media artifacts, the artifacts themselves, and the people who engage with or are exposed to those artifacts.

It is often claimed that political economists who study the media ignore workers and labor. For instance, “How workers function . . . is not illuminated by conventional critical political economy research.”¹³ Since political economy and critical cultural studies emerged together as contextual approaches in the 1970s and 1980s, there has been a steadily growing amount of work aimed at understanding the role of labor in the media, from the first *Critical Communications Review* in 1983 (which considered a range

11 For instance, Mike Budd and Max H. Kirsch, eds., *Rethinking Disney: Private Control, Public Dimensions* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2005); Janet Wasko, *Understanding Disney: The Manufacture of Fantasy* (Oxford, UK: Polity Press, 2001); Scott Fitzgerald, *Corporations and Cultural Industries: Time Warner, Bertelsmann, and News Corporation* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012); Gabriela Martínez, *Latin American Telecommunications: Telefónica's Conquest* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008); Micky Lee, *Free Information? The Case against Google* (Champaign, IL: Common Ground Publishing, 2010); John A. Lent, *Newhouse, Newspapers, Nuisances: Highlights in the Growth of a Communications Empire* (New York: Exposition Press, 1966).

12 See Vincent Mosco, *Political Economy of Communication* (London: Sage Publications, 1996).

13 Havens, Lotz, and Tinic, “Critical Media Industry Studies,” 236.

of media workers and trade unions) to recent collections by Mosco and McKercher on knowledge workers.¹⁴

Although the tendency has been to focus on workers' struggles, a wide range of studies have addressed media work and labor organizations in the media business. For instance, Hartsough examined relations between the Hollywood studios and unionized workers in the 1930s, as well as efforts by film unions to organize television workers between 1947 and 1952.¹⁵ Another example has been Nielsen's work with film worker and union organizer Gene Mailes to present a personal account of the struggle to secure democratic and independent unions within the larger industrial and political contexts in which film workers, the Mafia, studio moguls, and politicians operated.¹⁶ More recently, Deepa Kumar examined the Teamsters Union's successful use of corporate media in its strike against UPS, illuminating not only strategies for influencing commercial media texts to get labor's views into the media system but also how workers can organize to resist globalization.¹⁷

The contextual approach also recognizes people's struggles to influence the media. Some scholars have focused on struggles to ensure that media reflect a broad range of public interests at the national level.¹⁸ Others have explored tensions between media reform agendas articulated at that level and the concerns and media practices of grassroots reformers.¹⁹ Alternative media have also been examined, as in Brooten and Hadl's study of the Independent Media Center Network in terms of gender and hierarchy.²⁰ Their work reflected the inclusion of feminist theories and methods into a wide range of contextual scholarship. In the edited collection *Sex and Money: Feminism and Political Economy in the Media*, contributors examined media representations, consumer practices, and commoditization.²¹ Feminism also provided the lens through

14 Vincent Mosco and Janet Wasko, eds., *The Critical Communications Review*, vol. 1, *Labor, the Working Class, and the Media* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publications, 1983); Catherine McKercher and Vincent Mosco, eds., *Knowledge Workers in the Information Society* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008); Vincent Mosco and Catherine McKercher, *The Laboring of Communication: Will Knowledge Workers of the World Unite?* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009). See also Gerald Sussman and John A. Lent, eds., *Global Productions: Labor in the Making of the "Information Society"* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 1998); Toby Miller, Nitin Govil, John McMurria, and Richard Maxwell, *Global Hollywood* (London: British Film Institute, 2001).

15 Denise Hartsough, "Crime Pays: The Studios' Labor Deals in the 1930s," in *The Studio System*, ed. Janet Staiger (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989): 230–245; "Film Union Meets Television: IA Organizing Efforts, 1947–1952," *Labor History* 33, no. 3 (1992): 357–371.

16 Michael Nielsen and Gene Mailes, *Hollywood's Other Blacklist: Union Struggles in the Studio System* (London: British Film Institute, 1995).

17 Deepa Kumar, *Outside the Box: Corporate Media, Globalization, and the UPS Strike* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007).

18 Robert W. McChesney, *Telecommunications, Mass Media, and Democracy: The Battle for the Control of US Broadcasting, 1928–1931* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

19 J. M. Proffitt, A. Opel, and J. Gaccione, "Taking Root in the Sunshine State: The Emergence of the Media Reform Movement in the State of Florida," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 33, no. 4 (2009): 318–336.

20 Lisa Brooten and Gabriele Hadl, "Gender and Hierarchy: A Case Study of the Independent Media Center Network," in *Making Our Media: Global Initiatives toward a Democratic Public Sphere*, vol. 1, *Creating New Communication Spaces*, eds. Clemencia Rodriguez, Dorothy Kidd, and Laura Stein (New York: Hampton Press, 2009), 203–222.

21 Eileen R. Meehan and Ellen Riordan, eds., *Sex and Money: Feminism and Political Economy in the Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

which contributors to *Women and Media: International Perspectives* examined portrayals of women in the media, women's interventions to change traditional media, and women's use of alternative and emerging media as a means for expression.²²

Edited collections have been a regular outcome of dialogue and collaboration among political economists, cultural scholars, and social researchers. For instance, Hagen and Wasko gathered media ethnographers and political economists to explore interactions between audience engagement, generic forms of programming, commercial measurement, and human agency.²³ Collaborative research projects have also brought together researchers from different critical perspectives and often from different national settings. Examples range from the US-based Lifetime cable project, in which a textual analyst and political economist worked together at every level of the project, to the Global Disney Audiences Project, which involved numerous researchers and multiple methodologies to document people's experiences of Disney's products and penetration into local economies.²⁴

Integrations of political economy and cultural studies are also achieved in single-author books. Here we cite only two examples: Jyotsna Kapur's examination of the relationships among children's play, corporate media, neoliberalism, and the consumerization and corporatization of childhood, and Stabile's study of crime news, which combines historiography with textual, class-based, and industrial analysis.²⁵ Both books show the intertwining of sociality, culture, lived experience, economics, and politics that provides the context for the media.

