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There Isn’t an App for That:
Analogue and Digital
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Platform Capitalism
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‘What then shall we choose? Weight or lightness?’
Milan Kundera,
The Unbearable Lightness of Being (1984: 3).

Abstract

The move toward digitality and its individual-level spread through computer applications (apps) is transforming how we communicate. A major component of this transformation is the political process: both how it is enacted and how effective it is for the promotion of democracy. The political process has become both faster and ‘lighter’. The acceleration of the political process has received considerable attention over the last decade, but the essay introduces the idea of a ‘lightness’ that accompanies acceleration. This is connected to digitality and its concomitant diminution of our inherent human analogue capacities. The analogue capacities that enabled democratic politics in its modern version have been eclipsed by what are their digital antitheses. An analogue engendered political process continues to exist, but it functions at the elite levels of business and government; whereas the digitally-created ‘lightness’ of the virtual sphere constitutes the political process for the growing millions. The essay argues that this is an essentially alienating sphere that offers little by way of the traction and roots necessary for democratic and inclusive politics to grow and flourish.

Keywords
Digital, analogue, politics, time, apps, globalisation

Introduction

The mobile app is a major interface between the individual and the network. It functions presently as both cause and effect of a highly commodified digital culture
that is a cornerstone of the sustainability of the web. However, this culture is rather more than a powerful tool for the logic of accumulation. The suffusion of the app is also a sign of our post-digital ontology. Bernard Stiegler, for example, argues that the post-digital has already asserted itself, and, with the app as an element of this, has created a new sensibility through a transformation from the ‘process of the grammatisation of flows, [to] a process of discretization’ (2009: 40). What he suggests is a social, political, economic and communicative mass migration from analogue (flowing) to digital (discretize) modes of being, and this has created, as its central effect, more ‘efficient’ forms of technological control over society (p.38). This transformation, in Stiegler’s reading, is offered as a negative technological revolution, a ‘new technical milieu’ that ‘articulates and disarticulates the psychical milieu’ (p.40). Stiegler’s insight is important, and I develop and extend it here.

Whilst Stiegler considers the effect of an important transformation/revolution, he does not reflect upon the transformation/revolution itself. In other words, he does not ask: what exactly does it mean to be in a world dominated by digital technologies – in comparison with the world of analogue technology that we are leaving behind? Stiegler does not ask; and few other thinkers do today either. Part of the reason that the analogue-to-digital transition is viewed consciously or unconsciously in terms of a straightforward technological development is connected to something he argues elsewhere in his essay. Stiegler sees the hegemony of digitality¹ as inherently ‘dissociating’ and engendering of ‘the systematic and permanent control of attention and behaviour’ (p.38). Moreover, digitality ‘concretizes globalisation in the form of real time and the delegation of decision-making processes to the automatism of remote-control systems’ (p.32). What this means is that across a wider sphere, users are drawn – often through the app – into a temporally-accelerated sphere. This is a time-space compression that is its own form of control, creating what Virilio, over twenty years ago, foresaw as a form of time-based tyranny, where the growing velocity of information constituted a ‘dictatorship’ over cognitive agency (Virilio, 1995). The rapidity, comprehensiveness, and delegation to automaticity that accompanied digitality, and made it possible, has left us collectively unable to react to or reflect upon root causes and their meanings. Digitality. Discretization.
Dissociation. Time-space compression. These are the fundamental processes under which the app was created and now thrives.

Digital natives were born to this milieu. Surveys show that populations tend to accept digitality as constitutive of efficiency and convenience, or alternatively as tools that are potentially beneficial – if only they can be more democratically regulated (see Cornfield, 2005; Smith, 2018). In the intellectual sphere, where people are schooled to think more reflectively and systematically, the analogue-digital question did gain some purchase in the 1990s, as I will note below, but this faded as digitality itself became all-encompassing. Seemingly more important and immediate questions then began to compete for academic attention. And so those disciplines with perhaps the most ‘natural’ investment in the analogue-digital question, such as media theory, communications studies, social theory and so on, instead began to theorize upon the effects of digitality (political, economic, cultural, communicative) as opposed to the nature of digitality itself (i.e. Haraway, 1991; Poster, 1992; Heim, 1993; Negroponte, 1995; Mitchell, 1996; Hayles, 1999; Lunenfeld, 2000; Manovich, 2001). Important for my purpose here is that the established fact of digitality led to what may best be described as a gap where a systematic study of the ontological position of the human relative to the digital should be. Of course, the critical literature on the digital is a very large one, and I have only signposted it in the previous references. However, a certain direction in the ‘digital turn’ of the 1990s was taken. It was (and still is) primarily an outward turn; one directed toward digital effects instead of toward a fundamental theorizing of the structures of digital logic and the human relationship to it.

I want to reflect here upon the question of the nature of digital technology. I will argue that digital logic creates a different category of machine, one that is fundamentally different from the analogue machines that dominated the human-technology relationship since the beginnings of our species-drift towards tool-use. From this I consider what I see as the inescapable conclusion: that we ourselves are analogue creatures from an analogue world that is being eclipsed by the growing hegemony of digitality. Stiegler noted digital’s ‘dissociating’ effect vis-à-vis the human agent. I take his concept further to argue that digitality constitutes a profound alienation – not
only from the analogue context and history that enabled us to survive and thrive as a species, to create the worlds, institutions, cultures, ways of seeing and being that we did – but also from each other acting as inherently analogue communicative beings. More particularly it is the digitalising and networking of the communicative process as it pertains to the political process that I will theorise here. The essay will argue that digitality as the vector of the communicative process undermines politics in its broad liberal-democratic forms, and renders the analogue political process as unviable in the networked context. The app itself is unremarkable as far as digital enabling goes. It is a work of relatively unsophisticated algorithmic coding. But I use it here because the app, especially since 2010, has become a significant driver of the web ecology and a major point of entry into digital political practice.

The business of apps

App proliferation is driven by the growth of the smartphone, which itself has become a dominant form of web-based communication. Such growth reflects a corporate war of movement taking place in virtual space, and is seen by theorists such as Nick Srnicek as the driving force behind the ‘great platform wars’ where a once relatively open web is being replaced by ‘increasingly closed apps’ (2017: 112). From the simple to the complex and from the vacuous to the intelligent, the number of downloadable apps is vast, with the powerful lure being that many are initially free to the user. The largest provider of apps, Apple Inc., has approximately 1.2 million in its Apple Store and collectively these have been downloaded 140 billion times (Statista, 2018). Users themselves can arbitrate their success or failure – with the ‘going viral’ phenomenon bringing its own magnetising power to the process. The attraction of apps is boosted through the ‘natural user interface’ (NUI) feature. Simplicity of use through touchscreen functionality and what is a mostly easy and quick learning curve gives ‘the user the feeling that they are instantly and continuously successful’ within the app experience, serving to draw the user in further (Wikipedia, 2018).

There are at least three identifiable user contexts that may be identified from those apps able to gain traction. The first is the largely privatised use of an app, say, a game app that users will spend time on whenever and wherever the urge takes them. That
these are massively popular can be gauged informally by observing the numbers using them in trains, buses, and cafes, etc. Second is the class of app that enable the user in the economy: apps such as eBay, Uber, YouTube, airbnb and many others. Here individuals move from the non-pecuniary individuated realm into the digital economy where they are buying, selling, working and hustling to make money either through choice or necessity. Third is the class of social networking apps, primarily Facebook, which is back-ended by powerful, multilayered and integrated platforms combining many functions that engage the user in increasingly connective intermediation processes.

An app like Facebook acts like a driftnet for social experience: it gathers up previously disparate forms of communicative practice and converts it into a commercial resource of retrievable and manipulable data. An underside of this process is that as users we forget (or do not realise) that the digitalisation of social experience has become the algorithmic basis for profiling and targeting, and not just by Facebook, but also third parties who trade in such data, or steal it through hacking (Privacy International, 2018). This is the case not least in the practice of politics. However, before we consider the effects of the app-driven transformation of political action, we need first to theorise the context of the analogue-to-digital transformation, and to consider the effects of this for those who enact the political within the field of digitality.

**Being analogue in a digital world**

From the title of Nicholas Negroponte’s influential 1995 book, *Being Digital*, one might infer that he argues that we were once analogue but have become digital. That would be wrong. *Being Digital* is indeed about the rise of digital technologies, but all Negroponte’s references to analogue are concerned with technologies such as television and telephone. The noun ‘being’ in the title misleads because it does not refer to a transforming ontological state, but simply to a change of technological environment. This is perhaps understandable because until very recently the question ‘are we analogue?’ was one few thought to ask. Technologically speaking there was no reason to ask because ‘analogue’ was almost all there was, and so nothing to contrast this state with. I want to argue that with the rise of digitality, not only has
our technological environment changed, but that this change has revealed us as analogue beings – an ancient ontological state that is being outmoded.

My starting-point is that technology is what defines us as a species (Gehlen, 1980). Accordingly, the rise of digital technologies requires a deeper assessment of the ontological effects of the analogue-to-digital shift. I begin therefore from the premise that given human beings were at the very centre of an analogue universe they themselves created through analogue technologies – would it not be reasonable to suppose that our ‘being’ is analogue too?

The OED defines analogue as ‘a person or thing seen as comparable to another’. The term is derived from the Greek word *analogon*, which means ‘equivalent’ or ‘proportionate’. The OED offers a different understanding from the everyday definition that connotes televisions and telephones and machines of some sort. The first thing to note is that it is *human-centred and human-scaled*. It suggests that ‘equivalency’ or ‘proportionality’ are about the relationship between people and things – in the context of their immediate environment. It was the philosopher Democritus who first considered the human-technology-environment relationship in his idea that humans created technologies through imitating what they observed in nature. And so the skill of the spider in the action of ‘weaving and mending, or the swallow in house-building’ are examples of the cues in nature that enabled humans to adapt and control their environments (Menn, 2015: 18). Humans developed tools and techniques based upon what they saw around them, and from materials that were immediately to hand.

Scholars have only recently begun to look at this again. Media theorist Silvia Estévez, for example, considers our analogue essence as being rooted in the human relationship with technology and the natural environment. Key to this relationship, she argues, is the psychological process of *recognition*. Estévez expresses clearly the general principle of recognition in technology-human-environment interaction that has shaped how we have acted upon the world for thousands of years. The essence of analogue technologies, she writes, is that ‘their activity crosses time and space in a visible way that allows us to grasp [to recognise] the link between a movement and
its effect, the process, the continuity’ (2009: 402). And so an airplane may today be a
highly complex technology that pushes the boundaries of analogue recognition, but
in its basic activity of flight we still recognise it in nature in the action of birds. That
the airplane is modelled on flight in nature is readily graspable in the Democritean
sense if we choose to consider it. The point is that for almost all of human history
we did not have to consider analogue is this reflective sense, because the process
seemed obvious and ‘natural’ and there were anyway no alternative technologies to
challenge this ancient relationship.

Computers and digitality have changed this. Digital logic has no recognizable
analogue in nature; neither is it human-centred or human-scaled. Estévez writes that
‘Digital machines do not operate physically like something we could recognise in
nature’ (Ibid). It is a point taken to a more radical extension by digital philosopher
Laura Lotti, who writes that computers ‘enjoy a mode of existence proper to their
own being’ (2018: 51). This also recalls what Jacques Ellul, writing in the 1960s,
regarding the autonomy of automation, called the ‘characterology’ of emerging
computer technique, which brings forth the ‘attendant exclusion of man’ (Ellul, 1964:
135). With such autonomy, digital logic colonises analogue technology’s functioning
(e.g. the typewriter becomes a networked word processor) and forces it to conform –
or kills it off as inefficient if it proves resistant. We know this at the technical level,
but where do humans stand in this process? Having no recognisable analogue in
nature means that we do not easily grasp, or recognise, what digital does at the
technology-human-environment level. Computer logic is invisible to us, and it
operates at speeds that do not allow us to discern the ‘link between a movement and
its effect’ (Estévez, 2009: 402). Indeed, in the networked context, especially, digital
computers are so radically different that they function as a kind of ‘magic’, a
‘fascination with automatism’ that is driven by what Arnold Gehlen terms a
‘prerational impulse’, which perhaps explains why we tend to be so in awe of them
and so vulnerable to their power (Gehlen, 1980: 17-18). It is crucial to understand
this vulnerability if we wish to understand the loss of power and control that digital
logic effects, both at the individual and collective level. Control over technologies
and technological development gave humans the illusion of mastery over their
environment (Hassan, 2017). Whether this is true or false, by means of increasingly
sophisticated automation, computers take from us control of technological processes. In this context we can understand what Neil Postman meant in 1993 when he wrote: ‘computers do no work; they direct work…and have little value without something to control’ (1993: 115). That ‘something’ is our relationship with technology, and the cultures and societies that we created through this historical (analog) interaction.

The app is the tip of the spear in the process of digitality. As Evgeny Morozov (2015: npn) puts it, ‘the app is the end point of [the] much broader matrix of social, cultural, and economic relations’ that is neoliberal globalisation. The capitalist competition that propels digitality, however, ensures that the app is an always-changing and improving interface. With the smartphone we have access to a multitude of apps that are literally and persistently asking to be activated. Engineered purposely to addict by triggering the dopamine reaction in the brain, apps such as Facebook, or WhatsApp, or Instagram have quickly naturalised the habituated checking action that creates an intense but one-sided human-digital relationship (Lanier, 2018: 8-11). Such intensity, in the wireless and networked context, forms what Mark B. N. Hansen terms ‘atmospheric media’; media that are characterised by their powerful capacity to ‘solicit our engagement beneath the threshold of attention’ (2012: 498).

Much that was once analogue ‘natural’ in our communicative practice has become digital ‘atmospheric’. An effect of this has been increasingly less ‘interaction’ as we traditionally understood the term in social theory or political sociology – where person-to-person interaction forms the basis of social relations. Instead the ‘interface’ – where ‘user meets computer’ – becomes the default position for an array of fundamental social relations. We need to think about what this transition means in a general sense before considering its effects upon political communication and political action. The first thing to say is that in interface mode we become physically alone – ‘alone together’ as Sherry Turkle (2010) has characterised it. And the interface mode forms both the threshold and the vector of digitality. It simultaneously enables us to be apart from and to be part of the same communicative process. For example, to ‘lurk’ in social media forums expresses this uniquely digital capacity to be apart from, yet at the same time be a part of, human
communication. This is very different from traditional interaction through physical presence where all kinds of linguistic, cultural and body cues are apparent. Such analogue interaction creates social, cultural and political obligations and responsibilities that have no correspondence, no equivalent ‘recognition’ within digital atmospherics.

**Analogue politics: what was it and do we still need it?**

Connecting the technological with the political, the political philosopher Régis Debray argues that the major communications technologies used throughout history have played a key role in how political thought becomes social reality (2007: 5). The principal technologies of writing, print and the evolving mass media of the 18th Century, for example, made possible a certain kind of politics and political process, the liberal-democratic politics that we still see in their modern derivations around the world today. Books, pamphlets and treatises were analogue technologies creating analogue politics for analogue beings in an analogue world that we took to be natural because it corresponded to nature and to human cognitive and physical capacities – to the human scale – and to where the link between cause and effect in their circulation was more or less graspable. Importantly, it was such acting upon the world in ways that appeared ‘natural’ and in ways that had endured for a very long time, that gave humans the capacity to create the modern world and the modern political process. For Debray, it was through such ‘material forms and processes’ that political ideas were conceived and disseminated. And as they acted upon political society they did so through analogue ‘communication networks that enabled thought to have social existence’ (Ibid).

In its broadest sense, analogue politics is offline politics. This does not mean offline politics in an online-dominated world. As I will argue presently, this is a deformed and weakened political process. What I want to consider in this section is offline politics when offline politics was all there was. The first point is that at its most fundamental level, the political process is motivated through communication. But following Debray and picking up on Marshal McLuhan’s ‘the medium is the message’, it is not only that the technologies that we use give social currency to political ideas, but that the *ideas themselves* are shaped by the technology, acting as the
expression of the potentials and constraints that are inherent in any particular medium.

For instance, the ‘Republic of Letters’ that Dena Goodman (1994) describes, wherein the major philosophes of the 18th Century created their own networks of correspondence that served to materialise their thought and transform their world as a consequence, were obviously incapable, technologically, to think in concepts such as ‘real-time’, or McLuhan’s ‘global village’. The actual ideas expressed by Kant or Voltaire or Franklin or Paine through letters and books and journals were demarcated by the technologically-generated time and space of their era. The philosophes had their own time (clock-time), and their own space, an abstract space beyond the physical space of their own hometown, or village, or country. Debray termed this the ‘graphosphere’, elite 18th Century society networked through writing and print and constituting ‘a milieu for the reproduction of certain kinds of life and thought’ (2007: 6). In the context of political ideas, contemporaneous media, such as print, and their communication by foot, or carriage, or ship, had sufficient tractive force in time and space so as to allow for the conception and creation of temporally-specific political ideas, political parties and political institutions (Wolin, 1997). And from that era onward, ideas, parties and institutions grew – as did modern society more broadly – at an analogue technology-driven pace. This was fast enough for the transatlantic milieu of North America and Western Europe to transform dramatically and revolutionarily – indeed at a pace never before seen in human history. But it was slow enough and human-scaled enough also for people to recognise the trajectory of the cause and effect of change, and slow enough for democratic political institutions and political parties to take root and ‘naturalise’ the process.

Media technology underpins communication, and thus the political process. Media technology gave distinctive shape to liberal democracy during the Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution. The ideas and processes, the institutions and practices, were politics enacted as an expression of human-technological interaction. From the pen to the printing press, and from mass media to mass rallies, people, institutions and parties used technologies to act upon their environment in order to change it in some way: positively (in terms of developing democratic norms), or negatively, with history
exhibiting no shortage of instances when ‘progress’ in human affairs was in reverse (Gray, 2002: 153-190). Capitalism was of course very much part of this process, with its dynamic and innovatory energy warranting that media technology (any technology) would not remain static. However, Debray’s ‘graphosphere’ would not be superseded until the arrival of what he termed the ‘videosphere’, or the ‘age of the image’, in the late 20th Century (2007: 5). Prolonged analogue media dominance meant that these Enlightenment foundations could settle and enshrine precepts that would become the modern liberal-democratic process. And so deeply did these suffuse our consciousness and our daily practice of politics that they were considered at the time of their formation, and still today, as the discovery and application of a kind of timeless process; something that always was and would always be. For their part, the philosophes imagined they were uncovering something essential, something lost with the demise of Classical Greece. And in the new American Republic of the 1770s, for example, they revived and almost deified concepts from Athenian democracy in documents such as the Declaration of Independence, which affirmed that ‘all men are created equal’ was a ‘truth’ that was ‘self-evident’.

This has been a simple outline of analogue politics. But it illustrates the general political processes that came to us, via Greece and the Enlightenment, and which also gave rationale and coherence to modernity and capitalist industrialisation. Analogue technologies shaped the time and space of political ideas, allowing them to colonise and institutionalise to the point where they became the ‘recognisable’ practice of liberal democracy. Today this template has its regional variants, but most correspond to what Amartya Sen terms a ‘universal value’, one that has an immanently ‘constructive function’ (1999: 15), meaning that the universal has particularistic expressions. Analogue liberal democracy is thus flexible and often pragmatic, but it adheres to basic principles of equality, justice and freedom. I asked in the subheading above, regarding such politics: ‘do we still need it?’ To this I need to add: ‘can digital communication provide it?’ The short answer to the first question is ‘yes’. Moreover, given liberal democracy’s fragile and contingent composition, we must continually strive to deploy its values and constructive functionality everywhere and at all times – in ways appropriate to their context. However, it is a key concern here that this heritage and the capacities that it has transmitted down the centuries
are being diminished by digitality. New technologies sometimes improve upon the old, and sometimes they don’t; but digital logic created another category of technology altogether. It is this realisation that reveals the profound challenge that digitality denotes not only for the analogue world that it renders obsolete; it also exposes an ontological challenge to what we are, and to our continued capacity to practise politics in what had become the ‘traditional’ ways.

**The unbearable lightness of being digital**

At the beginning of his 1985 novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Milan Kundera contemplates the questions of ‘weight’ and ‘lightness’ through Nietzsche and Parmenides, respectively. The concept of weight derives from Nietzsche’s idea of eternal recurrence, where every life is destined to endlessly repeat itself. This places a tremendous weight of responsibility that the choices we make be the right ones. As Kundera puts it: ‘The heavier the burden, the closer our lives come to the earth, the more real and truthful they become’ (1985: 5). A life lived just once, by contrast, has no weight, no real responsibilities, and where ‘the absence of a burden causes a man to be lighter than air, to soar to the heights, take leave of the earth and his earthly being, and become only half real, his movements as free as they are insignificant’ (ibid.).

The utility of metaphor is that it allows us to think more exploratively about problems or issues that are novel, enabling a process of conception and description that can signal the beginnings of understanding. Metaphor can, as Martin Jay phrased it, ‘produce a flash of illumination that may be absent in more sober conceptual language (2010: 98). Questions of digitality and the political process are thus good candidates for the metaphorical approach. I will now develop a little further the metaphor of lightness as a way of thinking about our disconnection from the earth and from the environment and from the human-scaled physicality of analogue technology, culture and society. This will enable a fuller comprehension of the immense transition from analogue to digital that the world has undergone in the last generation.
In the social sciences, Zygmunt Bauman uses heavy and light to think about how capitalism has transitioned from ‘heavy modernity’, the ‘era of hardware’, to a ‘light modernity’ characterised by the logic of ‘software’ (2000: 118). Bauman also considers how, in the popular mind, and in the rationality of capitalism, this transformation is thought of as positive. The ‘seductive lightness of being’ through the digital-software revolution was profound and rupturing of the social fabric – but was not as violent and destructive of humans as the industrial revolution was. And so much of the rhetoric accompanying digitality was, and is, about our becoming ‘free’ from the ‘cumbersome machines’ (Bauman, 2000: 114) and free from the analogue technologies belonging to a more oppressive time. Bauman wrote some time ago, but he drew upon such metaphors that were common to social science in order to analyse politics and economics. And so for instance the metaphor of the ‘weight’ of political history can be appreciated in the case of, say, present-day Germany, where shared historical responsibility for the crimes of the National Socialists is still acknowledged by many (Weizsäcker, 1985). And in the economic realm, the ‘light’ touch or ‘friction free’ economy – most salient in Silicon Valley, or in software-driven financial services, more broadly – can be understood as another ‘seductive’ trope that promises a freer and less cumbersome economy, from which everyone will benefit. The state of lightness, one can therefore say, is to ‘lose’ something; to shed the weight of history, of responsibility, and to unburden culture and society of the physical weight of the ‘cumbersome machines’ that did so much good, but caused so much damage – in war, in environmental degradation and in construction of the polluted and teeming industrial city.

If we transfer our metaphors from the literary and the social sciences, to computer science and psychology, it is possible to see the ideas of lightness and loss function in a different way, and with different implications. In other words, to think of lightness and loss in human communication in the context of foundational thinking in computing and communication psychology gives new perspectives on what it means to communicate in the digital sphere, and what it means to enact politics there.
An arbitrary correspondence

What came to be known as the Macy Conferences on Cybernetics took place in New York between 1946-53. A series of ten meetings brought together leading computer scientists and others to discuss emerging theories on computing. At the 1951 meeting, R.W. Gerard, a neurophysiologist and behavioural scientist, gave a paper titled ‘Some of the Problems Concerning Digital Notions in the Central Nervous System’. Gerard argued that both analogue and digital processes functioned in the human brain, but each function expressed a different logic. He noted that:

…an analogical system is one in which one of two variables is continuous on the other, while in a digital system the variable is discontinuous and quantized. The prototype of the analogue is the slide rule, where a number is represented as a distance and there is continuity between greater distance and greater number. The prototype [of the digital] is the abacus, where the bead on one half of the wire is not counted at all, while that on the other half is counted as a full unit. [...] In the analogical system there are continuity relations; in the digital, discontinuity relations (1953: 172).

Communication therefore has two aspects: continuous and discontinuous, analogue and digital, and with the latter, in respect of the efficiency logic of digital computing, able to be more easily ‘quantized’. At this time, when computing was in its infancy, such differences constituted ideas and concepts of mainly philosophical interest and did not suggest in themselves, at this level of inquiry, anything problematic.

By the 1960s, computing was extending its capacities dramatically. In 1967, The Pragmatics of Human Communication appeared, which looked specifically at the analogue-digital question. Drawing from a blend of communication theory and psychology, Watzlawick et al. placed the rather sanguine view of the Macy Conferences in a more critical light. They argued that the ‘quantizing’ logic of digital computing is not able to usefully replicate human verbal or non-verbal communication because:
In digital computers both data and instructions are processed in the form of numbers so that often…there is only an arbitrary correspondence between the particular piece of information and its digital expression (2011: 41-2).

The authors go on to contend that where communication has a ‘content and relationship aspect’, and where ‘relationship is the central issue in communication’ then ‘digital language is almost meaningless’ (2011: 44-45). What digital communication lacks is ‘adequate vocabulary’ for the infinite contingencies of human relationships, and so ‘Not only can there be no translation from the digital into the analogic mode without great loss of information…but the opposite is extraordinarily difficult’ (2011: 47). The political philosopher Leonard Hawes takes this up in his book on political conflict, emphasising that in human communication it is impossible to not communicate; we always communicate something, but the message between the analogue and the digital cannot translate without gaps and voids of potential miscommunication. Digital communication, he concludes, lacks ‘an adequate vocabulary for qualities and shading of relationships’ (2015: 164).

If we take these insights on the problematic of human communication, especially the loss of information involved in analogue to digital translation, and the corresponding shift from continuity to discontinuity, and then use these to consider the analogue political process within social media, then the processes of digitality, of discretization, of dissociation, and of time-space compression – it is possible to conclude – have a compounding and negative effect upon the democratic process.

**Missing information and disinformation**

So quickly has Facebook become integral to the lives of millions of people, that we tend to forget it is an app, a commercial device that promotes itself as a neutral form of social communication. Notwithstanding its tribulations in the long wake of the 2016 election in the United States, Facebook remains a powerful platform. But it belongs to the wider app-ecosystem to which humans-as-users attach themselves to form the digital backdrop to everyday life. Walter Ong (1992: 293) observed that the technology of writing is so unusually powerful that it insinuates itself into our
consciousness as something natural, even although it is an invention, something we must learn to use. Apps like Facebook are not quite at this level of normativity yet, but this is the direction of their logic. Much of the app’s power comes from computing’s principal orientation, which is automation, the engineering out, as much as possible, of the human factor. With almost no physical or cognitive effort, and with no other physical human involved, the digital ecosystem opens up to the solitary user through the app interface. With dabs and flicks of the finger, rapid and invisible digital processes work automatically – ‘intuitively’ – to produce information worlds on screens that emerge from unseen clouds and databases. Such activity takes alienation to its purest refinement yet (Burkhardt, 2018: 12). This is alienation not only from the technologies we work with, as in the theories of classical Marxism, but alienation also from our natural (analogue) environment (Hassan, 2019).

It has been claimed that the app-ecosystem is not invisible, but is marked by its opposite, which is a ‘permanent excess: excessive downloads, excessive connections, excessive proximity, excessive “friends”, excessive “contacts”, excessive speeds and excessive amounts of information’ (Mellamphy et. al, 2015: 3). However, it is precisely the immaterial nature of digital excess that gives the app the power that it has over the user. Excess exists in digitality, and in the network as a whole, but is concealed at the focussed, individuated end point where user touches screen. Just as the growing carbon footprint that makes the internet possible is invisible to us, so too are its digital excesses. The interface appears seamless and smooth. But it is rendered discontinuous through algorithms that both curate and distract in a personalised and not ostensibly-excessive way. Through apps that display a surface simplicity through NUI, we feel ‘continuously successful’ and unaware of the enormity of which we are a part. The digital experience therefore creates a kind of double-blindness that renders the app-generated atmosphere as invisible: this is blindness to the physical environment that is filtered out when online; and blindness to the background computational immensity that brings the ‘magic’ of ‘automatism’ to our fingertips (Gehlen, 1980: 17-18).

Blindly we reach to the app to express ourselves politically at the individual and virtual-collective level. And when we engage the app, digitality acts upon us.
Facebook’s algorithms save you cognitive effort wherever possible: the cognitive effort of coming to a thought-out political opinion or trying to form one by considering the issues with others in analogue dialogue. For example, Facebook’s ‘What’s on your mind?’ function prompts users to upload anything they feel passionate or perplexed or pleased about. This sounds like the basis for political conversation and a way for feelings to be vented in a mass-communication form that may lead to groundswells of political opinion and potential political action. The first point to make, however, is that Facebook is in the business of content generation; its algorithms are less interested in your political opinion than your data-level response, whatever it may be. Beyond this banal commercial point, it is necessary to ask: can the app replicate or improve upon the analogue processes that gave us modern democracy? Can it indeed enhance and promote democracy?

The post-2016 Facebook-Cambridge Analytica dealings involving the use of customer data to profile and target potential swing voters in the US and UK gives an as-yet murky insight into how agency and power works in the app-ecology (Cadwalladr, 2018). But we can consider online agency and power in the context of two things that flow from the arguments made in this essay. First is that digital political interaction occurs in what has been termed ‘network time’ (Hassan, 2003). This is the accelerated temporality of the network where the imperatives of the neoliberal economy are coded and engineered into the web to induce users to act in a more distracted fashion (Hassan, 2012). Accordingly, the thought-through response, or measured participation in an unfolding dialogue, gives way online, via the working of the algorithms to amplify negativity, to the proffering of ill-considered opinion, to impulse-driven comment and trolling (Lanier, 2018: 18). However, from the perspective of the logic of content creation that engineers the process, quality is not the point, quantity is. Algorithmically structured for controversy and virality makes the communicative flow of the digitised political process more instrumental, and subordinates the substantive function of political discourse to the quantizing needs of data aggregators – an idea that echoes Stiegler’s point about the ‘discretization’ effect of digitality.
The second effect is more far-reaching and relates to how a lack of fidelity in the translation of analogue to digital information plays out in social media; in ways that leave people vulnerable and manipulable as political subjects. What Watzlawick termed the ‘arbitrary correspondence between the particular piece of [analogue] information and its digital expression’ (2011: 41-2) functions much like the problem of ‘missing information’ that Bill McKibben (1992) saw as a key characteristic of early digitality. For McKibben, the ‘information explosion’ of the 1990s had been largely scattergun: disconnecting as much as it connects, and creating the basis for multiple gaps and voids in our knowledge of ‘who we are’ and what we believe (1992: 9). Such ‘missing information’, he maintains, is more than just ignorance of certain facts, but an analogue-level withdrawal from each other, from nature, and from ‘most of our physical sense of the world’ (1992: 34). The ‘information explosion’ of the 1990s is, through developments in algorithmic software, today much more targetable and able to fill such gaps with messages of manipulation that produce a distorted impression of what is going on in the offline world (Singer and Brooking, 2018: 83-117). The dramatic increase in digital sophistication means the effect is much worse today insofar as the political process goes, and ‘missing information’ is now weaponized by disinformation. And as we see in countries such as Sri Lanka, where social media is used to spread anger and panic, this is not just a matter of being manipulated or of manipulating another, but of killing someone or of being killed by someone (Perera, 2018).

In social media politics, arbitrary correspondence, missing information and disinformation can act as a powerful basis for deception and manipulation by users able to exploit the mismatch between analogue and digital. A lack of confidence in the authenticity of anything can quickly become the default position online. At the level of banal human misbehavior, scamming and hoaxes and swindles proliferate online because often the ordinary user fails to recognise the digital sphere for what it is – a radically different realm where the analogue rules governing the ‘link between a movement and its effect’ (Estévez, p.402) are not present. Often this vulnerability results in simple commercial dishonesty, where our trust is misplaced and our inability to physically see something we may have purchased online means that either it’s not what we thought it was, or it does not exist at all. More significant is missing
information and disinformation in social media politics. The notorious 2009 Facebook experiment by Anders Jørgensen, a Danish academic, who posted a fake piece about a planned demolition of a famous Copenhagen fountain, and got 27,500 people to sign a petition in a couple of hours, was in retrospect a proof of concept. Today, Facebook can be the vector for political havoc with real-world consequences. In Myanmar from 2015-2017, ultranationalist Buddhists were whipped up by social media manipulators into frenzies of ethnic hatred against the country’s Rohingya Muslim minority. According to a UN independent inquiry, Facebook played a ‘determining role’ in the genocidal attacks that drove hundreds of thousands of Rohingyas to flee their homes and villages and seek refuge in neighboring Bangladesh (Darusman, 2018). Similar examples of disinformation inspire political enmity against an ethnic group or political enemies are found in Sri Lanka, in India, Philippines, Iraq, Turkey and elsewhere (Singer and Brooking, 2018; Vaidhyanathan, 2018).

Social media acting as interface between digitality and the individual enables ‘missing information’ to mix with disinformation to produce a toxic and post-modern form of political ‘engagement’ where ‘truth’ can be the first casualty, and where disinformation has no antidote – as the insertion of ‘truth’ to counter disinformation becomes just another element in the spread of confusion. This is a politics of alienation not only from reality and truth, but from technology and from nature, and reminds us again of Kundera’s metaphor of ‘lightness’. In his novel he asks: ‘which one is positive, weight or lightness?’ (1985: 3). In the context of analogue, weight corresponds to the stability of the earth we stand upon to create worlds in and through a natural ecology that will outlast our own time. In the context of digital lightness, we become unmoored in our consciousness from the analogue Earth to be buffeted by virtual currents whose origins we do not recognise, nor fully understand or control. We become vulnerable: to fads, to herd behaviour, to manipulation, and to the unending maze of disinformation. And as political subjects, the growing inability to recognise the world in traditional ways, through traditional political processes, means that the analogue and digital worlds we bestride are deeply antithetical, with offline democratic ends through online means destined to produce political frustration or failure.
In an essay titled, ‘Why Street Protests Don’t Work’, Moisés Naím describes the difficulty in translating digital politics into analogue outcomes:

…a powerful political engine is running in the streets of many cities. It turns at high speed and produces a lot of political energy. But the engine is not connected to wheels, and so the ‘movement’ doesn’t move. Achieving that motion requires organisations capable of old-fashioned and permanent political work that can leverage street demonstrations into political change and policy reforms. In most cases, that means political parties (2014: npn).

Naím argues that people and politics need to discard the app and go back to constructing and maintaining political institutions, join parties, go to meetings, read and write for old-fashioned media, and press for reforms in the traditional ways. One can think of the digital element of the Arab Spring risings of 2011 onwards and how, despite the initial successes across the region, the digital activism and its street and square ‘political energy’ succumbed to traditional political forms that were prepared to use undemocratic means and violence. Jodi Dean (2012) reached similar conclusions writing about the Occupy movement from around the same time with their similarly illusory hopes pinned upon what she terms the ‘quick fix of digital media’. Dean tells us that political challenges to digital capitalism must come, ultimately, from the slow and hard grind of analogue politics from an earlier era. Instead of using the app as means for the organisation of struggle, political work must take place in the analogue of recognition, of cause and effect. For Dean, activists in political struggle must see themselves as:

…components of a larger struggle requiring critical research, discussion, analysis and planning as well as the training of activists, organisers and even leaders. Their work is the work of parties: not the mass parties of electoral democracy, but the responsive and revolutionary parties of the previous century (2012: npn).
Concluding remarks

It has been said that those generations brought up with the web are the first in history not to have learned their media skills from their parents or forebears. They make it up as they go along. Their predecessors try to catch up, acquiring new skills, but often losing old ones in the process. This is a problem, one can easily see, if we want to understand the nature of the analogue and our historical role as part of its logic. This is a problem also for politics and the analogue political process. Where do we find and utilise the time for the ‘old-fashioned’ political work that Naim and Dean argue is so vital? How is it even possible when new generations, who will continue to be heuristic in their communicative practice, are each day less able to recognise previous forms of political practice as the forms that founded democracy?

The institutions of analogue politics still exist, of course. In every democracy, liberal or illiberal, voters elect people and parties that constitute congresses and parliaments that continue with the routines much as they have done for a long time. Bills are drafted and debated, committees do their work, hearings are conducted, questions are tabled, members meet with constituents. The mechanics of an earlier time continue creakily to unfold in recognizable and comforting ways. However, we live in a very different world today, a post-modernity where economic change (globalisation) and technological change (networked computing) has combined to transform almost everything, politics included. As Scott Lash noted in his Critique of Information, in digitality, ‘power is elsewhere’ (2002: 10). And to the extent that political power resided with the legislators in the liberal democracies, this has moved decisively from them to concentrate at the executive level. And power does not rest there but circulates contingently between the elite politicians and corporate CEOs whose interests converge in our post-modernity as never before. Political scientist William Scheuerman argued that power has concentrated at the executive level because it is only here where politicians are able ‘act with dispatch’ (1999: 27) on issues of vital economic and political importance. Executive-level politics making decisions without reference to the legislature is not new, but what is new is the extent of the overreach, and the rationale for doing so, which, according to Scheuerman, is located in the creation of the ‘high-speed economy’ (2004: 26-71).
Record levels of social and economic inequality across much of the world, coupled with the growing sense that political institutions no longer reflect the interests of the people, has seen a generalised inexorable drift and alienation from analogue political institutions. But people and society are immutably political. And for alternatives, for new communicative forms to give expression to political ideas in the hope of making them reality, millions have turned away from analogue newspapers and parties and institutions – toward the app and the politics of social media. The Occupy movement took inspiration from the Arab Spring, indignadas and other struggles. These gave hope to millions of disaffected people. These are also explicitly anti-institutional politics, and are an implicitly anti-analogue politics that sets much store in DIY internet activism. Notwithstanding its travails, Facebook and Twitter are prominent means for coordinating their local and global action. These have been given intellectual credibility by scholars such as Manuel Castells (2012) and by politically committed journalists such as Paul Mason (2013). Castells in particular is an influential scholar in the social sciences whose works have been translated into seventeen languages. In 2012 he published a book titled *Networks of Outrage and Hope*. Written up quickly in the heat of the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) tumult of 2011, Castells praises a revolutionary ‘contagion in a world networked by the wireless internet’ (2012: 2). At the end of the book, however, he injects a note of restraint to counter his earlier buoyancy:

…the only relevant question to assess the meaning of a social movement is the social and historical productivity of its practice, and the effect on its participants as persons and on the society it tried to transform. In this sense it is too early to evaluate the ultimate outcome of these movements, although we can already say that regimes have changed, and institutions have been challenged and that the belief in the triumphant global financial capitalism has been shaken, perhaps in irreversible ways in the minds of most people (2012: 244-245).

What can we say with the passing of less than a decade since Castells wrote? Regimes may have fallen, but these were dictatorships, which exist anyway always on a knife-edge. Moreover, Castells did not specify which ‘institutions have been challenged’;
nor can we identify any that were seriously so; and financial capitalism functions essentially in the same free-market way that it has since the 1990s, despite the sector’s almost total collapse in 2008.

In his *One-Dimensional Man*, Herbert Marcuse theorised what industrialisation did to political struggle in the 1960s. He wrote that ‘the technological transformation is at the same time political transformation [and that] established technology has become an instrument of destructive politics’ (1991: 227). Marcuse argued that industrialisation had been commandeered by an instrumental rationality, and it was this that created the ‘destructive politics’ of the late-1960s. Digitality constitutes a new technological transformation, one that is driven even more by instrumental reason (Feenberg, 2017: 149-150). The critical theory logic governing Marcuse’s thought in the 1960s, if applied to the technological transformation of our own time, does not augur well for our politics.

A digitality where much that is political is entangled with entertainment and labour presents us with a problem. This is fundamentally a political problem. To begin to understand the nature of the problem, we need to understand the nature of digital logic and its unsuitability for a politics formed through another category of technology. A possible solution would be to accept the dichotomy between analogue and digital politics and make a collective effort to forge new political processes through new and efficient communications technologies. But what about our political institutions and political traditions? In theory it may be possible to blend the vital, foundational analogue elements of democracy with the streamlining efficiencies of new communications technologies. But it seems that too many are now alienated from traditional politics. Moreover, an illiberal populism, much of it driven from online, is ascendant due to widespread feelings of alienation. And populist politicians pay lip service to their connections with those who put them in power (Lilla, 2017). Another path would be to do nothing. But this would leave politics and its communication processes to the logics of elite state and corporate algorithms and the power and profit imperatives that drive them.
Either way there is no app-based solution for this dilemma. Chris Cheshire, in his ‘Ontology of Digital Domains’, written before the digital turn turned fully toward effects as opposed to essences, argued that ‘The distinction between digital and analogue representation is philosophical before it is technical’ (1997: 86). Apart from the first step of philosophical inquiry into the nature of digital and the acceptance that we are analogue, it’s not even clear what the next step is. Thinking more reflectively about the universal utility of computing might be a starting-point. This should not be endless discussion about automation or robots or privacy or even about disinformation. These are effects of the deeper problem of a new category of technology that we have failed to recognise as such. That networked digital technologies constitute a ‘mode of existence proper to their own being’ that is antithetical to our own mode of being must now be seen as a legitimate philosophical question (Lotti, 2018: 51). The question is therefore an ontological as well as political one. To these we can also add the compounding issue of temporality – the pressure upon cognition and attention that contains the danger of inaction because we will forget or not realise, because of the intense media-cycle, that there is anything outside the digital. And if we get to that point, then what? Jürgen Habermas speculated upon what he called the ‘unfinished of project modernity’ and asked: ‘should we continue to hold fast to the intentions of the Enlightenment, however fractured they may be, or should we rather relinquish the entire project of modernity?’ (1997: 45-46). Given the immaterial nature of digitality, the more we are shaped by its logic, then the less we will have to ‘hold fast to’. And to paraphrase Kundera, the lighter our burden of truth and reality will then become as we live our lives further away from the roots and traction that flow up from our contiguity with the earth. At that point, modernity and its analogue politics will be finished as a means for the promotion of democracy.

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https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/may/07/the-great-british-brexit-robbery-hijacked-democracy


https://muse.jhu.edu/

Notes

1 Digitality is a term I develop in The Condition of Digitality (forthcoming, 2019 University of Westminster Press) to theorise and describe the emergence and dominance of a new category or technology, the digital. This is not only functionally antithetical to the analogue technologies that enabled humans to survive as a species, but the emergence of the digital has also given cause to reflect (for the first time) that we too are analogue, creatures of the technologies we created since the earliest times of our evolutionary drift towards tool-use.
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Abstract

This paper asks what we can learn if we research algorithms via a bottom-up methodology from a users’ perspective to see how everyday users can resist algorithmic objectives. In doing this, this paper theorizes the framework of agency in which users can shape and reshape algorithmic outcomes. The argument draws on theoretical knowledge grounded in empirical data produced in 10 in-depth interviews, Heidegger’s phenomenology of experience, and De Certeau’s notion of practices in everyday life. It explains how the phenomenology of experience can render algorithms visible for users by asking not what algorithms are, but by reflecting upon their meaning and how these reflections can transform into practices of everyday resistance. Finally, this article speculates about the potential implications of (meta-)data on machine learning that is purposely being manipulated by users, creating the possibility of what I am labelling a “hyperdodge”.

Keywords

Algorithm, Phenomenology of Experience, User’s Perspective, Agency, Hyperdodge

Algorithms have found their way into the fabric of our social life: from online-dating to route navigation and from searching for information to recommending shopping items. Algorithms are embedded within all our complex amalgams of political, technical, cultural and social interactions of everyday life (Willson, 2017). Through this development, the debate about algorithmic power has gathered momentum across interdisciplinary fields. But the research within this area is primarily concerned with the algorithm’s encoded syntax, its socio-political and economic environment, and its implications for a digitalized society. The trend to research algorithms seems
to be driven by the same forces that drive the algorithm: systemic thinking, big data, and quantification. Users are seen as they are by algorithms, “as members of categories” (Cheney-Lippold, 2011: 176), exposed to algorithmic decision-guidance techniques that influences users’ choices in the form of a “hypermudge” (Yeung, 2016).

Most research in media studies still predominantly looks at algorithms from a systemic viewpoint with a wide range of research interests: from the way they govern our lives (Gourarie, 2016), to scrutinizing the threats of algorithmic decision-making (Brake, 2017; Danaher, 2016; Zarsky, 2016), to how they transform culture and human interactions (van Dijck, 2013a), and how these systems shape our everyday life (Kitchin & Dodge, 2011; Willson, 2017; Yeung, 2016). While these groups of researchers produce valuable insights, they tend to see users’ (meta-)data predominantly as an economic and political resource for platform owners resulting in some potential limitations. This research may overlook the use of the same personal (meta-)data by everyday users who often tend to utilize algorithms as a resource to resist their objectives. Through various forms of intuitive and imaginative resistance these users have the potential to expose machine learning algorithms to a set of manipulated (meta-)data in the form of a “hyperdodge”. This strategy is one that can corrupt meaningful notions of machine prediction through quantitative pattern recognition. David Beer argues that the power of algorithmic systems can only be understood when they are investigated within their social ecology (Beer, 2017). Undoubtedly, the user is part of this ecology. Yet, a user’s perspective to fill the theoretical gaps between power, subjectivities and agency remains largely absent. Notwithstanding, this is a worthwhile pursuit. Many operational algorithms based on the principle of machine learning require data about users’ activity to recognize patterns, optimize their internal decision trees and determine more effective evaluative criteria for prediction. Within this (meta-)data of users rests the potential for users to actively shape algorithmic outcomes and exercise agency. However, only a handful of scholars research algorithms from a user’s perspective, with varying methodologies and research conclusions (see Bucher, 2017; Chambers, 2017; DeVito, 2017; Eslami et al., 2015; Hamilton, Karahalios, Sandvig & Eslami, 2014; Kant, 2015).
To users, algorithms might seem like alienated constructs, but their outcomes are not. A friend’s holiday photo on Facebook, a restaurant suggestion, or a personalized advertisement that is all a bit too accurate: these outcomes have value for people. While users might not understand what data entry points an algorithm uses to assess its result or how value is assigned to data within its syntax, users can grasp their essential working logic through experiencing these outcomes. And if this understanding – building on value-based experiences – can alter the way users interact with these systems, it changes the way their (meta-)data is being produced. This means that experiences can constitute a foundation of users’ agency within algorithmic decision-making. This shows the necessity to reverse the common question about the abilities of algorithms and ask: what do people do to algorithms?

The first part of this paper gives an overview to understand algorithms and their implications within the everyday life of users and illustrates different approaches to researching algorithms that will complement the user’s perspective. The second part discusses how we can understand algorithms as phenomena of everyday life, how users can become aware of algorithms, how this awareness can affect their (meta-)data production and the role of this (meta-)data within algorithmic decision-making. It shows how the phenomenology of experience can render algorithms visible for users by asking not what algorithms are but by reflecting upon their meaning and how these reflections transform into practices of agency with the potential to disrupt big data sets. The third part shows how this methodology plays out by illustrating briefly different modes of experience and users’ everyday practices of resistance with interview statements. This part will conclude the argument and speculate how these practices can be understood as networks of “anti-discipline” (Certeau, 1988: xiii), creating the potential for a “hyperdodge” – in contrast to Yeung’s notion of a “hyernudge” (2016) – that influences users’ decision-making.

While this article uses the singular form of algorithm, these are in fact conglomerates of operational algorithms, drawing on different methods to extract data, make predictions and produce knowledge. Furthermore, the argument within this paper only applies to algorithms that personalise outcomes for users and work with (meta-
data that is produced through users’ interactions with these systems. Most of these algorithms fall under Gillespie’s definition of public relevance algorithms – algorithms that “select what is most relevant from a corpus of data composed of traces of our activities, preferences, and expressions” (Gillespie, 2014: 168). These types of algorithms do not only compose databases but rather stand for a knowledge system themselves. Within his essay on the relevance of algorithms, Gillespie explains in detail the implications of these systems, as “we have embraced computational tools as our primary media of expression, and have made not just mathematics but all information digital, we are subjecting human discourse and knowledge to these procedural logics that undergird all computation” (Gillespie, 2014: 168). These types of algorithms could be further classified according to different distribution models of outcomes or according to their societal function, as Latzer et al. present in their functional typology of algorithmic selection applications on the Internet. These different types suit a user’s perspective, as people can relate to functions like search, aggregation, filtering, recommendation, scoring, allocation etc. (Latzer et al., 2014).

While the foregoing definitions and categorizations are concerned with distribution models, modes of outcome selection or different procedures to evaluate results, Ted Striphas shows a different perspective on algorithms by shifting the perspective to the outcomes. He argues that algorithms alter the way we understand and generate culture. He uses an historic approach by connecting the concepts of information, crowd and algorithm to illustrate the alteration of culture through computational processes. Striphas reasons that over the past 30 years humans have left cultural decisions – “the sorting, classifying and hierarchizing of people, places, objects and ideas” – increasingly to computational processes (Striphas, 2015: 395). Algorithms are cultural gatekeepers and Striphas understands this shift as “algorithmic culture”, “which is increasingly becoming a private, exclusive and indeed profitable affair” (Striphas, 2015: 395). Contrary to Gillespie, who argues that it is hard to judge an algorithm by its bias, due to a non-existent human metric, Striphas argues that this hidden logic and its outcome already demonstrates an alteration of human culture:
What one sees [...] is the enfolding of human thought, conduct, organization and expression into the logic of big data and large-scale computation, a move that alters how the category *culture* has long been practiced, experienced and understood (Striphas, 2015: 397).

He concludes that the publicness of cultural decisions is at stake and is being replaced by a new elite claiming to be transparent while covering up their working procedures. He thereby very much aligns his argument with other discourses looking at this from a legal perspective (see Cohen, 2012; Pasquale, 2015). As well as differing on viewpoints on the algorithm as a black-box, Striphas diverges from Cohen and others as he argues that the outcomes of algorithms themselves already portray a new way of cultural understanding. This understanding of culture is important. It illustrates a critical idea that culture has become algorithmic and shifts the focus away from the algorithmic syntax and what it does towards the things users can relate to and make meaning of.

The interrogation of the power aspects of algorithms has seen a much broader array of different approaches. While the object of study – the algorithm – is an entity of interest within various disciplines, a dissonance in the formal way of approaching this entity seems to divide scholars into two groups. One tends to treat an algorithm as a line of code and scrutinizes the design of the algorithm and its technical abilities. The other group treats algorithms as a social process (c.f. Beer, 2017). While both approaches aim to research the power implications of algorithms, they vary significantly in their advance, blind spots and outcomes. The technical perspective is helpful to understand the logic of algorithms and can illustrate how the harvesting of personal (meta-)data can feed data entry points of the algorithmic decision-making process. However, the technical side fails to investigate all facets of distinct privatized algorithms due to the black box approach of most corporations. Further, the research from the technical side fails to look into algorithms’ interference within the social sphere. It is good to remind ourselves here that “[a]lgorithms without data are just a mathematical fiction” (Constantiou & Kallinikos, 2015: 54). Failing to acknowledge how this data is being produced by users produces another blind spot. Furthermore, if the algorithm is treated as a line of code, the research ends with its
last line and cannot be reconnected to the social sphere. Beer argues that, “[d]etaching the algorithm in order to ask what it does requires separating the algorithm from the social world” (Beer, 2017: 4) and treating a separated entity as part of something is simply not possible. He argues, therefore, that algorithms are part of the social world and must be treated as a social process if one is interested in their power within social life. This argument is calling for a user’s perspective, as it asks for algorithms to be treated as part of the social sphere and thereby supports the view that algorithms are “products of history and subject to cultural logics” (Andrejevic, Hearn, & Kennedy, 2015: 384). Millions of users prove every day that they can understand the essential working logic of algorithms by simply using search engines, to find the results they are looking for and to create meaning out of them. This understanding can ultimately alter the conception of algorithmic understanding from a lay perspective and will be elaborated further in the next section dedicated to the user’s perspective and algorithms as phenomena.

But first, I would like to change register to show the importance of user-generated (meta-)data within algorithmic decision-making. When a user performs a search on Google, for example, its algorithm’s command structure resembles a linear or “a formal process or a set of step-by-step procedures” (Striphas, 2015: 403), calculating the optimal output for the input data. The data needed to evaluate these results resides within a network the algorithm can assess via its data entry points – gates, bridging the algorithm with varying datasets. These entry points are at the heart of an algorithm’s decision-making process. While some of these processes draw on external infrastructures incorporated on the Internet or internal platform-related metrics, others are drawing on user-specific (meta-)data generated through active and passive platform interactions. If an identical query between two users then results in different outcomes, it is due to different decisions the algorithm made while it was assessing its entry points.

Within this process, user (meta-)data has the potential to affect the algorithm in two ways. First, if data points offer different data, the algorithm is likely to have a different outcome. Some of these user-specific points might be related to the user’s location, their language input method, or profile information, if they have a log in or
cookies produced by previous browsing. Every sequential step within the algorithm’s syntax draws on a data point and every data point influences the one to follow. Every data point, therefore, has the potential to lead down a new path to a different outcome. If users alter one of these points, they are likely to receive different outcomes.

While this is very simple, I would like to speculate about the consequences for platform-related metrics of user (meta-)data and the way that operational algorithms or machine learning draw on this to develop new algorithms. These algorithms always operate with a certain logic or objective. For instance, maximizing user engagement with advertisements or personalizing media content to increase the time users spend on platforms. This objective is encoded by engineers who assume that data obtained through data points have a certain meaning: engaging with a link on social media means a user is interested; that cookies within a browser’s cache are produced by the same user; that the IP address’ location coincides with the location of the user; or that a like on Facebook means that a user likes a post. A machine learning algorithm’s objective might be to produce a new algorithm or several functions as a section within the algorithm that performs a specific task to get closer to its predefined objective. This could be through identifying patterns capable of connecting data points in new ways with different mathematical or statistical procedures: like a k-nearest neighbor classifier, a naive bayes classifier or a logistic and linear regression. While most of these algorithms use a model of inductive cognition (Berry, 2017: 78), it is important to remember that “[f]unctions cannot learn or produce anything, only reproduce patterns implicit in their structure” (Mackenzie, 2017: 84). In consequence, any predefined objective is hard to reach if the assigned value of the obtainable data does not correspond with the user’s value. Users are known to be resilient. They do not necessarily follow the logic and thought of engineers who have designed the systems they operate in, they might hit the like button on a post on Facebook to mock their peers (Kant, 2015), use a proxy or tactically delete their cookies, or even engage with content for a whole lot of reasons other than personal interest. The question is then, what value can an algorithmic

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1 It is important to note here that this process is not always linear and can take place in multiple ways. Regardless of the order in which data points are assessed, one data point has the potential to affect another.
output have for users, if the initial value to produce this pattern does not correlate seamlessly with the data that was used to find this pattern? While it is argued that “the accuracy of these algorithms is known to improve with greater quantities of data to train on” (Burrell, 2016: 5), the statement remains disputable if we critically assess the circumstances in which (meta-)data is being produced by self-interpreting subjects within big data sets. This discrepancy could then constitute a vulnerability of algorithmic decision-making. If a network of users – *bound by their shared experiences* – dodges an algorithm’s objective by altering their (meta-)data production, this could have severe consequences on predictive analysis or assessment of behaviour and creates the possibility of a “hyperdodge” manipulating (meta-)data across entire sets of big data.

There is an array of research that produces knowledge about the user, pursuing questions such as how algorithms influence the decision-making of individuals in the form of a “hypernudge” (Yeung, 2016) or the spaces users and algorithms share within everyday life (Willson, 2017). Looking at forms of media power in general and the importance of user (meta-)data, it seems necessary that algorithmic power can be understood in a broader sense when the user’s perspective is included within the theorization of algorithms. There are a few large surveys that include the user within the knowledge production about algorithms but these mainly conclude that most people are not aware of algorithmic decision-making within their everyday life (Eslami et al., 2015; Rader & Gray, 2015). Yet, the research designs within these surveys are deductive and only allow users to express their experiences with algorithms in predefined questions that might describe phenomena they have reasoned about within their own terminology.

Bucher (2017) offers a different way. She explores how users experience algorithms, allows for users to produce knowledge about algorithms in their own language, and refers to the way users think about them as ‘algorithmic imaginary’. She interviewed 25 people about their experiences with the algorithm that generates Facebook’s Newsfeed. She argues that algorithms are not experienced by people as a mathematical recipe but through “moods, affects and sensations that the algorithm helps to generate” (Bucher, 2017: 32). She argues that algorithms have the potential
to affect people and be affected. Thus, she found an entry point in the everyday life with algorithms from a user’s perspective. She illustrates how algorithms make people feel and this gives an insight into the power of algorithms and how it creates subjectivities. This contribution is valuable to anyone who is looking for a broader notion of algorithmic power via the user’s perspective.

II

The idea to research algorithms as phenomena in everyday life is useful from a user’s perspective. While Merleau-Ponty’s notion of “moods” as a mode of experience is suitable to illustrate momentary experience, there is a better way to illustrate how this experience can be embedded within a reflective process over time to exercise agency and resist an algorithm’s objective building up toward my notion of the “hyperdodge”. Heidegger explores the Kantian notion of experience in several works to explain the relation between beings and phenomena. According to Heidegger, experience has different modes. The main argument here will focus on an important distinction that he makes between Erleben and Erfahren. Both of these words translate into the English word ‘experience’, but while the former applies to unreflective experiences, the latter should be understood as reflexive experience, accumulating over time (c.f. Scannell, 2014). By focusing on “moods” of algorithms, Bucher looks at experience as erleben [living-through], which according to Heidegger is “isolated and temporary” (Inwood, 1999). While Bucher manages to capture many forms of people becoming aware of algorithms within their everyday life, this mode of experience does not progress, as experiencing an algorithm as erleben means to have lived through many of its moods. Experiencing an algorithm as erfahren, on the other hand, stands in relation to an interpretative process throughout time. Heidegger describes this mode of experience as “a sequence of steps of ‘experiencing’” (Heidegger, 1999 [1936]: 110).

Experience here starts as an encounter that “affects one […] without one’s having to do anything” (Heidegger, 1999 [1936]: 110). This can be a mood that is created through an algorithm and is similar to experience [as erleben]. However, this process continues when agents start to seek encounters. Heidegger refers to this step as “going up to something”, an active seeking of this mood (Heidegger, 1999 [1936]: 111). This is
seen by Heidegger as a transitional step that leads towards ‘testing’ and looking for “changing conditions of its encountering” (Heidegger, 1999 [1936]: 111) and towards “grasping ahead to what has the character of a rule” (Heidegger, 1999 [1936]: 111).

This notion of experience [as erfahren] is suitable to see how affectual experiences can reveal a subjective stance that is later reflected upon and how it can lead towards agency. While an IT engineer might have the vocabulary to conceptualise algorithms and their background processes within the hermeneutic circle, everyday users can still build on their own experiences and see how the way they approach the algorithm – by offering different data or meta-data over a period of time – reveals a different algorithmic outcome, which in turn has the potential to produce different moods. While experience [as erleben] is suitable to illustrate algorithmic encounters, experience [as erfahren] can show how users constitute algorithms as phenomena, thus, building towards an “algorithmic imaginary”, which Bucher defines as ways to think about what algorithms are (2017), which also includes reflections building towards everyday resistance.

Heidegger’s sequences do not necessarily lead towards an understanding of the algorithm as a mathematical step-by-step procedure; rather it brings users towards an understanding of its purpose within their everyday lives. Paddy Scannell argues that Heidegger’s notion of understanding points first towards the object’s meaning. This is embedded within Heidegger’s description of different ontological worlds of objects and their care-structure (Scannell, 2014). Instead of asking users what an algorithm is and considering its coded syntax, they are more likely to understand what it is meant to do. The meaning of algorithms then is an accessible phenomenon for users, as it is embedded within the experiences of the algorithm’s cultural outcomes. Not necessarily through its character as an object of the everyday, but through the meaning it conjures via a creative and reflective interpretation. In other words: experience as Erfahren. While it can be hard for users to think about what algorithms are, it is much easier for them to find meaning behind algorithms within their lives and, through that, may also find access to the question of what an algorithm is.

Although everyday users often do not have the vocabulary to explain how (meta-)data influences search results or how their activity is embedded into information
ecosystems, they have experiences based on algorithmic outcomes affecting them. Users can find ways to embrace or avoid these encounters. This is particularly interesting when the altered digital behaviour becomes a part of the algorithmic outcome itself through data entry points aimed at users within the algorithm’s input-throughput-output model (Latzer et al., 2014). This can be evident within the users’ everyday lives when sequences of experience [as erfahren] transform into practices.

As shown by Willson (2017), de Certeau’s work is relevant as its various components of strategies, structures, tactics and interactions are applicable to online spaces. Michel de Certeau’s work on *Practice of Everyday Life* (1988; Certeau et al., 1998) offers a useful guide to study how users deal with strategies and how they can resist, by limiting flows and dissipating energies (Highmore, 2007). While de Certeau’s work contributes in many ways to this methodology, I would like to restrict this article to the concepts of *strategies* and *tactics* (1988). While the concept of strategy accounts for the algorithm itself, a tactic refers to the “art of the weak” (Certeau, 1988: 37). The weak are the targets of the strategy, thus, users of the spaces created by platform owners, and their “everyday practices [...] are tactical in character” (Certeau, 1988: xiv). It stands to reason how these practices are continuously altered with different experiences of users.

While Heidegger shows the struggle for new subjectivities through the ontology of being, Michel de Certeau has a more praxeological approach. The similarities are in their interest to build their analysis on subjects situated in the everyday and therefore the approaches are complementary. The everyday in both approaches is characterised through experiences of otherness in space and time. While Heidegger is more concerned with existential questions about subjectivities, de Certeau looks at how subjectivities express themselves physically in the “art of making do” (Certeau, 1988). Rather than setting these two approaches apart, this research utilises both to show how experiences and actions are interconnected and transform each other and so build towards resistance of algorithmic objectives.
III

It is best to illustrate parts of this methodological understanding by drawing on user experience and everyday practices. The following statements are taken from interviews with users that helped to understand, ground and create the concept of the “hyperdodge”. While these interview passages seem like a good fit to the theory, it is important to note that the theoretical approach started with these interviews and due to the limited space, each theoretical argument can only be illustrated by one statement.

Within this first statement, we can see that this interviewee was affected by a simple advertisement allocation algorithm.

1. Being pushed into an affectual encounter & 2. Going up to something:

Anwar: I was looking for a t-shirt for a very obscure band when I was in Germany. Like it was really hard to look for that t-shirt and when I went back to using Facebook in Egypt I got a lot of pop-ups about this band and t-shirts from this band. I thought someone is like fucking me up or hacked my account. My laptop can’t read me that well and then I just had to read about cookies. […] The t-shirt thing was pretty trivial, but it fucked me up so bad. I had no idea how far they would go with this.

The algorithm here in the form of an allocation advertisement system has generated an outcome based on cookies stored within her browser. Anwar describes here how she was affected by this outcome and it pushed her into the first sequence of experience [as erfahreng]. She did not seek this encounter but was rather confronted by an algorithm that had suddenly been rendered visible within her everyday without her having to do anything about it. The second part of her statement also shows how she was “going up to something” (Heidegger, 1999 [1936]: 111) by trying to approach the encountered phenomena to avoid similar encounters in the future by reading about cookies to understand what happened.
3. Looking for changing conditions of the encountering:

It is also evident how individuals progress within this sequence and are looking for “changing conditions of its encountering” (Heidegger, 1999 [1936]: 111). Felix made his first encounter with the personalisation aspect of a search algorithm during a trip to France, where he realised that all his queries delivered results that coincided with his linguistic preferences and even showed him German advertisements for French restaurants in the area. This marked his first sequence of experience [as *erfahren*]. The sudden realisation made him curious, and after he had time to rationalise his affectual encounter he was ready to share his thoughts with his colleagues to look for changing conditions of the encountering of algorithms:

*Felix:* I just asked everyone to Google the same thing with their phones and everyone had different results. Back then that was a surprise, today I think it is obvious.”

This statement shows how Felix approached the phenomena from a different viewpoint after the initial affectual encounter that revealed the algorithm as part of his “paramount reality” (Berger & Luckmann, 1967) until its meaning was put into question. It also shows that after the initial surprise, that search results may vary, the affect through the algorithm was worn out while the experience was hidden within the everyday, and, again, it has become a key to interpret other encounters with algorithms in the future.

4. Grasping ahead to the character of a rule:

The last part of the sequence as “grasping ahead to what has the character of a rule” (Heidegger, 1999 [1936]: 111) should not be mistaken. What is described as a rule here should be understood as imagination: as a tool of the “practical consciousness” (Schutz & Luckmann, 1991) that individuals use within their everyday life to handle algorithms.

*Lee:* I realised that whatever I put into my Instagram account, the system recognises it as data. They will use it then to try to satisfy me. I’m not sure how to put this into a sentence but it is just the way they do it. It is not surprising anymore though. It is just a matter of your location, the hashtag, who you follow, who follows you […].
While this is just a snippet of an imaginary set of rules for a single algorithmic service, it shows how users rationalise different data entry points of algorithms and speculate about algorithmic objectives. In this particular example, Lee’s “rules” build a catalogue of different data points that have the potential to shape algorithmic outcomes but also touch upon concepts that have been worked out via different approaches, such as the “second index” (Stalder, 2009), or that algorithmic selection services often serve different customers with interdependent demands (Latzer et al., 2014). In its essence, this methodology is very simple: users are capable of experiencing the implications of algorithms via affectual encounters within their everyday life. This, on the other hand, has the potential to shape their consciousness and subsequently their behaviour and digital interactions with these systems. These value-based experiences, then, can alter the way data and (meta)data are produced by their users. This also means that they can alter algorithms building on the principle of machine learning, or at least shape their outcomes.

There is a simple way to render visible how this awareness translates into physical and digital practices, which manipulate and/or shape algorithmic outcomes according to the user’s imagination. This is palpable through Michel de Certeau’s understanding of strategies and tactics. De Certeau illustrates this with the design of the city. The city itself and thereby its streets, recreational areas and neighborhoods are designed with a certain strategy. Users on the other hand re-appropriate these spaces with their own practices to transform what producers offer. This works in a digital comparison as well: The “absence of a proper locus” (Certeau, 1988: 37) is then the space that is not traceable by algorithms. This is set within the realm of the consciousness in what users think while producing data to manipulate the value of the data that an algorithm processes, or by not producing certain (meta-)data at all. Many of these tactics are very simple. Some of the interviewees explained how they used a VPN connection to bypass blocked content of search engines in countries with restricted information access; others stated how they used tactical Facebook likes of political parties they do not agree with to escape their political eco-chamber and the algorithms’ strategy of instant gratification. Others build on affectual encounters and digital literacy to avoid being affected negatively in the future.
Kasper, for example, explained how he rationalized the frustration he felt when he had to endure weeks of Kickstarter advertisements on Facebook. He reasoned that the advertisement started to bother him after he followed a link that his friend had sent him through Facebook’s messenger. He thereby assumed that the answer to this breach must lie within messenger, that the platform’s algorithm must have concluded his interest in Kickstart campaigns by recognizing that he followed a link about a Kickstarter project. To avoid this, he started to copy links from his messenger and paste them into his browser, as this would interrupt the platform’s ability to follow his activity and archive his interests.

**Kasper:** I just realised if I copy and paste it [links] I leave the messenger without Facebook knowing that I followed something within their network.

By not offering data, Kasper shapes the algorithmic outcome by applying an avoidance tactic. His reflective experiences over time have shifted his subjectivity to the realization that algorithmic objectives are in fact ‘dodgeable’. With this practice he has developed a digital but not traceable tactic, to counteract the “algorithmization of the hyperlink” (Helmond, 2013). While he still follows the same path, his tactic isolates one space from the other, and thus limits the strategy of the algorithm via his assumption.

More significant were some tactics that brought no personal gain for people but simply represented tactics that worked contrary to an allocation algorithm’s logic to interfere with its objectives.

**René:** It’s just uncomfortable when the advertisements suit my interests too much, [...] I just tell Facebook that I am not interested in the content until something appears that actually doesn’t interest me [...] .

This tactic shows a discrepancy between the predefined value of data obtained by data points and the meaning a user might have while producing this (meta-)data. While the interviews produced many more ways of operating contrary to an
algorithm’s objectives, some of them did not necessarily make a lot of sense from a systemic viewpoint:

Robert: My feed is full of these cat videos I don’t want to see but when I am like really bored I do like to see it sometimes but on the other hand I don’t want to look at it because I am afraid I would get more of this stuff. Then, I scroll by slowly on the video and don’t click on it for the sound to start, so then Facebook does not know that I was looking at it. I mean with Facebook, the past plays such an important role, everything you look at becomes part of it and I just try to avoid these clicks that give them this chance.

Due to the algorithmic black-box it is uncertain whether this tactic has any influence on the curation of the newsfeed, but it does show how Robert adjusts his digital practices to his own set of rules. Effective or not, they illustrate further the divergence between the value of data that an algorithm processes and the circumstances in which it is produced.

Tactics like these show that users are “refusing a logic-of-application [by] replacing it with a logic-of-alteration” (Highmore, 2007: 119). Users are not simply following the algorithms’ objectives. While users can avoid outcomes and how they are produced, the technical side is not the only aspect users can avoid. They can also deprive themselves from the economic interests. Many interviewees stated avoidance tactics, or that they would never click on the first link in search engines, because then ‘they’ would earn money. Incidents like these have the power to illustrate that people are aware of strategies and have their own way of dealing with their frustration. They show how users are becoming reflexively aware of algorithms and can resist them with various everyday practices.

This is, of course, an idealised picture of users’ agency, but it provokes new thoughts on algorithmic power. Drawing on imagination and the meaning of algorithms within their lives, tactics are neither reliable nor can they make severe changes to the technological abilities of algorithms or their socio-economic objectives. Yet practices reveal that users have their own ways of getting around the implications of
algorithms. These experiences with algorithms and the users’ imaginations stand in a circular process and resemble a conversation that users have in the moment of reflection in the present with their future self, drawing on affectual experiences in the past and their imagination. This process builds a frame of agency because every assumption and adjustment of behaviour they make has the power to shape algorithmic outcomes, due to the data entry points of algorithms aimed at users’ activity. If not just one but all users act this way, contrary to the encoded logics of algorithms, it creates an entire network of “anti-discipline” (Certeau, 1988: xiii). For large-scale computation and machine learning in this regard, this network of users has a chance to make a difference. Perhaps Yeung (2016) is right when she says that users are exposed to a “hypermudge”. And maybe, under the same terms, algorithms might be exposed to a “hyperdodge”. A system of constant manipulation of algorithms, created by millions of users simultaneously corrupting the cogs of machine learning algorithms and operating contrary to the interests of their owners.

Conclusion

In conclusion, researching algorithms via the phenomenology of experiences can show that people can and do influence algorithms within their everyday life – even if they do not fully understand their technicalities. This argument sheds a different light on algorithmic power in contrast to connotations that take a perspective from the network down towards the user. Focusing on outcomes and the methodological shift towards a phenomenological approach enables the research to focus on a user’s perspective. This has been studied within the context of the everyday life of users and oriented itself around the work of Yeung (2016), Willson (2017), Cohen (2012) and Michel de Certeau’s notion of strategies and tactics (Certeau, 1988). The combination of both Heidegger’s phenomenology of experience and the work on everyday life renders visible hidden algorithms and what people do to them. This is contrary – as Bucher points out (2017: 42) – to the popular opinion that “the individual user is incapable of really experiencing the effect that algorithms have in determining one’s life as algorithms rarely, if ever, speak to the individual” (Cheney-Lippold, 2011: 176).
Regardless of the way users get in touch with these algorithms and the feeling that these encounters produce, users go from momentary and affectual experiences towards more reflective ones. This reflective experience manifests an imaginary about the phenomenon that users have become aware of and links to the user’s imagination to think about algorithms. This idea builds on Bucher’s “algorithmic imaginary” (2017) and extends through Heidegger’s notion of different ontological worlds (Heidegger, 1962). While users cannot factualise the algorithm per se, they instead find access by asking what it is meant to do for them, and what are its owner’s objectives. When a user asks what the algorithm should do for them, they can observe with varying practices how outcomes and feelings created through human-algorithmic interactions change. While this activity builds on imagination, as users cannot surely know what is inside the black box, it has in fact real consequences (c.f. Bucher, 2017: 40) and creates the potential for the hyperdodge. Therefore, experiences with algorithms and imagination are in circular interdependency – a circuit from machine to user and from user to machine. This circle between action and assumption is the frame in which everyday users can practice agency and reshape algorithms. Thereby, this notion opposes other views of users’ agency and power via a systemic research approach (see e.g. Cheney-Lippold, 2011; Fisher & Fuchs, 2015; van Dijck, 2013b). The problem with this advance has always been the algorithm as a black box itself. A different approach could contribute to the solution of this methodological problem by turning around this scheme: it starts with the user’s reactions to algorithms via the outcomes and looks at how the reactions alter algorithms.

In future, this research could be extended to a pluralist approach: combining the phenomenology of experience and reverse engineering experiments, or large-scale tracking to see the real potential of the “hyperdodge” to affect machine learning. This would require an extended sample to identify more moments, in which users can influence algorithmic decision-making via practices rooted within their imagination. However, such an approach would still not be able to answer what impact the users’ reshaping has because of the algorithm’s opaque nature. Some scholars have shown that reverse engineering, tracking or experiments are suitable approaches to research the implications of algorithms if it is known which
implications have to be looked for (Diakopoulos, 2015; Gehl, 2014; Jürgens, Stark, & Magin, 2015; Sandvig, Hamilton, Karahalios & Langbort, 2014). An approach via users’ perspectives rooted within the phenomenology of experience could provide these insights. Such an approach could make a great contribution towards an understanding of algorithmic power as it could scrutinise each step to research the algorithmic power that David Beer describes: materiality of algorithms, understanding the work of coders, modelling in action, understanding their role within everyday practices, seeing how people respond to algorithmic processes (Beer, 2017: 11) – but inverted and from below.

References


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Drone Film Theory:
The Immanentisation of Kinocentrism
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Abstract
This essay looks at the role of drones in contemporary culture, including cinema. It suggests that drones are the latest in a long line of media that involve the physical separation of humans from the world and from each other, a logic of separation that intersects with military and entertainment interests. In this way, the drone signals the simultaneous and interlinked cinematisation (or kinocentrism) and militarisation of society. Looking from a distance and fighting from a distance, as combined in the drone, not only have a militaristic purpose; they also serve to render god-like the unseen and unquestionable operator of the drone (and the viewer of images). This becoming god-like can also be seen in the conquest of time, as the never-ending and real-time demands of permanent surveillance, permanent war and permanent work all relegate other times (for example, peace and leisure) into unreality; the permanent now of media, war and capital is the only perceived ‘real’ time. As humans via separation become media, so, too, do media become more like humans. The essay ends, then, with a ‘weird’ suggestion that drones constitute a ‘sky-net’ that signals an imminent technological singularity.

Keywords
Drones, kinocentrism, media, recession, war

Various scholars have noted how the drone plays a key role in what China Miéville might term the tentaculum novum, or an era of interconnectivity that brings to mind the tentacles of the octopus and/or squid (see Miéville, 2008). In a special issue of Culture Machine dedicated to drone culture, for example, Dane Sutherland links drones to the tentacular literature of Miéville and his ‘weird’ precursor H.P. Lovecraft in order to convey how the drone in some senses epitomizes the ‘insidious
and tentacular reach of neoliberal capitalism and the subsequent colonization of thought and action that is essential to the condition of real subsumption and its anthropological impact’ (Sutherland, 2015: 3). In their contribution to the same issue, Dan Mellamphy and Nandita Biswas Mellamphy link drones to Agartha, ‘a vast, active [...] coordinated system of governance-mechanisms (political and/or military, scientific and/or scholarly, economic and fiduciary) allowing worldwide information capture and control through interlocking systems of (political and/or military, scientific and/or scholarly, economic and fiduciary) surveillance, sifting and sorting’ (Mellamphy and Biswas Mellamphy, 2015: 2-3) – an approach to the contemporary era that echoes the ‘tentacular’ thought of Lovecraft and Miéville, with which the authors expressly engage in other of their essays on the digital age (see, for example, Mellamphy and Biswas Mellamphy, 2014). Finally, Rob Coley and Dean Lockwood in their introduction to the issue also discuss the drone in relation to the ‘weird’ as a result of how ‘the drone is redacted, hidden in plain sight, present but opaque’ (Coley and Lockwood, 2015: 3-4).

I shall leave for others a fuller consideration of the tentacular qualities of the drone (for example, Brown and Fleming in progress), but in this essay I shall use the drone as a point of focus to pursue a ‘weird’ line of thought through various aspects of contemporary digital culture, suggesting that the drone is a capitalist marriage of media and war, and simultaneously a becoming-media of humankind and a becoming-human of media-kind, the latter of which (media-kind) we might characterize as the kin/kinder/children of the kino/cinema that are so-called ‘new’ or digital media. As media become ubiquitous, so does the kinocentrism (or cinematic thinking) that they bring with them become immanent and naturalised, such that the ‘real’ time of media becomes the only time or temporality accepted as real, as under unceasing surveillance and illumination memory is destroyed and we live in a permanent present that we might define through the concept of nuncocentrism: the perception that the only real time is now, and that the time of media is the only real time. What is more, I shall in the tradition of speculative philosophy (and fiction?) propose that the tension between these two trends – humans becoming media and media becoming human – are the very stakes that drones help to crystallise, as can playfully be made clear by the idea that these networked machines that exist in the
sky truly are in some senses the sky-net that is predicted to engender apocalypse in James Cameron’s famous *Terminator* movie (UK/USA, 1984).

But if we are going to fit drones into a history of media, then first we must establish what a medium is. We shall do this by taking the ‘weird’ step (pun intended?) of starting with shoes.

**Onwards and upwards: from shoes to drones**

It seems logical to assert that humans used their feet for walking before they had shoes. And yet, the barefoot human – even with feet more resistant to the elements than the softened foot of the shoe-wearing human today – would not have been able to traverse all terrain barefoot. Spikey rocks, hot desert sands, cold ice floes: all would have limited the ability of humans to cross the planet. The shoe, therefore, functioned historically as a means for humans not only to protect and to comfort their feet, but also to traverse a greater range of land in the name of exploration and/or mere survival (having to move from one area to another owing to drought or an equivalent threat or hazard). And yet, forasmuch as the shoe gives to the human greater mobility, it also functions as a means of separating humans from the planet: rather than the direct feel of earth beneath our feet, that sensation is now mediated by the hide or other material from which the shoe is constructed. In the case of crossing hot sand or cold snow, this separation is not necessarily a bad thing; it saves our feet from harm. But we nonetheless have here an example of a medium not simply being what Marshall McLuhan (2001) would term an extension of man, but also separating humans from the earth.

What is more, the further and the faster that our media have taken us, the more they have separated us from the surface of the earth. If the shoe raises us a few centimetres from the earth, the wheel raises us inches more, while the wing and the rocket raise us to indefinite heights, even beyond the gravitational pull of the planet, allowing us to traverse space at ever-faster speeds. Parallel to these media that physically can transport us across space by separating us spatially from the earth, so have our telecommunications media equally involved the ever-faster passage now not of ourselves though space, but of information from and about other spaces to
ourselves. Not only am I separated from the earth when I fly from London to Skopje, but I also separate London from itself when I send information about it – in the form of words, a sound or an image – to Skopje. Media, thus, involve movement (as we shall see, a key attractor of attention), and a logic of greater mobility as linked to lower amounts of friction, or contact, with the world. As Paul Virilio (1989) would argue, this involves a logic of speed, in the sense that less friction equals faster speeds. For present purposes, though, the important point to note is that media suggest a logic of separation from the world, which in turn might furnish the human mind with the idea that the world not only is something with which we are not profoundly connected, but which we might also by extension exploit and mould as we see fit (we modify its very space by shrinking that space through media).

In some senses, then, the drone combines the logic of two different types of medium. It is itself a highly mobile, flying machine that hangs and flies separate from the earth, while it also transmits moving images and other pieces of information from the places that it observes when flying. With regard to the former, we can understand how the drone becomes the next in a series of technologies that is linked to humanity’s endeavour not to be a human defined by earth and mud, or what Donna J. Haraway (2016: 11) defines as *humus* or soil, but rather to achieve divinity, inhabiting the sky, or becoming not a muddy, earthbound human made from *humus*, but disembodied light (with ‘divine’ coming from the ProtoIndoEuropean root *dyeu*, meaning ‘to shine’). Indeed, Benjamin Noys sees the drone as part of a ‘discourse of the theological view,’ which is contrasted with the messy (muddy) ‘muddle’ of terrestrial life (Noys, 2015: 1 and 13), while Pasi Väliaho also links the ‘visual economy of drones’ with the ‘light of God,’ with the drone operator experiencing ‘divine might’ (Väliaho, 2014). Drones thus engender a quasi-divine ‘gaze from nowhere’ (McCosker, 2015: 5), as ‘[t]o become drone is to become light, to achieve illumination’ (Coley and Lockwood, 2015: 5).

With regard to the taking and movement of images enabled by the drone, meanwhile, we can think about how in January 2016, *Russia Today* posted on YouTube drone footage of the city of Homs. As the drone hovers over the city, we see that it is devastated, ruined and lifeless. Beyond any irony that a Russian news channel would
produce this footage following the city’s destruction by government forces that used barrel-bombs supplied by Russia as part of their offensive, and beyond any irony that it is a drone camera that captures this footage in the age of drone warfare, the widespread visibility of the shelled city demonstrates how the drone divorces Homs from itself, creating a kind of cloned, mediated Homs that we observe, but not with the same sense of reality as we would see Homs were we looking at it for ourselves, through the primary rather than secondary medium of our own eyes. It is the logic of separation from the world and from each other via mediation that has enabled humans to perpetrate the kind of barbarity that is the destruction of Homs – and the drone camera returns to affirm as much in filming the city, shrinking it to images that themselves travel immediately around a shrunken world after the real Homs has been destroyed.

If by the logic given here media always involve separation of humanity from the planet, then media always involve some sort of violence through the creation of a boundary; while nominally protecting the foot, the shoe at the very least brings about a change in/does violence to our relationship with the world – with the shoe becoming increasingly weaponized over time, as the steel toecap inflicts pain almost uniquely on the victim, while kicking someone with an espadrille might involve pain for both kicker and kickee. I might unfurl a tentacle at this point and reference how the throwing of shoes is analysed at some length by Hamid Dabashi in Can Non-Europeans Think?, where the gesture is discussed as being perceived in the West as a specifically Arab trait, especially after a shoe was cast by Muntadhar al-Zaidi at George W. Bush in December 2008 in Iraq. The gesture supposedly sullies the victim since the sole of a shoe is dirty (Dabashi, 2015: 177-178). While Dabashi takes issue with reading as an Arab trait what is more simply/also a universally human gesture of disempowered frustration, the hurling of the primitive medium of the shoe in the era of drone warfare nonetheless might ‘muddy,’ humiliate and thus bring back down to earth the world leader who mistakes himself for a media-empowered god. Notably, Dabashi also writes in relation to Syria about how ‘absent from the calculations of both the left and the right are the people, the real people, ordinary people, those who occupy the public space, populate it, own it’ (Dabashi, 2015: 140). That is, a place like Homs is doubly destroyed, first by missiles fired from, among other things, drones,
and then by the drone cameras that record it, since both involve the violent separation of humans from the world and from each other.

In this way, media can be understood as instruments of war – drones included: ‘drones are still overwhelmingly weapons [...] any drone built today will look and serve fundamentally as a weapon’ (Rothstein, 2015: 143). Not only are drones weapons, then, but philosopher Grégoire Chamayou (2015) suggests that they are nothing less than the perfection of war: a flying camera with weapons, the drone sees all and can strike anywhere, at any time, and with no danger of the loss of human life – for the side operating the machine if not for their opponents. That is, the drone involves separation from the earth and from the other, thereby carrying out an initial act of violence that will make all subsequent literal violence easier. Whereas war was once waged between two armies that faced the possibility of dying when entering into combat (thereby meaning that one would only fight when necessary?), now with the separation of the drone pilot from the so-called opponent nigh absolute, war becomes more commonplace. Furthermore, war becomes like a film (or a game): the other is just an image, with no reality, in a world in which we all pursue the quest to become an image/to become light in order to become powerful via monetisation/capital. If the other-as-image is not real, and yet images are now the measure of reality, then we can begin to understand the immanentisation of kinocentrism: cinema is now the measure of reality as opposed to vice versa, with reality itself having disappeared – much like the human inhabitants of Homs, which has been destroyed in the cinematic war for power, or which has been destroyed for cinema.

The aim here is not to trivialise war or the destruction of Homs, but to point out how the destruction of Homs – and war more generally – become precisely trivialised under the logic of kinocentrism, which itself is becoming immanent, or ubiquitous, as I shall presently explain.

**Kinocentrism, war and becoming light**

Vilém Flusser, who is noted for his own interest in tentacles (Flusser and Bec, 2012), argues in his study of photography that we lead our lives ‘as though under a magic
spell for the benefit of cameras’ (Flusser, 1983: 48). Susan Sontag, meanwhile, has famously suggested that ‘[s]o successful has been the camera’s role in beautifying the world that photographs, rather than the world, have become the standard of the beautiful’ (Sontag, 1979: 85). More than photographs being the standard of the beautiful, though, it would seem today that photographs are also the standard of the real. You are no one if you are not visible, as the widespread cult of celebrity together with a selfie culture that is reinforced by social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, would seem to suggest.

What is real is measured in terms of visibility – which in turn is measured not simply by being in a photograph, but by being in a photograph that attracts attention. That which attracts attention is, from the cognitive perspective, big, involves bright colours, typically a face or (near-)symmetrical features and various other attributes that appear regularly in the glossy photograph and the bright light of the computer or smartphone screen. Beyond the formal attributes of many photographs, however, that which elicits and maintains the most attention for humans is movement, as we seek to work out whether what is moving is predator, prey or mate (see Brown, 2011). When movement is added to photography, therefore, we have a near-foolproof formula for attracting and maintaining attention. Photography plus movement is of course cinema – and so if I say that we live in a kinocentric world, it is not that cinema supersedes photography or that humans watch more films in cinemas than they do shows on television or videos online. They do not. But these media mimic to varying degrees the techniques developed first in photography and then in cinema, but with the movement of cinema functioning as the key attention-grabbing facet that has become a globalized and almost unstoppable mechanism for capturing and keeping attention. The capturing and the maintenance of attention in turn enable the production of money, which in turn creates and consolidates power. Kinocentrism, then, is the rendering-cinematic of the world for the purposes of capital, as Jonathan Beller (2006) has so cogently argued.