Many other contextual scholars working in political economy, cultural studies, social research, or some combination thereof have produced a prodigious amount of research that is worthy of inclusion here. This outpouring of research and its recognition of agency—whether individual, collective, corporate, or institutional—as well as structuration, has been ongoing for decades. For many contextual scholars, the conceptual or methodological divisions between or among political economy, cultural studies, and social research have essentially collapsed, yielding scholarship that synthesizes these areas with grace and delicacy. One example is Anderson's analysis of the music industry, although many others might be cited.²⁶ Even this very short overview of relevant research, which focuses primarily on North American research,

22 Carolyn M. Byerly and Karen Ross, eds., *Women and Media: A Critical Introduction* (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2004).

23 Ingunn Hagen and Janet Wasko, eds., *Consuming Audiences? Production and Reception in Media Research* (New York: Hampton Press, 2000).

24 Jackie Byars and Eileen R. Meehan, "Once in a Lifetime: Narrowcasting to Women," *Camera Obscura* 33–34 (1994–1995): 12–41; Eileen R. Meehan and Jackie Byars, "Telefeminism: How Lifetime Got Its Groove, 1984–1997," *Journal of Television and New Media* 1, no. 1 (2000): 33–51; Janet Wasko, Mark Phillips, and Eileen R. Meehan, eds., *Dazzled by Disney? The Global Disney Audience Project* (London: Leicester University Press, 2005).

25 Jyotsna Kapur, *Coining for Capital: Movies, Marketing, and the Transformation of Childhood* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005); Carol Stabile, *White Victims, Black Villains: Gender, Race, and Crime News in US Culture* (London: Routledge, 2006).

26 Tim J. Anderson, *Making Easy Listening: Material Culture and Postwar American Recording* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006) examines the music industry's political economy, the aesthetics enabled by technologies of recording, labor union reactions to technological threats to people's livelihoods, and popular reaction to Warner Bros.' use of dubbing and rerecording in *My Fair Lady* (George Cukor, 1964).

should demonstrate that contextual approaches do not ignore media makers, artifacts, or audiences.

Concluding Thoughts. It may be possible to argue that this current wave of media industry approaches represents an effort to claim the study of media production in a more palatable form for cultural analysts, policy wonks, and the media industry itself. In other words, the aim might be viewed as an approach that neither is heavily invested in (overtly) neoliberal economics (represented by media economics) nor has the taint of Marxism (represented by political economy).

This strategy would seem to be working, as some of the researchers associated with these approaches have developed working relationships with selected media industries.²⁷ We are left wondering, is the creation of such a new approach actually necessary when the contextualized approaches of political economy and cultural studies provide ample and strong tools—both theoretical and methodological—for analysis of the media? Furthermore, are these recent proposals mostly attempts to create a stripped-down, more acceptable, apolitical political economy or a meaner, broader, more relevant cultural studies? Since political economy is so often demonized in these discussions, we would guess that it is probably the latter. We also wonder, is the call for middle-range studies focused on white-collar workers another way to paper over class structure and to erase the ultimate context in which we all work, that is, capitalism? Indeed, the critique of capitalism and capitalist media is often missing from these industry discussions, a distinction that may indeed separate celebratory and contextual approaches. Again, it is important that more scholars are paying attention to the study of media as industry and commodity. But it would be helpful if “new” approaches would present a more accurate and careful representation of previous traditions, or would at least admit that they are rejecting a political economic approach on ideological grounds.

Of course, this is not the first time—nor are these the only examples of—misrepresentation, misunderstanding, and rejection of Marxism, political economy, and/or the political economy of the media. Nevertheless, careful analysis of capitalism, its structures, the consequences of those structures, and the contradictions that abound, is more than ever relevant and needed, as represented by recent calls for a reinvigoration of Marxist analysis.²⁸ Indeed, the study of political economy is definitely growing in North America and internationally.²⁹ We welcome further opportunities to integrate

27 A recent example is the Media Industries Project, housed at the Carsey-Wolf Center at the University of California, Santa Barbara: “The Media Industries Project brings industry practitioners, policy experts, and leading scholars into lively dialogue on the future prospects of modern media. Focusing especially on digital media, globalization, and creative labor, the Project provides independent analysis of key trends and developments in media culture” (<http://www.carseywolf.ucsb.edu/mip/about>). Meanwhile, Henry Jenkins heads the Convergence Culture Consortium, an academic and business network which seeks to rethink consumer relations in an age of “participatory culture” (<http://www.convergenceculture.org/aboutc3/>).

28 Terry Eagleton, *Why Marx Was Right* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011).

29 For recent overviews, see Dwayne Winseck and Dal Yong Jin, eds., *Political Economies of the Media: The Transformation of the Global Media Industries* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011); Janet Wasko, Graham Murdock, and Helena Sousa, eds., *Handbook of Political Economy of Communications* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

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