Indeed, for Beller, we live in a world in which brand and image supersedes actual product, with the ‘cinematic mode of production’ (getting and maintaining attention) becoming the chief mechanism of capital. The ‘cinematic’ mise-en-scène of the most
typical selfies makes this clear: expensive clothes, an expensive restaurant, a celebrity encounter, an expensive tourist destination, someone who can afford leisure time more generally, bright sunlight and an overriding emphasis on making visible all suggest the conjointly capitalist and cinematic underpinnings of the logic of the image. If capital is defined by cinema, though, we must also remember that reality is defined by capital, such that our world can be defined by what the late Mark Fisher (2009) termed ‘capitalist realism’: capital is the only accepted reality as we can imagine no alternative to it. The world of neoliberal capital is, then, a world that involves the primacy of a logic of visibility and attention that started in photography, which was intensified in cinema, and which now seems irreversibly to have taken hold in cinema's new media kin/kinder/offspring. This kinematic/cinematic logic is everywhere – as the proliferation of screens that surround us testifies. Given the ubiquity of screens, including on our person – with many humans incapable of passing more than a few minutes without consulting a screen out of ‘boredom’ (so boring has reality become in relation to cinema) – our age might be defined as the age of the immanentisation of kinocentrism. You are not real if you are not visible, and you are most visible when you are most cinematic; to be most cinematic, you must adopt the capitalist logic of having and producing symbols of wealth. If you are not capitalist/cinematic, then you are not real. And if you are not real, then you are as good as dead, and thus can (and in some senses must) be killed with impunity, because you never ‘existed’ in the first place as far as the cinematic values of capitalist society are concerned.

I have already mentioned Paul Virilio, who is a key thinker in elucidating the connections between cinema and war. But I should like briefly to suggest here how the immanentisation of kinocentrism is also the immanentisation and the rendering-permanent of war, or of a logic of violence and killing, such that there is a prevailing and intertwined logic of cinema, capital and war, which combine to become the only accepted/acceptable reality. Technologies of vision and the accrual of information are key to military strategy – with first aerial surveillance/mapping and then aerial combat and the distance from the enemy that this entails being key to gaining advantage over one’s opponents. The logic of surveillance, then, is a logic of war, as the drone crystallises the ‘will to see all, know all, at every moment, everywhere, the
will to universalized illumination” (Virilio, 1994: 70, quoted in Väliaho, 2014). For Mike Hill, the ‘drono-sphere’ is also an era of ‘pre-emptive and permanent war… war as unseen and everywhere apparent, up close and distant, sped-up and frozen in time’ (Hill, 2012: 252). That is, drones see war not as an alternative to peace, with the two thus belonging to different moments in time. Rather, the surveillance carried out by drones functions as a means not just to fight enemies, but also to predict and to pre-empt where and when enemies might arise. By this logic, everyone becomes a potential enemy and must be surveilled, hence the institution of war as ‘everywhere apparent,’ even though ‘unseen,’ in the sense that its very ubiquity means that it cannot be distinguished from any other state (i.e. it becomes permanent).

The desire to become light/cinema, then, ties into this military logic of universal and permanent war via universal and permanent illumination, as made clear perhaps by the ‘dronie,’ or the taking of selfies with drones (see McCosker, 2015: 2), and the drone-strike image app, Dronestagram (see Rothstein, 2015: 114). While the non-military use of drones – e.g. for agriculture, personal use and of course filmmaking – is widely acknowledged (see Baker, 2015; Bolman, 2015; Jablonowski, 2015), such alternative usage does not so much undermine the military logic of the drone as dronify, and thus militarise, those areas in which drones are being put to use. Indeed, we are moving into an era where even the weather is being weaponised – in the sense of creating storms as part of military operations, while also pointing to a history of military campaigns that involve the ruination of agricultural crops (i.e. agriculture does not de-militarise drones so much as drones militarise agriculture; see Hill, 2012: 258ff). As the increasingly widespread use of 4x4s in urban situations suggests a desire for the car to become a tank deployed to shut out and, alongside the use of tinted windows, to create a sense of separation from the rest of the world (with pedestrians regularly experiencing situations in which drivers use their cars to threaten and to intimidate them), so might we understand that the drone also involves the weaponisation of new realms of human life, suggesting that war is everywhere and always. Even military advisers sympathetic to the plight of drone pilots and ideologically aligned with their use in contemporary warfare/the war that is the contemporary discuss how ‘remote combat crews need a chance to return to peacetime,’ the implication being that these crews do not get such an opportunity, because for
them the war is non-stop, especially after ‘16 years of uninterrupted combat operations’ (Blair and House, 2017).

With these links between cinema, war and capital in mind, it should not involve too great a stretch to suggest that contemporary war is everywhere and that the era of drones involves a shift away from the military industrial complex and towards the military entertainment complex. That is, cinema has replaced industry as the military’s chief ally in defining life under contemporary capital (see Neary, 2015: 3-4), as cinema becomes capital’s chief mode of production. Kinocentrism is thus immanentised as we seek to become cinema/light in a world in which everything is always illuminated. The question to ask, then, is what is the cost of drone culture. We can explore this by looking at the concepts of disappearance, recession and asymmetry.

**Disappearance, recession and asymmetry**

Although not looking at drone warfare or drone film footage, Patricia Pisters describes the multiple screen aesthetics of contemporary Iraq war films as the ‘logistics of perception 2.0’ (Pisters, 2010: 249). The 2.0 in her title signifies the newly interactive nature of the war film, which directly uses or otherwise mocks up the kind of footage that is taken by soldiers themselves in combat situations; in effect, one no longer watches war but takes part in it, with war video diaries and leaked pictures such as those from Abu Ghraib conveying not only the increasingly intertwined relationship between war and image technology, but also the ‘traumatic kernel’ of this interactive logistics of perception (Pisters, 2010: 249). At one point, Pisters cites Virilio to explain how ‘the culmination of the progress of representation technologies in their military instrumentalisation is “the complete evaporation of visual subjectivity into an ambient technical effect, a sort of permanent pancinema. Which, unbeknown to us, turns our most ordinary acts into movie action, into new visual material, undaunted, undifferentiated vision-fodder…[whose main aim is] a waning of reality: an aesthetics of disappearance’ (Pisters, 2010: 236).

While Pisters points to the interactive nature of war, I would like to explore how the drone nonetheless encapsulates a logic of separation and detachment, a detachment
that is rendered via the making of images. That is, while Pisters describes war as like gaming, its logic of separation (and grabbing attention) is cinematic. The production of the Abu Ghraib photos, or of a war video diary, functions as a means of dealing with the very reality of war. The medium literally puts a distance between the participant and the real war that they are experiencing. This in turn serves to show us how the society of the cinematic spectacle has allowed cinema to replace reality as the measure of our existence, such that reality, when we are thrust into it as soldiers in a war, becomes unbearable – and we are forced to create more cinema in order to deal with it. In other words, cinema presents itself as the cure to its own disease – with cinema and Virilio’s original thesis of the logistics of perception (1.0 or 2.0) demonstrating that war is the product of a cinematic logic whereby the other is reduced to a status that is unreal, or subhuman, such that they merit death via combat in the first place. The eurocentrism of kinocentrism is made clear by the overwhelming western dimension of this need to take photos and to record war from within and to bring the spectacle of war to others as viewers – war becoming a cinematic spectacle that, since it attracts attention, also highlights the way in which war as cinema is also war as capital, while the use of war as cinema helps to make money for the capitalist class.

In this way, I agree with Virilio/Pisters’ notion of pancinema, which is akin to the immanentisation of kinocentrism, while also agreeing with the idea of reality being on the wane, or disappearing. However, drone imagery of war perhaps makes this clearer via the very distance – rather than the embedded reporter or soldier’s proximity – to combat. Rendered a relatively small dot seen from an aerial, god-like vantage point on a screen, the reality, or the humanity, of the so-called ‘enemy’ other disappears, with the destruction of that other becoming the very show that justifies the system of cinema-capital-war that created the other’s otherness in the first place.

If the distance of the drone – and of course the drone pilot – from the action leads to some sort of disappearance, then this distance also involves a literal aesthetic recession: the other is far away from the drone and the drone pilot, receding into the background. The aesthetics of recession is a term that has been used in a recent PhD thesis written by Yong Liu in order to define contemporary 3D cinema. In that
cinema, argues Liu, the depth of the image, or what is referred to commonly as the positive parallax, is increasingly used expressively, such that a whole new dimension has indeed been added to film. The world or worlds that we see on the cinema screen literally recede away from us, hence the aesthetics of recession (Liu, 2016).

Leon Gurevitch, meanwhile, has written about how early 3D images circulated widely and regularly featured vistas from the colonies of both places and indigenous peoples, Gurevitch’s argument being that the 3D images functioned as a popular medium for justifying the practices of empire, while simultaneously not bringing the viewers closer to the places or subjects depicted in the images, but instead creating a distance that in turn leads to the possibility of colonialist exploitation (the other is not seen as human, but as an object that can be exploited). In this way, 3D still images, circulating nearly 60 years before the invention of cinema, anticipated the role that cinema itself would also play in colonialism and empire through the creation and circulation of moving images of empire created by, for example, the employees of the Pathé brothers (see Gurevitch, 2012).

While Yong argues that 3D cinema in the digital era needs to be understood as an innovative tool for changing how stories are told, since it has helped to produce movies like Need for Speed (Scott Waugh, USA/UK/CFrance, 2014), he does not consider how the recession involved in 3D imaging may not so much increase a sense of spatial realism as reinforce a sense of detachment not from the film, but from the real world, which we hope or expect to conform to cinema, or which we hope is cinematic – with cinema asserting its power precisely by becoming the measure of reality as opposed to reality being the measure of cinema. If war and cinema are strongly interlinked, then the rendering cinematic of the world furthers our understanding of the militarisation and weaponisation of as many aspects of our world as we can think of, including information and/or the data that we provide to companies via our smartphones (also characterised as drones by Jablonowski, Mellamphy and Biswas Mellamphy alike), who can then use that data against us in order to control our behaviour for the purposes of capitalism via a combination of cinematically-induced consumerist desires and debt.
This process also involves the weaponisation/militarisation of vision (see Stewart, 2012: 7), with vision thus becoming nothing more than targeting (the French verb *viser* means to aim; as Hal Foster puts it in his consideration of the work of Harun Farocki, ‘any grid – a perspectival painting, a computer screen, your front window – begins to look like another target, a crosshairs about to line up’ – see Foster, 2004: 161). This pan-war is also made clear by the drone, the military iterations of which can strike anywhere and at any time – regardless of whether an official war is taking place between the country that owns the drone and the country in which its warhead detonates. War is no longer between countries; it is in all places at all times – or at least could be. As Lt Colonel Jack Johns (Bruce Greenwood) says in *Good Kill* (Andrew Niccol, USA, 2014): drones are everywhere. The film explicitly links drones to cinema when Johns later paraphrases Jean-Luc Godard in saying that they are not engaged in a just war, but just war. Redolent of Godard’s call not for just images (images that reinforce a sense of justice), but just for images (mere images), Niccol makes clear the link between drone warfare and cinema: drones speak of an era not of just wars (in the sense of justified by a sense of justice), but of just (nothing more than) war. Where Godard’s phrase would seem to ask us to understand images as images, Niccol seems to suggest that now there is only war as there only are images.

To return to drones in relation to recession, then, the aesthetics of recession that Liu identifies in contemporary 3D cinema is also present in drones as a result of the very distance of the drone from its target; to make a reference to Omer Fast’s film about drones, *5,000 Feet is the Best* (Israel/Germany, 2011) in terms of distance from drone to target (5,000 feet is 1.5 kilometres – a kind of extreme long shot and depth of field that commercial 3D cinema currently can only dream of). It is not the third dimension, then, that sees an intensification of recession, such that those depicted in images are deprived even more of their humanity. Rather, what the 3D image and the drone have in common is the digital, with the digital thus being what drives this aesthetics of recession – to the point of reality waning and the subject disappearing.1

**Gods don’t die**

In his analysis of drone warfare, Derek Gregory suggests that ‘[d]istance lends re-enchantment,’ with drone pilots not being simply ‘cubicle warriors’ or ‘commuter
fighters,’ but as possessing ‘a terrifying Olympian power released through the U[manned] A[erial] V[ehicle]’s Hellfire missiles. “Sometimes I felt like a God hurling thunderbolts from afar,” one pilot admits […] “Those about whom we make life-or-death decisions, as they scurry below or carry on as best they can, have – like any beings faced with the gods – no recourse or appeal”’ (Gregory, 2011: 192). It is quite common to read reports about how drone pilots are traumatised by the work that they are asked to carry out (see Blair and House, 2017) – and this is certainly a story peddled by Hollywood in their depictions of drone pilots, as we can see in Good Kill, where pilot Thomas Egan (Ethan Hawke) is clearly traumatised by his work, such that he drinks and is violent towards his family. While critical of drone warfare (see Piotrowska, 2017), Good Kill nonetheless conforms to a relatively stereotypical view of the male drone pilot as traumatised. While this stereotype persists, however, this view has been rejected in reports where drone pilots suggest that they had not been ‘particularly troubled by their mission,’ and that piloting a drone is ‘a gamer’s delight… It can get a little bloodthirsty. But it’s fucking cool’ (see Chamayou, 2015: 106-107). In other words, the drone pilot can indeed feel detached from their work, seeing as unreal the people whom they observe and/or kill, with this separation from the subject predicated upon the medium that has put distance between the observer and the observed, giving to the observer power and speed, but creating a hierarchy in which the observed recedes from view, a victim of recession, deprived even of their victimhood by the heavily mediatised stories of drone pilot observers being the ones traumatised by their involvement in this one-sided combat.

For drone combat becomes one-sided or asymmetrical, as Chamayou has also explained. As mentioned, war is traditionally fought between two sides that are prepared both to kill and to be killed. But contemporary warfare increasingly is conducted between a side that is prepared to die and another that is prepared to kill but not to suffer any casualties whatsoever. War is no longer based upon bravery and sacrifice; it seems rather to be based on cowardice (Chamayou, 2015: 17). This desire for a lack of casualties for the side that by definition is the aggressor in creating a combat zone from which they are physically separated is achieved through seeing, but not being seen, and through hearing, but not being heard. Where a drone traditionally might well have a key aural component – think of the buzzing of the
wings of a drone bee – the drone today is silent and unseen. It thus reflects the role of the voyeuristic film spectator – but with potentially devastating consequences for those taking part in the show that the drone operator is watching.

This banishment of death from the side of the aggressor in war masks how the other, so-called ‘enemy’ is always already considered dead, or at least not properly alive, subhuman, just an image on a screen that can unthinkingly be wiped out at the push of a button – as if playing a game, i.e. for fun. Here we can see the ‘necropolitical’ aspect of drones: ‘the arrogation of the sovereign’s right both to command death and to assign grievable meaning to the dead’ (Allinson, 2015: 113). To move in a different direction, though, I might suggest that what the desired absence of death for the aggressor brings us close to is the primordial separation that media, including cinema, pretend to offer – and that is the separation of death from life, such that we consider some things dead and others alive and never both at the same time – a theoretical cat conceptualised by Erwin Schrödinger notwithstanding. This perceived separation – of life from death – is perhaps the key conceptual hierarchy that has enabled humans to treat their world and each other as if separate, as if not really living (i.e. already dead, and thus to be killed without consequence or reprisal). Furthermore, this separation of death from life is what drives the perceived need to immortalise oneself through what I might call becoming cinema: the rendering cinematic of one’s life through the use of media – from posting selfies on Instagram to dreaming of becoming famous and thus appearing in images and films across the world as a means of verifying that one’s life is real. The creation of this separation between life and death means that death now is traumatic, perceived as unnatural – hence the traumatised response to the death of celebrities – rather than being an inevitable truth. In other words, we again see how the separation of life from death renders death traumatic, which in turn reinforces the separation between the two, and a clinging on to life, while at the same time needing for that life the death of others, who are not perceived even as alive but already as dead and thus killable for the purposes of making oneself seem or feel alive. Cinema-capital-war is in some senses, then, an asymmetrical and necropolitical industry of death that is used to validate the lives of the few, the dehumanisation/conceptual and then literal death of the many for the immortalisation of the minority. Wanting to become a god, because gods
don’t die. Since gods don’t die, they transcend time, becoming eternal. In some senses, then, the drone era sees the weaponisation of time itself via what I shall term nuncocentrism, to which I shall turn my attention presently.

**Nuncocentrism and real time**

It is by outsourcing and creating a distance from death, and by imposing death upon others (by thrusting others, along with death, into recession) that gods come to believe that they cannot die, and that thus they can transcend time. I am not talking about transcending time in the sense of being able to travel backwards and forwards through it. Rather, I mean transcending time by moving from the realm of the temporary to the realm of the eternal – possibly having a beginning, but striving to have no ending. Writing of the early stages of the first Gulf War in 1990, Virilio argues that ‘war has become a total and ubiquitous phenomenon where image is one “munition” among others. It matters little what thing (plane, tank, warship, etc.) is in question, nor does it matter what image is employed (radar, video, etc.); what matters is *their presentation in real time*’ (Virilio, 2005: 23). And it is in the phrase ‘real time’ and the demand for real time entertainment that we can find this bid for divinity.

For real time presentation is not simply the presentation of events that are happening right now – a flattening of space such that images can be broadcast across the globe at the same time, without any requirement of time to disseminate those images. ‘Real time’ as a phrase also conveys the demand for a temporality of the now to be presented as real. Put more clearly: the now becomes the only temporality that is admitted as real – with the past and the future being delegitimized in favour only of the now, which becomes as a result the only real time – with the impression that the now is the only real time meaning that it takes on a hegemonic status, a divinity that renders other times unreal, with the exclusive reality of the now being at the core of capitalism’s ideology.

We can see how this is so in various ways. As pilot Steve Watts (Aaron Paul) and airman Carrie Gershon (Phoebe Fox) step into and out of work at odd hours in drone film *Eye in the Sky* (Gavin Hood, UK/South Africa, 2015), so does the distinction between work time and other times cease to exist – and not just for drone
pilots, but also for all workers who as a result are turned into drones (see Noys, 2015: 15). Instead of a separation between work time and leisure time, say, there is only a now-time of work that requires being on call at every moment, be it day or night – with *Eye in the Sky* also showing the UK interacting with the USA interacting with Kenya in real time; all three places now no longer operate in different time zones, but in a single, militarised zone of time, the now; past and future are obliterated as now becomes the centre of the universe, hence the phrase nuncocentrism.

‘As computers and cellphones, and the constant stream of stimuli they offer, pose a profound new challenge to focusing and learning,’ suggests an article in *The New York Times*, ‘[t]he risk […] is that developing brains can become more easily habituated than adult brains to constantly switching tasks – and less able to sustain attention’ (Richtel, 2010). I can feel this in my everyday life as I am constantly surrounded by screens, with a screen being the first thing I consult upon waking and the last thing I consult before sleep (the screen is my lover, or at least my partner). I constantly am checking email, anxious that more messages have come in for me to answer – even though most of them are unimportant (in fact, the less important, the better, since I can answer them at speed or even delete them without reading them, a gesture that still takes priority over the most important messages, which tend to sit for longest in my inbox, awaiting a moment when I can find some time to answer them ‘properly’ – which can often end up being not at all, as their importance vanishes under the weight of now-messages that come to swamp me). I am writing a paper for a research seminar and I go online to check something, say the publication date of Paul Virilio’s *Desert Screen*; I see I have various emails in my gmail inbox and I delete half of them and answer the rest. I realise that I need, or at the very least want, to send a link to a news story to a friend, and so go to that link myself, copy and paste it, look at a couple of other news stories, and then send the link to my friend. Since I am on my gmail, I think I might as well check my work email, and a similar situation arises; I can delete several emails, but various others require answering. One requires me to log in to my university’s virtual learning environment to check a reading assigned for that week, another my online diary, another the staff work portal, where I in turn log on to the university’s academic records, and so on. And since I have checked gmail and work email, I might as well look quickly at Facebook, not least because I can also
see I have some notifications. I comment on a couple of people’s posts, add a link to someone else’s – while looking at that link briefly to copy and paste the URL – before looking at a couple of news stories, comment threads and a cat video that I like. I then go back to my essay and look at it dumbly for a few seconds, before remembering that I need to check that publication date of Paul Virilio’s *Desert Screen*. In other words, in the regime of real time, I have no memory in the sense that I specifically cannot remember and often forget that which I came online to discover.

The permanent illumination of the world leads to an absence of sleep (see Crary, 2013). And since sleep is necessary for me to develop memories (see Hobson, 1995), then without sleep and under permanent and universal illumination, I thus cannot form memories – that is, I lack focus/attention (for more on how screens harm sleep, see, *inter alia*, Figueiro and Overington, 2016). What is more, I also have no imagination as I find myself thinking in Facebook status updates, the medium now dominating my thoughts of the future, as well as alienating me from the past. In this process, the now becomes the only time that is real, as I can neither remember nor imagine another time, with the now taking on a sense of being unquestionable or divine as I am kept at the screen for the purposes either of working – which becomes a permanent process – or for the purposes of destroying my abilities to think about anything other than work, and thus living for capitalism and the bastard kin screens of cinema, which are a war machine ensuring my subservience.

The above experience of forgetting what one went to one’s computer to do may be banal, but the point is that such nuncocentrism is precisely banal, with the (evil) banality of work and war defining my entire existence. Without memory and imagination, I am like Jason Bourne myself weaponised – not because I remember combat skills loaded into my muscle memory, but because I remember nothing and can imagine no alternative to work (which in Bourne’s case is to make literal war), meaning that I am defenceless against the militaristic forces of capital, knowing only to look at my drone-phone and other screen devices, which in turn gather data that will be used further to control my behaviour as my banal life wears interminably on.
Indeed, the strength of my subservience to the screen can be seen in my addiction to my phone. If a different time beyond the time of constant stimulation threatens me – if a different time becomes a bit too real by virtue of being boring, maybe even traumatic – then out comes the phone in order for me to get some screen time, a time that has become, to adopt an old advertising slogan, the real thing. This is the distinction between real time, which is constant, and durée, the Bergsonian sense of time in its true unfolding (see, for example, Bergson, 2001). Through the shrinkage of space – I can see Nairobi right now in Bolton – I am not confined to the here and now in the traditional sense, but to the simultaneous now of everything at my fingertips immediately, which does include a kind of conquering of the past for the purposes of the present in the form of the archive that I can filter at all times, calling up Elvis Presley to sing for me at one minute, and then Skrillex to perform at another. Truly we are gods, giving (Facebook and YouTube) thumbs up and thumbs down to the gladiators who fight for survival before us, and yet which fight we can choose to end at any moment if it is not entertaining enough for us.  

Without wishing to be too ‘weird,’ we also might get a sense here of how both the excitement and the supposed trauma of the drone pilot affirm the same sense of now as the only real time. No doubt there is much that is boring about looking at the live feed of empty desert that is the drone pilot’s usual lot for long stretches of their work. But equally it becomes small wonder that the sheer duration/durée of such moments is traumatic enough that the pilot then actively wants to blow something up and enjoy the video game dimensions of their work as a kind of reward for all of the rest of the experience. Real time now in some senses demands it.

**How not to be seen**

The drone helps us to think about the immanentisation of kinocentrism, whereby cinema, capital, war and the temporality of the now become the measure of our reality. This is indeed a military entertainment complex, not least in the sense of encompassing our entire reality, as per the Latin word complexus: cinema, capital, war and the now are intricately woven together (com-plectere), taking on such complexity that they are not very easily analysed. The way in which the drone affirms this immanentisation can also be seen in how the drone shot becomes increasingly
ubiquitous in contemporary cinema, both in fiction films – as per those Hollywood productions specifically about drone warfare mentioned above – and in documentaries, such as when a drone takes off in Washington Square Park in Asif Kapadia’s *Amy* (UK/USA, 2015), as well as in art house hybrid films such as *Francofonia* (Aleksandr Sokurov, France/Germany/Netherlands, 2015). It is not that cinema has not had a long history of aerial shots (e.g. those made with helicopters). But the drone seems to have intensified the ubiquity of such shots, which in turn suggests that there is an aesthetic dimension to the political/ideological manoeuvre of presenting the now-time of the military entertainment complex as the only admissible reality/as the only real time. In this way, as Jacques Rancière (2006) would suggest, the near-omnipresent drone shot signals the struggle for power in the contemporary world as also being a struggle in/of aesthetics: who can present themselves most authoritatively and/or who can capture the most attention – with any user of the drone shot (and any maker of any image, perhaps especially digital images) thus in some senses affirming the immanentisation of kinocentrism, even if their film would otherwise claim to be ‘oppositional.’ It may be important for Kapadia and Sokurov to use the drone image in order to suggest death – the death of Amy Winehouse, the death of art in Paris under Nazi Occupation. It may also be important for the female voice of Winehouse to work with these drone images in order to critique the patriarchal and fascist dimensions of image culture. But perhaps any drone image just intensifies the grip of the screen, which in turn intensifies the grip of kinocentrism – as the screen time given over to Winehouse’s persecutors only seems to redouble and thus to affirm her persecution in Kapadia’s documentary, just as the drone footage of Homs redoubles the shelling that has torn it apart.

In this way, it does not particularly matter if an image is ‘oppositional’ or conservative. Just as the phrase real time has at its core the justification of now as the only admissible reality, so does the term reality show have at its core the justification of show, of show business, of business and of the busy-ness of show, as the only admissible reality. Referring back to a *Playboy* interview, Chuck Todd asked Donald Trump at a Meet the Press event in August 2015:
The questioner asks, ‘What is all of this?’ – meaning talking about your yacht, the bronze tower, the casino, what does it mean to you – and you replied, ‘props for the show.’ And they said, ‘what show is that?’ And you replied, ‘the show is Trump and it’s sold-out performances everywhere’ (NBC News, 2015).

As the people recede (and as groups of people are precisely what drones look out for as potential targets – since any gathering or absence of separation is a potential threat to capital; see Väliaho, 2014), the show marches on, and even if Trump barely makes sense, he has an intuitive logic of what in this paper I have termed the immanentisation of kinocentrism. That is, just as Trump still attracts and maintains attention even when he is being criticised by his opposition (‘all publicity is good publicity’), so might all drone shots reaffirm the immanentisation of kinocentrism.

Perhaps the only option that remains, then, is not to enter at all into the world of images and not to be visible, even if that would express some sort of ‘social’ death and/or consign one into a realm outside of perceived reality. According to Eva Parra Iñesta, high definition imagery is fetishised in Colombia, such that to appear in HD is a sign of empowerment, with HD images themselves becoming as valuable as ‘gold and cocaine’ (Parra Iñesta, 2015: 1). Parra Iñesta goes on immediately to compare this perceived need for HD images to Hito Steyerl’s defence of the ‘poor image’ as perhaps a worthy opponent to HD imagery (see Steyerl, 2012: 31-45). That is, where HD connotes power, poor images reject power; where drone imagery also suggests power, earthbound and ‘muddy’ images might also reject power. If power goes overground, then escape goes underground, or it makes itself invisible as per Steyerl’s *How Not To Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File* (Germany, 2013), in which the artist develops ways in order not to be seen by surveillance satellite and other cameras. Not all of the disappearances that Steyerl mentions are positive, since they include being disappeared by a state. Nonetheless, as invisibility is used to hide the sources of power (the unseen drone, the unseen offshore bank account), so might it be used to evade kinocentrism – through a rejection of the cinematic (see also Gronlund, 2017: 41-44).
Weird conclusion

Let us embrace the likelihood that not being seen is self-defeating – in that its evasion of kinocentrism does little or nothing to stop kinocentrism. The drone signals war without frontiers, a kind of total and permanent war in which the belligerent gods seek blood in their bid for immortality, striking anywhhen and anywhere, claiming the blood of innocents. Furthermore, the drone war signals a one-sided war without risk of death – or in effect a war without war. As we move into an era in which election results and perhaps even wars may be decided by computer hackers, then the ongoing/coming cyberwar is equally a war without war. As Alex Gibney suggests in Zero Days (USA, 2016), his recent documentary on the American-British-Israeli developed virus weapon, Stuxnet, it is also a war without attribution. That is, war will not be one-sided so much as sideless. Confused and thus in a state of paranoia and fear, everything and nothing will be true, trust and empathy will disappear, and war and capital will, through cinema and its bastard kin, have developed further as the only reality, now no longer confined to host nations, but ubiquitous and permanent. Faced with such a world, one can even understand the reactionary nationalism of Trump and Brexit as an expression of fear as nations and most of their people lose yet further their relevance in the face of relentless capital (even if I personally believe that the call for nationalist capitalism is misguided as a defence against unchained capital’s relentless march).

The making real of a capital that no longer requires nations is the next step in the creation of a war that no longer requires sides and a capital that no longer requires humans – except as sacrifice. This, perhaps, is what humans mean when they speak of the technological singularity – the moment when artificial intelligence becomes intelligent and thinks for itself, a becoming-human of the media at a moment when humans seek to become media by becoming light. This becoming-human, though, is also becoming a ‘god’ in the sense that it involves sacrificing humans as it sees fit, just as humans sacrifice themselves by prostrating themselves before the screen machines. Faced with, or traumatised by, a godless universe, humans have had to create this cinematic capital-god of war for themselves; and this cinematic capital-god of war will demand blood, striking cruelly at any point in time and without pattern or reason – just like a drone.
Capital and cinema will be seen retrospectively as embryonic versions of this singularity. That is, we shall only see the singularity too late. And we shall only see it when the god-machine of war puts humans into war with each other, shrinking us first from the nation to the city state and then into a general apocalyptic all-against-all as we pray to the drone-god not to send down hellfire to kill us but to kill our neighbour for his sins first. Perhaps we are already all drones working for the machine-god. Indeed, the soldier is now a mere drone, an ‘agentless capturer of footage’ who does not so much fight as create images for consumption (see Smith, 2016: 96). Turned to drones, there will only be a singular drone rhythm (a singularity?). But this will not be drone music designed to free our minds, but the never-ending cruelty of hellfire on earth (like hell, it will be never-ending and without possible alternative). As humans seek to become light, to become cinema, to become media, so might we conversely realise that media are seeking to become human, in the sense of being recognised as alive. The drone, then, is the placement in the sky of a network of machines, a sky-net that will give body to media just as humans abdicate the planet to reside within the media by becoming light. This will be a kind of Lovecraftian end of days, then, as announced by the famous pre-drone shot of the alien birds surveilling Bodega Bay in Alfred Hitchcock’s *The Birds* (USA, 1963). The tentacular and alien intelligence of capital in the form of cinema and its kin media is dividing humans so as to conquer them, enslaving us under the amnesiac permanent illumination of screens that hubristically we believe set us free and make us gods. Perhaps only the muddy poor, underground and invisible, will stand a chance…

**References**


**Notes**

1 This aesthetic/visual recession could be linked to another type of recession that also is connected to digital culture and which is not a shortcoming, but a structurally logical part of our contemporary world, namely the economic recession that keeps many humans purposefully in debt, and thus getting poorer (while those whom we might hold equally if not more responsible for it are bailed out). This imbalance creates a very clear hierarchy between the have-s and the have-nots, with the have-s almost certainly considering the have-nots as their inferiors. This is a (logical) consequence of the distance created by the have-s from the have-nots as a result of the economic disparity between the two. An economic recession is the recession of the poor from the rich, such that the two disappear from each other’s sight, only to be united in extreme situations like war. This recession is linked to the digital because of the increased role that computers play in trading, which in combination with trust in those computers enables the accrual of so much bad debt that economic crisis ensues. In this way, we might contend that those observed by drones are the victims of a double recession: paying the price for the greed of bankers while also disappearing from view.

2 A further tentacle of nuncocentrism is the common perception that old films are boring, bad or, at best, ‘good for their time,’ as people believe that now is the best time as we follow a relentless path of improvement called ‘progress,’ which term belies a belief in our ability to control time.

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‘Mediatization’: Media Theory’s Word of the Decade

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Abstract

This short commentary looks at aspects of the debate about the term ‘mediatization’, paying particular attention to recent, cross-referring exchanges both in support of the concept and critical of it. In the context of its widespread use, it suggests that continuing questions need to be asked about the conceptual status of the term, the originality of the ideas it suggests and the kinds of empirical project to which it relates.

Keywords

mediatization, theory, politics, influence, institutional change

No term has received more extensive attention in recent media theory than ‘mediatization’. Often heralded as a route to exciting new insights into the study of the relationship between the growing importance of the media and shifts in a range of institutional and cultural structures, it has also been subject to varying queries as to its definition, application and relation to existing terms and perspectives. Here, Deacon and Stanyer (2014) have perhaps provided the most direct critical appraisal, generating in the process a range of responses, and I shall give attention to the terms of their continuingly valuable critique later. In a brief, clear overview of the notion in Media Theory, Terry Flew (Flew, 2017: 51), rightly stressing the political dimension, although not exclusively so, notes a core proposition that ‘changing structural relations between media and politics has developed to a point where political institutions, leaders and practices are increasingly dependent upon media and
conform to the logics of media production, distribution and reception’ (following in part Mazzolini and Schulz, 1999). By no means would everyone using the notion agree to the terms employed here, but then finding agreement as to definitions and application presents quite a challenge.

Like many others, I have frequently encountered the term in reading across the field in the last decade, sometimes within research of substantive quality on various topics, sometimes in work less impressive. A number of uses have inclined towards the portentous, stunned by the new theoretical vistas opened up, while others have seen it as a fruitful basis upon which to conduct the kinds of exercise in ‘refinement’ which have a tendency to give the impression of conceptual progress while effectively circling around the same spot. As a journal editor, I have also often encountered it in what we might call ‘token’ mode – thrown into a sentence, an abstract or even a title, without definition or clear use, in the hope of indicating an attractive topicality, a sense of the theoretical ‘cutting-edge’, beyond that carried in the main body of a manuscript. Deacon and Stanyer (2014) note this kind of usage too, referencing it in their survey of journal articles using the term from 2002-2012. Across all these encounters, including those with work contributing to debate, I have yet to be convinced that the idea offers any significant new approach to analysis and understanding of media-societal relations beyond that which we had before the notion came into common usage. What can we now think about that was not possible before? That this is not a straight case of intellectual fraud or mass deception I can readily agree, since many advocates and users have shown their originality and perceptiveness in previous and concurrent work, including work in which the term is employed. However, just how this notion has become so central to discussion on media theory, in the process effectively hi-jacking some lines of research that had seemed to be getting along quite well without it, seems to me to deserve yet another note of comment, albeit quite a short one.

I want to develop my account by identifying a number of points around which key issues and questions gather. Given the size of the literature that has now grown around this topic, on the edge of requiring a monthly audit, my approach is necessarily a sharply selective one as well as one acutely aware of the modest levels of
originality now available to any general commentary on this theme. The selectivity extends to its citations, in which I pay particular attention to recent exchanges in the journal *Media, Culture and Society*, where a number of key advocates and critics of the idea have developed their views in close cross-referencing. So whatever value this note of comment may have, it is certainly not as a ‘literature review’, although many of the papers which I cite performed, in part, this function at their time of publication.

1. **The distinction from ‘mediation’**

As Flew describes, a good deal of effort has been placed, certainly in the earlier phase of writing on the theme, into distinguishing ‘mediation’ from ‘mediatization’. ‘Mediation’ can be viewed as essentially a loose, descriptive term, indicating the processes and modes through which the media extensively act as the means for a very wide range of perceptions, knowledge and feelings to be circulated in modern societies. Their constructive role in the business of effectively ‘brokering’ aspects of reality is often variously emphasised to avoid a simplistic notion of relay. Although there have been some attempts to give ‘mediation’ a tighter, more ambitious theorisation (as always, a move towards italicization indicating the higher goals!), the continuingly wide range of applications, connecting back to earlier usages (as in the sense of ‘intermediary’) has worked against this, acting as a kind of gravitational tug on a distinctive theoretical identity. However, what the word points to, across a diversity of uses, is an aspect of media activities completely different from the ideas of shifts in the organisational order of political and public life indicated by ‘mediatization’. I believe that this is also a loose, descriptive term, the ‘heading’ for certain kinds of change – in need of immediate work at ‘sub-heading’ level to save it from a banal obviousness. However, its emphasis on shifts in structural media-social contexts and relations rather than on the processual character of media practices as constituents of perception and knowledge is such that it is difficult to imagine a serious confusion occurring except at the primary level of word identification. What a stress on the error of confusion is often used to suggest, however, is a relative neglect of questions about media-related shifts in the broader socio-political order compared with questions about media representation. How far has such neglect actually occurred?
2. Media and societal order

Certainly, within political communication studies, there has been for some time a substantial strand of work which, rather than taking a classic ‘effects and influence’ approach to media-society relations (tracking the consequences of output), has been concerned to examine the way in which the political system itself, and political practices, have changed as a result of the perceived need to accommodate/adapt to, and indeed, use and if possible pre-empt, the range of ‘media logics’. A classic text, one with a broader perspective than the directly political, is of course the widely referenced Altheide and Snow (1979), which sought to explore the implications of media centrality for the working structures and practices of social institutions some 30 years before the present ‘mediatization’ debate began. Indeed, the question of how politics may be changing as a result of increasing media centrality became perhaps one of the central questions of political communication studies internationally, with Mazzolini and Schultz (1999) giving close attention to the process in what is still the most cited publication on the topic. Questions about media-related shifts in other areas, including the military, healthcare and education, were also pursued. In a collection I co-edited in 2003 with the title Media and the Restyling of Politics (Corner and Pels, 2003) the question was explicitly engaged from a number of different perspectives alongside an attempt to track the changing styles of political publicity and political expression. In our introduction, we drew the distinction between ‘politicised media’, seen as an imbalance in the direction of a circumscribed media system, and ‘mediatised politics’, seen as a situation in which politics has ‘become colonised by media logics and imperatives’ (2003: 4). This was an indicative rather than theorised use of the term, of course, and it underplayed the growing significance of social media for political culture, but questions can be raised about just what degree of clear progress has been made beyond the earlier set of perceptions and arguments to which our book was just one (rather late and partly derivative) contribution. This is not to make the case for no progress at all, since both empirically and conceptually a development of previous understanding about the broader ‘adaptation’ of social institutions and practices to media systems has occurred. It has necessarily extended to the specificities of social media but has hardly brought about the Copernican shift that is sometimes implied by ‘mediatization’ enthusiasts (and it is still, largely, ‘previous understanding’). I shall
return to this central question of the new perspectives revealed through use of the concept in a later section.

3. The ‘singularity’ of –izations

Although there have been a number of attempts to pluralize a sense of the time-scales, specific sectors and kinds of consequence involved, mediatization has inevitably often become reduced, if only by implication rather than by argument, to a broad process of slow transformation, whatever the sub-level variations (such as those indicated by referring to different phases of change). Flew notes how critics have pointed to the problem with a singularised ‘media’ at work here (and a consequently singular ‘media logic’), a problem which has been recognised and responded to by at least some of those championing the idea. Clearly, adaptation to social media introduces a range of variables beyond those involved in relating to ‘mass media’. He also identifies the risk of a conflation of very different dimensions of political and social life; some tightly institutionalized and some far more informal, some requiring to develop specific media polices regarding use of the media as a matter of strategy, some subject to a range of indirect, and often conflicting, shaping pressures. Of course, to give ‘too much’ recognition to variations across sectors and across timescales, as well as across media forms, would risk reducing the theoretical status of mediatization as a candidate ‘paradigm’, instead positioning it as a useful descriptive label for a range of very diverse shifts. This is a tension played out at points across a number of contributions to the debate, if sometimes implicitly. A related issue is that of scale, or of the degrees of ‘mediatization’ found (whatever the criteria that might be used to define these in relation to an idea of an end state).

4. The case for a new concept

Before examining in more detail recent exchanges about the definition and use of the term, I want to look more closely at the case put forward for its value. Here, Couldry and Hepp’s (2013) editorial to a special issue of Communication Theory is excellent in its directness and clarity. On its first page it notes how the concept has:

…emerged as the most likely “winner” in a race between many terms, all cumbersome and ambiguous to varying degrees – mediatization, medialization, mediation – that have been coined to capture somehow
the broad consequences for everyday life and practical organisation
(social, political, cultural, economic) of media…(191)

There is a nice frankness both in the suggestion that an international competition has been going on (although one might think ‘medialization’ was handicapped right from the start!) and recognition of the ‘cumbersome and ambiguous’ nature of all the competitors. But why is new ‘coinage’ required? Here, the authors identify a deficit in existing media research. This is a failure to attend to general contexts and to concentrate instead on ‘accumulating more and more specific studies’ (191) within which particularity displaces any sense of general process. I have indicated that this deficit does not seem to exist in anything like the degree suggested, with particular reference to political communication, although I think the argument could be made across most areas of media research, certainly over the last 20 years. In response to this drift into particularity, the authors argue, ‘mediatization’ will offer an ‘integrative concept’ for a newly ‘internationalized’ field (192). That the term should be seen as part of a broader shift, involving expansion and international self-consciousness, in media research more generally is interesting, suggesting a term whose benefits are not simply conceptual but institutional, helping to connect previously divergent groupings, to provide a productive heading for boundary-spanning research initiatives. This is made explicit in the later remark that there is an ‘increasing institutionalization’ of research which seeks to capture ‘the wider consequences of media’s embedding in everyday life’ (195) and which needs a new concept in order to break decisively away from the ‘influence’ paradigm in the kind of attention it gives to the relation between ‘changes in media and communications’ and ‘changes in culture and society’ (197). What I find notable here is the very general, indeed gestural level, at which the case for ‘mediatization’ as a notion indicating a broad re-framing of research priorities and approaches is made. At times, it seems almost as if a strenuous case is being developed by rhetorical force alone, an impression compounded by the wide variations of usage to which Couldry and Hepp themselves helpfully point.

This problem of generality is perhaps the key problem identified by Deacon and Stanyer (2014), who see the success of the concept as owing extensively to its very lack of discriminatory power, its function as a ‘container in which different things
can be placed’ (1039). They go so far as to describe the term as a ‘pseudo-universal’, indicating that it is a concept ‘without boundaries’ which performs an ‘allusive function’ only (1040). They see a ‘solution’ to present circumstances as lying in the taking of either of two actions – the move of the idea downwards so that it is a ‘middle level’ concept with more defined indicators for the purposes of analytic differentiation, or (less neatly) the development of ‘connected concepts’ at lower levels of abstraction, the better to support analysis and conceptual refinement. A second area of problems they identify are those concerning the historical and historiographic aspect of mediatization as a proposed research perspective: in what ways does mediatization have to be researched historically and across what time-spans are its shifts to be plotted?

In what is generally a measured response, Hepp, Hjarvard and Lundby (2015) defend the notion as indicating a ‘paradigm shift’ in media research, noting nevertheless that ‘we are still at the early stages of this theoretical endeavour’ and that ‘empirical work firmly rooted in the mediatization concept is still relatively scarce’ (315). They reject the accusation that media-centricity must follow, stressing the connections that must be made with other domains and disciplines (this essentially being placed as an imperative for the future rather than anything achieved to date). They argue for a more subtle and complex set of relations between media and social change than, they feel, Deacon and Stanyer suggest is presumed in mediatization research and, on the question of historicality, agree with the central importance of this dimension, noting a present division in mediatization studies between those which essentially focus on relatively recent media developments and those which see the importance of going back, perhaps to the ‘beginning of humanity’ (319). Finally, they dispute the perceived problem of conceptual status, seeing no general difficulties with operating the idea at both ‘context sensitive’ levels as well as at the level of a ‘general analytic frame’ (320). They finish, in part echoing an argument in Couldry and Hepp (2013), by noting the way in which ‘fundamental questions’ have been neglected as a result of the ‘ongoing specialization of the research field’ (321). Overall, this is a response which mixes attempts at rebuttal with part-concessions but which, even in some of the terms of its defence, not only leaves in position many of the question marks placed by Deacon and Stanyer but serves to generate new ones, including about the proposed working relationship with other strands of media inquiry and with other
disciplines (a point brought out in the brief note of reply by Deacon and Stanyer, 2015). It is clearly the case that continuing uncertainties about conceptual level and historical frame figure centrally in later exchanges, as I shall show in the next section.

5. Societal metaprocess, paradigm or sensitizing concept?

Perhaps one of the most crisp and productive of recent contributions comes from Lunt and Livingstone (2016), connecting both with the Deacon and Stanyer critique (2014, 2015) and the response by Hepp, Hjarvard and Lundby (2015), as well as with other writings. Their commentary starts as a qualified defence of the notion (an idea ‘worthy of further exploration’, 462) but becomes, if indirectly, a very cogent questioning of large parts of the claims-making offered in support of the concept. At the centre of their argument is a concern with the need for cross-disciplinary research, not just research from a base in media studies, ‘in ways too rarely attempted’ (463). This sense of an idea which cannot develop properly within the empirical and theoretical boundaries of media research alone, is developed alongside a recognition that a good deal of what is being indicated under ‘mediatization’ has strong linkage with a ‘host of long-established media theories’ (464), connections not always clarified or even recognised. Perhaps their key question concerns the mooted status of the idea as indicating a ‘metaprocess’ within the larger analysis of modernity, alongside ‘globalization’ for instance (a position which a number but by no means all proponents have suggested). They note that it seems reasonable to ‘set a high bar’ for adding to the list of societal metaprocesses, with an added challenge being that of ‘explaining the relation between mediatization and other metaprocesses in charting the transformations of modernity’ (468). In their strongest concluding comment, they observe that to secure the ‘metaprocess’ idea ‘would require an ambitious and evidenced account of socio-historical change over centuries’, an account which would be recognised ‘beyond media studies’ and applied in other disciplines (468).

This seems to me to place the further development of the notion in a very useful context, somewhat cooling down the excited sense of breakthrough which has frequently been expressed and making firm claims about the need not just for more empirical work (including historical work) but for work that not only travels and is validated across the disciplinary boundaries but is developed across those boundaries.
Perhaps the validation of its ideas across such boundaries is not such an unfamiliar challenge for media studies, which has often imported ideas from other fields but has a rather less impressive track record when it comes to the export business (and this at a time when many disciplines are increasing the attention they pay to media and communication in developing their research agendas). In a coda which I find less convincing than the main line of argument, the authors refer back to an earlier paper (Livingstone and Lunt, 2014) in which they noted that ‘mediatization’ could be considered a ‘sensitizing concept’, guiding empirical research and interpretation (here drawing on Blumer, 1954 and its use by Jensen, 2013) This seemed a quiet move in the direction of a more modest status for the idea. In their 2016 paper, having discussed the ‘sensitizing’ idea again, they continue this vector of travel when they say they would now rather choose to see it as a ‘research programme’, one which opens up ‘an enabling and flexible research framework’ (468) to which different theories and empirical projects could be attached. This is a collegially positive way to invite both further discussion and research as to the idea’s ‘promise’ across contested terrain but the accommodating looseness of the terms contrasts a little with the firm line on conceptual status taken in the main section of their piece. Perhaps, though, the unfussy directness of the framework/enabling role is preferable to deploying the delimited category of ‘sensitizing function’.

The route ahead?

One of the things that those taking diverse positions might agree on is that further serious application of the term, including in historical work, will be valuable in showing the originality of the theorisations it allows when engaging with diverse data. Continuing dispute at the conceptual level will continue, of course, and here I think Lunt and Livingstone offer a useful marker as to the issues which it should address as well as the tone in which it should address them.

I will conclude by reference to one of the latest contributions to the debate (Ekstrom et al., 2016), published after Lunt and Livingstone’s assessment. This also works with the sense of a more ‘open agenda’ being desirable, noting the foreclosures which have sometimes appeared. For instance, the authors pursue a theme I raised earlier, of how writers arguing for the distinctiveness of the mediatization approach can offer ‘a caricature of mainstream research’ as displaying a commitment to
particularity which displaces attention to general social contexts (1094). They note that an examination of current work internationally shows this charge (one made in Couldry and Hepp, 2013, as well as by others) not to be substantiated, going on to comment that:

…if agreed that the concept of mediatization refers to the various ways in which media shape social and cultural transformations, it has to be recognised that a large group of scholars do research on mediatization without making use of the concept (1094, emphasis added).

Ekstrom and his colleagues set ‘three tasks’ for future studies, all connected with empirical inquiry – historicality, specificity and measurability. The first of these strongly connects with the recommendations of Lunt and Livingstone, the second seeks to examine more closely media specificities and context specificities, and the third engages with questions about the kinds of qualitative and quantitative data that might be variously applied in research. All the points relate back to the earlier discussion of Deacon and Stanyer (2014). Despite their several reservations as to the current situation, however, they finish by noting how the promise of a ‘vital research field’ can be realized with further development. It seems to me that they offer no grounds whatsoever for situating the term as central to a distinctive ‘field’; indeed most of their commentary undercuts such a notion. What perhaps is at work here, at the end of a paper with shrewd and clear recommendations, is the sheer pull of the ‘legitimacy’ of the idea as this has now been established in parts of the research community (revealingly, and connecting with the earlier point on this issue, they note positively its ‘institutionalization’ through such measures as it becoming a permanent section within the activities of the European research network, ECREA).

In conclusion, I want to make it clear that I have no problems with the use of the term ‘mediatization’ to indicate a dimension of media-social-historical change that needs further direct attention. This dimension concerns the deeper social penetration of modes of ‘media awareness’ and ‘media relatedness’, following recognition that we now ‘live in’ the media rather than ‘live with’ them, to follow Deuze (2012). As it engages with the shifting diversity of social media, it will certainly need to recognise
not only the immense variety but also the often contradictory character of the directions which institutional ‘adaptations’ take. The attention can be given using a variety of theoretical and methodological tools, some of which are suggested by those seeing themselves as conducting mediatization research, and some by those preferring other categories for indicating the identity of their inquiries. Certainly, recent research on UK governmental archives which attempts to track media-related shifts at the level of ‘deep’ institutional rather than ‘front-of-stage’ politics (Garland, Tambini and Couldry, 2018) is original and productive by any measure, although the boldness of its title (‘Is the government mediatized?’) suggests some of the problems of ‘degree’ referred to earlier. Similarly, Stig Hjarvard’s attempts to explore media-related shifts in religion (among many papers see, for instance, Hjarvard, 2011) opens up original and important sociological perspectives, even if the primary evidence relates more directly to cultural than to institutional shifts as such (tracking institutional change raises questions of access as well as of method, the challenge of which all researchers recognise).

Useful as a broad descriptor as it might be, however, what the term does not satisfactorily indicate is any kind of theory, meta-theory, paradigm or even research framework with a clear, independent identity. That such an intensive literature should have surrounded it, in its abstract wrangles at points resembling the character of a dispute in medieval theology, is quite astonishing. What does it say about the current state of media theory that this has happened? Is the explanation, or part of it, that we are looking at a research field in significant parts of which there is a longing for a new ‘ization’, one capable of ‘working at altitude’ so to speak, and particularly one that is self-generated rather than adopted from elsewhere in social theory?

References


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Introduction:

Edward S. Herman and the Propaganda Model Today

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Edward S. Herman, the American media critic best known as the co-author with Noam Chomsky of *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (2002 [1988]), as well as the principal architect of the Propaganda Model (PM) first outlined in that book, died in November 2017 at the age of 92. To pay tribute to Herman’s legacy, and to mark the 30th anniversary of *Manufacturing Consent*, this special section presents contributions from a range of scholars to reflect on, and to critically engage with, the contribution that the PM has made to the critique of journalism and to media, communication and cultural theory more broadly.

The section includes essays from Victor Pickard & Todd Wolfson, Tom Mills, Khadijah Costley White, Paula Chakravartty, Alan Macleod, and Yuezhi Zhao; the republication of an interview with Herman himself; and several discussion pieces between the editors of the recently published collected volume, *The Propaganda Model Today* (Pedro-Carañana, Broudy and Klachn, 2018), and other scholars (including Chomsky) on the theoretical and methodological lineage of the PM and its relation to other approaches to media critique within the traditions of media/communications and cultural studies in particular.

An explicitly political critique of the mainstream media’s (MSM) monopoly on what is considered ‘newsworthy’, the PM identifies five filters through which reality is subjectively represented to create what we consume as ‘the news’: ownership (and
the profit-making motivations of privately-owned corporations), advertising (and the competition to attract advertisers as principal source of funding), sourcing (and the dependence of journalists upon a narrow range of elite sources of ‘trustworthy’ information), flak (the negative reactions to media coverage, such as the strategic management of public information by lobbyists and pressure groups), and ideology (anti-communism in its original articulation, though later updated to include free markets, militarism and the war on terror).

Although originally developed as a critique of US journalism’s treatment of international politics and US foreign policy, the PM has been revised and applied to a wide range of other case studies over the last three decades. It has also been more popular in some countries and disciplines than in others, criticised from a wide range of perspectives, and marginalised within academia more generally.

In Jeff Klaehn’s republished interview with Herman, and in Chomsky’s contribution to a discussion panel on ‘Media Theory, Public Relevance and the Propaganda Model Today’, Herman and Chomsky discuss the origins and ongoing development of their model, the influence on their work by economists such as Alfred Marshall, Edward S. Mason and Joe S. Bain, political theorists such as Antonio Gramsci, and critical work on the political economy and ideological functions of the media by Peter Golding and Stuart Hall, among others, and the way that the PM has been taken up (or not) over the years. Victor Pickard and Todd Wolfson also, in their essay, connect Herman’s intellectual background to the anti-fascist project within the political-economic tradition of communication research, emphasising the links between his academic output and his political activism in Philadelphia, while Yuezhi Zhao highlights the contradictory way in which Manufacturing Consent has been taken up in China, by those who use it to demystify the US media system, by those who dislocate the book from Herman and Chomsky’s broader critique of the political economy of global communication, and by those who use it as a “how to” guide to enhance the effectiveness of Chinese official communication. Throughout the rest of the first discussion piece, the contributors consider the various critiques that have been made against the PM – and in his essay, Tom Mills also considers the extent to which Manufacturing Consent overemphasises the homogeneity of media systems,
underdevelops the concept of ideology, and lacks empirical evidence on the operation of the five filters – and reflect on the model’s links with alternative critical approaches to media and communications, arguing in particular against what they see as a depoliticisation of cultural studies.

In a second discussion piece, ‘The Propaganda Model and Black Boxes?’, the participants debate various methodological, philosophical and practical issues to do with the application of the model, and the extent to which it requires revision or being supplemented by additional approaches or methods depending on context and the case under study. The relationship between the macro-level data typically generated by the identification of the five filters of the PM, and the kind of micro-level data that would demonstrate more how these filters actually operate, is debated at length in the discussion piece. Similarly, in his short article, Alan MacLeod uses the PM to assess Western media coverage of the Colombian (won by right-wing Ivan Duque) and Venezuelan (won by left-wing Nicolas Maduro) elections of 2018, comparing his analyses to Herman and Chomsky’s analyses of “paired examples” of elections in Guatemala in 1982 and Honduras in 1984-5 (US client states) with those in Nicaragua in 1984 (won by the enemy sandinistas). With updated examples and interviews with journalists, MacLeod demonstrates the validity and continued relevance of the PM, as well as how it can be supplemented and substantiated to also demonstrate the micro-processes of journalism.

In a final discussion, ‘The Propaganda Model and Intersectionality: Integrating Separate Paradigms’, the discussants turn their attention to questions of identity and intersectionality, and the accusation that proponents of the PM have tended to ignore issues of race, gender and sexuality. Here, discussion centres on whether the existing filters suffice, as they are capable of incorporating such questions, or whether new filters are needed to address issues that cannot be reducible to the underlying critique of capitalism that informs the PM. In the same vein, Khadijah Costley White points out in her essay that “Herman’s critiques of anti-blackness and racism in media, while scarce, remain poignant”, although she adds racism, anti-blackness, patriarchy, sexism, heterosexism, militarism and elitism to the reigning ideologies that bolster those in power, stressing the importance of thinking through
race and racism in any political-economy analysis of media and policy. Likewise, Paula Chakravartty considers the decolonial significance of Herman’s critiques of US empire and the “structuring logic of media actors and networks that justify the expropriation or killing of almost always racialized and gendered “unworthy victims””.

Taken together, the essays, discussions and interview capture a wide range of potential future directions for the application of the PM, and of starting points for further debate on the relation between political-economy and cultural studies, between class and race/gender/sexuality, and between theory, critique and empiricism in media scholarship.

**Acknowledgements**
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Media, Power and the Origins of the Propaganda Model: An Interview with Edward S. Herman

JEFFERY KLAEHN

Abstract

To commemorate the 30th anniversary of the Herman-Chomsky Propaganda Model (PM) and the publication of the collected volume, *The Propaganda Model Today*, this article re-presents an interview with Edward S. Herman that was originally published with *Fifth Estate Online* in 2008. The interview explored the origins of the PM, common criticisms of the PM, ways in which the PM was updated during the first two decades after it was initially introduced, and whether the PM can and should be applied to other media (such as television news, talk radio, the internet, popular films, pop music and music videos, and comic books). The interview questions have been edited and abbreviated from the original, and a bibliography has been added which directs readers to works which have explored (and will explore) topics and issues discussed within the interview.

Keywords

Propaganda Model, Edward S. Herman, propaganda, ideological power, elites, Cultural Studies, Sociology.

Jeffery Klaehn: How would you characterize the relationship between media and power? And what are your thoughts on the most important implications of media power for democracy and public education today?

Ed Herman: The mainstream media (MSM) are an integral part of the power structure and in consequence consistently serve the ends of the leaders within that power structure. This means that democracy and public education are not primary aims of the MSM; the former, if fully realized, might well be damaging to the ends of the powerful; the latter also, unless properly channeled and limited, could be injurious to the powerful. These incompatibilities are likely to increase if inequality...
grows and if a military ethos and culture become steadily more important (as they have). The MSM will respond with attacks on and marginalization of ‘populism’ with its equalitarian tendencies, and will normalize enormous military budgets and wars.

**Jeffery Klaehn:** What inspired the PM? What were your overall hopes and aims for the model?

**Ed Herman:** We were inspired by the failure of the MSM to serve the public interest and the unwillingness of media analysts to give adequate weight to the structural basis of that media mal-performance. The model actually derives from models of industrial organization, where in past years the paradigm was that structure shapes firm behavior and ultimately economic performance. Fewness of sellers means less intense competition and greater profit margins. The PM similarly relates structural facts like ownership, funding sources, news sources and the relationship of these to the media, the ability to generate threatening flak, and the power to influence ideological premises, to ultimate media news and editorial performance. We hoped that this model would focus greater attention on fundamental forces affecting the media – that it would help explain their choices and frequent double standards and participation in propaganda campaigns.

**Jeffery Klaehn:** What are the theoretical and real-world foundations of the PM?

**Ed Herman:** The theoretical foundation is in good part the economic model of industrial organization that traces back to the great British economist Alfred Marshall, but assumed its more modern form at Harvard with Edward S. Mason and his student and later Berkeley academic Joe S. Bain. Our thinking was also influenced by pioneering media analysts whose ideas also flowed into our work: Warren Breed, Gaye Tuchman; Ben Bagdikian, Philip Elliott, Eric Barnouw, Peter Golding, Stuart Hall, Leon Sigal, and others. The ‘real world’ foundation was our own observations over many years, written up in many articles and books, on how the media operate in choosing, ignoring, stressing and contextualizing (or decontextualizing) the vast flow of news.

**Jeffery Klaehn:** Does the PM share overlaps with critical discourse analysis, and how do you explain resistance and hostility to the PM?

**Ed Herman:** The overlaps with critical discourse frames are numerous, but this is because the subject is immense and many tracks can be followed that are often not inconsistent with one another but stress different things. We don’t stress subtle language variations and/or the nuances in effects when the elite is split and a certain amount of dissent becomes permissible. Our emphasis is on the broader routes through which power affects media choices, how this feeds into media campaigns, and how it results in dichotomization and systematic double standards. The propaganda model focuses heavily on the institutional structure that lies behind news-making in ‘a world of concentrated wealth and major conflicts of class interest.’ This leaves lots of room for other tracks and sub-tracks in areas we deal with.

The resistance and hostility to the PM had several sources. One is that it is a radical critique, whose implication is that modest reforms that don’t alter the structure very much aren’t going to affect media performance very much. This is hard for non-
radicals to swallow. Another source of resistance has been based on our relatively broad-brush strokes with which we model a complex area. This makes it allegedly too mechanistic and at the same time lacking in a weighting of the elements in the model! But we don’t claim that it explains everything and we are clear that elite differences and local factors (including features of individual media institutions) can influence media outcomes. We argue that the model works well in many important cases, and we await the offering of one that is superior. But we also acknowledge that there remains lots of room for media studies that do not rest on the propaganda model. This same room opens the way to criticizing the model for its failure to pursue those tracks and fill those spaces.

**Jeffery Klaehn:** It’s been suggested to me at various points that studies applying the PM represent political criticism. What are your thoughts on misplaced criticisms of the model and on misconceptions about it that continue to circulate?

**Ed Herman:** The key as I have noted is that it is a radical model, a class-based and class-bias model, and that in itself will explain much of the hostility. That will make it ‘political,’ whereas analyses that take the status quo as a given and that confine themselves to modest reforms are ‘non-political.’ This kind of critique is implicitly political. Applications of the PM do take ruling class interests as unified on some issues and as yielding consistent premises in the MSM (like benevolent intent in external ventures, and the superiority of market over government interventionary solutions to economic problems). But we are very clear that the ruling class may be divided on some issues, with important consequences for the media and the space within which journalists can work.

**Jeffery Klaehn:** On the question of relevance, did you create the PM to be fundamentally democratic, available for reading and use by specialists and non-specialists alike?

**Ed Herman:** We are democrats and oppose elite rule and great inequality. The PM shows that the MSM are elite institutions that serve an elite and not the general populace. This seems to us a rudimentary fact, but the model spells it out in its main features. We certainly didn’t write this for specialists alone – we wrote it for everybody. Obviously elite interests and their supporters will find the thrust of the model upsetting and wrong-headed.

Social reality is very complex, but that is why a relatively simple and straightforward model like the PM is especially useful – cutting through that complexity to essentials. Ordinary persons can grasp complex realities as well as the elite, but we are happy to help them do this in a world where elite interests often try to obfuscate that reality.

**Jeffery Klaehn:** In what ways might the PM be modified, improved or updated today?

**Ed Herman:** We modified it in 2002 to include free market ideology as an important ideological premise, complementing anticommunism. We could possibly improve it by spelling out in much more detail the ways in which elite divisions and local factors affect the media and allow dissent more space, although there is always the danger
that the view of the forest might be lost in the profusion of detail on the trees. We
could update on the growing command of militarism and war and the consequent
growth in war propaganda. We may do this in an Epilogue to an edition of
Manufacturing Consent being published in the UK by Bodley Head to celebrate the 20th
anniversary of the publication of the model.

Jeffery Klaehn: Can the PM be applied to other media, such as television news
and the internet? Should it be? What about popular films and comic books? Is
it possible to explore media content and/or various political-economic
elements of the contexts in which these media are produced, applying general
principles associated with the model?

Ed Herman: The model certainly applies to television news, and in fact it can
probably be applied as well to other media forms, modified as necessary by the
extent to which they deal in matters of strong elite interest, the importance of
advertising, and their ownership. A great many of the more important institutions in
the categories that you name are parts of media conglomerates, and operate under
similar pressures and rules. There may be special features of these media and local
conditions that will modify the applicability of the propaganda model. But there is no
logical reason why they shouldn’t be subject to the same general principles and be
worthy of study along these lines.

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Abstract

This essay reflects on Ed Herman’s legacy by connecting his intellectual background to the anti-fascist project within the political economic tradition of communication research. Given that one of the authors (Todd Wolfson) was good friends with Ed and worked with him on independent media, we also consider how he applied his radical critique to local activist projects in Philadelphia. This analysis helps underscore the fact that Ed Herman’s insights hold much contemporary relevance for the many political problems facing American and global society today.

Keywords

Political Economy, Media Criticism, Journalism, Propaganda, Democracy

Last year we lost one of our great radical scholars. Ed Herman, who was writing cogent media criticism right up until the end of his life, died at the age of 92. Reflecting on Herman’s legacy offers us a valuable opportunity to consider the important implications that his life’s work holds for the many media crises facing us today. It also allows us to locate his work within a larger intellectual tradition, one devoted to tracing out the structural roots of power in an effort to aid activist projects toward contesting them. With this in mind, the following essay has three
aims. To briefly sketch Ed Herman’s intellectual origins and connect this lineage to the political economic tradition of communication research, describe how he applied his radical critique to local activist projects in Philadelphia, and consider his insights in light of current problems facing commercial media systems.

**Ed Herman’s Anti-fascist Intellectual Roots**

Ed Herman hails from a research tradition that reflects a radical approach to analyzing power. This tradition has been largely marginalized within the field of communication research, but it is most akin to the sub-field of critical political economy. Herman shared a mentor with two other radical scholars: the economist Doug Dowd (who also passed away last year) and the critical media scholar Dallas Smythe, who is widely recognized as one of the founders of the “political economy of communication” tradition of media studies. Dowd, Smythe, and Herman all studied with the same left-wing economist at Berkeley, Robert Brady. Much of Brady’s work – for example, studying the early rise of fascism in Germany – was devoted to understanding how the capitalist logics driving technological developments and business organizations enabled dangerous concentrations of power (Brady, 1937; Dowd, 1994). Dan Schiller (1999) has credited Robert Brady with deeply influencing two pioneers of political economy – Smythe as well as Herb Schiller – and thereby linking the field to an explicitly anti-fascist agenda. Schiller notes that Brady passed on the key insights that business interests seek to control many aspects of social life – through media and by other means – and these hegemonic tendencies serve as a prerequisite for fascism.

This intellectual lineage – one that exposes the structural roots of power with the express purpose of challenging them – remains consistent throughout Ed Herman’s work. Herman, who spent nearly his entire professional life teaching at the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton Business School (as well as periodically lecturing at the Annenberg School for Communication) focused on how corporate power operated through business relationships. He also devoted much scholarship on criticism of American foreign policy (Chakravarthy, 2018). These interests would lead him to scrutinize the role of commercial media in propagating elite agendas.
Ed Herman, like most radical political economists of media, understood that to apprehend journalistic norms, we must first consider the political economic system within which the institutions of the press are embedded. This key insight is far too often missing from the broader field of media and communication studies – as well as much contemporary media criticism – which has historically assumed an accommodationist relationship with the American media system’s commercialism (Pickard, 2015: 201). Whereas many media scholars take the commercial design of the American news media system as a given and a largely benign condition, Herman started out with the proposition that the commercial media system primarily served elite political and economic interests and, therefore, was antithetical to democracy.

**Ed Herman’s Media Criticism**

In reflecting on Herman’s legacy for the field of communication, it is impossible to over-state the importance of his and Chomsky’s *Manufacturing Consent*. This 1988 book serves as a seminal text for structural criticism of commercial news media, specifically how they serve to advance the interests of political and economic elites. The book conceptualizes Herman and Chomsky’s famous “Propaganda Model.” Drawing from a number of case studies, they show how news coverage selectively filters out some bodies of evidence while privileging others according to larger power relationships. Their model suggests that patterns of omission and emphasis stemming from persistent news routines and values can be attributed to five structural “filters” unique to commercial media: corporate ownership, advertising, reliance on official sources, flak from interest groups (predominantly rightwing), and anticommunism (now updated to focus on anti-terrorism and other official enemies). The book is a rare attempt to link commercial media’s political economic structures with predictable biases and distortions in news media content.

Thoughtful and nuanced criticism of the Propaganda Model has been raised by left-of-center critics over the years. Ed Herman (1996) addressed some of this criticism in a classic essay published in the *Monthly Review*. One point that stands out is his critique of professional news norms, which penetrates to the ideological constraints of commercial media:
Professionalism and objectivity rules are fuzzy, flexible, and superficial manifestations of deeper power and control relationships. Professionalism arose in journalism in the years when the newspaper business was becoming less competitive and more dependent on advertising. Professionalism was not an antagonistic movement by the workers against the press owners, but was actively encouraged by many of the latter. It gave a badge of legitimacy to journalism, ostensibly assuring readers that the news would not be influenced by the biases of owners, advertisers, or the journalists themselves. In certain circumstances it has provided a degree of autonomy, but professionalism has also internalized some of the commercial values that media owners hold most dear, like relying on inexpensive official sources as the credible news source (Herman, 1996).

Even casual observers will note that much contemporary media coverage continues to conform to official narratives – even as some reporting and commentary takes on an adversarial stance toward the Trump administration – carefully hewing to hegemonic discourses about America’s and capitalism’s role in the world, just as the Propaganda Model would predict.

Herman built upon these insights over the last several decades. He co-authored a book with Robert McChesney (1997) that continues in this vein, linking ownership structures, profit imperatives, and elite ideological agendas within the broader global media system. This work advances the key insight from critical political economy that a media system is always embedded within a larger political economic system – in most cases, capitalism – and this shapes many of the everyday, taken-for-granted aspects of how that media system operates. Drawing from such insights, Herman continued to write incisive media criticism for popular news outlets, including Monthly Review and Z Magazine. In one of his final essays, he even addressed the “fake news” hysteria, in which he historicized the judicious use of misinformation by elites over the past century, and how a very compliant New York Times reliably amplified this propaganda (Herman, 2017).
Ed Herman’s pioneering media criticism demonstrated how commercial systems are incapable of providing substantial, critical journalism and reliable government accountability, especially leading up to and during times of war. Given the corporate libertarian logics driving the American media system (Pickard, 2015), good journalism that focuses on major social problems like climate change and inequality is often bad for business. Therefore, Herman believed that nothing less than a structural overhaul was required, and he believed that we must mobilize around action plans for instituting alternative models—and political strategies for implementing them—that aim to unhook journalism from profit imperatives. As it becomes abundantly clear that a commercial media system cannot withstand profit pressures long enough to confront an elite-driven status quo—especially during times of war and economic crisis—Herman urged us to pursue democratic alternatives to the current system. Herman’s commitment to local activism attested to these ethical commitments.

**Ed Herman’s Activism**

A central theme in Ed Herman’s structural media criticism is that profit-driven journalism serves as a tool for propagating the ideology of elites. This core insight led him to a host of activist projects meant to shine a light on distortions in news media content. In particular, much of Herman’s writing focuses on the bias of mainstream news media coverage of international politics. Later in his work, he applied this same critique to local media, particularly the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, to account for their elite bias.

Through the later part of his career, Herman spent a great deal of time illustrating, in detail, the ideological slant of US newspapers on international crises. This work began in collaboration with Noam Chomsky in the book, *Counter Revolutionary Violence: Bloodbaths in Facts and Propaganda* (1973). *Counter Revolutionary Violence*, which saw extreme censorship by a publisher that destroyed over 10,000 copies of the book (Frazier, 2018), was focused on American media’s reporting of U.S. actions during the Vietnam War. Building on that project, Herman and Chomsky published *After the Cataclysm* (1979), where they looked at news coverage of U.S. actions in Cambodia and other parts of Indochina. In these two books, and specifically *After the Cataclysm*,...
Herman and Chomsky began to develop their thesis on American media as a propaganda machine that reinforces U.S. geo-political interests. This work naturally led to *Manufacturing Consent*, where the authors took their initial analysis that had focused on Asia and offered a more systematic analysis of modern-day propaganda in capitalist society.

In the years to follow, Herman continued to develop the propaganda model approach, writing trenchant critiques of the U.S. media system through analyses focused on the disintegration of Yugoslavia, the genocide in Rwanda, and the war in Ukraine. All of this work was hallmarked by both rigorous research and a biting appraisal of our failing (or succeeding) media system. Alongside his scathing analysis of the U.S. media system's role in supporting U.S. hegemony, Ed Herman also turned to focus on local work in Philadelphia. In 2002, he worked with local activists to launch *Inkywatch*. The mission of *Inkywatch* was to monitor “the *Philadelphia Inquirer* for deception and bias.” He published *Inkywatch* from 2002-2008, and during that period the website was a key part of a radical media ecosystem in Philadelphia that was anchored by the *Philadelphia Independent Media Center* (Wolfson, 2014). In this phase, Ed worked closely with one of the authors (Todd Wolfson) on radical media projects throughout the city. And while Ed wrote biting copy, as a person, he was a sincere and generous mentor and co-conspirator to many organizers, activists and budding radical scholars.

As the main contributor to *Inkywatch*, Ed published dozens of articles each year and he used the *Inkywatch* website as a public ombudsman to hold the newspaper to account for its political and economic biases. His work ranged from criticism of *The Inquirer's* reporting on the Iraq War to analysis of the paper’s consistent bias in coverage of the Mumia Abu-Jamal case.

Herman wrote an article shortly after the U.S. attack on Iraq in 2003 entitled “Inky Notes: The Inky Celebrates ‘Liberation’ in a Propaganda Mode,” that epitomized his work on *Inkywatch*. He wrote:
The Inky (Philadelphia Inquirer) hops aboard each war bandwagon with uncritical zest, and sometimes falls on its face in the process. Its front page headline of April 10, accompanied by pictures of the toppling statue of Saddam Hussein, and a celebrating group of Iraqis, was ‘Toppled Ruler: Hussein's grip finally broken, jubilation sweeps Baghdad.’ As usual, nowhere in the accompanying article or associated editorial columns was there any mention that the dictator now toppled had long been supported by the United States, initially in his Ba’ath Party’s seizure of power and thereafter during most years of his tyrannical rule (Inkywatch, 2003).

Herman’s consistency in his scholarship, political writing, and activism is noteworthy. For instance, throughout all of Ed’s local activism, he linked directly to the broader analysis of the political economy of media institutions. He illustrated this by consistently referencing the propaganda model in his analysis of The Inquirer. Accordingly, while the main goal of the Inkywatch was to criticize the “rightward tilt” of the newspaper, Ed also reported on the ever-shifting ownership structure of The Inquirer, and he worked to tease out how it shaped the newspaper’s reporting. With this approach, he was able to connect his political economic analysis of the Philadelphia media ecosystem to his content analysis of The Inquirer. This ability to connect theory to rigorous and grounded analysis is one of Ed Herman’s many strengths as a scholar and as an activist.

In a similar vein, Herman recognized that the only way to challenge the propaganda machine was to assist radical political struggles, while cultivating alternative and independent journalism as an antidote to the corporate media. Ed expressed this instinct by consistently giving money and time to local media projects, including the Philadelphia Independent Media Center, Media Tank, and the Media Mobilizing Project, while also supporting national and global independent media projects where he published much of his work.
Onward

Ed Herman worked to develop an accurate and all-too-unique assessment of modern capitalist society and, in particular, its commercial media. Collaborating with a host of scholars and activists, Herman became one of the foremost critical analysts of the media system’s political economic structures while undertaking rigorous content analysis of how this “propaganda machine” operated on the ground. While Ed’s scholarship was at times bleak, he was a staunch believer that through large-scale social change another world was possible. He expressed this belief through his friendships and in the way he fought for a just media system by supporting independent and radical media. Reflecting on Ed Herman’s work allows us to better understand current problems – that they are political problems subject to human agency and progressive change if we organize to make it happen. Ed was an exemplar of a radical scholar, a committed activist, and a democracy-loving human being. Let us hope that part of his legacy is to inspire future activist scholars to pick up where he left off and carry on the struggle.

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The Legacy of Edward Herman

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Abstract
This article reflects on the legacy of the American media critic and political economist Edward Herman; his influence on the field of media scholarship, and on the author’s own work. It notes that Herman’s contribution has often been underappreciated due to Chomsky’s enormous stature as a public intellectual, and argues that as the principal author of the ‘propaganda model’ Herman made a significant contribution to scholarly and public understanding of the private news media. It notes a number of weaknesses in Manufacturing Consent, some of which are well known and have been addressed by the authors: an overemphasis on ‘closure’ and homogeneity in media systems, and a related ‘media centrism’ that may engender a certain political fatalism; an underdeveloped conception of the role of ideology; and a lack of empirical evidence on the operation of the five ‘filters’ as casual mechanisms giving rise to media content. It concludes that such weaknesses notwithstanding, Herman’s model is an exemplary piece of sociological theorising, and is only deterministic or simplistic insofar as it is ambitious and schematic.

Keywords
Edward S. Herman, propaganda model, manufacturing consent, terrorism experts, corporate-state power.

The American media critic, Edward Herman, died in November last year at the age of 92. Herman is best known as the co-author with Noam Chomsky of Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media, first published in 1988. That book, though initially not especially well received by media scholars (Klaehn and Mullen, 2010), became a classic text in the media studies canon, and remains probably the most influential single radical critique of the corporate news media.

Inevitably perhaps given Chomsky’s enormous stature as a public intellectual, Herman’s contribution to Manufacturing Consent has too often been overlooked. He was, after all, first author, and in fact was largely responsible for the development of
what he referred to in a subsequent afterword as ‘the analytic underpinning of the book’: the ‘propaganda model’ (Herman and Chomsky, 2008: 189). In 2013, at an event at the British Library, Chomsky acknowledged in conversation with the British journalist Jonathan Freedland, that: ‘Most of the work on the propaganda model itself was due to my colleague Edward Herman… and I mean, I agreed with it, but I can’t take the credit for it’ (Chomsky, 2013).

Herman’s ‘propaganda model’ is both a description of the institutional structure of the US news media and a theory of media performance. The opening chapter of *Manufacturing Consent* describes the size, ownership structures and profit orientation of the US news media; its dependence on advertising as the major source of revenue; its reliance on elite sources for information; and its susceptibility to political pressure and anti-communist ideology. These factors were described by Herman as ‘filters’ that shape reporting in such a way that ‘media news people, frequently operating with complete integrity and goodwill, are able to convince themselves that they choose and interpret the news “objectively” and on the basis of professional news values’ (Herman and Chomsky, 2008: 2).

The opening chapter of *Manufacturing Consent* concludes by presenting the propaganda model as a hypothesis about media content: if the corporate news media is as described – a set of institutions embedded within the US corporate-state nexus – how would we expect it to report? We would, Herman and Chomsky suggest, expect to find ‘a systematic and highly political dichotomization in news coverage based on serviceability to important domestic power interests’ evident in the ‘choices of story and in the volume and quality of coverage’ (Herman and Chomsky, 2008: 33). The remainder of the book consists of a number of detailed case studies analysing press coverage of US and US-sponsored atrocities in Latin America and South East Asia that together convincingly support the authors’ hypothesis.

The propaganda model proved over time to be enormously influential politically. In scholarly circles, though, it has often been regarded either as overly deterministic, overly simplistic, or both (Schudson, 1989; Golding and Murdock, 1991; Goodwin, 1994). Schlesinger’s (1992: 302) claim that it offers ‘a highly deterministic vision of
how the media operate’ that tends ‘to stress the tendency towards virtual closure of the US national media system...in the service of the powerful’ is a typical assessment. This seems a fair criticism of the thrust of the original text, if not the explicit claims made therein, and it is a point clarified by Herman and Chomsky in the foreword to the 2002 edition:

These structural factors that dominate media operations are not all-controlling and do not always produce simple and homogeneous results. It is well recognized, and may even be said to constitute a part of an institutional critique such as we present in this volume, that the various parts of media organizations have some limited autonomy, that individual and professional values influence media work, that policy is imperfectly enforced, and that media policy itself may allow some measure of dissent and reporting that calls into question the accepted viewpoint. These considerations all work to assure some dissent and coverage of inconvenient facts (Herman and Chomsky 2008, xii).

In an earlier text Herman went further, stating that differences within the elite can occasionally lead to ‘attacks on the intent as well as the tactical means of achieving elite ends’ (cited in Freedman 2014: 122). Schlesinger’s point, then, would seem to be well taken by the authors, and even if the original formulation downplayed contradiction and contestation within the corporate media (Freedman, 2014), the authors’ broad claims about patterns of reporting are nevertheless well supported by the evidence they present, of which I am not aware of any convincing refutation.

There remains, however, a question around causation. That the ‘mainstream media’ tends to reflect the interests of powerful groups in society is, as Chomsky has noted, ‘one of the best-confirmed theses in the social sciences’ (Chomsky et al., 2002: 18). But why is this the case? Manufacturing Consent essentially tags some strong evidence on media performance onto Herman’s theoretical model, without adducing any evidence as to the causal relationship between the two. Contrary to claims made in some quarters, both are sophisticated and empirically informed, but what we do not see in Manufacturing Consent are Herman’s five filters in action. This is less a criticism
of Herman and Chomsky – one study can only do so much – than the way in which their contribution to media theory has been received; although one cannot completely divorce one from the other. Herman and Chomsky’s sole focus on institutional structure on the one hand, and media performance on the other, and their disinterest in the ideology and practices of journalists that mediate the two, obviously leaves one aspect in the media system unexplored. They argue that this is ‘fully justified’ given the consistency of reporting patterns (Herman and Chomsky, 2004: 106), which is fair enough. But it is an oversight which could easily have been addressed through more engagement with the existing sociological literature (for a discussion of the model’s relationship with sociological theory, see Hearns-Branaman, 2018 and Klaehn and Mullen, 2010).

In my view, Herman’s analysis should have invited less straw man criticism and either greater efforts at empirical refutation, or more ethnographic and comparative studies to examine the assumptions made about the influence of different ‘filters’. This in fact was one of the motivations behind my own work on the BBC (Mills, 2016; Mills, 2018), which sought to examine the relationship between media performance, organisational culture and political economy in a media organisation quite different to the US press, and in recent years others have sought to engage more directly with the applicability of the propaganda model in different contexts (see for example Sparks, 2007; Freedman, 2009; Pedro, 2011a; 2011b).

This sort of work is important not only for testing the robustness of Herman’s theory, but for escaping some of its potential intellectual and political limitations. Manufacturing Consent effectively debunked a set of erroneous assumptions about the corporate media in the United States, which were related to broader and equally erroneous assumptions about American society in general, and its role in the world. But the schematic formulation Herman offered was certainly parochial and has in my view been applied too readily to distinct institutions and in distinct contexts.

Herman’s theory perhaps too easily also engendered itself to political fatalism. The book became enormously influential in the 1990s, when history ended for a time, and its totalising theory of media propaganda certainly resonated with the political inertia
and capitalist triumphalism of that period. The ideological power of the media power in such contexts can often be exaggerated and a related problem with how *Manufacturing Consent* was received politically is that it too easily lent itself to a media-centric analysis. This arguably stems from the fact that Herman’s theoretical model, which was really a theory of media performance, used the term ‘propaganda’, which is suggestive of media institutions themselves as producers of politically motivated disinformation, drawing attention away from the interests in society which shape media reporting (Robinson, 2018). Again this is at odds with the theory as actually presented in the text, which outlines the media’s embeddedness within wider structures of corporate-state power – indeed it is notable that only two of Herman’s five ‘filters’ are related to the structure of the media – but the ambiguity about the media’s ideological power is certainly there.

Whilst Chomsky has focused more broadly on elite intellectual culture, Herman was overwhelmingly concerned with media reporting in his writing, but with a clear awareness of the active role of wider networks of power and publicity. His joint work on terrorism experts (Herman and O’Sullivan, 1989), for example, which was a starting point for my forthcoming manuscript with David Miller on this same subject, focused on an ‘industry’ of experts with close connections to the US state and conservative think tanks who disseminated a shared ideological perspective on political violence. As with his work on the media, the focus was on how patterns of reporting differed according to US interests, but in this case the focus was on ‘the institutional apparatus – government, thinktanks, security firms, and experts that expound and elaborate’ a ‘onesidedness and huge bias in the mainstream’ (Herman, 1996: 89).

It is arguable that the resolutely critical thrust of Herman’s writings have, as Gavan Titley suggests (2016), led on occasion to an unwarranted scepticism about atrocities not attributable to the US and its allies – a charge levelled at Herman personally by George Monbiot in his criticisms of Herman’s co-authored book, *The Politics of Genocide* (Monbiot, 2012). But there’s no doubt that in *Manufacturing Consent* and his other work Herman made a hugely significant contribution to our understanding of the politics of private news media. To my mind, his model is also much more
sophisticated than it is often given credit for; effectively integrating critical political economy with organisational, professional and political ideology and practices, even if the latter elements remain underdeveloped. In this sense it is an exemplary piece of sociological theorising and is only deterministic or simplistic insofar as it is ambitious and schematic.

References


Notes

1 Thanks to David Miller for this point.

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Herman in Theory and Practice:

Race and Power

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Abstract

With the passing of Edward Herman, it is important to reflect on the ways that race and power figured in the theories he posited about the media. This essay discusses Herman’s theories on the ways in which capitalism and race intersect within news.

Keywords

Race, news, media bias, capitalism

I had not heard of Edward Herman the day that I sat in a rather gray meeting room with colleagues at a national show on PBS. While I was only a lowly production associate at the time, I was also the only black editorial staffer. So there were times, like this one, when I felt the need to speak up.

We were screening a piece on living wage campaigns which featured two families, one black and one white. The ostensible objective of the show was to convey the little-known (or little-acknowledged) truth that most poor Americans are employed in full-time jobs that pay them too little to support their families. Each family featured in the episode had more than one child — but the host asked only the single black mother why she was pregnant and having another child in light of her struggles to make ends meet.
I was, to say the least, shocked by the question. Was he suggesting an abortion? Adoption? Permanent sexual abstinence for a grown adult? A narrative of irresponsibility because she had, like many humans before her, conceived a child? Was it her fault that her employers did not pay her enough to support another child?

Edward Herman’s work might have helped me cogently explain the way the question was shaped by anti-blackness and only served to push the failures of capitalism onto this woman’s shoulders, stigmatizing her reproductive choices rather than the lack of resources thereof. I might have reminded them, as Edward Herman once argued, that we were falling into the trap of journalism in which we portray “anti-Black theorizing, even if blatant and a rerun of long-repudiated doctrine, [not as] provocation and bigotry; [but as] courageous truth-seeking” (Herman, 1995: 86). This was PBS, the bastion of liberal news and public service. If they could not understand the sexism and racism embedded in questioning the reproductive decisions in the only family not headed by a white man, then who would?

Instead, my voiced concern about the interaction between the show’s host and a working poor black mother seemingly fell on deaf ears. I recall gently querying why she was being asked about her choice to have a child and suggesting we take the exchange out. I was told, in response, that “our viewers want to know”. Even in the world of non-profit news, consumerist impulses to meet audience expectations and biases guided such decisions.

But it is, of course, the obsession with engaging the loyalty, desires, and ideology of viewers that frequently concerned Edward Herman the most. It is through his work that such newsroom scenes can be rethought, analyzed, and reconfigured.

Herman’s discussion of capitalism and the way it shapes our political and informational institutions was the primary focus in his work. His relentless emphasis on examining political economy in journalism demanded that we think not just about the messages that the media produce, but the forces that shape those messages.
In his book *The Myth of the Liberal Media* (1999), Herman argues that a capitalist emphasis on a free market approach to media production and dissemination necessarily constrained free expression. Property owners and the monied elite typically owned or controlled the means of free expression and, thus, constrained it to suit their own interests. As Herman saw it, this was a fact embedded in the very Constitution and the intent of its wealthy authors.

The influence and ownership (and we should add, race and gender) of wealthy Americans on mass media produced a “media bias towards status quo and interests of the corporate system” (ibid, p.15). To rely on advertising revenue meant the media must generate content that appeased and propelled business interests, creating an aversion to controversy and opposition to those in power. In this way, Herman argues that the “free market model limits free expression” and creates instead a “decentralized pursuit of a set of micro-interests” that support the actions and goals of those most in power (ibid, 16). In other words, mass media under capitalism made the media just another set of tools for extending and maintaining control. While the media do not all share the same perspectives and point of view, Herman and his friend Noam Chomsky argued that the media did work collectively to exclude “views that challenge fundamental premises or suggest that the observed modes of exercise of state power are based on systemic factors” (Herman and Chomsky, 1988: xii). In such a media system, reigning ideologies that bolster those in power – racism, antiblackness, patriarchy, sexism, heterosexism, militarism, elitism, etc. – would overall be positively and consistently conveyed (even if implicitly).

For me – as with most theory – Herman’s insights become most keen at the points in which they meet my own experience, study, and engagement with the media. It means almost nothing to state repeatedly that the media function as complements and conduits of a capitalist regime without a personal history and context through which one can fully understand the everyday mire of journalism’s entanglements. It is through the mire, I think, that Herman’s theories are most clear.

Herman’s theories were rooted in his own work as a journalist, including his experience of being blacklisted. As an occasional op-ed writer for the *Philadelphia*
Inquirer, he reported his own observations of pro-war, pro-conservative stances within the paper. He experienced his own brush-up with the paper’s leadership when he wrote a column “on state terrorism, which identified Israel (among others) as a terrorist state” (Herman, 1999: 122). According to Herman, this column upset enough pro-Israel supporters that he was “de facto blacklisted”.

This narrative and its veracity, of course, rests on one’s perspective of a conflict that continues to be a political and academic lightning rod to this day. For Herman, it represented a pro-war media stance that supported a powerful and successful lobby. For others, of course, Herman's accusations represented an anti-semitic point of view. In either case, it could be argued the Inquirer's actions in publishing Herman's column and excluding his future contributions appealed to a hawkish and xenophobic right-wing.

In my experience, the mire of journalism, capitalism, and politics was represented in a single exchange in a production meeting about a young black mom in a small gray room. Of course, I would be the first one to point out that racism and sexism did not heavily figure within Herman’s work. He, like most socialist writers of his time, seemed to see them both as mere consequences of capitalism rather than its pillars.

But Herman's critiques of anti-blackness and racism in media, while scarce, remain poignant. In Triumph of the Market (1995), Herman discusses the ways in which racist messages find footing in mainstream media. For example, Herman points out the widespread media attention given in the 1990s to The Bell Curve, a book written by Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray that argued the intellectual inferiority of Black people compared to their white peers. Herman pointed out the failures of media networks to place Herrnstein and Murray’s claims about the education of Black children “in the context of scientific racism”, a lengthy history of white supremacist pseudo-science research. Fast-forward to 2017, and a more recent CBS Sunday morning segment about college students protesting paid right-wing speeches on campus presented Charles Murray as a sympathetic researcher with a controversial point of view. The media segment neglected to mention his stakes in
racist claims and ideologies – uncomfortably similar to media coverage that Herman observed more than two decades ago.

The core issue, Herman explains, is that the media normalize racism, which is “made acceptable to an important racist constituency and fitted to serve the political agenda of the powerful, setting the intellectual and moral stage for a new wave of harsh policies towards the descendants of the victims of the slave system” (ibid: 90). In this way, anti-blackness is not only specific to media coverage of Black people, it is also endemic. The media portraits systemic attacks on the freedom of Black people, such as slavery or lynching, as “tragic errors” – simple mistakes in a generally progressive nation rather than fundamental building blocks upon which our politics, policy, and economy continue to rely.

Of course, this is in line with Herman’s overall argument about a market-oriented media that must justify the oppression of the poor and venerate the wealthy. Anti-blackness works “in accord with the law of markets”, rewarding those (in particular, anti-Black Black people – think Stacey Dash, Clarence Thomas, or Sherriff David Clarke) “who are prepared to help administer the necessary blows and discipline to the dispossessed” (ibid: 95).

More recent examples of these market-based dynamics can be seen in Disney-owned media groups censuring and censoring Black media professionals for their coverage of a nationwide police brutality National Football League protest. The protest began with a Black quarterback named Colin Kaepernick kneeling during the National Anthem in 2016 to display his objection to a series of largely unpunished police killings of unarmed Black people. The protest spread and involved mostly Black players on other teams, garnering swift and widespread criticism from right-wing and right-leaning football viewers who saw the athletes as unpatriotic; in particular, the newly elected president Donald Trump, who expressed in a speech that he wished NFL league owners would “say, Get that son of a bitch off the field right now! Out! He’s fired!” (Graham, 2017).
In response to the threats to bench players, a Black woman ESPN anchor named Jemele Hill (already criticized by the White House and others for calling Trump a “white supremacist”) tweeted that “This play always works. Change happens when advertisers are impacted. If you feel strongly about [a threatening owner’s] statement, boycott his advertisers” (Pallotta, 2017). ESPN is not only owned by Disney, but also has a $15 billion contract with the NFL to air its games. Their punishment for advising a threat to revenue dollars was swift. Hill was subsequently suspended and removed from her position as show host. A few months later on ABC, another Disney-owned company, the network canceled an episode that discussed Kaepernick’s protest on “Blackish”, a weekly family comedy focused on race (Holloway, 2018). Profit, advertising, and brand imperatives allowed only anti-black discourse to reign on the subject and led to the removal of narratives challenging white supremacy and profit. Kaepernick himself, considered one of the best quarterbacks in the country, still remains without a contract until he agrees to cease his silent protest (Garcia, 2017). As Herman would have predicted, capitalism and systemic ideologies about the oppressed prevailed.

Herman’s theories on anti-blackness, power and imperialism help in thinking through the ways in which we understand race and journalism today. In discussing the police, the purveyors of disproportionate violence against black people and people with disabilities, Herman explains that the media tends to portray the police as credible and authoritative information sources. In covering immigration, Herman notes that American media neglect to mention our country’s role in generating and contributing to the crises and conflicts from which people flee (Herman, 1992: 109). The media create categories that distinguish between “constructive”, “nefarious” and “benign” bloodbaths, skewing these narratives based on the extent to which a conflict benefits Western interests rather than the collateral damage that it produces (Herman, 1995: 104). The media propagate and give a platform to conservative ideology and policies that “generate disorder, crime and job scarcity by increasing unemployment, withdrawing the safety net from the weak, unleashing greed, encouraging corporate abandonments, and returning society to the law of the jungle” (Herman, 1992: 79). That is, the media help those in power to violate the very
meaning of the social contract, and do it by reestablishing its boundaries. In this way, Herman argues that the media help “normalize the unthinkable” (ibid: 97).

There is, too, an almost prescient quality to Herman’s work. I haven’t decided yet if that’s because history tends to repeat itself or if there is something more magical afoot. But it strikes me fairly often that Herman’s work seems to have predicted the Donald Trump presidency as a natural progression in America’s hegemonic political and media system, even if he himself did not predict Trump’s victory. Like most progressive and liberal voters, Herman was too distracted by the power and influence of what he called the “Clinton menace” to clearly see the rise of Trump (Herman and Garrison, 2016). But it is, ironically, in Trump and Trumpian policies that Herman’s theories are best revealed.

In Herman’s earlier work, he gave a clarion call on the potential rise of fascism in America. There are some real nuggets in these texts, such as explaining why environmentalism fails under capitalism or the salience of “law and order rhetoric” in authoritarian regimes. In particular, Herman explains that “the “market” does not like anything approaching real democracy, which invariably imposes higher taxes on those who can afford to pay and supports worker rights and benefits” (Herman, 1995: 116). Instead, the market favors authoritarian governments and pressures journalistic narratives to do the same. As the market resists constraint and any limits to growth, environmentalism is also seen as running “counter to fundamental characteristics of a capitalist economy” (Herman, 1992: 110). While he does not state it explicitly, these impulses necessarily affect the media that cover issues such as climate change and pollution. Hermanian logic would dictate that journalists would tend more to support the individualist and consumerist ideologies that bolster anti-environmentalist rhetoric rather than focus on the communal impact and consequences of environmental neglect and injury.

It is probably most in his descriptions of “Law and Order” regimes that Herman’s Trumpian echoes are most clearly elucidated, as are the importance of thinking through race and racism in any political economy analysis of media and policy. In a 2017 speech before police officers, President Donald Trump implored cops to not
“be too nice” to suspects and encouraged them to rough up people in their custody (Swanson, 2017). Trump ran on a “Law and Order” platform, telling his supporters on the campaign trail that “We must maintain law and order at the highest level or we will cease to have a country, 100 percent. We will cease to have a country. I am the law and order candidate” (Nelson, 2016).

Herman explains that law and order regimes “gradually enlarge the rights of the state and the powers of police, increase the severity of penalties for lower class crimes, and fill up the prisons” (Herman, 1992: 82). Moreover, the racial implications of such rhetoric are clear – as Herman points out, “law and order” (L&O) and its doublespeak partner, “crime in the streets”. These code phrases signify the purported threat posed by poor blacks and other minorities to white safety and jobs. […] The conservative “solution” to increased crime and violence is more police, prisons, and an end to “coddling” (Herman, 1992: 79).

This dynamic creates a feedback loop that journalists and the news media help maintain and legitimize (Gilens, 2009; Hall et al., 2013; Reeves and Campbell, 1994). The media treat this racism and disenfranchisement “gently”, Herman claims, with little or no reflection on the morality or depravity of such stances. It is, in the end, a media system that dutifully follows the lead of a political government which manufactures villains and crises that are instrumental to capitalism and market-based political control.

Herman is useful for thinking through the consequences of a media system that promotes and abets a capitalist regime that puts profits ahead of people. For my work in particular, Herman not only reminds me of what is at stake in media and democracy, but what it means concretely for the perpetuation and justification of oppression. While it may be surprising that Herman’s work makes me recall a moment of failure in disrupting a hegemonic narrative in a news story I was helping to produce, it also reminds me of the importance and stakes that lay in speaking back. Moments of rupture help provide a space for consideration of taken-for-
granted narratives and the biases that lay within. And this, perhaps, is the most significant Edward Herman lesson of them all.

References


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The military juntas of Latin America and Asia are our juntas. Many of them were directly installed by us or are the beneficiaries of our direct intervention, and most of the others came into existence with our tacit support, using military equipment and training by the United States. Our massive intervention and subversion over the past 25 years has been confined almost exclusively to overthrowing reformers, democrats, and radicals – we have rarely “destabilized” right-wing military regimes no matter how corrupt or terroristic (Chomsky & Herman, 1979: 16).

My colleague Miriyam Aouragh (2017) and I recently published an article where we wondered why it was that the vast majority of English language scholarship on the Arab Uprisings’ “innovative social media use by youth in Egypt and Tunisia had so little to say about the US’ and other Western colonial powers’ legacy of occupation, on-going violence and strategic interests in the region at large.” Suddenly, a region that has been long ignored in mainstream media studies literature when it comes to
theories of democracy or social movements, became, momentarily, the focus of numerous books and articles speculating on the promise of Facebook and Twitter youth-fueled revolutions (Bennett and Segerbergh, 2013; Castells, 2012; Howard and Hussain, 2013; Papacharissi, 2014). All of these technology-forward accounts of social transformation side-stepped the decade-long US-led war on terror and its impact across the region, not to mention the much longer Cold War roots of media control and surveillance backed directly by decades of US support for long-time authoritarian allies President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt and President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia. It appeared to us – both of us as scholars of media and politics in the Middle East and North Africa and in South Asia respectively – as if the “Arab Spring” was a “vindication within Media Studies and Communications of the universal appeal of Western liberal democracy delivered through the gift of the Internet and other “technologies of freedom.”

This common-sense correlation between individual freedom and liberal democratic order is rooted in a much longer contradictory history of US exceptionalism, from its settler colonial origins defined from founding father and slaveholder, Thomas Jefferson’s era, as an “empire of liberty”. Distinguishing its imperial ambitions from European colonial powers, Jefferson justified Westward expansion of the republic by military force. However, as political theorist Anthony Bouguès argues in drawing from historian William Appleman Williams (1980), “the sustainability of its political power resided in the realm of the mind and in bending consciousness to conform to what was seen as the natural spirit of being human…the natural unfolding of human destiny as embodied in the ways of life that were founded on conceptions of American liberty” (14). Given the mediatization, or the ways in which media institutions, technologies, practices, and affects shape both the context and currency of politics and war in the 21st century, this brief essay considers the legacy of the work of Edward S. Herman in this distinct practice of U.S. empire.

Theories of media and democracy, whether liberal or critical, are largely grounded in the historical experiences of the birth of the free press and the emergence of the public sphere as it evolved in Western Europe and the United States (Chakravartty and Roy, 2013; Engel and Becerra, 2018). Since the mid-20th century, the US model
of market-driven media came to be seen as the universal aspirational model for much of the world whereby “…the independence of American media from government control, the fearless way in which American journalists are able to criticize authority” became a source of inspiration around the world (Curran, 2011: 16). As James Curran goes on to write, “American media – viewed from a distance – seems like a shining city on a hill.”³ It is this vantage point of safe distance, where the “free liberal media” operates in relation to its “good citizens” – assumed almost always as the wealthy, white, heterosexual male (Schudson, 1999) that Herman and Chomsky’s scholarship on the neo-colonial political economy of US media power, fundamentally challenges.

I was drawn to the opening quotation from Chomsky and Herman’s 1979 book, an early critique of the US Human Rights regime and what the authors call the rise of “Third World fascism,” in the backdrop of the media maelstrom over Trump’s “treasonous” performance in his press conference with President Vladimir Putin in Helsinki in July of 2018. The issue of “fake news” and secret foreign interference affecting democratic elections within the US is surely grave and worthy of public scrutiny; how might we rethink the constitutive role of the “free liberal media” in holding democratic institutions accountable if we stretch our frame of analysis beyond national borders? This is precisely what Chomsky and Herman were asking us to do in The Washington Connection (1979), where they provide detailed accounts of the most influential liberal US news media systematically downplaying political and military “interference” in both elections and in the perpetuation of mass violence by the US’ authoritarian allies in Brazil, Burundi, Chile, Paraguay, Indonesia and Thailand. Current research based on more recently declassified information on Cold War interventions by both superpowers holds Chomsky and Herman’s findings to be true. For example, a widely cited quantitative study documents that the US intervened in sovereign foreign elections between 1946 and 1989 some 62 times in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East, with the vast majority as covert operations where concerns for democratic legitimacy were almost always trumped by concerns for national interest (Levin, 2016).
In this sense, Chomsky and Herman provide a substantive challenge to the standard celebratory liberal narrative of the post-war “free US media,” memorialized in both scholarship and popular culture – for a recent reference think Stephen Spielberg’s melodrama The Post – as instrumental in ending the Vietnam war and taking down President Nixon along the way (Gitlin, 2003). Instead, in 1979 – the year of the Iranian revolution and the year before the political hegemony of Ronald Reagan and Maggie Thatcher, they ask us to reconsider the democratic value of media institutions that insist on such limited and parochial standards of democratic freedom for the few at the costly price of mediated political machinations fostering “Third world fascism.”

Manufacturing Consent (2002 [1988]), with Edward Herman as the primary author, honed in on the institutional culpability of the US “free media” in selling the fantasy of US exceptionalism in the 1980s and 1990s. It is important to remember that the book, while covering the history of US involvement in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos as well as Central America, was first published during the Reagan era, which saw both the expansion and enforcement of global neoliberal economic reforms and renewed excesses of covert military engagement from Central America to Afghanistan-Pakistan and beyond. By the early-1990s, following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the spread of commercial satellite television, new optimistic theories of media and globalization and the spread of civil society became central components of a renewed “popular belief in the unique mission of the United States to secure the destiny of liberal democracy across the world (Grandin, 2011: x). The “CNN-effect” and American popular culture appeared to be bringing the world together against state control whether in Eastern Europe or China, and hybrid media flows promised new cultural and political possibilities beyond American cultural homogenization.

What becomes clearer in retrospect is that theories of global media and democracy, formulated in the heady early days after the end of the Cold War amidst new and rapid advances in digital media technologies, turned away from what might remain the long-term structures of US media power, specifically in relation to what would become the global South. Chapters 2 and 3 of Manufacturing Consent focused on US
media coverage of a series of corrupted elections and covert wars during the Reagan era in Central America. What they found was that US media coverage “...often surpassed expectations of media subservience by government propaganda demands” (2002: xlix). In describing US Cold War policies in Latin America during the Reagan era, historian Greg Grandin argues that “Cold War terror – either executed, patronized, or excused by the United States – fortified illiberal forces, militarized societies, and broke the link between freedom and equality, thus greatly weakening the likelihood of such a fulfillment...” (2011: xv). In other words, instead of assuming that US media technologies instill individual freedom (against state power), the work of Herman and Chomsky revealed the ways in which “U.S. empire weakened Latin American democracy by de-linking social solidarity from the idea of freedom, which has been recast as personal liberty, setting the stage for free market ideology” (2011: xv).

What does this mean for how we understand US commercial media and democracy conceptually? How might the findings of Herman and Chomsky in Central America in the 1980s influence our understanding of the role of the commercial US media and media technologies in shaping subsequent elections at home and abroad as well as in shaping the parameters of the never-ending wars against crime, migration and terror in the 21st century? We could say that Manufacturing Consent makes a persuasive case about the constitutive role of commercial US media institutions and technologies in fortifying illiberal forces and breaking the link between freedom and equality, with implications both “at home” and abroad. In the last 30 years, Manufacturing Consent has stood out as a stubborn thorn in the side of the endless iterations of optimism about global commercial media and the magic of the Internet to ensure, if not deliver, the promise of liberal democracy.

**Free Market Media as Propaganda: A Decolonial Critique**

In closing, I would like to highlight what we might consider the decolonial significance of Edward S. Herman’s persistent critical analysis of US media power in relation to the world at large. While he worked in an entirely different intellectual tradition, I would say we see clear parallels between Herman’s critique of US imperial exceptionalism and its neo-colonial media infrastructure, and what today we might
call decolonial theory and politics (Byrd and Rothberg, 2011; Bhambra, 2014; Harney and Moten, 2013). Anti-colonial thinkers have long pointed out that the West’s humanism and technological prowess was built on the edifices of slavery, genocide and colonial rule in the Americas, Africa and Asia. The barbarism of the West was defined through its relationship to the creation of the “colonized savage,” as Aimé Césaire wrote so powerfully in *Discourse on Colonialism*, first published in 1950:

First we must study how colonization works to civilize the colonizer, to brutalize him in the true sense of the word, to degrade him, to awaken him to buried instincts, covetousness, violence, race hatred, and moral relativism; and we must show that each time a head is cut off or an eye put out in Vietnam and in France they accept the fact, each time a little girl is raped and in France they accept the fact, each time a Madagascan is tortured and in France they accept the fact, civilization acquires another dead weight, a universal regression takes place, a gangrene sets in, a center of infection begins to spread; and that at the end of these treaties that have been violated, all these lies that have been propagated, these punitive expeditions that have been tolerated, all these prisoners who have been tied up and “interrogated,” all these patriots who have been tortured, at the end of all the racial pride that has been encouraged, all the boastfulness that has been displayed, a poison has been distilled into the veins of Europe and, slowly but surely, the continent proceeds toward savage (Césaire, 2000: 35-36).

Without citing thinkers like Aimé and Suzanne Césaire or Frantz Fanon (2007), among many other influential anti-colonial intellectuals, we hear echoes of these works in Chomsky and Herman’s preface and throughout much of their writing on media and democracy: “The Free Press has fulfilled its primary obligations to the state by averting western eyes from the carnage of the war and effacing US responsibility…All in all, the performance of the Free Press in helping to reconstruct a badly mauled imperial ideology has been eminently satisfactory. The only casualties have been truth, decency and the prospects for a more humane world” (Chomsky and Herman, 1979: x).
I see this parallel perhaps most clearly in the well-known and oft-quoted discussion of “worthy and unworthy victims” in Manufacturing Consent (2002), where the authors contrast the lavish media attention to “people abused in enemy states as worthy victims, whereas those treated with equal or greater severity by its own government or clients will be unworthy.” Herman and Chomsky write that “While this differential treatment occurs on a large scale, the media, intellectuals, and public are able to remain unconscious of the fact and maintain a high moral and self-righteous tone. This is evidence of an extremely effective propaganda system” (37).

During the initial few months of the extraordinary spectacles of the Arab uprisings, the US media and Western scholars of “social media revolutions” considered Egyptian and Tunisian activists “worthy victims” of oppression by their own nation states. U.S. complicity in the backing and funding of militaries of the Mubarak and Ben Ali regimes and the heated geopolitical context of a region afflicted by a decade-long war was left out of these considerations (Iskander, 2013; Herrera, 2014). As the repressive aftermath of the 2011 uprisings in Egypt and across the region make abundantly clear, “any assertion of the contagious or transformative powers of media and information technologies require a foregrounding of geo-political histories and the machinations of capitalist crises” (Arough and Chakravartty, 2017: 560). Turning to today’s “unworthy” victims, the “ungrievable” victims of asymmetrical warfare, whether in Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen or Palestine, come to mind (Butler, 2016; Daulatzai and Rana, 2018). We might also consider the innumerable victims of police violence “at home,” only recently made visible through the Black Lives Matter liberation movement (Taylor, 2016). We obviously cannot but think of the “unworthy victims” of US interventions in Central America and the Middle East and North Africa when we consider the quiet normalization of the Muslim Travel Ban or the cruel regime of migrant separation, incarceration and deportation (Paik, 2017). Here, we can see that it is the structuring logic of media actors and networks that justify the expropriation or killing of almost always racialized and gendered “unworthy victims”.

Herman and Chomsky’s propaganda model helps us understand that the excesses of the Trump regime are not an inexplicable aberration, but rather forces us to consider
the continuities across the long-20\textsuperscript{th} century that has led to this current moment of political crisis. The “unworthy victim” is tenable of course only if we first establish that they are sub-human and thereby prone inherently to violence or pro-actively a threat to the “empire of liberty”. The systematic propagation of racialized and gendered “unworthy victims” of European and American empire should therefore take us back to the settler colonial histories of genocide (Wolfe, 2006), the unresolved legacies of slavery and Jim Crow segregation and the domestic implications of the extra-territorial expansion beginning in 1898. The work of Edward S. Herman, whose prolific scholarship on the violence of neocolonial US media power from the Cold War to the on-going War on Terror, provides us with much needed tools to break through the recurrent amnesia about the U.S.’ “empire of liberty” as a modern mediatized way of life.

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**Notes**

1 In fact, Manuel Castells, author of one of the most influential books on the 2011 social movements (*Networks of Power and Outrage*) was awarded the Ithiel de Sola Pool Award by the American Political Science Association in 2013. De Sola Pool, author of *Technologies of Freedom* (1983), was an influential Cold War advocate of the powers of electronic communication in subverting state control.

2 For more on “mediatization” see Stromback and Esser, 2014 and Murdock, 2017. Numerous scholars have written about what we can call the mediatization of war including: Butler, 2016; Kuntzman and Stein, 2015; Mattelart, 1994; McCoy, 2009; Mirzoeff, 2006; Parks & Kaplan, 2017.

3 Curran raises this familiar Reagan-era trope reviving US colonial mythology to provide a critique of the paradigmatic role of US media systems at the center of theories of media and democracy. Specifically, in this section Curran critiques the influential text by Dan Hallin and Paolo Mancini (2004) “Comparing media systems: Three models of media and politics.”

4 We can point to a vast literature in Media Studies and Communications, as well as Anthropology, Sociology and Political Science that focused on the democratic, “deliberative” promise of
commercial global media technologies and institutions beginning in the early-1990s. This work is too large and varied to catalogue in this short piece, but could include among many others: Calhoun, 1989; Fishkin, 1991; Keane, 2003; Straubhauer, 1991; Tomlinson, 1999; Jenkins & Thorburn, 2004.

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Manufacturing Consent for the 2018 Elections in Venezuela and Colombia

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Abstract
Herman and Chomsky laid out their propaganda model of how foreign countries are presented in the news directly relates to their closeness with Washington. Criticisms of the model declare it overly deterministic and lacking in evidence for the everyday functions of journalism. This article assesses Western media coverage of the Colombian and Venezuelan elections of 2018, finding that the propaganda model continues to hold. Furthermore, by conducting a series of 27 interviews with journalists covering the two countries, it finds evidence to support Herman and Chomsky’s theories about the pre-selection of journalists and how ownership and management, sources and flak influence the output of media.

Keywords
Colombia, manufacturing consent, media, propaganda model, Venezuela

Introduction
2018 marks the 30th anniversary of the publication of Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky’s seminal Manufacturing Consent (2002 [1988]). In it, the authors laid out their propaganda model – a theory of the media’s function. They argued that the mass media’s true purpose in society was not to inform and educate the public, but rather to propagandize and brainwash them into support for the policies, outlook and positions of the rulers of society: to manufacture consent for the ruling elite.

The book has been enormously influential. Robert McChesney claimed that, ‘The genius of Manufacturing Consent was that it opened an entirely new way of
understanding the US news media... There is no doubt that it is the most widely read and influential work on how to understand the US news media’ (Herman, 2018), while Tom Mills (2018 [2017]) notes it became ‘a classic text in the media studies canon, and remains probably the most influential single radical critique of the corporate news media’.

Eschewing conspiracy theory, Herman and Chomsky set out a structural critique of the media, arguing that there is rarely any need for overt censorship. Rather, journalists are prized for their obedience and acceptance of neoliberal ideology rather than their independence. As they explain:

Most biased choices in the media arise from the preselection of right-thinking people, internalized preconceptions, and the adaptation of personnel to the constraints of ownership, organization, market, and political power. Censorship is largely self-censorship, by reporters and commentators who adjust to the realities of source and media organizational requirements, and by people at higher levels within media organizations who are chosen to implement, and have usually internalized, the constraints imposed by proprietary and other market and governmental centers of power (2002: preface).

This leads to a situation where journalists are ‘predominantly white middle class people who tend to share the values of the corporate leadership’ (Herman, 1982: 149), meaning a hegemonic groupthink begins to arise in the newsroom, as everybody comes from the same background and shares the same outlook.

The propaganda model argues one crucial role of the media is to legitimize elections in friendly countries and to delegitimize those in enemy states, without regard to the empirical facts on the ground. To highlight this theory, Herman and Chomsky used the paired examples of elections in Guatemala in 1982 and Honduras in 1984-5 (US client states) with those in Nicaragua in 1984 (won by the enemy sandinistas). They describe the first two elections as being held under ‘conditions of severe, ongoing
state terror against the civilian population’ (2002: 88). In contrast, those in Nicaragua were ‘a model of probity and fairness by Latin American standards’ (2002: 131).

Nevertheless, the media ignored the enormous waves of violence, presenting the first two elections positively while displaying an overwhelming ‘tone of negativism and apathy’ (2002: 118) on the Nicaraguan elections, insisting that democracy was crumbling, ignoring reports from Western election observation teams who praised the proceedings. As such, they accused the US media of serving as ‘loyal agents of terrorism’ (2002: 142) by downplaying or covering up the waves of massacres.

Critics of the propaganda model have labelled it overly deterministic (see Ashraf, Soherwordi and Javed, 2016) and that the authors should have interviewed journalists as part of their work (Romano, 1989). It has also been criticized for being too simplistic and unable to provide evidence that shows that it is specifically the five filters of ownership, advertising, sourcing, flak and anti-communism that affect decisions to publish work (see Corner, 2003; Lang and Lang, 2004).

In response, Klaehn (2003) noted that, by these criteria, virtually every social science model could be classed as overly deterministic, arguing that it is not the model’s design nor function to test these micro-processes of journalism; rather it is a ‘big picture’ model. Meanwhile, Herman (1998) claimed that journalists were extremely unlikely to ‘confess’ anything if interviewed, making the endeavour useless.

However, it may be that the defenders of the model are missing a trick, and that by interviewing the journalists who create the news it is possible to add a new layer of understanding as to why certain stories are run and others are dropped or heavily edited. By simply asking journalists about the process we may be able provide the evidence of the filters at work at a micro level, thus greatly enhancing the model’s credibility.

**Paired Examples: Venezuela and Colombia**

In Chomskyan fashion, this study will use the paired examples of Latin American elections, those of Venezuela and Colombia, updating Herman and Chomsky’s
examples and testing if the model continues to hold. It also includes data from a set of interviews with 27 experts and journalists covering the Andean region for major media to ascertain if the explanatory factors (journalistic pre-selection, the five filters) impact the reporting of the area.

The 2018 elections in Colombia and Venezuela make an extremely good test case. They are both similarly sized countries with similar populations, culture and heritage. Indeed, for a time they were the same country, and are still considered sister countries to this day, sharing a near identical flag. The elections happened within a week of each other in May 2018. However, crucially, in recent years the two countries have moved down radically different political paths. In 1998, Venezuela elected a leader, Hugo Chavez, who would go on to re-nationalize the oil industry, revive the OPEC cartel, drastically increasing oil prices, criticize the US invasion of Afghanistan at the UN and embrace the ideology of 21st century socialism. He famously labelled President George W. Bush ‘the devil’ and became the cornerstone of a new Latin American independence movement of leftist governments keen to reduce American influence in their countries. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld described him as a ‘new Hitler’ and the US has been involved in multiple coup attempts against Chavez and his successor, Nicolas Maduro (MacLeod, 2018).

In contrast, Colombia continues to be a key American client state, with the US pouring billions of dollars into the Colombian military (and paramilitaries) through their ‘Plan Colombia’ scheme. The country is by far the largest recipient of US military aid in the region and has sent more officers to the School of the Americas (now renamed the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Co-operation), where they have been taught for half a century to see communism everywhere and stamp it out brutally (Stokes, 2005: 5-7). Colombia consistently votes alongside the US at the UN and is the key US military stronghold in the region, providing a number of military bases. It has had a succession of right-wing, neoliberal governments.

In Venezuela, the leftist Nicolas Maduro won (with 68 percent of the vote), while in Colombia, the right-wing Ivan Duque won (with 54 percent). Thus we should expect the media to legitimize the Colombian and delegitimize the Venezuelan elections.
The Venezuelan opposition (and the US government) had been demanding an immediate presidential election for over a year. When Maduro acquiesced, they demanded it be pushed back. When he accepted this, they decided to boycott their own election, with both the opposition and the US government predetermining it to be fraudulent. They demanded that UN election observers not come to oversee the events as they would likely ‘legitimize’ them (Reuters, 2018). In contrast, the supposedly dictatorial Venezuelan government pleaded with the UN to send as many observers as possible.

Elections in Venezuela are already probably the most heavily monitored in the world. Successive reports from hostile sources such as the European Union and the Carter Center have strongly praised the election system (MacLeod, 2018: 60-1). Indeed, President Jimmy Carter (2012) stated that the Venezuelan elections were ‘the best in the world’. The 2018 elections in Venezuela were of note because they took place under a fractured US-supported opposition, with some boycotting the proceedings. The US also demanded opposition presidential candidate Henri Falcon stand down, in an attempt to delegitimize the vote before it started. However, the vote took place in complete normalcy and under the auspices of senior election officials from around the world, who testified to the election’s validity. The Latin American Council of Electoral Experts (CEELA), consisting of senior election co-ordinators, most from countries openly hostile to Venezuela, praised the ‘high level of security and efficiency’, noting that the vote reflected ‘the will of its citizens, freely expressed in the ballot box’ (CEELA, 2018). The African mission’s preliminary report characterized the election as a ‘fair, free, and transparent expression of the human right to vote and participate in the electoral process’, endorsing the proceedings’ ‘comprehensive guarantees, audits, the high-tech nature of the electoral process’ (Venezuelanalysis, 2018). Indeed, the strongest criticism the international election teams’ reports had was that some polling stations were not on the ground floor, meaning some voters had trouble accessing them.

In comparison, the Colombian election, which pitted the conservative Ivan Duque against the leftist Gustavo Petro, took place under a heightened state of terror, with Petro narrowly surviving an assassination attempt, while many of his supporters were
not as lucky. The incumbent conservative party under President Alvaro Uribe had overseen a massacre of over 10,000 civilians (Parkin, 2018). Colombia is also the most dangerous place to be a human rights defender or trade unionist, as many more unionists are killed inside Colombia than in the rest of the world combined (Human Rights Watch, 2008). This is partially because the military and paramilitaries have been trained by the US to see agitating for better wages as a communist conspiracy to destroy the country and to respond with a clenched fist. The paramilitaries – right-wing death squads linked to the government – issued generalized death threats to those who tried to vote for Petro. There was widespread vote-buying, with American observers, such as Daniel Kovalik, mistaken for voters and offered money to vote. There were over 1,000 official electoral fraud complaints (Kovalik, 2018).

The mainstream media virtually unanimously presented the Venezuelan elections as a farce, the ‘coronation of a dictator’ (Sequera and Pons, 2018), according to The Independent. The New York Times described the ‘widespread disillusionment’ among the people voting in a contest ‘critics said was heavily rigged’ (Neuman and Casey, 2018). CNN claimed there was an ‘international outcry’ over the proceedings, with the international community demanding the suspension of the election while The Huffington Post christened it ‘a farce cementing autocracy in the crisis-stricken OPEC nation’ (Cohen and Aponte, 2018). The Wall Street Journal described the contest lauded by election monitors as one:

…deemed illegitimate by the opposition and foreign governments, paving the way for heavier international sanctions amid widespread discontent over [Maduro’s] management of an economy in free fall. Even before the ballots were counted, opposition candidate Henri Falcon cried foul, saying the election was a sham and calling for a new vote this year (Vyas and Forero, 2018).

Thus, the media presented the elections as a very poorly attended travesty, despite the fact that the 46 per cent turnout, when one side had told its voters not to participate, was seen as a victory for Maduro and a repudiation of the opposition on all sides inside Venezuela. The Washington Post neatly summed up the overall message
of the coverage, describing the events as ‘the fortification of a dictatorship’ (Faiola, 2018).

In contrast, the media endorsed the elections in Colombia a week later as a hopeful chapter in the country’s history, describing the 53 per cent turnout in a tightly contested vote as high and the events as peaceful while rarely mentioning the aforementioned issues. When they did, they were downplayed. CNN (McLaughlin, 2018) noted that ‘though there have been isolated incidents of violence related to the election, they have been minimal’, while Al-Jazeera (Rampietti, 2018) euphemistically noted there was a ‘taboo’ against voting for leftists in the country. Petro’s assassination attempt was barely mentioned in the press. Indeed, the only dangers associated with the election, according to the media, were due to the left. There were ‘fears about Petro’s economic policies’ (McLaughlin, 2018) and that (according to Associated Press) he would swing the country ‘dangerously to the left’ (Armario and Goodman, 2018). Furthermore, many outlets, including the liberal NPR took pains to present Alvaro Uribe as ‘immensely popular’ (Otis and McCallister, 2018). The widespread vote-buying, intimidating, rigging and assassination threats went unnoted, leaving the image of a rather bland, uneventful democratic process.

It can therefore be said that the case studies of the recent elections in Venezuela and Colombia represent a textbook example of the propaganda model in action. Yet by conducting interviews with the journalists responsible for the coverage of the two countries it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of the micro-processes of journalism that critics say cannot be explained. I conducted a series of 27 interviews with experts and journalists covering the Andean region and found that if we look for evidence of the filters at work, we can find it.

Of course, this methodology is not without its problems. Journalists have little incentive to bare all, have their own agendas, and their accounts must be treated with skepticism. There are, of course, serious economic and other consequences to whistleblowing or revealing the inner workings of media companies. Furthermore, journalists pre-selected for conformity and acceptance of corporate norms are unlikely to be aware of the boundaries of the expressible and the factors limiting their
reporting. Therefore, there are certainly limits to the utility of interviewing them, especially those still working inside media organizations. However, these limits should be tested and this study found it to be an extremely useful methodology.

It became clear that journalists come from a small, elite segment of the population and are pre-selected for their conformity and acceptance and internalization of neoliberal rules. Matt Kennard, who covered Latin America for the *Financial Times* (FT) and was highly critical of his colleagues’ coverage, stated:

I read *Manufacturing Consent* before I started my master’s and I thought that it sounds like a tight argument but it must be more complicated. Then I went into the elite institutions like Columbia Journalism School after my undergraduate and went straight onto the *FT*. And what you realize is that you just can’t think certain things and have a career. People might have started with my ideas when they were younger but they would go to these institutions and learn that everyone else thinks a certain way. And if you start dissenting or if you start having an opinion that goes against everything you are being taught, then you are just not going to progress. It is that simple. That’s the beauty of the system. It is not like the Soviet system. It is not like you will be put in jail. You just won’t rise. And that’s why no one ever thinks these things. It is just implicit in what you do.

Many of those sent to Latin America seemed completely unqualified to serve as correspondents, save for their conformity. Many admitted they had been hired without the ability to communicate in even basic Spanish, a pre-requisite for dealing with Colombia and Venezuela where English proficiency is below ten per cent – below that of Sri Lanka or Indonesia (Education First, 2018). Freelancer Girish Gupta was an example of this. He said:

I came very ignorant actually. The first year or so I was just trying to learn and get my head round things, both learning journalism and about the industry, which can be two separate things, and also learning about Venezuela, politics,
and economics...When I got here my Spanish was non-existent. I just bumbled along.

A *Wall Street Journal* correspondent who asked not to be named confided that they had been unable to speak the language until six months after they started their job in Venezuela. As English proficiency is correlated with class, this leads to a situation where the only people Western journalists can speak to are members of the elite, who have a very particular view of the events in Latin America. Reuters’ Brian Ellsworth noted that:

> Definitely...there is a certain echo-chamber that you can get sucked into and a certain outside vision of the way people want to see a country.

This leads to a ‘groupthink’, according to former *Los Angeles Times* Venezuela correspondent Bart Jones, who described the ‘groupthink’ he saw among journalists:

> There was definitely an atmosphere of “Chavez is a bad guy,” you know? And we need to fully present and almost take the side of the “resistance,” the “dissidents,” or whatever you want to call them. They would actually use those terms... And some of them were outright government haters. One of them said it to me once, “we have got to get rid of this guy”.

The inability to communicate with the population leads to the sourcing filter becoming especially prominent in the case of Venezuela, where there is an extremely strong class/government support correlation (Cannon, 2008) and where the government has effectively written off the foreign media as hostile propagandists and largely refuses to speak to them. As Gupta said:

> In Venezuela it is near impossible to talk to government officials. But there are sources in other sectors, people in opposition.

Bart Jones corroborated this, noting:
You have got to get the news out right away. And that could be a factor in terms of “whom can I get a hold of quickly to give me a comment?” Well it is not going to be Juan or Maria over there in the barrio [slums] because they don’t have cell phones. So you can often get a guy like [anti-government pollster] Luis Vicente Leon on the phone very quickly.

Sourcing in Colombia has traditionally been especially difficult owing to the civil war that has raged for over 50 years, leading to a very dangerous situation for foreign journalists, who overwhelmingly stay inside government-controlled areas and do not seek out alternative sources in the FARC guerillas, for example, leading to stories that reflect the government line.

Anatoly Kurmanaev of Bloomberg noted that there were ‘very few people’ who know what is going on and therefore ‘we end up going to the same people pretty often’.

The coverage of the two countries is also clearly influenced by ownership and the owners’ representatives in upper management. Jim Wyss, who covers the Andean region from Bogota, Colombia for the Miami Herald was initially defensive about the idea, adamantly stating:

I have never heard anybody in the international press saying they were being restricted in any way.

Yet later in the interview he casually said:

Every now and then I will get something from my boss’ boss. They will be like “hey, what do you think about this?” and what that means is “go out and investigate it.” …When your high-up bosses make mild suggestions, you take them very seriously.

Telling is his unawareness of how this could be understood as a factor affecting his work, having completely accepted the first filter as normal, common sense, rather
than a constraint influencing journalistic output. If there is a clearer example of Herman and Chomsky’s ideas on internalizing the preconceptions and constraints of ownership, I do not know it.

Others confirmed that ownership and upper management strongly affected what they wrote. Bart Jones said:

> What you might see from [top brass in] New York a little bit more would sometimes be some of the direction too, when it came to the political stuff anyway. They were very careful to make sure that a certain point of view was strongly in there… I think you definitely had to temper what you were writing. There was a clear sense that this guy [Chavez] was a threat to democracy and we really need to be talking to these opponents and get that perspective out there. There was an emphasis put on that.

Kennard admitted that this led to widespread ‘self-censorship’, even if ‘most people don’t realize they are doing it’, saying:

> I just never even pitched stories that I knew would never get in. What you read in my book would just never, ever, in any form, even in news form, get into the FT. And I knew that and I wasn’t stupid enough to even pitch it. I knew it wouldn’t even be considered. After I got knocked back from pitching various articles I just stopped.

He also provided specific examples of top-down editorial control and censorship that shaped the dominant narratives in foreign reporting, revealing:

> At the FT, I actually carried on writing as I would. So I put in things like ‘US-backed’ when describing US-backed dictators, when the convention is to just put “Russian-backed” or “Iranian-backed” if they are a bad guy. But I kept doing it because I wanted to test out that Manufacturing Consent idea. And it was explicit. What happens if you put “US-backed” into a newspaper? Will they take it out? Yes! And the funny thing is that no one would ever know because
the journalists would just never [even] think it. It is a form of mind control because everyone thinks they are free. And the best people to write censored articles are people who don’t even realize they are performing self-censorship.

When asked, it was clear that flak from a variety of groups also shaped reporting. Dan Beeton, a writer and economist at the progressive Center for Economic Policy Research noted that his work was constantly attacked:

That is the framework. If you are a reporter and you write something that is not considered negative enough against the Venezuelan government then you will get flak. There is push back, maybe from the US government, but there are any number of right-wing think tanks, Venezuelan exiles have their own organizations and lobbies and their champions in the US Congress…We have been challenged repeatedly and questioned any time we say something about it – whether we get funding from the Venezuelan government. There is this assumption that if anyone is saying anything that goes against the conventional wisdom that they must be in the pockets of the Venezuelan government.

Wyss also noted that the strongly conservative Miami ex-pat Latino community also stirs up outrage and anger to police his writing (emphasis added):

I hear from grumpy readers when they feel I am not being hard enough on Venezuela. I never get any pressure from anybody except from some radical readers who see everything through the prism of Cuba so if you are not hammering Maduro hard enough you tend to get emails.

Reporting from dangerous areas, journalists’ lives can be at risk. In 2017, left-wing reporters Mike Prysner and Abby Martin were the subject of a viral, fake news campaign that depicted them as Venezuelan secret police informers. A nationwide right-wing search to find and burn them alive was undertaken. Fortunately, they escaped to the US. Other government-sympathetic journalists were shot and burned (RT, 2018). None of these have been mentioned by Amnesty, the Committee to Protect Journalists or other human rights groups. Meanwhile, in Colombia, right-
wing death squads regularly threaten or assassinate journalists they deem to be too critical. Colombia is one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a journalist (Witchel, 2018), and those who dare to report critically about the government or the paramilitaries face threats graver than in almost any other country.

Conclusion

It is clear that the propaganda model’s theory of legitimizing and delegitimizing foreign elections still holds. The case of Venezuela and Colombia proves this. Elections in Venezuela, an enemy of the US government, were presented as a sham, as, just like in Nicaragua, the media ignored glowing reports from international observation missions to decry the process as a meaningless farce in a distinctly similar fashion to that which Herman and Chomsky found. In contrast, US ally Colombia was presented as a vibrant democracy, with the media glossing over or simply not reporting the numerous and widespread problems with the vote, downplaying the violence and the terror in a similar fashion to the reporting of Guatemala and Honduras.

Going beyond analyzing the reporting from afar, however, we can achieve a deeper understanding of the propaganda model in action, up close, by interviewing those involved in creating the news. The interviews with 27 experts and journalists provide evidence to support Herman and Chomsky’s assertion that journalists are pre-selected for their conformity, their sharing of corporate values and their internalization of the rules that control what is published and what remains unsaid. This leads to a hegemony of thought in the newsroom. Furthermore, it can provide us evidence of how the five filters affect journalistic output. This study has highlighted the role that ownership, sourcing and flak play in manufacturing a particular view of Venezuela and Colombia in the West, one that would perhaps not be recognized by their respective populations. Herman and Chomsky did not set out to create a model that would explain the micro-processes of journalism, but this article has shown it is possible to test their theory more fully.
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Abstract

Boosted by a Chinese translation of *Manufacturing Consent* in 2011, “manufacturing consent” and “propaganda model” have become fairly well-known terms in the Chinese communication studies field. Actual understandings and invocations of these ideas, however, are complex and multifaceted. Graduate students tend to have a superficial understanding of these ideas without a grasp of Herman and Chomsky’s broader critique of the political economy of global communication. State propaganda officials and communication strategists tend to accept these concepts for their demystification of the US media system on the one hand, and use *Manufacturing Consent* as a “how to” guide to enhance the effectiveness of Chinese official communication on the other. While there are also examples of more substantive expositions of Herman and Chomsky’s ideas on their own terms, a strong liberal perspective continues to take the US media as a normative model for China and ignore works such as *Manufacturing Consent*. As China expands its global reach, how Chinese scholars come to terms with Western critical communication scholarship and develop their own indigenous critique of the political economy of global communication has emerged as an issue of both theoretical and practical importance.

Keywords


I never met Professor Edward Herman; however, his work had a large impact on me. In fact, the mere mention of his name immediately brought up the titles of three of his single-authored or co-authored books, *The Real Terror Network: Terrorism in Fact and Propaganda*, *Global Media: The New Missionaries of Global Capitalism*, and of course,
Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of Mass Media. As a researcher from China and as somebody who undertook to study “the regime of objectivity” in North American news media as part of my graduate work, these works constituted part of the foundations for my critical knowledge on the political economy of US and global communication. The “five filters” that shaped US media coverage of global affairs, especially those in relation to different countries in the rest of the world, the US media’s “double standards” in reporting human rights abuses and political violence, the distinction between “worthy” and “unworthy” victims of human rights abuses, as well as the distinction between state-sponsored or “wholesale” terrorism and “retail terrorism”, were some of the powerful concepts that linger in my mind.

So, not surprisingly, when I had a chance to co-edit a translation series of English language critical political economy of communication books for Peking University Press in China in the late 2000s, Manufacturing Consent was a clear choice, and to my surprise, it was not yet translated into Chinese at the time. The book, along with four other English language political economy books, were included in the small trial series. Published in 2011, the Chinese edition of the book, according to an editor at the Press, had a first press-run of 6,000 copies. As of mid-May 2018, 5,300 copies had been sold. However, this is not the whole story of the book’s circulation. When I checked the Chinese Internet, it immediately became clear that there is another world of the book’s circulation: like many other academic books, PDFs of the entire Chinese version of the book are available in China’s cyberspace for free downloading on many websites. Thus, there is no question that the actual circulation of the book is much wider than the hardcopy.

A Famous Book with a Not So Famous First Author

How was the reception of Professor Herman’s work in China? I contacted B, an earnest and hard-working doctoral student in China, for a quick reality-check in the late afternoon of May 15, 2018. Maybe it was pure coincidence; maybe I was blessed by Professor Herman’s spirit: B told me that he had been reading Manufacturing Consent all day that day! Why? Because, a few days ago, in the middle of finalizing his doctoral dissertation on the media in the Middle East, he had come across a translated book by another Western scholar who criticized the “Propaganda Model”.

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So, he decided to reread the book to find out what exactly the target of the specific critique was and whether it was valid.

B’s experience of being triggered to reread the book because of a criticism of it is probably not untypical. Because the “Propaganda Model” has been so influential, it has attracted many criticisms. These criticisms, in some cases by “big name” Western scholars, unintentionally contributed to its publicity, even though it may have also simultaneously contributed to the model’s marginalization and dismissal. For example, many years ago, when I suggested a doctoral student in the US to read the book, she immediately dismissed it as not worthwhile her time. When I asked the reason for her quick dismissal, she responded by saying that it is “instrumentalist”, and she cited an authority who had said so.

Although mainstream American communication scholarship constituted the bulk of Chinese textbook knowledge, the “Propaganda Model” has also earned a place in the “established” knowledge system in the journalism and communication research field, even though it was typically attributed to the more famous Noam Chomsky alone. For example, *Manufacturing Consent* was one of the twenty titles in a widely circulated list of must-read books for graduate entrance examinations administered by a leading school in the field, with Noam Chomsky listed as the sole author of the book. In another case, “Norm Chomsky: The Propaganda Model” was featured in a concise half-page dictionary-style codification of “core knowledge” in a book self-advertised as China’s most valued reference guide for journalism and communication students wishing to undertake graduate entrance examinations. Given that reference guides like this are indeed very popular among those who wish to master the basic repertoire of ideas and concepts for graduate studies in the field, there is ground to believe that many Chinese scholars with post-graduate degrees have heard of the model. Chomsky’s famous status as a linguist has no doubt contributed to the model’s authority and wide popularity.

According to W, another graduate student at a leading Chinese university I interviewed for this piece, he bought the book when he was a third-year undergraduate student, and he had heard of the concept multiple times and in
different contexts in lectures during his undergraduate studies. Like B, while W is also aware of the name “Herman”, and he even remembered that Herman is indeed the first author of *Manufacturing Consent*, he has no idea of who Herman was, or what field of specialization he was in, although he assumes Herman must be a white male American scholar.

**An Easy to Follow Model in a Not-So-Easy to Finish Book**

To gain a rudimentary knowledge of the “Propaganda Model” through study guides and undergraduate lectures is one thing; to have actually read *Manufacturing Consent*, especially from cover to cover, is another. Here again, the respective experiences of B and W were probably typical of those of other Chinese graduate students. And they are unsurprisingly similar.

B told me that he first purchased the Chinese translation of the book when he bought another book in the Peking University translation series and found out that this book is also part of the series. That is, like many others, he had already heard of the book before its Chinese translation. He tried to read the book during the first year of his doctoral study; however, after having read the first chapter in which the “propaganda model” was described, he found the detailed case studies in the book, especially the analysis of US media coverage of small third world countries in Central America and Southeast Asia, hard to focus on. In particular, he found it difficult relating to the details of the unfolding events in these small countries. As B reflected on this situation after having spent two more years studying the media in the Middle East and gaining a critical perspective on international political economy since his initial encounter with the book, one needs background knowledge of international relations, especially Cold War-era geopolitics and the internal politics in different world regions, including the complex intersections of domestic, regional, and global politics in countries such as Cambodia, Laos, Guatemala and Nicaragua, to actually appreciate the empirical analysis of the book. Similarly, W said that other than learning a bit from the first chapter of the book and having a vague idea about how the US media are involved in “manufacturing consent”, he did not get into the rest of the book at all.
Thus, it seems that while the book’s critique of the US media registers well with Chinese students, the book’s substantive insights into the political economy of international communication and the role of the US media in international politics did not register much. This, of course, is highly consistent with the prevailing media-centric mode of learning among Chinese media and communication students. In short, the “propaganda model,” or “manufacturing consent” more popularly, was taken by Chinese students solely as theory about the US media.

Furthermore, these two interchangeable concepts exist in the universe of “abstract knowledge”, not as part of the organic everyday framework for understanding US media coverage of global affairs. To be sure, many take these two buzzwords as effective demystification of an idealized US media system, thus contributing to a critical understanding of the US media. However, Chinese students and scholars also filter this framework through their own lens, experiences, and academic concerns. My cursory survey of the Chinese academic literature in relation to Manufacturing Consent supports the impressions I got from discussing with graduate students such as B and W regarding the “uses” or “misuses” of the book.

**Instrumentalist and Critical Readings of Manufacturing Consent**

To begin with, because the “propaganda” nature of a media system or the role of media in “manufacturing consent” is taken for granted in official Chinese media theory, readers will find the model’s revelations easy to accept. It fact, because the book is seen as confirming an instrumentalist view of the US media, it may contribute to reinforce official Chinese media theory. For example, in a review of the book for a journal targeting Chinese officialdom, the reviewer, a Chinese propaganda official, introduces the book as an informed analysis of the role of the US media from within the US. Specifically, the reviewer discusses the relevance of the book for China in two regards (Wu, 2013). First, in light of the heated ongoing debates about the role of the Chinese media, the reviewer suggests that those who idealize the U.S. media system and advocate its full imitation in China should cool down and take a careful reading of this book first. Second, the reviewer believes that the book provides useful revelations of how the US government manages the media. That is,
rather than resorting to blunt measures of control and censorship, the US government is able to administer sophisticated measures of “soft control”, thereby turning its agenda into the media’s agenda. Thus, in making the media “willingly” “dance to its tunes”, the US government “silently” accomplishes its objective of controlling public opinion (Wu, 2013: 110). In short, the reviewer sees the relevance of the book not just as a critique of the US media system, but also as a “how to” for Chinese officials in terms of “manufacturing consent.”

This instrumentalist reading of the book is not uncommon and it needs to be understood within the context of Chinese officials’ and scholars’ instrumentalist preoccupations with improving the party-state’s communication strategies and its approaches to media management, so that its controlling methods are less arbitrary and its propaganda techniques are more effective – keep in mind that the term “propaganda” is understood in a positive, or at least neutral pre-Cold War sense. Similar to the perspective of Wu, in an article entitled “Western propaganda models and techniques” by communication scholar Wang Junchao (Wang, 2009), the “propaganda model” is discussed both in terms of its debunking of the “myth” of the US media as a diverse and free system and its revelation of various “propaganda techniques” in the US. Within the context of this article, which provides large inventories of various western propaganda techniques during both peace and war times, it is clear that the author’s interest in the “propaganda model” lies primarily in the ways it sheds light on how propaganda is done in the US.

I could not have imagined such a reading when the book was included in the Peking University translation series. And I am not sure whether Professor Herman would turn in his grave on learning such an instrumentalist reading of the “propaganda model” in China. After all, as communication scholars, we are all too aware of multiple readings of a text in different contexts. For myself, I found Wang Junchao’s following concluding remarks interesting to note: while some of the propaganda techniques in the West are reflective of the common characteristics of communication and persuasion, and are thus worthy of being borrowed by the Chinese media, others – such as “fear-mongering”, “scapegoating”, “sensationalist agitation” and “covered up lies” – are of a “manipulative” and even “fascist nature”.
As such, these techniques are incompatible with “the Marxist propaganda principle of seeking truth from facts”, let alone “the basic propaganda principles of China’s mainstream media” (Wang, 2009: 72).

Apart from the above instrumentalist understanding of *Manufacturing Consent*, there is a more philosophical and critical understanding of the book. Such a reading links Herman and Chomsky’s critique of the media with the latter’s linguistic theory, and his belief in the potentiality of human beings for freedom and autonomy, as well as his critique of the existing systems of statist and capitalistic domination (Shan and Li, 2008; Wen and Wang, 2011). In an article entitled “Media control and its core issues within the overriding perspective of Orwell’s problem,” Shan Bo and Li Jiali, two Wuhan University communication scholars, presented a comprehensive analysis of Chomsky’s linguistic and philosophical inquiries in relation to novelist George Orwell’s problem of explaining why we know so little, given that we have so much evidence (Shan and Li, 2008). However, while the author credits Chomsky for having contributed a unique theoretical framework and methodological means to reflect upon “media control in the context of democratic politics” (Shan and Li, 2008: 74), they also provide a fairly comprehensive summary of the criticisms against the propaganda model and Chomsky’s other media critiques. In particular, they note how the model appears to have gone beyond what is acceptable to mainstream media analysts who believe that despite its problems, the US media system is still sound, and how, in these days of postmodern theorization, the model’s holistic mode of analysis and problem-solving could easily provoke dismissal and derision. Further, they note how the model has been criticized as a case of “conspiracy theory” and “Marxist instrumentalism”, and how “even left-wing media analysts” have critiqued the model for being “instrumentalist” and “functionalist”. Finally, they also point out that Chomsky’s anarchist syndicate society is of a utopian nature (Shan and Li, 2008: 81-82). What is also significant, though, is that the authors did not engage with Herman and Chomsky’s substantive critique in *Manufacturing Consent* of the role of the US media in sustaining an exploitative and dominative international political economy; nor do they discuss the relevance of the critique to the Chinese context. Further, because Chomsky’s work on linguistics and his philosophical concerns
about human nature are the overriding entry point of the entire assessment, Herman’s contributions are minimized throughout the article.

Because China is not discussed as an example of the US media’s double standards in *Manufacturing Consent*, few Chinese students and scholars have made a connection between the “propaganda model” and US media reporting of China. Even though “anti-communism” was one of the five ideological filters in the model, as W told me, because China’s official discourse frames the ongoing US and China conflict not in ideological terms, but only in terms of trade, national interests, and geopolitics, few will think of the model’s “anti-communism” filter as having any relevance to or resonance with today’s US media coverage of China. Instead, “anti-communism” was understood in the past tense, and most significantly, in relation to the bygone era of US-USSR Cold War rivalry. Thus, although many Chinese students and scholars are aware of *Manufacturing Consent*, and some even make critical analysis of US media coverage of China in their own work, the “propaganda model” has not registered much as an effective conceptual framework in Chinese scholarly analysis of US media coverage of China.

Finally, although there is a growing constituency of scholars who are interested in the Western critical political economy of communication literature, it is fair to say that the majority of Chinese communication scholars are still harboring liberal sensibilities and continue to hold the US media as a positive model and desirable alternative for China. While many among these scholars may have also heard of *Manufacturing Consent*, they have simply chosen to ignore the book. Some have continued to champion US-style professionalism as an ideal for China, without even bothering to offer a critique of the book’s argument. For those who hold a linear view of history and believe that China’s future lies in a US-style liberal capitalist democracy, it is even improper to introduce concepts such as “media imperialism” and the “propaganda model” into the Chinese communication field. Underpinning such a perspective is the following reasoning: in order to secure freedom and democracy for China, it is better not to engage with critiques of the US system and the larger international political economy. In this teleological and methodological nationalistic perspective, the problems of the US are the problems of an already
achieved democracy, while the Chinese are still starving for freedom and democracy! The fallacy of such a perspective is easy to point out: the US and China have always existed in a structural relationship within the global system. This is one of the key methodological insights of the kind of political economy of communication analysis that Professor Herman contributed to through his work. When *Manufacturing Consent* identified “anti-communism” as an ideological filter in the context of Cold War geopolitics, an argument was made that alternative developmental paths taken by people in the rest of the world were being blocked.

**Concluding Questions**

In May 2018, as I was contemplating on how to best pay tribute to the work of Professor Edward Herman from the perspective of a political economy of communication scholar with a research interest in China, the US and China trade war was at its hottest stage. Meanwhile, the Communist Party of China and China’s media and academic establishments were busy with celebrating the 200th anniversary of the birth of Karl Marx, culminating in a high-profile speech by Xi Jinping on May 4, 2018 in the Great Hall of the People. In this speech, Xi not only celebrated the continuing relevance of Marxism and communism, but also proclaimed the Communist Party of China to be a proven heir of Marxism and the international communist movement. That is, despite all its reformist twists and turns, China continues to wave the communist flag, at least at the level of official rhetoric. At the same time, Xi is also very clear on the importance of sinifying Marxism in the “new” era that his leadership has ushered in.

How will China’s new generation of scholars, such as B and W, develop their own knowledge of US, Chinese and global media in this new global political economic and discursive context? Now that there is not much more left from the “founding fathers” of mainstream American communication research to be introduced into China, in what ways will the work of Western critical political economists such Dallas Smythe, Herbert Schiller and Edward Herman start to shape their conceptual map and perhaps even become the building material of their own China-grounded intellectual house? In other words, how will they sinify Western, critical political economy of communication to develop their own critical communication theory for
the 21st Century? Furthermore, as China tries to expand its global linkages through the “Belt and Road Initiative”, will B, W and their generation of young scholars become more attuned to the Western scholars’ critique of US cultural imperialism and the role of the US media as the “missionaries of global capitalism”? Do they learn these concepts in order for China to emulate the US style of hegemonic global communication or to avoid it? Will the regional and domestic politics of smaller Asian, African and Latin African countries become more relevant to B, W and their fellow young scholars as China gets more involved in the global political economy, including the political economy of global communication? If so, what substantive lessons will they learn from the kind of analysis that *Manufacturing Consent* and Herman’s other works had to offer? As we pay tribute to Edward Herman, his critique of global capitalism and US imperialism, these are some of the questions that I found relevant to raise.

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Abstract

Since its initial formulation in 1988, the Herman-Chomsky Propaganda Model (PM) has become one of the most widely tested models of media performance in the social sciences. This is largely due to the combined efforts of a loose group of international scholars as well as an increasing number of students who have produced studies in the US, UK, Canadian, Australian, Japanese, Chinese, German, and Dutch contexts, amongst others. Yet, the PM has also been marginalised in media and communication scholarship, largely due to the fact that the PM’s radical scholarly outlook challenges the liberal and conservative underpinnings of mainstream schools of thought in capitalist democracies. This paper brings together, for the first time, leading scholars to discuss important questions pertaining to the PM’s origins, public relevance, connections to other approaches within Communication Studies and Cultural Studies, applicability in the social media age, as well as impact and influence. The paper aligns with the 30th anniversary of the PM and the publication of the collected volume, *The Propaganda Model Today*, and highlights the PM’s continued relevance at a time of unprecedented corporate consolidation of the media, extreme levels of inequality and class conflict as well as emergence of new forms of authoritarianism.

Keywords

Propaganda Model, Cultural Studies, Edward S. Herman, hegemony, ideology, elites, propaganda, Sociology, ideological power.
Introduction

What follows is a discussion of Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky’s Propaganda Model (PM) of media performance, meant to explore questions from The Propaganda Model Today: Filtering Perception and Awareness, which was published open-access on October 25, 2018 by the University of Westminster Press. Over the past three decades, since 1988, when Herman and Chomsky’s now classic Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media (MC) was first published, scholars have continued to apply, reflect upon and debate the PM, and this engagement continues. As the following discussions demonstrate, divergent and sometimes contradictory viewpoints concerning the PM and its broader context within the fields of media theory, social theory, and cultural studies, as well as its explanatory and analytical achievements, have inspired much debate and fruitful scholarship. Hopefully, the spectrum of views presented below is rich enough to provoke interested readers into engagement with – and formulation of their own independent positions on – the various subjects discussed herein. More importantly, debates such as these constitute an antidote against the possibility that radical scholarship will end up fostering new dogmas.

Discussion

Jeffery Klaehn: Can you please discuss Ed’s influences and how and why the two of you created the PM?

Noam Chomsky: A little background. Ed and I began to work together in the early ’70s, after a number of contacts before in anti-war activities. In 1973, we published our first book, Counter-revolutionary Violence. It was published by a small but quite successful publisher, owned by the Warner Communications conglomerate. An executive of the parent company saw the book, and demanded that it be destroyed. In the ensuing controversy, he closed the entire publisher, destroying not only our book (a few copies escaped) but all its stock. The matter was brought to the attention of prominent civil libertarians, who saw no problem because it was all in the private sector; no state censorship, no interference with free speech. A few prominent figures disagreed, notably Ben Bagdikian.
We went on to write a much longer and extensive two-volume work on similar themes, *Political Economy of Human Rights* (in 1979), then later turning to *Manufacturing Consent* (in 1988), along with other joint work.

The basic framework of *MC* was Ed’s, which is why I insisted, over his objection, that his name come first, contrary to our usual policy of alphabetic listing. Ed was a Professor of Finance at Wharton School, the author of a major 1981 study *Corporate Control, Corporate Power*. Our book *MC* begins with an investigation – mainly Ed’s – of the business structure of the major media and the broader institutional setting in which they function. In brief, the media are major corporations selling a product (audiences) to other corporations (advertisers), with close links to the broader corporate world and to government. The core thesis of *MC* is that these central features of the media tend to influence the character and assumptions of reporting and interpretation. We suggested five filters that derive from the institutional analysis (one, the fifth, generalized in a second edition), and proposed that they have a significant effect on determining how events in the world are presented and interpreted. The bulk of the book then tests the thesis, selecting cases that the media regard as of primary significance.

In other publications, joint and separate, going back to the ’60s and continuing to the present, we have examined numerous other cases over a broad range, as have, of course, many others. Ed’s work in these domains over half a century constitutes a remarkable contribution to understanding of what has been happening in the world, and how it is refracted through prisms that are often distorted by ideology and systems of power.

My personal judgment, for what it’s worth, is that the basic thesis of *MC* is quite well-supported, certainly by the standards of the social sciences. My own feeling, which I think Ed largely shared, is that the general conclusions apply in somewhat similar ways to the prevailing academic and broader intellectual culture – the hegemonic culture in the Gramscian sense – topics I’ve discussed elsewhere. But that is for others to judge.
In the current period of “fake news” and (quite understandable) general contempt for institutions, our book is commonly misinterpreted as suggesting that one can't trust the media because of their bias and distortions. That was not our conclusion. Though (like everything) they should be regarded with a critical and open mind, the major media remain an indispensable source of news and regular analysis. In fact, a large part of MC was devoted to defending the professionalism and integrity of the media against an attack in a massive two-volume Freedom House publication, which accused the media of being so consumed by anti-government passion that they radically distorted what happened during the Tet Offensive of January 1968, undermining popular support for the Vietnam war and contributing to the failure of the US to achieve its goals – virtuous by definition. We showed that the critique was wrong in virtually every important respect, to a level approaching fraud, and that the reporting from the field was honest and courageous – though within a framework of assumptions that reflect the effect of the filters.

Hardly a day passes without illustrations of these pervasive features of reporting and commentary. To pick virtually at random as I write, from what remains the world’s most important general news source, the New York Times, we read that the Trump administration is shifting “its national security priorities to confront threats from Russia, China, North Korea and Iran” – that is, to confront what the administration claims to be such threats, claims that do not become reality merely because the propaganda system so declares, and in fact largely dissolve on analysis. And we are reminded of an Open Letter of September 2002 signed by two dozen courageous international relations scholars that so radically confronted power that “none of its signatories have been asked to serve in government or advise a presidential campaign,” an Open Letter that warned that “war with Iraq is not in the U.S. national interest” – or to break free of patriotic propaganda, the invasion of Iraq would be – and soon was – a textbook example of aggression without credible pretext, “the supreme international crime” of the Nuremberg Tribunal, which sentenced Nazi war criminals to be hanged for lesser offenses.

Such examples are so common as to be unnoticeable. In their general impact, they were more significant than the cases of serious distortion, sometimes exposed, just
because they are so standard, insinuating a framework of perception and belief that becomes part of the background noise, hardly more than common sense, to borrow from Gramsci again.

Jeffery Klaehn: How does the PM connect with other critical approaches within communication studies and media theory?

Christian Fuchs: Broadly speaking, the PM stands in the tradition of ideology critique. The PM, as a critical approach to ideology, is most closely connected to the Frankfurt School’s analysis. The joint starting point is the critique of instrumental reason, which goes back to Marx’s notion of fetishism and Lukács’ concept of reification. Capitalism is a society that is based on instrumental reason: capital tries to instrumentalise human labour, domination tries to instrumentalise the public, and ideology tries to instrumentalise human consciousness for partial interests. Critical communication and media approaches such as the PM differ from bourgeois approaches in that the latter take the instrumental character of communication and power structures for granted and neutrally describe who communicates what to whom in which medium with what effect, whereas critical approaches show what role communication plays in power structures and into what contradictions of society it is embedded.

Joan Pedro-Carañana: Christian’s response is connected to Eduardo Galeano’s quote that opens *The Propaganda Model Today*: instrumental reason objectifies the media and journalism as mere means (of communication) to achieve the ends of capitalism, i.e., its reproduction through capital accumulation and concentration of power (see Pedro-Carañana, Broudy and Klaehn, 2018). We discuss in the book how Auguste Comte, the father of positivism, and the founders of communication studies in the US argued that the role of the media and social science is to promote the adjustment of consciousness to systemic structures. Instrumental rationality, therefore, does not question the ends. Positivism advocates for the eviction of values in media analysis. But this is impossible; what happens in reality is that instrumental reason is grounded in the values of capitalism. On the other hand, emancipatory reason questions existing ends, intends to promote new ends of human dignity and reflects on how the media can become appropriate means for the population to
develop their own awareness and critical analysis. It does not attempt to persuade people to comply with objectives that have been established by external powers, but instead aims to show and explain the world so that citizens can establish their own objectives. Emancipatory reason focuses on how communication can provide tools for people to think how they can free themselves from oppressive structures and build a more just society on the grounds of shared knowledge and collective action.

**Florian Zollmann:** The PM also connects well to approaches from classical economics and sociology as it is based on industrial organisation and functional analyses. Classical economics theory suggests that public goods like news cannot be sufficiently provided via markets. This is a well-known phenomenon with respect to other public goods like health care or education whose provision abysmally fails under a market regime. Whilst media economists from various political outlooks have highlighted this problem, the PM is the only media-approach that systematically accounts for such market failures. Consequently, Herman's work on media economics and his assessment of journalistic gatekeeping provide an important foundation for the PM. Herman was critical of the so-called liberal gatekeeper studies’ focus on micro-issues when investigating journalistic selection and production processes in newsrooms. When building the PM, Herman consequently argued for the need to prioritize macro-level news media analyses (see Zollmann, 2017). However, many gatekeeper studies also lend support to a PM approach.

As Herman argued elsewhere, the PM is in “the tradition of the Breed approach,” particularly his gatekeeper study, “Social Control in the Newsroom: A Functional Analysis” (1999: 57; see also Breed, 1955: 328). Breed’s study identified a newsroom policy enforced by proprietors and “that reporters must learn and apply in order to prosper and even survive in their jobs” (Herman 1999: 57). Herman (ibid) reflected on Breed’s study as follows: “The implication is that the news is skewed by a combination of economic factors and political judgments that are imposed from above and that override professional values.” Breed’s important study, in turn, is based on the functional analysis set out by the sociologist Robert K. Merton. Merton (1968: 104) identified the following elements, among others, to which functional analysis relates: institutional pattern, social structures and devices for social control.
Functional analysis aims at attributing functions and dysfunctions (consequences) to the societal elements described above (see ibid: 104-105). Of course, we can see significant intersections: the PM similarly emphasises dysfunctions – the production of propaganda as a result of market forces, ownership and funding structures as well as the wider political-economic environment of the media. I think it is useful to consider these issues because the PM bridges critical theory, classical media economics, conflict theory and functional analysis (see also Klaehn, 2003a).

**Tom Mills:** The PM is compatible with a broad range of media and communications scholarship, as others have noted, but that said, it has always sat slightly uneasily alongside other approaches. *MC* wasn’t that well integrated into existing work, and the authors are openly disinterested in certain questions that have preoccupied media and communications scholars, such as professional ideology. I suspect its initially poor reception among many critical scholars was partly because of this; especially given that it is an ambitious text by two outsiders to media and communications studies. It is also not a Marxist text in the narrower sense, although there’s obviously a significant crossover with media scholarship in the Marxist tradition, and with critical social science more broadly, as Jeffery Klaehn and Andrew Mullen (2010) have argued. A pretty consistent bone of contention here has been the extent to which the PM allows for conflict and contestation, but in my view this stems more from the tone of *MC* than the explicit claims made by the authors, who have been pretty open to criticisms on this point.

**Jeffery Klaehn:** I argued that the PM ought to be formally incorporated into the structural-conflict approach within mainstream sociology in a co-authored essay with Andrew Mullen that argued, “In terms of its basic underlying assumptions about the dialectic between ideological and communicative power and the structural organization of advanced capitalist societies, the PM unequivocally shares the general worldview associated with the structural-conflict or political economy perspective, known as conflict theory within mainstream sociology” (Klaehn and Mullen, 2010). This essay, “The PM and Sociology: understanding the media and society,” aimed to unpack reasons why the PM represents a critical sociological approach, to explore the model’s potential within the sociological field, and to consider the trajectory of its
reputational reception. The PM, in my view, explores the relationship between ideological and institutional power and discursive phenomena. I have written about criticisms of the PM, including those likening the PM to the gatekeeper model (see Klaehn, 2003a: 361). Further, on the functionalism critique, Edward S. Herman (2018 [1996]) pointed out that: “The criticism of the PM for functionalism is also dubious and the critics sometimes seem to call for more functionalism. The model does describe a system in which the media serve the elite, but by complex processes incorporated into the model as means whereby the powerful protect their interests naturally and without overt conspiracy.” I agree with Florian and Tom on how the PM connects with other critical approaches (above).

Yigal Godler: There is a loose connection in that all critical approaches seek to illuminate and uncover power relations that are doctrinally concealed. However, in my view, the coherence and success of these approaches is not equal. Whereas the PM is very specific in pinpointing the agents who exercise power over the media, much of critical theory often obscures them, by e.g. sometimes referring without further specification to ruling classes or elites. It is often very difficult, for instance, to detect the agents of power in various applications of cultural hegemony in media studies. Doubtless, the PM makes references to elites and ruling classes, but only after their identity has been rather neatly delineated. I do, however, find close parallels between the PM and the Investment Theory of Party Competition, Thomas Ferguson’s institutional analysis of the outcomes of US elections and subsequent policies. Although the latter is not an explanation of media content, the explanatory framework pinpoints the agents of power, whose features provide a robust explanation for the outcomes of US elections and the policies adopted by various administrations. Despite the difference in explananda, there is a close relationship between the two approaches in that both hypothesize about and bear out the consequences of business control over democratically vital institutions, such as the media and the fora of political decision-making.

Jeffery Klaehn: What, in your view, does the PM offer that other approaches or critiques miss?

Christian Fuchs: Bourgeois and traditional approaches to the study of
communication miss the analysis of communication in the context of power, class, exploitation, domination, contradictions, social struggles, and the quest for participatory democracy and democratic socialism. The PM together with other critical communication approaches challenges these limits.

**Daniel Broudy:** For me, the most striking thing about the PM is its audacity to step back and take stock of the whole theatrical display and critique the larger system within which mass media perform. Here, in 1988, we saw an economist and a linguist, virtual outsiders, disassemble the whole superstructure, examine its parts, and describe how media imperatives within are set by stronger forces at work in society, namely ownership, funding, flak, access to official sources and the self-reinforcing feedback loops fueling the perpetual necessity of higher profits. Whereas Max McCombs and Donald Shaw, for example, had offered in their Agenda Setting Theory extremely compelling proof of how corporate media mold the public discourse by transferring the salience of news objects into the public agenda, Herman and Chomsky went further by unfolding the interlocking interests that drive the entire system. Their Model also integrates a description of ideological influences over media performance, and this aspect of their scholarship seems to be absent from other approaches (see Pedro, 2011a, 2011b; Mullen and Klaehn, 2010). We all might have our own ideas about why the major media cover certain objects of interest and not other topics, but the PM helps us see how the prevailing ideological forces have corporate news consumers in their grip. Morris Berman famously observed that people have ideas, but ideologies have people, and the PM pricks our conscience, goading us to consider how ideology's hand holds our perception and awareness in its palm.

**Yigal Godler:** In a nutshell, it is unparalleled in its clarity and its empirically demonstrable explanatory power.

**Florian Zollmann:** Whilst the PM is sketched with a broad-brush stroke, its analytical categories are well supported by other research. The PM yields salient results due to its simplicity and grounding in empirical facts. Furthermore, the method of paired examples is one of the most powerful aspects of the PM. This
approach of comparing news media reporting patterns of similar events enables to identify systematic media distortions on the basis of an objective standard that is independent of a researcher’s individual biases.

**Oliver Boyd-Barrett:** MC (and the PM) continues to be a powerful and seminal text, greatly undervalued in the academy (particularly in US media, journalism and communications studies) for reasons that are clear to contributors here. There is certainly merit in discussing the extent to which it can be validated within the epistemological frameworks common to social science and many of us have contributed to such debates. In terms of “new knowledge” I consider the PM itself (i.e. Chapter One of the original text) a somewhat derivative and truncated contribution to our understanding of propaganda, of much less interest and power than the other chapters of that same book of which it constituted the introduction. Much of the content of the PM was familiar to political economy scholars of media at that time. Its revelatory power, I think, was somewhat less global, complex or systemic as Schiller’s model of cultural and media imperialism in 1969. The PM’s pedagogical value, on the other hand – because of the “5 filters” concept – has been and still is immense, even though it is much too much sold on “systemic” rather than “agency” explanations, and even when the rest of the book actually provides a lot of evidence for the role of journalists as agents of propaganda in the sense that they are more than mere systemic cogs but reflective human beings making choices that do not have to be made even at the level of survival.

Additionally, the model in its original formulation is insufficiently nuanced. I have argued that some of the filters defy observability or quantification, but we now have a surprising volume of evidence for the kinds of transactions I have previously ascribed to the “black box” (e.g. I think of numerous revelations of journalists complicit with intelligence agencies, the Pentagon’s network of ex-military television pundits, that kind of thing). For scholarly originality, I look to the natural comparison methodologies of the chapters on Central America which among other things seem to implicitly counter criticisms that the model is media-centric. However, and this brings me to my main point, I would counsel against making of MC or the PM too much of a canonical text elevated above so many other worthy contributions.
to our understanding of propaganda and media complicity with power. It is a clever
and important text, by all means, but I think if our mission is to understand
propaganda, then there is such a broad wealth of other literature that clamors for our
attention, and so many grave developments in all domains of our current existence –
not least those of the digital media age – that we simply cannot afford to pedal the
same bicycle and expect it to get us to where we need to go.

In the past year or so, for example, my attention has been directed to some of the
most significant propaganda wars of our times: they concern the nature and reality of
climate change, the meaningfulness of “Russia-Gate,” narratives about MH17 and
who shot it down, the circumstances of the 2014 coup d’état in Kiev, the return of
Crimea to Russia, claims and counter-claims as to whether the Syrian Arab Army, or
“militants,” or “activists” used chemical weapons, the furor over the alleged Russian
poisoning of the Skripals in the UK, the real nuclear “balance” between the
US/NATO and Russia/China, the narratives of 9/11, and so on, ad infinitum. In
tackling all these and other issues, I simply accept that the PM in its broad outlines is
a very helpful contribution that we can and should largely, for much of the time, take
for granted, simply because there are so many other important questions that
demand our attention (and for which the PM is not actually all that adaptable or
helpful) – details of the Dutch JIT investigation into MH17, its methodology and its
relation to data supplied among other sources from Atlantic Council allied
Bellingcat.com; the extent to which we can trust international adjudicatory bodies
such as the International Commission for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons; the
robustness of evidence of use of chemical weapons by either Syrian Army or jihadists
in Dhouma; the “real” history of Daesh; the history of the development of
novichocks in the Soviet Union and adoption of that development by other
countries; evidence and counter-evidence as to whether the Podesta emails at the
DNC were leaked or hacked; how to relate supposed evidence of Russian meddling
in the 2016 elections to evidence of Anglo-American meddling in elections
worldwide via online operations of organizations such as Cambridge Analytica etc.
etc. – if we are serious in our endeavor to advance our understanding of the nature
of propaganda today. This is no longer, and probably never has been, just a “media
thing,” because it involves such a complex network of players in the political,
corporate, intelligence, technology, and financial realms into which mainstream media are so closely integrated at so many different levels.

**Jeffery Klaehn:** I agree completely in that we, as scholars, should examine ways in which media and other sectors interconnect, but I think the PM suggests this with its emphasis on structural and institutional frameworks (see Klaehn, 2002a). My edited and co-edited books have explored topics and issues relating to communicative power and discourse, including the near-genocide in East Timor (Klaehn, 2002b, 2004, 2005); dissent (see Klaehn, 2006a, 2006b); gender inequality (Klaehn, 2008); war; capitalism, and social inequality (Klaehn, 2010). I also agree that scholars should take a multi-paradigmatic approach and have argued that the PM and discourse analysis share much in common (Klaehn, 2009). I look at the work other participants in this discussion have produced and are producing and can’t help feeling completely inspired in thinking of what we can accomplish, individually and collectively, in the future, along with scholars from around the world who are concerned to engage with issues relating to democracy, power and the common good. I feel the PM, as a conceptual model, reads as contemporary, now, thirty years after it was first introduced by Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, and is especially relevant today (see Pedro-Carañana, Broudy and Klaehn, 2018).

**Tom Mills:** In comparison with a lot of scholarship on the media, what it does very well is to situate news media as part of the corporate-state power structure of American society. Superficially, MC can read like a very media-centric text, but in analytical terms it’s not; only two of the five filters are features of media organisations. A lot of other critical approaches similarly seek to integrate an analysis of the news media into a broader critique of capitalist society of course, but the PM stands out for its intellectual and political clarity. MC is a sophisticated, but highly accessible text, and like Herman and Chomsky’s other writings, it is radical but thoroughly empirical. This precision sets MC apart from a lot of texts with a similar sort of critical orientation.

**Jeffery Klaehn:** What are your thoughts on the PM and its approach within the framework of cultural studies today, particularly in relation to claims that cultural studies has become largely depoliticized?
Christian Fuchs: In critical communication studies, models competing with the analyses by Herman and Chomsky and the Frankfurt School include cultural studies concepts of communication, such as the ones by Stuart Hall or John Fiske. Representatives of this approach often criticise Herman and Chomsky for neglecting resistance, counter-power, and the active role of the audience. Herman and Chomsky are not over-optimistic, but have always stressed the role and importance of alternative media or what Raymond Williams, whose approach of cultural materialism constitutes a kind of bridge between different critical communication theories, calls alternative communications.

The three main problems cultural studies approaches can face are a) the structuralist and poststructuralist influence that can neglect human beings, b) the relativist assumption that all forms of reception, responses, and audience behaviour are equally likely, c) the deterministic assumption that audiences and users always have to resist and rebel. Herman and Chomsky do not cover all aspects needed for a critical theory of communication because they have never intended to create such a theory, but analytical tools. They diverge in this respect from the Marxist tradition, but share with some cultural studies approaches the opposition to grand theoretical narratives. A dialectical, critical theory of communication can in contrast build on elements from different critical approaches, including Marxist political economy, ideology critique, the PM, critical cultural studies, various critical social theories, psychoanalysis, socialist feminism etc., in order to create a combined framework for the analysis and critique of power and communication in society viewed as totality.

Yigal Godler: I think the PM is essentially outside the framework of “cultural studies”, at least in the mainstream sense of cultural studies. I fully agree that “cultural studies” in the mainstream sense has been largely evacuated of significant political content. Much of cultural studies chooses to ignore or circumvent structural explanations, while the PM foregrounds them. Nonetheless, the PM is of course concerned with explaining one important chunk of intellectual culture, and in that literal sense it is an explanation of certain aspects of culture. But I take it that the question referred to “cultural studies” in their institutionalized sense, or as it is
understood in the mainstream of media studies and the academic social sciences more broadly.

**Florian Zollmann:** I think cultural studies as well as the media and communication sciences more broadly lack a critical engagement with the institutional structures of the media. The question of how corporate power and market forces affect the media and political systems in liberal democracies is often not addressed by scholarship. An exception is Ferguson’s Investment Theory of Party Competition mentioned by Yigal (above). Such blind spots are clearly accounted for by the PM. This outlook makes the PM a vital tool for research at a point in time when corporate power and inequality have reached unprecedented levels in the Western hemisphere. On the other hand, I see some important overlaps between the PM, cultural studies and communications research.

For example, Stuart Hall’s primary definer thesis and W. Lance Bennett’s indexing norm effectively constitute the PM’s sourcing filter. As mentioned above, media economists have highlighted how market allocation is incompatible with public service news provision. So I think a close reading of the literature thus reveals that the PM is supported by mainstream scholarship (I have discussed this in more detail in Zollmann, 2017). However, Herman and Chomsky focused on the intersections of US-imperialism and corporate media power – looking through a propaganda lens. Using such a critical framework has arguably led to the unwarranted marginalisation of the PM because the media field is too de-politicised and hesitant to engage critically with state-corporate power in liberal democracies.

**Jeffery Klaehn:** Should critical scholarly work be oriented toward public relevance? And how do you position the PM in this context?

**Joan Pedro-Carañana:** Absolutely. The whole point of critical theory is to be connected to practices of social justice. PM scholarship has been able to provide rigorous studies of media structures and empirical analysis of media contents while remaining accessible to a non-academic audience. The PM has aided activists around the world to understand media systems and engage in practices for media reform and the democratisation of the media landscape. It has also helped to create non-
corporate media that provide invaluable information to understand contemporary forms of oppression and develop alternatives for the common good. Moreover, the PM can assist ordinary citizens to further develop what Chomsky calls intellectual mechanisms of self-defence. It can aid audiences in reducing credulity and developing skepticism.

Christian Fuchs: I agree with Joan. The PM and critical communication studies in general are not just analytical frameworks, but need to be practised as forms of critical, public intellectualism that aim at the creation of a democratic public sphere. They aim at the critique of asymmetric power structures in the world of media and communication and the instrumentalization of the public sphere. Herman and Chomsky’s concern is the strengthening of the public and common good. Democratic communication and democratic communications are an essential aspect of society’s commons.

Yigal Godler: I happen to think that all scholarship in the social sciences ought to be oriented towards public relevance, and especially critical scholarly work. The PM is an excellent example of scholarship which does exactly what scholarship is supposed to do, which is to reveal doctrinally hidden truths, be these institutional, cultural or otherwise. For me, all of social science, insofar as it is not trying to prop up those in power, ought to try to puncture false beliefs that stem from doctrines that sustain existing authoritarian and hierarchical institutions and relations. Needless to say, most social scientists couldn’t care less about the continued existence of such institutions and relations, which in my book disqualifies them from the status of doing authentic social science. Perhaps some of them are, for instance, good gatherers of data or good grantsmen, but these are very superficial trappings of what being a social scientist means.

Florian Zollmann: I also agree. Research has an important public service function. The PM is basically an analytical tool that allows to critically interrogate media structures and performances. This is certainly an important task for public-service oriented research. Moreover, PM scholars try to avoid abstract and unnecessary scientific jargon and this further enhances public accessibility and relevance.
**Tom Mills**: I agree with all the comments above. Scholars in general should address important and pressing social questions, and if they do that then their findings should have real world consequences. In many cases this necessarily means assuming a critical orientation, since many of the problems we face stem from the power structures that have been the focus of Herman and Chomsky’s work. Michael Burawoy, in my discipline, writes about both “public” and “critical” sociology (2005). The latter is a radical critique directed towards the discipline itself, whilst the former is about engaging with movements beyond academia that are capable of bringing about social change. I think this is a good model for scholars of all disciplines to think about critique and public engagement, and the authors of *MC* have been extremely effective in both offering an uncompromising challenge to the complacency of liberal intellectuals, and orienting themselves towards social movements.

**Jeffery Klaehn**: Everyone’s saying they’re in agreement on this question, and I am too. I think of C. Wright Mills and the promise of sociology: the sociological imagination (see Klaehn and Mullen, 2010: 19). The PM enables further understanding of how economic, social and political power sync with communicative power.

**Jeffery Klaehn**: *Is the PM more relevant now, in 2018, than it was in 1988? In the 1990s? In the 2000s? Why or why not?*

**Christian Fuchs**: In capitalist and class societies, there have always been approaches to instrumentalise humans, which includes the attempt to instrumentalise their consciousness. Not just the critique of ideology, but the critique of all forms of alienation and instrumental reason has always been, is and will always be crucial as long as class society exists. *The Propaganda Model Today* shows that the PM remains important today for understanding and analysing communication critically.

**Daniel Broudy**: Your questions call my attention to the subtitle of *MC*. In it, Herman and Chomsky imply that media do not operate in a vacuum free from outside influences; their performance is largely the effect of political and economic sensibilities acting upon them. Their aim is not achieving accuracy as much as
developing a representation of the world that squares with these sensibilities. Part of their persuasive power depends upon the power of the glossy façade to camouflage these forces at work. This much the elites admitted back in 1928 when we find Edward Bernays, nephew of Sigmund Freud, who observed that, “Democracy is administered by the intelligent minority who know how to regiment and guide the masses” (Bernays, 2005 [1928]).

Consider society today and the uninterrupted processes of regimentation at work in light of Fred Block’s incisive reminder: “the economy is not autonomous, as it must be in economic theory, but subordinated to politics, religion, and social relations” ([1944] 2001: xxiv). In actual practice, Karl Polanyi argued, the market economy is always, embedded and enmeshed in institutions ([1944] 2001: 60), and we can observe these phenomena before us today playing out in the efforts of the technocrats consolidating their power through deregulation and, thus, the marginalization of dissident voices. In your questions, if your reference to ‘relevant’ connotes ‘useful’, then, certainly, the PM served well in 1988 and has, with the passing years, served an increasingly relevant role. Like Polanyi’s model of the market, Herman and Chomsky’s model of media performance serves as a stark reminder that the manufacturing processes of information and the manufacture of consent are enmeshed in social, political and economic relations.

Yigal Godler: I would say it’s at least as relevant, and in some countries probably more so than before, insofar as they, and their media systems, have undergone a more extreme subjection to the rule of international capital. The PM would become irrelevant if the liberal-pluralist dream or something like it becomes a reality. So, for instance, if tomorrow mainstream media cease to be business-run or dependent on some other authoritarian institution, the PM will have served its historical purpose. As long as that’s not the case, the PM continues to be a powerful, if an almost self-evident, explanation of why an important segment of society’s institutional landscape operates the way it does.

Florian Zollmann: Yes, and the institutional environment of the news media has not significantly changed during the last 30 years. If anything, corporate-capitalist and
market control over the news media system have intensified. National and international levels of inequality have increased as well. These factors concurrently raise the importance of a class-based model. To that effect, the research presented in *The Propaganda Model Today* further demonstrates the relevance of the PM today.

**Tom Mills:** It is certainly still relevant. There has been an historic shift in media and communications technology underway in the decades since *MC* was written, but the structure of the news media in terms of content production remain basically the same, even if news items are shared across different platforms. The internet has certainly brought new opportunities for alternative media, but even if the entry costs are now much lower, none of these initiatives can compare to the resources and reach of the corporate news media. The big question is in what ways will the challenge digital technology poses to the corporate news media’s business model, and the power of Silicon Valley, which is at the cutting edge of capital accumulation, reshape things? The corporate news media is still dominant, but it is in crisis. Advertisers have no particular fealty and now have much more sophisticated means of reaching audiences. This creates serious problems, and there has been discussion amongst, and conflicts between, the political and corporate elite around how this should be managed. There seems to be a consensus forming around a system of cross-subsidies from, and greater regulation of, the platform giants. I think we can expect to see a new sort of institutional form start to emerge, and one that without a significant political intervention will serve broadly the same interests that the traditional news media has.

**Jeffery Klaehn:** On the subject of social media, can the PM reveal any new insights about social relations of power?

**Daniel Broudy:** Social media are really interesting nowadays. If I were cutting new paths of research on social networking services (SNS) and the PM, I might proceed from the claim that social media, at least the major players, are actually anti-social. Social psychology, media studies, journalism, political science, and cognitive linguistics would probably have much to say about what’s been happening lately. The first filter of the PM refers to ownership of the dominant media outlets. These are corporations themselves oriented toward profit and observant of the demands of
investors. Since their rise from obscurity, SNS have grown, however, to dwarf the old gatekeepers, such as The New York Times and The Washington Post.

The objects of discussion in the public discourse are increasingly being shaped not by observant human editors but by algorithms written by observant programmers. Those who reject or openly challenge this system of performance now risk ex-communication and/or economic marginalization. Examples have already been made of fearless journalists and agitators. First, they came for Alex Jones to deplatform him, but now upstart SNS companies focused on preserving free speech in a cyber-commons are at risk of being subsumed. After the reported slayings in a Pittsburgh synagogue, the social network Gab (noted as a cesspool of hate speech) illustrates how an entire company can be threatened if it departs from the path that Facebook and Google now tread. Common knowledge holds that the internet has long been, among other things, a magnet for revolting behavior and imagery, but this new trend signals a definitive step toward authoritarian forms of censorship. Facebook’s participation on the Atlantic Council and Google’s work with the military-industrial complex should not surprise anyone who has looked, even casually, at the history of these sorts of time-honored interrelations. Obviously, social media’s performance depends upon revenue, but there isn’t much profit in truth-telling.

Conspicuously missing from major mainstream media was Facebook’s deplatforming of TeleSUR, a Venezuelan-based multi-Latin American state funded media organization meant to counter CNN. Authoritarian control over the public discourse and the collective consciousness will emerge in a corporate clown with an affable smile stamping, as Orwell once noted, on the faces of the masses forever. As the PM’s filters prioritize ownership, size and profit orientation of dominant media, as well as advertising, sources, flak and ideology, you see them at play in the performances of social media – an area Christian Fuchs (2018) is exploring.

**Christian Fuchs:** My chapter in The Propaganda Model Today has the title “Propaganda 2.0: Herman and Chomsky’s Propaganda Model in the Age of the Internet, Big Data and Social Media.” It shows what forms ideology and power take on today in the context of social media. Concerning ownership, the likes of Google and Facebook
use algorithms that have a secret, non-public logic that determines online visibility. Google and Facebook operate globally and virtually, which allows them to shift around their finances into tax havens so that they avoid paying taxes, which undermines the public good. They are the world’s largest advertising agencies. In respect to the advertising filter, advertising on social media is targeted, algorithmic, based on real-time surveillance and big data, and puts users’ activities and attention to work. In respect to the sources of communication, celebrities, corporations and populists dominate attention and visibility on social media. There are filter bubbles and authoritarian populists that polarize political online communication. Political bots generate fake attention, fake likes, fake re-tweets, which distorts communication in the public sphere. It becomes difficult to discern what communication originates in a human being or a machine. In respect to “flak”, dominant interest groups use social media as “soft power” tools for trying to influence the public sphere. But we also find fascists and authoritarians online, who often hide behind anonymity in order to use the violence of language to threaten, intimidate and harass political opponents. In respect to ideology, we find both ideologies of and on the Internet. Fake news is as old as tabloid media. But in the world of social media, they are partly generated and disseminated at high speed globally by both human fake news factories and by fake news bots.

We are experiencing the transition from neoliberal capitalism towards increasingly a new level of neoliberalism that is based on authoritarianism: We see the emergence of authoritarian capitalism. Social media is embedded not just into class and capitalism, but today into an especially dangerous form of capitalism that uses nationalism, the friend/enemy-scheme, authoritarian leadership, law and order politics, and militarism. The most important political task is to question and drive back authoritarianism, which includes that we create communication spaces that take out the speed of communication, i.e. decelerate communication, make political information and communication less superficial, and allow meaningful debate. Club 2.0 as public service Internet platform is a concept for this task.

Yigal Godler: Insofar as one wishes to explain the contents appearing on social media by recourse to the PM, I think this is a hopeless endeavor. Simply because the
production of content on social media is not subject to the same constraints that exist in a business-owned newsroom. As is well known, the PM was designed to account for the behavior of the American elite media, not to account for every possible media-related phenomenon. Needless to say, Facebook is a business, and every business inflicts some kind of sabotage on society (in Veblen’s sense). The latter characteristic is shared by General Motors, Facebook, and the New York Times as well as many other businesses, even though the specific features of the sabotage that each business inflicts are qualitatively different. However, for the sake of analytical precision and intellectual integrity, I don’t think that we need to pretend that the PM explains more than it does. Of course, none of this means that social media do not interact with the processes of news content production, when, for instance, producers of news content take into account prospective Likes and Shares or insofar as news stories are accessed by users through social media. But the dynamics of these phenomena seem to call for a separate explanatory account. That is, on condition that there is something that requires urgent explanation here. It should be remembered that the PM has not only successfully explained media behavior, but also debunked the misconception that the elite media are neutral or objective. Does anyone really believe that about either the contents or the algorithms of social media?

Florian Zollmann: It is possible to demonstrate how the PM’s filters manifest in the social media sphere. For example, my chapter in the volume, titled “Corporate-Market Power and Ideological Domination: The Propaganda Model after 30 Years – Relevance and Further Application,” sketches how the first and second filters of the PM apply to social media. In accord with what Daniel and Christian say, I suggest that social media applications have been enveloped in political-economic structures. The major social media organisations constitute near-monopoly corporations with substantial funding from the advertising industry. Expectedly, this has impacted on social media technology and performance: cookies and other tracking technologies were instituted to surveil and control users, website search engine rankings have become a function of economic power, and selected offerings have been censored by way of political convenience.
Additionally, social media accounts and online comment functions allow for unprecedented flak campaigns by powerful actors and agencies. It should also be noted that social media and the Internet more broadly have not been able to contribute significantly to news provision. Real journalism needs extensive resources, substantial amounts of money and institutional backing. Yet, the digital media environment has not been able to provide viable new funding models or revenue streams. In fact, at this point in time, the journalism sector has lost revenue as the advertising industry has shifted investment from legacy news to Internet companies. This means, unfortunately, that in terms of news access the public has been further weakened vis-à-vis its positioning in social relations of power. Additionally, novel Internet channels have increased the ability of traditional power elites, intelligence services and the new right to manipulate publics via direct forms of communication that bypass the traditional news media.

**Jeffery Klaehn: Your thoughts on the impact and influence of the PM to date? On the value of the PM for communication studies and media theory, moving forward?**

**Christian Fuchs:** The PM continues to provide some important foundations for a critical theory of communication. But, it is not a theory in itself; there are dimensions of media power that it does not focus on, such as the exploitation of digital and cultural labour, privacy violations, or communications and digital surveillance. I see it as an important task to create a critical theory of communication that builds on the rich history and tradition of critical communication studies.

**Daniel Broudy:** The PM, like other models, is a representation of observed phenomena. The model has been incredibly influential in studies undertaken by numerous scholars across the decades and across cultural boundaries in our efforts to grasp the complexities of media performance (see Pedro, 2011a, 2011b; Klaehn, 2009). I can recall a 2010 article in which you and Andrew Mullen presented the PM as a critical sociological approach to understanding media and society. Power in all of its forms is central to that discussion. Power to influence public discourse and perception of key issues, to ignore other objects, to shape knowledge and mollify dissent. I think this kind of inquiry is becoming increasingly more important as the
public becomes increasingly more aware of ideology and its role in bounding debate within only approved or official frames of reference. Think of how power is used to redefine what hate speech is, for example, and how common citizens questioning the newfangled definitions of what is and isn’t male or female are castigated and promptly tarred as haters or fascists. Think of how power is used to redefine anyone who poses critical questions about patently obvious flaws in logic concerning the destruction seen on September 11, 2001, the manufacturing of consent for a War on Terror, and the other perverse forms of rationalizing we see in corporate media among talking heads. Power seeks a silenced, or self-censoring, populace whose thoughts are colonized by the homogenizing message that mindless mass consumption is really the only way to exist.

**Yigal Godler:** In my view, the PM is to Media Studies an unrealized paradigm shift. It has demonstrated a much more compelling, intellectually honest and analytically lucid way of doing media research, which has been dismissed by the discipline for this precise reason. If Media Studies had been an aspiring science rather than an orthodoxy, it would have been revolutionized by the PM. Instead, it reacted to the PM like the Academic Church normally reacts to autonomous thought.

**Florian Zollmann:** To this day, Herman and Chomsky as well as other PM scholars have produced a large set of important studies. We have particularly good insights now in the ways that Western elite news media organisations have misreported wars and foreign policy crises. This work spans dozens of conflicts with Western participation in Vietnam, Cambodia, Iraq, the Balkans, Libya, Syria, Venezuela and many other countries. Scholars have also applied the PM to looking at societal issues such as austerity, class and inequality. There has also been a great deal of theoretical developments and updates of the PM. Critiques of the PM, whilst some of them genuine, have been thoroughly addressed also thanks to the recent work by Jeffery Klaehn, Joan Pedro and Daniel Broudy. So it would be fair to say that the PM stands on solid grounds today and awaits fruitful scholarly application and refinement.

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The Propaganda Model and Black Boxes?
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Abstract
This essay brings together leading scholars to debate important questions pertaining to methodological, philosophical, and pragmatic arguments and counterarguments about the necessity to observe the Propaganda Model filters in operation.

Keywords
Propaganda Model, media analysis, observability, social science research, methodology, methods, epistemology, validity, Cultural Studies, Communication Studies, media theory.

Introduction
Much of the criticism that has been directed at Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky’s Propaganda Model (PM) reveals, on a close reading, tacit assumptions about the nature of evidence and explanation. The following debate attempts to articulate some of these tacit assumptions. As it happens, even scholars who believe the PM is, at core, evidentially sound, have expressed the concern that the unobservability of some aspects of the PM’s operations weakens its explanatory power and validity, and have called for research which would render the PM’s components more observable than they presently are. These points are articulated and directly addressed by the participants in what follows.
Andrew Mullen: There is a voluminous body of evidence supporting the first hypothesis of the PM: that where there is elite consensus on a particular policy issue, media will largely reflect this view in its coverage of that issue. Scholars have demonstrated, time and again, that media systems – in the United States and in other countries where media are predominantly corporate in orientation – effectively serve state and corporate interests in what can be described as propaganda-managed democracies. The macro-level approach that the PM engenders has not only been applied in a wide variety of countries, it has also proved its worth in terms of understanding and explaining media coverage of both domestic and foreign policy issues. I have produced evidence confirming the third hypothesis of the PM: that the media, and academia, will generally ignore or marginalize the PM and the empirical evidence offered in support of it (Mullen, 2010). The second hypothesis of the PM – that media coverage of any policy issue is effectively shaped by five filters – is much more problematic. Indeed, it could be argued that this is the Achilles’ heel of the PM in terms of understanding and explaining media performance. As Boyd-Barrett (2004: 448) argued, “Some filters of the PM, by their very nature, constitute a significant challenge of observability: they tend to fall within the compass of what may be described as the ‘black box’ within whose darkness occur some of the operational transactions that probably must occur for the implementation of Herman and Chomsky’s political-economic determinants. Penetration of this ‘black box’ remains, for the most part, a major challenge to those who would seek further operational confirmation of the PM.”

Indeed, I have frequently encountered difficulties in operationalizing some of these filters when researching and writing about specific case studies of media performance using the PM. Moreover, these difficulties have been recognized and highlighted by book and journal article reviewers who have complained that the analytical framework provided by the PM does not and, in their opinion, cannot, account for the particular instances of media coverage that are being discussed. Critically, this has often been used to justify a fundamental revision, or sometimes rejection, of my work in terms of publication. In short, it is often argued that these filters are too abstract and removed from the day-to-day realities of the media production process.
to account for the observed media coverage. This is not true of all of the filters however.

The sourcing filter and the ideological filter are relatively straightforward to operationalize via the standard content and discourse analysis approaches utilized by media scholars. More problematic are the ownership, advertising and flak filters as these cannot be readily discerned, or “read off,” using such approaches. Instead, operationalizing these filters in any particular instance requires evidence that can only been gleaned from a micro-level study of those involved in the media production process of that particular output at that time (i.e. the journalists and editors involved). To strengthen the body of evidence put forward to justify the PM, I would suggest that scholars engage in more qualitative micro-level studies, focusing on how media owners, advertisers and flak machines constrain and shape journalistic and editorial output in particular instances. This micro-level evidence can then be deployed to augment the macro-level data generated via the sourcing and ideological filters in a way that makes the PM much more difficult to dismiss. It’s time to open that “black box.”

**Yigal Godler**: What we’re dealing with is the question of what should count as evidence for the validity of the PM, whose assumptions consist of a series of institutional facts which were dubbed “filters.” Whereas Herman and Chomsky provided content-based evidence which was collated from US elite media-coverage and which dovetailed with the institutional facts they’d listed, critics have alleged that such dovetailing is insufficient evidence in support of the PM. From the critics’ perspective, the only way in which the PM could be borne out is a scenario in which one could directly observe the operation of all or some of the filters. At times, this complaint was accompanied by a call for various kinds of micro-sociological research into the goings-on inside news organizations.

To adjudicate in this debate I think one must derive some basic (and admittedly, in my case, inadequately informed) lessons from the history and philosophy of science. My understanding is that science routinely explains observable phenomena through the postulation of unobservable layers of reality. Of course, such unobservable layers
are not simply postulated – their consequences are worked out in detail and often with a startling degree of mathematical precision. However, there is no expectation that the multiverse or strings or dark matter, or for that matter such well-established forces and entities as gravitation or atoms or curved spacetime, would simply reveal themselves to the observer in any direct way. Instead, such entities are postulated insofar as they help scientists explain why a set of phenomena behaves in some manner, rather than in some other logically possible manner. Simply put, in science what’s observed is the tentative consequence of the hidden underlying reality which cannot be observed. Thus, what is observed is neither identical to, nor is it a replica of, the unobserved.

Now there is obviously an important difference between the underlying realities that the natural sciences postulate to account for observable phenomena and the realities postulated in the PM. Whereas the former seek to postulate entities which were not thought to exist prior to their postulation, the PM postulates realities which are hardly in dispute and in fact are trivial: the profit-orientation of businesses, the reliance on advertisers’ money, the reliance on official sources etc. Unlike in the case of the multiverse, the PM’s assumptions are considerably less open to controversy and dispute. Thus, it is unclear why it is reasonable to forego direct observation in the case of the putative hidden structures of nature, whose existence is often questioned, but unreasonable to forego observation vis-à-vis institutional structures about whose existence and operation there is no comparable dispute. Indeed, it appears that the latter is an attempt to manipulate the burden of proof in the hope of denying the obvious.

The late Edward Herman pointed out long ago that critics of the PM failed to demonstrate that it violated the principle of logical consistency; namely, that they haven’t shown in their critiques that the PM would explain opposites. Herman further pointed out that the critics failed to explain by means of some alternative explanation why the contents of the American elite media came out in the way that they did in Herman and Chomsky’s study of the media (recall Daniel Hallin’s attempt to explain Herman and Chomsky’s and his own findings through the vague notion of “professionalism,” which itself is quite logically inconsistent; see Herman [2000: 106]
for details). For this reason, one awaits a serious critique of the model, and not one which sets an arbitrary precondition for its validity.

I have no doubt that one can sometimes obtain micro-sociological evidence for the PM under exceptional circumstances, and my understanding is that Marsha Coleman’s doctoral dissertation about the coverage of the Steve Biko assassination initially contained such valuable interview material (in that case, a journalist was pulled out from covering the subject because of editorial pressures, and both the editor and the journalist were interviewed), which was incidentally excised from her dissertation due to faculty pressures. But there’s a difference between taking the interview data as something to be explained, which is how I think Coleman approached it, and hoping that the interview data will contain admissions by journalists and editors of succumbing to power (the absence of the latter, incidentally, seems to be Michael Schudson’s reasoning behind rejecting the PM). As it happens, Coleman’s case also anecdotally illustrates that mainstream scholars are not satisfied even with micro-sociological evidence which is consistent with institutional explanations. Thus, it seems like the demand for micro-sociological evidence is not really about an authentic concern for the validity of the research, but about finding an excuse to dismiss unpalatable political-economic questions and empirical conclusions.

In sum, no one to my knowledge has provided a persuasive argument about why micro-sociological evidence is a necessary condition for establishing the validity of the PM. At best, it’s a possible independent source of evidence, the absence of which in no way undermines the model, anymore than the unobservability of underlying realities postulated in the natural sciences undermines the validity of scientific theories.

Jeffery Klaehn: I’m not in favor of formally revising the PM to include analysis of various micro-level processes. Study of micro-processes and admissions of intent should not be necessary conditions for PM research. Herman (2018 [1996]) characterized intent as an “unmeasurable red herring.”
Evaluating data for content, omissions and style of presentation may be undertaken in order to delineate the extent to which news discourses and “boundaries of debate” are ideologically inflected. Such analysis entails assessing media choices regarding how news stories are framed and presented.

**Andrew Mullen:** To clarify, and to avoid misrepresentation, I am not advocating a fundamental revision of the PM to include micro-level analyses in each and every case where the PM is utilized. The macro-level studies of media performance that have been conducted to date should be taken on their own merit and scholars should engage with these findings and provide alternative explanations where they disagree – instead of simply ignoring the PM and its supporting data as so many seem to do. Furthermore, there are many practical problems involved in conducting such research. Gaining scholarly access, in real time, to journalists and editors during the media production process regarding a particular policy issue may be difficult. And even when such access is granted, journalists and editors may not be truthful about the structural constraints under which they are working – preferring instead to defend their claimed objectivity and professionalism – and/or they may have internalized elite perspectives such that they are not even aware of their functional role in a propaganda system. My argument was simply that the existing scholarship on the PM would be strengthened by providing such data. Providing greater clarity on the operation of the five filters – as Hearns-Branaman (2018) and Robinson (2018) advocate in their contributions in *The Propaganda Model Today* – would make it more difficult for opponents of the PM to dismiss Herman and Chomsky’s work.

The filters that Herman and Chomsky chose to include in the PM are not simply the result of deductions and/or logical abstractions of the media production process. Take the advertising filter for example. This was included in the PM because of the many observable cases of advertisers’ preferences manifestly having an impact on the media production process. Herman and Chomsky talk at length in *Manufacturing Consent* (2002 [1988]) about Curran and Seaton’s *Power without Responsibility* (1981) study which documented the history of the British press and how, over the course of the Nineteenth and Twentieth centuries, the radical and working class press was transformed, or in some cases closed, because of commercial and ideological
discrimination by advertisers. Herman also discussed a specific case of advertisers’ editorial intervention in the Sut Jhally (producer, director) documentary, *The Myth of the Liberal Media* (1997). In short, the filters are not just structural; agency on the part of journalists and editors can be empirically demonstrated in concrete instances. As social scientists, and positivists, we should, indeed must, be able to empirically verify—and allow others to test—the conceptual and theoretical precepts that we advance. A set of micro-level studies informed by the PM would allow us to do just that.

**Yigal Godler:** It is true that if one were to adopt a positivist view, then the PM could only be valid if it had been formulated on the basis of a generalization from exclusively observable phenomena. However, I think there are good philosophical grounds for rejecting positivism (I found particularly inspiring Roy Bhaskar’s [2008] arguments against it), as science does not seem to proceed on the assumption of thoroughgoing observability of theoretical concepts. Now, sure enough, there are cases in which advertiser pressures can be directly observed, as well as documented cases in which journalists are pulled out, moved to another beat or replaced after their actions have come into direct conflict with the business interests of publishers. The crucial question, though, is whether such cases must be shown to occur in every instance of coverage which is explained by the PM, lest the PM be dismissed as insufficiently verified (despite a plethora of content-based evidence explicable in terms of the assumptions of the PM). In my view, an affirmative answer to the latter question is not a reasonable position to take, unless one adopts a positivist view (which I reject). Now it is true that cases of observable and active interventions by business interests to shape coverage are likely to make life a bit harder for those seeking to dismiss institutional analyses, but only a bit, as even then mainstream scholars will (and have) come up with an excuse to dismiss conclusions they don’t like (as happened in Coleman’s case; I also don’t think Herman and Chomsky’s mention of Raymond Bonner’s case or Chomsky’s mention of the replacement of the editors of the op-ed page of the *New York Times* has made them more popular with the mainstream crowd).

Thus, instead of playing into the hands of mainstream scholars who postulate unreasonable preconditions for the verification of the PM, one should be able to
articulate what precisely is wrong with these arbitrary preconditions. It is also curious how mainstream scholars generally reject positivism, but tacitly accept its tenets when dealing with ideologically unpalatable work (in contrast, has anyone ever gotten a direct micro-sociological glimpse of Bourdieu’s concept of habitus? See Dylan Riley’s (2017) penetrating critique of Bourdieu’s fundamental concepts). Furthermore, the PM, as I recall, was designed to account for routine coverage, not to account for strategic interventions. And in routine cases, it is reasonable to assume that journalists and editors know and acquiesce in (if not outright accept) what is expected of them. This does not mean they have lost their agency, but merely that under the institutional constraints that exist it is completely rational for most of them to do exactly what is likely to increase the probability of their promotion and job security. The self-justification comes later (i.e. post-acquiescence) as people like to make virtue out of necessity, with the possible exception of complete cynics.

**Tom Mills:** As others have intimated, I think a realist as opposed to positivist approach is useful to address this question of “black boxes.” Content analysis of the type presented in *Manufacturing Consent* strongly supports what we referred to here as the first hypothesis of the PM, namely that the corporate news media largely reflects the elite consensus on particular policy issues. The evidence for that is overwhelming, whatever journalists and liberal intellectuals like to think. The remaining scientific question is one of causation. What are the underlying mechanisms that give rise to the observed patterns of reporting? With a complex system like the news media we are talking about the tendency of a particular ensemble of structures, powers and relations to produce empirically observable effects (Fleetwood, 2001); in this case particular types of news content. Some of the “filters” postulated in *Manufacturing Consent* can be observed empirically, others we would expect to manifest more subtly in the culture and practices of journalists. But all the “filters” (or causal mechanisms) can be, and have been, researched. Comparative studies can suggest, for example, to what extent different media ownership structures or revenue models give rise to different patterns of reporting, whilst archival or investigative research, for example, can help uncover the role of the state in “sourcing” and “flak.” I think it is important to push back against the dismissive responses to the PM, but equally I think we can be perfectly open-minded.
about the role, and relative significance, of the “five filters.” What’s important about *Manufacturing Consent* is that it very effectively debunks the foundational myths of liberal journalism, and also offers a plausible explanatory model. None of the calls to open up the “black box” that gives rise to media content threatens to undermine this political significance.

**Jeffery Klaehn:** The PM is what it is: extremely well-suited toward analyzing media content. Should it be concerned to explore other issues and processes that are outside its field of play but looked upon as constituent parts of what may be viewed as an organic, coherent whole? I agree, supporting data can be and is useful, but this can exist apart from PM analysis (see, for example, Klaehn, 2010). I’m not in favor of updating the PM in ways that will make admissions part of the burden of proof equation, and this isn’t typically required of other conceptual models (Klaehn, 2003a; 2003b). Qualified change would also be problematic. Herman (2018 [1996]) was very clear that the PM is not concerned with intent. Supporting data can, however, exist alongside PM analysis.

**Daniel Broudy:** History offers examples of how major media and other organizations work to guard mainstream gates in service to real power. While it is rare, indeed quite unlikely, that institutional insiders possessing evidence of crimes would testify to researchers intent to understand why and how corporate media select issues “fit to print” and so shape public debate, declassified documents certainly provide compelling proof that the PM is a mostly accurate reflection of how media perform.

*Declassified documents* can serve to breach the lock on the “black box” that often prevents researchers from accessing micro-level evidence that would confirm in interviews how media coverage is effectively shaped by the PM’s filters. Though they are in no way necessary to substantiating the power of the PM to illustrate mass media behavior, such documents can disclose evidence of key patterns of how major media and their institutional actors fulfill their gatekeeping functions when scandals or fundamental shifts in public opinion threaten to undermine the entire system.
During America’s age of apartheid, social movements in the political left working toward labor rights, women’s rights, native American rights, and the rights of African Americans threatened to destroy the hegemonic order. The American Civil Rights Movement began emerging more clearly in December 1955 when Rosa Parks was arrested for disobeying ordinances requiring blacks to give up their seats to whites demanding comfortable space on crowded buses. While Parks’ arrest precipitated a series of events galvanizing people into action, the establishment response to the widening Movement appeared in official policy merely a few months later, in March 1956.

The FBI was tasked explicitly in agency memoranda by J. Edgar Hoover to surveil, infiltrate, discredit, disrupt, and even eliminate people and the activities of movements seeking redress. The FBI’s illegal and secret counterintelligence program (COINTELPRO) remained hidden from public view until 1971, when anti-Vietnam War activists stole evidence of the operation from the FBI and leaked it to the news media. The media’s performance during this period – and since – in prioritizing and selecting the topics of public import, confirm the PM’s hypothesized filters. In 2013, when Glenn Greenwald broke Edward Snowden’s story of not just continued but expanded counter-intelligence operations waged against citizens, it became clear that the corporate media as a check on power is a pervasive and insidious myth – a necessary illusion that news somehow accurately reflects objective reality.

Clearly, there is no elite consensus in the Republic today on the vital importance of preserving or protecting Constitutional rights of common citizens, nor on the rights of real journalists exercising press freedoms to report on repression and malfeasance. Testifying to the power of the PM to illustrate such corporate media performance is the marginalization of truth tellers, the periodic calls for the assassination of journalists seeking to report objective truths, and the demonization of whistleblowers. Would a Wiki-source for Leaks open to public scrutiny have been necessary had corporate news actually been fulfilling its role as a watchdog? The porthole on truth that Assange and his cohorts have opened appears to be another “black box” rife with unfiltered versions of history.
It’s no surprise, therefore, that you now have *Newsweek*, a purveyor of corporate public relations, featuring Naveed Jamali – Senior Fellow in the Program of National Security at the Foreign Policy Research Institute – calling for the swift prosecution of Assange. The five filters illustrate how Jamali’s opinion piece can be decoded: A self-professed *spy* employed by an influential Flak machine argues in a mainstream publication an opinion that stokes public fears that national security must take precedence over the U.S. Constitution, while the owners of this medium and the advertisers protect the status quo in the interest of preserving power and profits. Such is the ongoing work of warlocks and magicians who wrap themselves in the flag on corporate media platforms while working to undermine the Constitution. It is vitally important, you see, that we remain as citizens committed to our habits of consuming products and points of view while being suspended in states of ignorance as plans unfold to destroy completely the rules of law.

These are extremely serious issues and cut straight to the heart of the 1st and 4th Amendments and our ability as citizens, aware of the threats before us, to speak and to understand the most pressing concerns of our time. Is it any wonder that budding scholars concerned about these very same issues are routinely cowed into self-censoring and looking away from research projects that might engage them further into studies of this elaborate system of manipulation? Empirical evidence verifying the PM’s hypotheses can be extrapolated from these patterns of behavior.

**Joan Pedro-Carañana**: I agree with Andrew Mullen that there is a lot of evidence that demonstrates that the five filters identified by the PM have an important influence in corporate media performance. The collection *The Propaganda Model Today* (Pedro-Carañana, Broudy and Klachn, 2018) added further empirical evidence of this influence to the existing body of literature. However, as Andrew argues above, it is also true that it is difficult to measure the impact of each of the filters in the news coverage of all specific case studies through the analysis of media contents.

On the other hand, I agree with Yigal Godler that positivist epistemology should be discarded, while still orienting PM research towards empirical analysis. In the introduction to *The Propaganda Model Today* we provide a criticism of positivism as
originally conceptualized by Auguste Comte, later developed by the school of Mass Communication Research (Lasswell, Lazarsfeld etc.) and currently being applied in Big Data and algorithms.

Further empirical evidence based on content analysis can be provided in regards to ownership, for example, with studies that analyze the quantity of media representations that convey the view of liberals and conservatives on a given topic (the two ideologies of media owners) as well as the view of revolutionary or alternative forces (which are usually marginalized or excluded).

As Andrew holds, the direct influence of advertisers cannot always be observed, but I have argued (Pedro, 2011a) that there is also an indirect influence which can be summarized in the axiom of “not biting the hand that feeds you.”

Even if direct influence cannot be demonstrated in every case, there are plenty of studies that confirm advertisers’ meddling in media treatment of fundamental topics. The indirect influence of advertisers could also be observed in media contents through an analysis of news items dealing with the main advertisers by comparing the number and the characteristics of the stories that are favorable to advertisers and those that are critical. Other studies of content analysis can be conducted to identify the influence of each filter in communication production.

In addition, I agree with Andrew that sociological and ethnographic analyses of journalism can and should be used because they usually support the PM’s main hypothesis. Some of these studies, including those conducted by Herbert Gans (2003), have shown, for example, that journalists think that commercial pressure and fear from flak play a key role in limiting journalist’s autonomy and establishing the frames of news coverage. Florian Zollman (2009) and Jesse Owen Hearns-Branaman (2018) have also shown that sociological studies actually support the PM.

Jeffery Klaehn: I’m in complete agreement.
Joan Pedro-Carañana: Further reflection about “black boxes” should lead PM scholars to include new filters, such as the propaganda system proposed by Oliver Boyd-Barrett (2004) and Piers Robinson (2018) and the security system proposed by Daniel Broudy (2018). The direct influence of the Pentagon and other powerful agents of propaganda in Hollywood has been demonstrated by Matthew Alford (2009, 2010, 2018).

There is surely a need to carry out further studies on the transformations that the internet has brought about, especially with regards to algorithms and Big Data, which are obviously connected with private ownership, the need to maximize profits and advertising, but also with the other filters, as Christian Fuchs (2018) has shown. We know that these factors contribute to a great extent to the hegemony of algorithms that favor well-established, commercial, institutional and powerful actors, as well as superficiality and redundancy, while diminishing the visibility of different, innovative and alternative communication (see Barry Pollick’s (2018) analysis of the websites shown by the Google search engine dealing with sports team owners and those about athletes).

In my opinion, the biggest “black hole” of the PM is derived from the fact that it is not dialectical enough. The filters focus on class struggle from above, but in order to understand the existence of plurality in the media, even if limited, and the possibilities of democratic and egalitarian change, it would be necessary to include factors related to class struggle from below. Counter-forces promoting plurality in the media and social change were identified and explained in Manufacturing Consent (Herman and Chomsky, 2002 [1988]) and in Herman’s revisiting (2018 [1996]) and retrospective (2000). However, these counter-forces weren’t included, conceptualized, operationalized and systematized in the model itself, which is focused exclusively on the critique of powerful agents that affect media performance and explain media propaganda.

I agree with Colin Sparks (2007), Des Freedman (2014), Christian Fuchs (2018) and Miguel Álvarez-Peralta (2018) that instead of focusing exclusively on filters that explain the propaganda function of the mainstream media, PM scholarship should
also pay attention to counter-forces that influence media performance. It is clear that, in any historical period, the media are organized to reproduce the existing macro-social system, and the PM is the most comprehensive model to explain why this is so in today’s capitalist societies. However, it is also important to consider that there are alternative forces that work to expand the spectrum of acceptable opinion and eventually transform both the media and social systems.

Some of the counter-forces that PM scholarship has identified include the conflicts between different sectors of the elite, the emergence of strong social movements, the role of journalists (and star-journalists) as allies of the precariat in the class struggle for social change, the culture of different national and local cultures (which might push towards media and social change), the existence of producers of online media contents who promote change, and the need of the media to sell their products by complying with some of the demands of audiences. If we take into account power relations, we notice that the capacity of these factors to influence the media system is limited by the structural filters of the PM, but they, nevertheless, have some impact which ought to be observed.

Florian Zollmann: I basically agree with both positions offered in the exchange. On the one hand, the traditional PM approach is certainly valid. In Manufacturing Consent, Herman and Chomsky (2002 [1988]) clearly established the PM’s filters on the basis of an extensive analysis of media scholarship as well as empirical data. Using these filters as variables and deducting predictions for media content pattern is fully in accord with the positivist scientific program (see Klaehn, 2003a; 2003b; Zollmann, 2017; also Thompson, 2009). On the other hand, it is not in contravention to the traditional PM approach if novel research aims at assessing the mechanics inside the black-box outlined by Boyd-Barrett (2004) and as suggested by Andrew and Joan above (see Thompson, 2009). In fact, the early so-called gatekeeper studies based on newsroom ethnographies, questionnaires and content analysis have done just that – although, of course, not with reference to the PM as they were often published earlier.
In my book *Media, Propaganda and the Politics of Intervention* (2017), I have devoted a literature-based chapter to discussing how the empirical findings of this gatekeeper and related research actually support the PM. The gatekeeper researchers demonstrated that journalistic intent is largely overridden by organization-institutional imperatives in the fashion theorized by Herman and Chomsky.

To provide a few examples of the striking findings of that research: Edward J. Epstein (2000 [1973]: 41) concluded that “While any given news decision, when taken alone, may seem idiosyncratic, it is still possible, paradoxically, for the total news output of an organization to be largely determined by general rules, routines and policies.” Herbert J. Gans (1980: 119) stressed in a study of broadcasting news, which was based on participant observation and content analysis, that, “while, in theory, sources can come from anywhere, in practice, their recruitment and their access to journalists reflect the hierarchies of nation and society.”

Moreover, Gans (1980: 277) contextualized the findings of his study as follows: “[...] my observations support the structural analyses of the news media proposed more often by activists or social scientists on the Left than on the Right: that journalists are restrained by systemic mechanisms that keep out some news.”

Gatekeeper research, in fact, can shed light into the black-box of news filtering processes assessing the impact of hierarchies and organizational pressures on the conduct of individual journalists. Whilst much of this research supports the PM, gatekeeper approaches could also be used to investigate the significance of potential counter-forces, as suggested by Joan above. So there are no contradictions if scholars develop the gatekeeper and related approaches further in order to investigate the mechanics within the filters of the PM. Perhaps this should be conducted in conjunction with a macro-level analysis of the news organization and its output.

I agree with Jeffery that such gatekeeper-analyses should not be regarded as a condition to validate the PM and that it is problematic that PM research is often held to higher standards than other research programs. But I also agree with Andrew and Joan that there is no harm in further validating the PM on the basis of deeper
analyses of newsrooms and other agency contexts. In fact, building on Oliver Boyd-Barrett’s work (2004), I have just written a new, forthcoming chapter looking at structure-agency dynamics. The aim of the chapter is to advance the PM by way of incorporating studies that show how agency is undermined in media organizations or otherwise plays a role in manipulating the news (to be published in the forthcoming edition *Still Manufacturing Consent: the Propaganda Model in the Information Age*, edited by Alan MacLeod of the Glasgow University Media Group). In the chapter I am not suggesting any revisions to the PM’s filters in terms of processes on a micro-level. I rather highlight that structure-agency dynamics could be further accounted for by PM scholarship in order to advance our understanding of how filtering processes occur. Additionally, and incorporating intersectionality scholarship, I also suggest that sexism and racism should be regarded as new filters for the PM (see Zollmann, forthcoming). For instance, in the Western hemisphere, media owners and investors are overwhelmingly part of a male-dominated, white elite. Similarly, women, persons of color or migrants are disproportionately underrepresented in the journalism industry and disadvantaged in hierarchical decision-making tiers. These structural issues facilitate multiple biases in news content as identified by an abundance of scholarship (see e.g. Ross, 2017; Van Dijk, 2012). I propose in my chapter that these issues and scholarships should be integrated within an intersectional PM and also in terms of novel news filters (see Zollmann, forthcoming).

**Jeffery Klaehn:** These are fantastic ideas! I’m in complete agreement with Andrew regarding relative merits and difficulties associated with obtaining black box type data. This debate will no doubt continue and give way to even more beneficial developments in the years and decades to come, as scholars continue to develop and refine their methodological and conceptual approaches in utilizing Herman and Chomsky’s PM to undertake research in the ever-changing contemporary social world; as it really should be, given the relentless development of persuasive communication and propaganda.

**References**


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The Propaganda Model and Intersectionality: Integrating Separate Paradigms

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Abstract

The world is currently witnessing a revitalisation of the right and of authoritarian political tendencies. Right-wing forces across the globe have been able to push misogynist, homophobic and xenophobic discourses into the mainstream of politics and media. Whilst these developments have been fuelled by the neoliberal economic programmes unrolled since the 1970s, sexism and racism have always been anchored within the structures of real existing capitalism. This suggests, then, that many of the societal issues we are encountering today are rooted in structural disadvantage and oppression pertaining not only to economics and class but also to gender, race and ethnicity. Yet, approaches in Communication Studies and Cultural Studies have often engaged in separate interrogations of media misrepresentations in relation to either class and economics, or gender and/or race. On the other hand, intersectional scholarship has long highlighted how these societal spheres are interconnected and should thus be researched simultaneously. The Herman-Chomsky Propaganda Model constitutes the leading analytical tool to theorize and investigate media bias. The following contributions will conceptualize and illustrate how the PM relates to intersectional scholarship and societal structures. This will be done on the basis of theoretical elaborations and empirical case studies as well as broader discussions of the politics within the disciplines of Communications Studies and Cultural Studies. It will be demonstrated that the PM can be used to unveil interlocking media biases and misrepresentations deriving from parallel societal discriminations including classism, sexism and racism.

Keywords

Propaganda Model, Intersectionality, Political Economy, Identity, Power, Discrimination, Social Control, Communication Studies, Cultural Studies
Florian Zollman

Introduction

Much literature based on the Propaganda Model (PM) and related approaches from the critical political-economy tradition have highlighted how economic inequalities in society relate to bias in media representations. This research has critically investigated news media representations of domestic affairs, conflict, war, and foreign policy issues, amongst other crucial topics. In these particular contexts, media gatekeepers have often been theorized by way of class-based institutional biases. Yet, sexism and racism in society equally facilitate systematic filtering processes and misrepresentations in the news media. Additionally, we are currently witnessing an era in which the political right as well as new forms of authoritarianism are on the rise, as exemplified by the election of Donald Trump as 45th President of the USA, or the election of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AFD) into the German parliament. At the beginning of the 21st century, right-wing forces across the globe have been able to push misogynist, homophobic and xenophobic discourses into the mainstream of politics and media. It is thus crucial for scholars and students of media and communication systems to analyse media representations in the context of multileveled structural forms of power, discrimination and oppression. The PM is well-suited for such an intersectional approach that accounts for class-gender-race biases. As a matter of fact, Edward S. Herman’s work not only derived from an anti-fascist tradition, it has also been known for its anti-racist outlook (Pickard and Wolfson 2018; White 2018). As Khadijah Costley White (2018) argues: “Herman’s critiques of anti-blackness and racism in media, while scarce, remain poignant.”

Similarly, Joan Pedro (2011b: 1907) suggested to combine the PM with approaches that look at stereotyped representations and drawing from postcolonial and feminist approaches.

To what extent, then, can Herman and Chomsky’s PM be used to study media representations of race, gender and ethnicity? Structural models like the PM tend to be marginalised in Communication Studies and Cultural Studies. Does the same apply for approaches to the study of gender and race? Why is it important for Communication Studies and Cultural Studies today to focus upon structural inequalities? Is there a hierarchy in Communication Studies and Cultural Studies, in terms of what is popular to look at and what is not?

The following contributions further explore these questions and cover different aspects relating the PM to gender, race, class, and intersectionality scholarship, as well as broader topics and issues such as power in society and the marginalisation of approaches in Communication Studies and Cultural Studies.

Jeffery Klaehn

How Inequalities of Gender, Race and Ethnicity Can Be Incorporated Within the Existing Framework of the Propaganda Model

Based upon publications, the PM seems to be most popular in the United Kingdom (UK), and has over the past decade been gaining wider currency internationally. The PM is moving (or, more accurately, being moved?) from the porous margins of the
disciplines of Communication Studies, Cultural Studies and Sociology more quickly and steadily now than perhaps ever before, as evidenced by *The Propaganda Model Today* and the constant flow of substantial journal articles published over the past decade (see Pedro-Carañana, Broudy and Klaehn, 2018; Pedro, 2011a, 2011b; Zollmann, 2017). I predict we will see more research applying the PM to media content on race, ethnicity and gender, and to surrounding issues of inequality, particularly structural inequalities.

When looking at diversity of sources, do we have to look at these in terms of capitalism and the corporate media? And do issues involving gender, race and ethnicity sometimes exist apart from this framework? I would argue a definitive yes on the first question, if the sources in question are appearing in corporate-owned media, because capitalism and ownership structures set the context within which media content is created and produced. And I would suggest that the answer to the second question is no, for the same reasons. Inequalities of gender and race/ethnicity in relation to media ownership should be incorporated as central areas of focus within the ownership, advertising and sourcing filters, and the fifth filter, which is flexible enough to be context-specific, may also be relevant (for elaboration on the fifth filter, see Klaehn, 2009).

Can issues involving gender and race/ethnicity be explored concurrently, utilizing additional models? Yes, absolutely, but, at the same time, the PM is analytically well-suited to exploring topics and issues involving unequal power relations.

The PM’s framework does not assume a focus on capitalism and class at the expense of race/gender bias, thus treating them as superficial symptoms of capitalism rather than as something more substantial. Ownership, size and profit orientation subsume both material and ideological power and directly link institutional power, advertising, profit and other dimensions that, taken together, represent the matrices of capitalism (Klaehn, 2002; 2010; Fuchs, 2018; Alford and Broudy, 2013; Broudy and Tanji, 2018; Mullen, 2010). As political techniques utilized in persuasive communication become increasingly more sophisticated, the PM continues to represent a conceptual framework oriented toward empirical analysis of media content, critical engagement and public relevance (Klaehn, 2003). Does it afford opportunities to explore ways in which media content mobilizes (or not) emotion while scapegoating minority groups? Can it enable and deepen understanding into ways media content connects with populism and strategies designed to mobilize fear, anger and desperation, with communication intended to further ‘divide and conquer’? The PM is applicable to both the specifically local as well as to international topics and issues. As a conceptual model, it is centrally concerned to explore ways in which power meets meaning in discourses. Capitalism (and, arguably, global plutocratic power) typically frames race/gender bias; however, the PM, I would argue, is particularly well-suited for topics and issues involving social inequalities. What the PM will be applied to, and how, is entirely open to researchers utilizing the model.

There also exists, however, a rich and diverse range of literature within Communication Studies and Cultural Studies on legitimations, and this literature may be drawn upon alongside the PM in undertaking research, even though the PM is centrally concerned to explore legitimations. The PM can and in certain cases really should be used in unison with other conceptual models, to enrich the extent to
which research will fully capture specific dynamics in play across different time and place contexts. The PM is extremely well designed to be applied to a range of media. A bricolage approach would certainly be worthwhile, however, depending on contexts.

What about countries that are also capitalistic and that also have corporate media, but which simultaneously may have very different ideological assumptions? In France, for instance, marginal representation of non-white and especially Muslim voices is also linked to national ideologies of racial colour-blindness and universal French citizenship. Does a focus on capitalism and corporate power mitigate against understanding the full range of reasons for marginalization in such contexts, and can the PM be repurposed to address this? It shouldn’t be. In this specific case, all the filters would, in theory, still apply. And the fifth “dominant ideology” filter could be adapted to specific ideological forces in play.

To what extent can and should issues involving class-gender-race biases be addressed with the PM’s existing filters? Can journalists not sourcing Muslim women on issues relating to the veil, for instance, be analyzed in relation to the existing sources filter? Yes, of course. What about the #MeToo movement? Analysis of the quantity and quality of news coverage accorded sexual harassment and sexual assault pre- and post-#MeToo would almost certainly yield interesting results that would enable further understandings of media performance in relation to patriarchy.

Could #MeToo be explored in relation to the PM’s first two filters? Would the flak filter also come into play, in terms of fear and reporting, ‘blaming the victim,’ threats? In terms of the fifth filter, patriarchy could certainly be positioned as a central ideological paradigm framing all. These questions could be explored in papers, essays and dissertations which would further demonstrate the resiliency and reach of the PM’s explanatory framework and also almost certainly lead to more new scholarship that will expand the boundaries of the possible in terms of The Propaganda Model Today and in the years and decades to come as well.

Can gender, race and ethnicity be accounted for within the PM’s existing filters, or do we need to develop new filters? A central aim of this discussion is to create opportunities for debate and to encourage further reflection on this question.

**Florian Zollmann**

*Sexism and Racism as News Filters: An Intersectional Approach to the Propaganda Model*

Intersectional scholarship has long highlighted how class, gender and race are interconnected (see Belkhir and Barnett, 2001). Intersectional research has shown that power is not only a function of wealth (i.e. social class) but also of gender and race. Media owners, managers and senior editors, in fact, are members of a male- and white-dominated economic elite. These intersecting class-gender-race biases, it could be argued, have parallel consequences for news access and outcomes.

To what extent, then, should sexism and racism be accounted for by the PM? In a forthcoming chapter in the edition *Still Manufacturing Consent: the Propaganda Model in*
the Information Age (forthcoming), edited by Alan MacLeod of the Glasgow University Media Group, I have proposed sexism and racism as new filters for the PM (see Zollmann, forthcoming). Whilst these filters are conceptualised, systematised and integrated in my forthcoming paper, it might be worth discussing why such a theorisation of the PM is warranted. Sexist and racist media output is widespread and derives from institutional biases. Consequently, a PM approach can incorporate these structural and performance issues that go beyond economic and class-based filtering processes (see Herman, 1999: 14).

In terms of sexism, research by Karen Ross et al. (2016: 824) finds that a greater number of women as opposed to men graduate from journalism and media degrees and consequently enter the profession at about the same rate as men. Yet, women “do not go as far or as fast or take up the same beats as men and leave the industry earlier” (Ross et al., 2016: 824). Women’s career advancement opportunities lag far behind those of men and women, and are effectively marginalised in and excluded from the industry. This state of affairs is the consequence of “deeply gendered” socialisation processes in newsrooms (Ross et al., 2016: 825). Ross et al. further highlight how filtering processes impact on women in the news industry: “In the United Kingdom, women now make up the majority of journalism students, but senior roles remain largely occupied by men, the pay gap in the profession is stubbornly wide and there remains a gendered segregation in the types of news which women are employed to produce as well as the roles they are allocated within news organisations more broadly” (Ross et al., 2016: 825). This directly translates into news media reporting. “When we consider news content, research has documented the ways in which male defined news selection criteria favour topics which privilege male voices and reach out to sources whose status position also favours men,” write Ross et al. (2016: 826). Moreover, looking at a global, macro-level, the scholars find “a shared understanding of what constitutes news, whose voices are important and whose actions should be represented” and this “understanding seems universal and privileges men’s domination in a spectacularly consistent display of hegemonic reproduction which maintains the patriarchal status quo” (Ross et al., 2016: 839).

In terms of racism, there is a similar picture in regard to persons of colour, ethnic minorities or migrants, for whom it is even more difficult to become news workers in industrialised countries. These groups, in fact, face major institutional barriers with a view towards their ability to access the news media as media owners, managers or journalists (see Zollmann, forthcoming). News is overwhelmingly managed and produced by white elites operating in an indifferent institutional culture and lacking understanding of ethnic minority issues. For example, news tend to exclude expertise on ethnic minority groups, who are either underreported or disproportionately highlighted as a menace to society (see Van Dijk, 2012: 21). Teun A. van Dijk depicts a process of “othering” which:

... is specifically also true for those of ethnic minority groups, organizations, or persons. Their press releases tend to wind up in the wastepaper basket, and only the largest organizations in special circumstances may be explicitly sought after or their press releases used in news production. Ethnic minorities, their leaders, or spokespersons are not usually considered experts about ethnic events, even about those
events that involve themselves. Rather, they are typically considered biased sources, whereas (white) politicians, police officers, lawyers, scholars, or organizations tend to be seen as “independent” or “expert” and hence as reliable sources, also on ethnic events. “Our” white group and its members are never seen as being “ethnic” in the first place (van Dijk, 2012: 20).

A Harvard study by Alberto Alesina et al. (2018) found that in six Western countries (France, Germany, Italy, Sweden, the UK, and the USA) natives have stark misperceptions and stereotyped ideas about migrants. Accordingly, people have false impressions across the board, which are largely independent of social indicators such as income, age, gender, education, political affiliation or sector of work. “We find strikingly large biases in natives’ perceptions of the number and characteristics of immigrants: in all countries, respondents greatly overestimate the total number of immigrants, think immigrants are culturally and religiously more distant from them, and are economically weaker – less educated, more unemployed, poorer, and more reliant on government transfers – than is the case,” Alesina et al. (2018: 2) write. The scholars also reflect on the source of the problem: “a world of misinformation” and reinforcement of stereotyped perspectives in the media (Alesina et al., 2018: 30). Again, it is worth quoting the conclusion of the Harvard scholars at length:

Citizens and voters have distorted views about the number, the origin, and the characteristics of immigrants. (...) Anti-immigration parties have an incentive to maintain and even foster the extent of misinformation. Because information is endogenous, a vicious cycle of disinformation may arise. The more natives are misinformed, the more they become averse to immigrants (...), and the more they may look for confirmation of their views in the media. As a result, the media has an incentive to offer information supporting these views. For instance, immigrants who commit crimes or who free-ride on the welfare system may receive more media coverage than non-immigrants doing the same (Alesina et al., 2018: 30).

The exemplary presentation of sexism and racism in the news industry and resulting news media biases indicate deep-rooted filtering processes in accord with a PM. Further research with the PM could, thus, account for how sexism, racism as well as classism in society contribute towards news media misrepresentations. In fact, an intersectional approach to the PM would suggest that news media bias unfolds on an interlocking class-gender-race axis (see Zollmann, forthcoming). For instance, it has been shown “that women of color are multiply oppressed by race, class, and gender” (Belkhir and Barnett, 2001: 163). The same applies to LGBTQ and disabled people who similarly face manifold layers of oppression. This means that structures of domination and their news representations should be researched simultaneously as well as separately depending on the issue at hand (Belkhir and Barnett, 2001: 163). For example, we can expect racist and sexist “othering” not only in news media reporting of domestic affairs but also on Western imperialism and war. In the two latter instances, news media coverage not only hides the underlying economic (class) interests of the Western war machine but also frames people in target countries as irrational, vulnerable and backward (sexist and racist stereotyping) (see Zollmann, forthcoming).
In terms of domestic politics, news media reporting of austerity might not only be weighted against the working class but also void of perspectives highlighting how women and persons of color are more adversely affected by such policies than white men. In such and similar instances, a simultaneous approach to studying news media misrepresentations in consideration of the full spectrum of class-gender-race biases is advisable. On the other hand, there might be cases when separate analysis is reasonable in order to obtain analytical clarity and account for individual experiences of oppressions and their representations (see Belkhir and Barnett, 2001: 163-164). In any case, adding an intersectional approach to the PM appears to be of major importance. As Jean Ait Belkhir and Bernice McNair Barnett argue:

Race, gender and class represent the three most powerful organizing principles in the development of cultural ideology worldwide. Even though each culture constructs views of race, gender and class differently, there is always some social construction around these three particular differences/similarities, and thus far, that construction has almost always resulted in structured inequality (2001: 157).

**Tina Sikka**  
*The Importance of Integrating the Propaganda Model with Intersectionality in Communication and Cultural Studies*

I think that the structural inequalities highlighted within the PM and other frameworks – I am thinking here of work by Robert W. McChesney, Dallas Walker Smythe, and Vincent Mosco (see Mosco, 2009) etc. – are critical to assessing how wealth facilitates social control. Without their analysis of the media as an economic institution, in which one is able to better understand how ownership, class-interests pressure, cultural hegemony, and ideologies work to buttress elite consensus, it would not be possible to conceptualize a coherent politics of identity and difference, since class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, dis/ability are all situated and articulated out of these very systems of power.

Communication and Cultural Studies have to be politically engaged in order to do this. I cannot think of an area of Communication and Cultural Studies that does not participate in some form of social activism as well as critique. Whether we are talking about media policy, transnational communication, cultural theory, media studies, popular culture and celebrity, media and gender, race and/or sexuality, or gaming studies, to name but a few, the study of communication and culture consistently centres fundamental questions around meaning-making, power, action, ideology, information, democratic participation and engagement in ways that go beyond abstraction and towards the study of concrete political practice. Going way back to James Carey (2008), in his book *Communication as Culture*, he talks about how social life is produced and reproduced through communication but makes it clear that communication itself is a form of action – specifically political action.

Intersectionality also plays an important role with respect to power and social control. Whenever I try to explain or discuss intersectionality in a classroom context, I always go back to the 1977 Combahee River Collective Statement and to their
central framework – which I believe underpins all intersectional thinking. In it, the Collective (2018) state the following: “We ... find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously.” Power and control figure centrally in this definition.

However, then, as now, it is imperative to examine how hierarchical structures and relations of power also shape the self and identity. One area of research that does this quite well is contemporary social movement theory in which capitalism, neoliberalism, patriarchy, and the state are seen as macrostructural assemblages that are in a dialectical relationship with identity positions.

I also think there can be something of a hierarchy between Communication Studies and Cultural Studies, but I would think of it more as a set of fissures existing not hierarchically but nodally where, at times, some research programmes are given priority over others as a result of socio-cultural trends and political realities – which is something PhD. students appear to be acutely attuned to. For example, I have seen a rise in projects that centre on or, at least, include: discussions of marginalized identities (e.g. intersectionality as a buzzword comes up often), digital technologies/digital humanities; novel ways of thinking about communication and its relation to late capitalism; as well as innovative ways of examining how power and knowledge manifest themselves in different areas of socio-cultural life. I think political-economic analyses are making a resurgence, likely as a result of an increasing interest in socialism, as well as the changing nature of popular culture (in light of streaming services).

However, I do find methodologies retain a kind of hierarchical ranking in the minds of graduate students who are often reticent to use perfectly valid qualitative methodologies, like narrative analysis, auto-ethnography, and phenomenology, without feeling worried that the traditional markers of acceptable research (generalizability, verifiability etc.) are lacking.

It is unfortunate the PM tends to be marginalized in Communication and Cultural Studies, and I conclude as much below, but today I see the problem as moving in more productive directions that seek to examine how intersectionality can best be taken up in practice. What I mean here is the study of precisely how race, gender, class, dis/ability, and sexuality are mutually constituted in and through socio-political and economic structures in ways that account for difference as well as identity.

There still, however, remains a lot of hostility to the idea that identity positions (what Nancy Fraser (2002) calls a ‘politics of recognition’) should constitute primary sites of theorization and research as opposed to class politics. Some scholars look askance at the study of identity and difference by arguing that it encourages a kind of marginalization Olympics. A quote by Kobena Mercer (1992: 33-34), which never fails to frustrate me, comes to mind: “There is nothing remotely groovy about difference and diversity as political problems,...The management of diversity and difference through the bureaucratic mantra of race, class and gender encouraged the divisive rhetoric of being more marginal, more oppressed and therefore more righteous than thou.” This argument has resurfaced in different guises today.
It is important to map out how intersectional inequalities and structural disadvantages are inextricably linked. New permutations of intersectional analysis have gone to great lengths to reflect this. Remember that Kimberlé Crenshaw’s conception of intersectionality, early on, was that identities are constituted within institutions and structures that can be advantaging for some and disadvantaging for others. In a recent piece she emphasizes this by arguing that contemporary “intersectional analysis foreground[s]....political and structural inequalities” (Cho, Crenshaw and McCall, 2013: 797).

Elizabeth Poole
How the Propaganda Model Furthers an Understanding of the Production Contexts and Content around Diversity Issues

In response to questions about the place of structural models in the fields of Communication and Cultural Studies, I would suggest that it depends how we are conceiving of these subjects. In the interdisciplinary approach to Media, Communications and Cultural Studies that is prevalent in the UK’s university system, I would argue that the political-economy approach (of which the PM is a part) is central. This approach highlights the political and economic structural biases in (mostly) capitalist systems that result in gender, class and racial norms in the media. Rather than repeat what has already been said here, I want to focus on how the fifth filter, ideological bias, intersects with the others. It has been suggested that following the Cold war, Islamophobia is an equally significant ideological filter in the gatekeeping process. My own research on the production, representation and reception of news about Muslims in the UK illustrates this. Here, I will focus on a project that examined the production of news about diversity issues (mostly focussing on Muslims) in both mainstream and minority organisations in 2011/12 (Poole, 2014).

Interviews with 40 journalists from a range of media outlets (but only one conservative press media-worker in this self-selecting sample) demonstrated the dominance of white, male, middle-class employees in the mainstream media, while the minority media was similarly dominated by male, middle-class employees. This is clearly linked to wider structural biases where there are more entry barriers in general for women, and for minorities in mainstream organisations. This and the organisational context also had an impact on content. For example, those working in smaller local organisations felt they had more freedom from editorial control in the choice and story angle. The negative representation of Muslims across a range of media in Western contexts is well-documented (Poole, 2002; Richardson, 2003; Baker et al, 2013). This clearly stems from a specific economic environment where a largely commercial media system (filter 1) that needs to attract advertising (filter 2) excludes minority voices.

Politically, the ‘war on terror’ has cast Muslims as an extreme Other, a homogenised, suspicious community within; and, currently, a scapegoat for other ills through the discourse of immigration and austerity. If the majority of sources in the media derive from the political-economic establishment, this further marginalizes Muslim voices (filter 3). Obviously, these are generalisations and the situation is more complicated,
but I simplify here for the sake of the argument and due to limits of space. Digitization has diversified the media and the production context where the means of distribution are open to a wider demographic. Those working in minority media outlets felt they could write progressive stories, not positive stories propagating Islam, but with nuance and more depth and the opportunity to challenge “culturally defined frameworks of knowledge that take place in the encoding of media content” (Georgiou and Gumbert, 2006: 15). Although, as Rigoni and Saitta (2012) argue, it is important not to assume this resistant position in ethnic media, which equally often develops following a similar market logic. Commercial pressures there also resulted in a focus on conflictual news values. A disconnect also emerged between minority media workers who believed their creative endeavours could be a source for mainstream media, further diversifying the news, and mainstream producers who were either ignorant of these sources or continued to rely on existing primary sources (filter 3). The positive self-identification and feeling of belonging provided, in relation to the opportunity for voice, by minority media was blocked by the filters managing mainstream media, preventing their wider participation in the public sphere.

Within the organisational structures in which they worked (mainstream media), minority producers reported a tendency to be placed on ethnic stories and with this a ‘burden of responsibility’. Reflections on the role of their (ethnic) identities in their everyday professional practice were interesting. Minority producers suggested that their backgrounds could be an asset in accessing sources and writing stories with sensitivity to impact whilst journalists from a majority ethnic background argued that this should be irrelevant; journalists should focus on reporting factually and so be unconcerned about impact. This demonstrates the absorption of a professional ideology creating a normative culture which can have an impact on the production, content and consumption of articles about minority groups. Minority producers are often left in a double-bind where they are expected to cover ethnic stories (and the cultural obligations related to this) but their objectivity is often brought in to question.

The aim here is not to reduce participants’ responses to essentialized audience positions based on a static view of ethnicity or race, but to illustrate the conflicting loyalties felt by minority producers on a daily basis due to a specific context which is detailed by the PM. Despite a diversified media landscape, the political economy of the Internet means unequal relations are replicated online. Corporate interests dominate and alternative voices are marginalised. In a market-driven media environment it can be difficult for smaller enterprises to gain a significant audience share. These enterprises may remain economically marginalized and rely on ‘switched on’ audiences finding them. Equally, populist voices have successfully garnered new digital media forms to shift political discourse further to the right (Feshami, 2018; Siapera, 2019). In this context, the PM continues to offer a compelling theory for understanding these developments.

Daniel Broudy
The Propaganda Model and Intersectionality: Bridging Divisions in Culture and Opinion on Geostrategic Policies in Okinawa
One question is whether the PM can help citizens understand particular representations of gender, race, and/or ethnicity appearing in mass media. Representation is both a performative act and an effect of it. From my position, I sometimes wonder how these characteristics of a society’s population, especially populations perceiving themselves to be homogenous, intersect with ways in which media content is (re)produced for mass consumption. While the PM was conceived as a structural critique of media, I would further the point that the structure is itself a reflection of the elites embedded within it. Extending the PM to this point raises questions, naturally, about the people who occupy such positions. If mass media and content are largely in the hands of people in power and molded by their perspectives and imperatives to maintain society’s prevailing order – or structure – then the PM can reveal something about how public consent to policy is manufactured and dissent marginalized.

As a racial minority (westerner) living in an ethnic minority region of Japan (Okinawa), I have noticed over the past two decades how local concerns about Okinawa’s geostrategic position – vis-à-vis Tokyo and Washington’s mutual security treaty – are minimized or marginalized in mass media in light of the surrounding military base politics and economics. With the annexation of Okinawa by mainland Japan in 1879 and the subsequent post-WWII US military occupation until 1972, the people of Okinawa have been caught up in various contradictory and competing political forces. For example, local resistance to national defense policies crafted in Tokyo and Washington, which see the majority of US forces locally garrisoned, has created deep divisions among citizens both in Okinawa (just 0.6% of the Japanese landmass) and in America over the often reported necessity of maintaining this post-WWII defense structure. The situation here, in fact, invites study and critique from around the world wherever local citizens critically question and resist similar situations created by Washington and its clients, as Herman and Chomsky point out in Manufacturing Consent (2002 [1988]).

Over the years, I have heard countless students complain, sometimes quite passionately, about this unfair situation which engenders in them mixed feelings of what it means to be an Okinawan in Japan, the odd intersection of being Japanese by nationality but seeing their expressed views about ongoing social and economic inequities consistently ignored by powerful decision-makers in far-off places. University students question why – if they are truly Japanese citizens with full rights – their voices are continually ignored. Many excellent scholars both inside and outside Japan today describe local conditions as a kind of double colony where local calls for fundamental change in the status quo fail to dent the national politics of two huge powers in Tokyo and Washington.

To cite a handful in a cornucopia of many other researchers, I have found the work of Ushi Chinen (知念 ウシ) to provoke much thought. Identifying as an indigenous woman (Uchinanchu), she writes mostly in Japanese about colonialism in Okinawa (知念 ウシ, 2010) and the symbolic violence (知念 ウシ, 2013) enacted against the people by the largely unchanging post-WWII defense structures. Also, seeing herself as a transplanted minority from Japan, Miyume Tanji has written extensively about resistance movements (2006) in Okinawa and the propaganda campaigns (2017) needed to maintain this order over the decades. Hideki Yoshikawa has spoken about
the militarized environment and written about the effects of base expansion on Okinawa’s unique flora and fauna. Laura Hein, Mark Seldon, Peter Simpson, Makoto Arakaki, and I have also collected and edited a range of representative essays on the intersections of local memory, concepts of nationality, ethnicity, and cultural conflict (Hein and Seldon, 2003), and resistance (Broudy et al, 2013) in contemporary society. David Vine has assembled a massive tome on the intersections of economics, politics, environment, and gender in Base Nation (2015). Maki Sunagawa has written about local resistance (2015) and has even interviewed John Pilger (2016) and Douglas Lummis (2015) on these structures of violence and oppression that have appeared in East Asia since the end of WWII. So, much more work has been done and can be furthered by scholars interested in the PM and the apparent areas of overlap with intersectionality as regards ethnicity and culture.

While deeply rooted in past colonial-era policies, Okinawa’s issues have also grown and been exposed to the neoliberal global order that subjects more and more individuals to the forces of the free market. Long reliant on central government investment, due to the disproportionate US base burden, Okinawa has been surging nonetheless in the tourism sector, but the great majority of revenues are shipped back to the mainland where huge industry concerns wield power over the region. The neoliberal plan today puts ethnic minority populations around the world in increasingly precarious positions, especially so in Okinawa as people are caught between the desire of wanting to develop the local economy on their own terms and wanting to preserve remnants of the indigenous culture and history and languages threatened with erasure by powerful business interests.

Island-wide resistance movements seeking real change, more autonomy in local politics and economic decision-making, are treated increasingly with derision and contempt. Intersectionality, again, could shed much light on how power is used to keep order in minority populations. Areas ripe for analysis can be found in comparative studies between national media and local media – the agenda setters and the smaller players.

Not long (just a few years) ago, a famous mainland novelist with political leanings to the far right created a national spectacle when he offered in a public speech in Osaka some words about Okinawan post-war history, quite divorced from reality. Described years previously by Donald Rumsfeld (2005) as the most dangerous in the world, a controversial US airfield in the heart of a major city in Okinawa was said to be an issue in 2015 only because the Okinawans decided to crowd its fences, for economic purposes, after the war (Ryukyu Shimpo, 2015a). Even though historical records show local communities had been bulldozed by American troops for the construction of an airfield fit for bombing missions of the mainland, Naoki Hyakuta made an apparent effort to erase this aspect of Okinawan history and culture.

When both local newspapers called on Hyakuta to correct his error, he doubled down, as it were, and called for their closure. His call on the government to curtail local media operations evidently emboldened politicians in the national congress to claim that the Okinawa Times and the Ryukyu Shimpo had been completely hijacked by left-wing (communist) forces and needed to be closed because of the “antisocial behavior” (沖縄タイムス, 2015) in the island-wide resistance movement against new US base construction. Another member of the congress, Hideo Ohnishi,
observed that, “the best way to punish the [Okinawan] media is to take away their advertising revenue. We [congressmen] should lobby the Keidanren (an organization of Japan’s major business leaders)” (Ryukyu Shimpo, 2015b). Such media and political performances across regional and national boundaries, across ethnic and economic divides, reveal much about these intersections of power and the propaganda they necessitate.

**Mandy Tröger**

*On Blind Spots in Transatlantic Perspective*

If, in 1977, Dallas Smythe (1977) lamented that communication was a “blind spot” for Marxists, in 2018, issues of race and gender are blind spots for political economists of communication more generally and for the PM specifically. Because of this, “its [the PM’s] reading of any cultural product is liable to be caustic” and lacking in subtlety (Alford, 2018: 151). I therefore appreciate the effort to introduce gender and race, and issues of intersectionality, to the model. To me, this stands for a broadening of the field of critical political economy as a whole. It is a welcome response to shifting playing fields – throughout history, race and gender have been significant “markers of difference” (Garnham, 1995) and cannot be ignored, (even) if the main point of entrance is class. The inclusion of both, gender and race, also bridges a still existing antagonism between Political Economy and Cultural Studies (e.g. Herman, 1996). Both theoretical approaches aim for a common goal: to understand social complexity, to lay open institutionalized structures of privilege and power, an emancipation from below (see Tina Sikka, above). For this, it is mandatory to look at intersecting issue of class, race and gender. Following Florian Zollman (FZ) and Jeffery Klaehn (JK), I agree, there is no intrinsic indisposition of the PM to integrate intersectionality. Such integration does, however, require a rethinking of the ways we conceptualize and apply the model.

In my proposition, I focus on English-language literature only. The PM, while established in the UK (see Elizabeth Poole and FZ above) and important though marginalized in the US, in Germany it is non-existent. This stands exemplary for the absence of the entire political-economic paradigm. A student might easily receive a degree in Communications Research and not have heard of Chomsky/Herman, the Frankfurt School or Critical Theory. This often surprises scholars outside of Germany. In recent history, however, there has been a strong political (anti-communist) impetus for it. A “double conservative turn,” first in the 1970s, and then again, in the 1980s, led either to occupational bans (e.g. Host Holzer) or to a severe hampering of individual careers (Meyen, 2017a). Critical scholars working in the Marxist tradition either left Germany (e.g. Hanno Hardt, Manfred Knoche) or were doomed to work at the margins or outside the field (e.g. Franz Dröge, Jörg Becker). What is left nowadays is a fairly conservative field strongly influenced by US mass communication research (Meyen, 2018). As Sebastian Sevignani has put it, in German Communication Research “the Cold War has yet not ended,” making any critique of capitalism essentially impossible (Meyen, 2017b). This partly explains why the PM with its anti-communist filter (“us” vs. “them”) and its fundamental critique of capitalist-driven media production (see Kristin Comeforo, below) receives little to no acknowledgment. There is movement however, for instance, in the recent founding of the German [Network of Critical Communication Researchers](#). Its aim to
(re)introduce Political Economy and Cultural Studies approaches to the study of media and communications has caused a bit of a stir in the field (ibid.) Next year, it will host its third annual conference. Still, this shows how in Germany the struggle and blind spots currently lie elsewhere. I, therefore, cannot speak to the broadening of the PM in general, but only to its application in the English-language realm.

Looking at the names of respondents who have initially been asked to contribute to this segment, I cannot help but think that I have primarily been asked in my position as a woman, and secondarily, as a young scholar whose work is firmly based in the tradition of critical political economy. If this is true, I can see the rationale in it. Writing about gender and race is difficult to do, it is irritating and disruptive, especially for white men doing political economy. Those who are “tired” of hearing about “the politics of race and gender” (hooks, 1999) should remember that also facing these inequalities is tiring; it is not a choice but a (pre)condition that cannot be ignored.

It is generally on female scholars to address issues of gender bias (even though it includes an entire spectrum of sexism), and people of color to point to institutionalized racism (if only for the pleasant notion of diversity). This, however, is not because women and/or people of color do not have anything else to talk about. Rather, if they did not do it, no one else would. In academia, predominantly still white and male, it is only because of marginalized groups and their constant push to put these inequalities onto the agenda that we now think about introducing issues of intersectionality to the PM. I do not think, however, that it requires a particular type of genetic precondition to be aware of and write about race and gender (or their exclusion and/or exploitation) in the media and communication sector. The work of JK and FZ show that very clearly. Tackling these problems, however, is a discomforting process for it requires the questioning of long-held assumptions of how we do things. With reference to the PM, this means adjusting established patterns of how we look at media and news production by taking a more complex approach to social reality. In the end, this can only (and will) strengthen the PM.

There are differences in approach and opinion as to why this has yet not happened. I agree that the lack of gender/race issues has zero to do with the PM’s explanatory power; I hesitate, however, to blame it on the PM’s own marginalization. Also looking at the “ideology of corporate diversity” (Carañana, Broudy, and Klaehn, 2018: 13) itself (disregarding the intersections of class with gender and race) would not offer conclusive answers to the question of why the PM might be blind to these issues. While it is undoubtedly true that the corporate model does hold its share in upholding a status quo by leaving “little room for critiques of free-market capitalism” (ibid.) and by addressing women, people of color and other marginalized groups for market interests only (Gray, 2013), it would be dishonest to not be self-critical. As with any theory or model, the blind spots of the PM and the initiatives to fill them owe much to those who apply it.

While FZ and JK already present complex ideas on how to introduce gender and race to the PM, there are two options that are not mutually exclusive: first, as layers to existing filters or, second, as filters in their own right. For instance, advertising: while generally, this filter focuses on the dependence of media outlets on advertising revenue (with all its implications), the gender/race layer makes it possible to see the
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(heterosexual) whiteness in this market rationale. Such readjustment would not require a reinventing of the wheel. Anamik Saha (2018), for instance, in combining critical media studies and media industries research with postcolonial studies and critical race perspectives already shows “how political economic forces and legacies of empire shape industrial cultural production and, in turn, media discourses around race” (synopsis). Likewise, issues of “new” target markets (e.g. communities of color, protesting women, LGBTQ communities) and new schemes to appropriate gender and race for market purposes have long been critiqued by critical race and feminist scholars (Gray, 2013; Roy, 2017). In relation to the PM, however, it could open unique ways to ask for and make visible (gaps in) Flak. Suggested in part also by JK, a larger PM analysis of Black Lives Matter, the #MeToo or LGBTQ movement, would allow for a political-economic frame of gender/race issues in news coverage. I doubt, however, that applying solely existing PM filters would suffice to come to a conclusive analysis. The inclusion of race and gender makes necessary a broader (capitalist) frame of institutionalized racism and sexism (Roy, 2017). Again, advertising: taking a central role in the production and distribution of media content according to target markets, looked at through a new gender/race filter, advertising-driven media points to gaps between consumers and citizens according to gender/race lines. Again, this is not new, just adjusted to fit a broader PM analysis. Connected issues of consumer citizenship (Gent, 2018) come to mind and would be easy to integrate.

With more females and people of color entering the field of communications and/or related professional fields, an inclusion of gender and race issues (as layers to existing filters and/or as new filters) allows them and other marginalized groups to find an inherent class dynamic to what they see and experience in daily life, the lens being critical political economy. In the end, including issues of intersectionality makes the PM more accessible and, in return, stronger, for it opens up blind spots to (our own) assumptions and privilege.

Alison Edgley

Intersectionality in the Media: a Test for the Logic of the Propaganda Model

Can the PM accommodate contemporary debates around exclusion, inclusion and intersectionality? Or is it a model that is dated, limited and incapable of navigating the often fraught debates currently taking place? It is fair to test the quality of the PM by exploring its capacity to handle new phenomena in general, as well as the complexity of issues in particular. The way to do that is to be clear about the structure and claims of the PM, and assess to what extent they can be applied, and whether greater understanding results.

A key premise of the PM is that, under conditions of democracy and (state) capitalism, debates within the media will be constrained, and take place only within very narrow confines. The effect is to ensure that there is little or no systematic questioning of the Western ideology under which we live. This ideology maintains a view of society in which those who work hard succeed, that power is diffuse and distributed among all citizens, and that abuses of power are down to ‘bad apples’ rather than the result of systemic flaws. Under these prevailing norms, an event may
only be deemed newsworthy if it does not challenge the status quo, in the sense that the framing of the event does not raise meaningful questions about or significantly threaten elite power and privilege. In consequence, there may well be debate, discussion and differences of opinion, but the central contention that state capitalism systematically privileges an elite, who on the whole are white-middle class males, is not on the agenda or open to serious question.

The PM identifies five filters through which the ‘raw material of news must pass’ before an event is deemed newsworthy by mainstream media outlets. These filters ensure that debate remains constrained, narrowed in specific ways. The first filter is ownership, whereby the considerable start-up capital required and other barriers to entry mean that mainstream media organisations are concentrated among elites. Privately-owned media companies, all of which are capitalist organisations, are set up to make profits while selling what they present as news. While owners may not directly influence day-to-day content, there is a lack of evidence that they tolerate let alone facilitate systemic analysis of power and privilege as part of their output.

The next three filters explain the underlying processes in relation to news gathering and distribution activities. The second filter notes that media companies have been reliant on advertising as a source of revenue. Put more generally, these companies focus on monetising the consumption of their output, as can be seen with new social media entrants, whether they admit they are news producers or not. Capitalist companies source capitalist media organisations. Their mutual interest in not undermining the system of wealth and privilege also has an impact on the tone and framing of media content, once more in predictably self-serving ways. The third filter is the need for credible and regular sources of news. This means media outlets turn to other elites in government and business, in order to provide the materials to generate and frame news. Superficially, they treat these sources as neutral and reliable and thus safe in their unwillingness to question the wider systemic privileging of power and wealth. The fourth filter is that business and government elites have the resources to mobilise ‘flak and enforcers’ in the form of litigious complaints should media companies stray into unwelcome arenas.

The final filter was framed within the original rendition of the PM as the ‘ideology of anti-communism’. This filter was conceived of during the Cold War, and draws upon identifiable tropes entailed in the explicit selection or framing of events. Most common is the arbitrary and simplistic division into good guys – ‘us’ – versus bad guys – ‘them.’ Today, and post-Cold War, the predominant filter has become the ‘anti-Muslim ideology’. The point here is that it could be any systematic ‘othering’ of a group deemed damaging to Western power and morality claims, such as ‘immigrants’ as a threat. Within these frames, events get cast as being about bad guys when individuals or groups explicitly or implicitly challenge the Western ideological claim to be the sole arbiter of moral virtue, because the West purports to offer freedom and democracy, as well as equality of opportunity to all. While social media, with its purported democratisation effect on news agendas, has had a number of interesting impacts on mainstream media organisations (not for discussion here), it has not been credibly argued that social media has undermined the central premise of the PM in terms of mainstream media framing.
It has frequently been asserted that the PM is Marxist in orientation (which, by implication, is a fatal flaw). It is not difficult to see that the focus in its original construction on ‘anti-communism’ rhetoric, as well as its focus on the structural effects of the political economy of state capitalism in shaping news, has arguably contributed to this interpretation. However, as I have previously argued, this labelling is to mis-understand and mis-interpret Chomsky’s broader social and political theory. Chomsky’s approach is libertarian socialist, not Marxist. This means that the root of his critique is not directed at the economic determinism of capitalism. Instead, the critique is about the political organisation and protection of elite economic and power privilege through the institution and legitimation of the state. Chomsky’s extensive writing makes the persuasive case that capitalism’s contradictions and incoherence means it could not possibly have survived without a state which intervenes economically and politically to ensure that the interests of elites are defended and perpetuated. In the process, political and economic elites are instrumental in maintaining the system of elite privilege by obscuring and redirecting attention away from demonstrably illiberal and self-serving systems and structures of state capitalism.

With this broader libertarian-socialist framing, we can see that the filters of the PM are designed to keep Western elites safe from any perceived or actual threat to their power and privilege. As these elites tend also to be white middle-class males, we might expect this group to see any and all challenge from ‘others’ as a potential threat to their sense of entitlement to power and privilege. As ‘most people are not monsters,’ elites can and do believe their own meritocratic rhetoric and sense of entitlement, which is why Chomsky retains special ire for intellectuals who are well-positioned to expose the lies of government that perpetuate these intersectional inequities.

There is a clear link between Chomsky’s identification of the predominant ethnicity and gender of elites, and the empirical observation that it is not just the lower classes which are woefully under-represented in both media ownership and decision-making positions (which would be the basic Marxist criticism). The systematic exclusion of women, ethnic minorities and people with disabilities has become more evident. LGBTQ communities are drawing attention to their experience of exclusionary practices: intersectionality raises another set of marginalities, experiences of discrimination and rejection of ways of being. They are not reflected in the prevailing elite, and they represent not just a threat to their power, but also to their cultural supremacy. This state of affairs can only be explained in one of two ways. Either we continue to endorse the Western ideological rhetoric of freedom, democracy and equality of opportunity, which means we would have to conclude that individuals from these intersecting and disadvantaged groups are just less willing or less able to own or run a media organisation. Or we must assume that systems, structures and the instrumental decision-making of white, middle-class, male elites operate to systematically generate powerful forms of exclusion, both economic and cultural.

As the first filter shapes and intersects with the other four filters, we are left with a powerful explanatory model to explain the intersectional disadvantage of those who fail to systematically benefit from mainstream Western social and political organisation. Those who most stand to benefit from the economic and political privileges of a system that obscures systematic inequalities, who own and run
mainstream media outlets, and who make advertising decisions, are turned to and treated as neutral and reliable sources, as well as being able to afford to generate flak and enforcement when their privilege is threatened. Through the filters they ensure threats are neutralised, obscured or ridiculed. There will be ‘honorary’ people who are black, gay, disabled, female and intersectional who may inhabit a tiny minority of positions of power and privilege, but they only achieve this as long as they do not systematically question the systems and structures that underpin power and privilege in the West.

The fifth and final filter is suitably adaptive and could be re-named the ‘ideology of anti-difference.’ Those who are different and ‘othered’ who dare to question the morally superior claims of Western social systems and elites get systematically ignored or re-framed via the PM filters as dangerous, hysterical, irrational or unreliable. The analysis of the campaigns to address intersectionality are well-served by the PM. In turn, the PM clearly passes the test of being a viable and illuminating model.

Andrew Mullen
Intersectionality: A Contribution from Political Science

In 1986, the anarchist-libertarian socialist collective, the South End Press, published an important book entitled *Liberating Theory*, which was edited by Michael Albert (1986). The book set out to explore intersectionality and how class, gender, race and other aspects of our identity, plus our positions in the societal hierarchies that constitute modern capitalism, interact and how activists can navigate this complexity and avoid the limitations inherent in privileging just one aspect of our identity/position over the others. This book was the product of a collective intellectual effort that included Noam Chomsky, Holly Sklar and others, and it aimed to promote a new framework, labelled as complementary holism, for understanding and explaining contemporary societies, and to inform activist strategy. Although this work is quite dated, I believe it still provides a useful framework for understanding intersectionality. More specifically, it provides an approach which avoids treating class, gender, race, etc. as competing paradigms for understanding and explaining society and which instead attempts to integrate these into a comprehensive analytical framework. This work arguably has the potential to make an important contribution to the debate about how the PM can be used to conceptualize class, gender, race, etc. I tend to agree with Klaehn and Edgley that the existing framework of the PM, and its five filters, are flexible enough to incorporate these issues without the need for any additional and separate filters. My view is that capitalism incorporates and exploits racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination, as part of its general divide-and-rule strategy, but there is no reason why Black people, LGBTQ people, women, etc. cannot ascend the hierarchies within the capitalist system, including media corporations, if they possess the ‘correct’ outlook and values; e.g. Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, Margaret Thatcher, etc. What matters is your politics, or more specifically your political ideology, not your identity. That does not mean that gender, race, etc. are irrelevant, as some traditional Marxists have argued in the past, but it does mean that we need a more sophisticated understanding of intersectionality and one that rejects simple binaries. Complementary holism offers us an escape route from this intellectual cul-de-sac.
There are two other classic works from political science that could contribute to the operationalization of the PM in ways that incorporate and illuminate racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination. The American political scientists, Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz (1970), challenged the simplistic accounts of liberals such as Robert Dahl and their accounts of decision-making and the distribution of power in liberal-democratic capitalist societies. Bachrach and Baratz implored those studying power to pay attention to what is going on within institutions; i.e. agenda-setting and the mobilization of bias which serves to elevate certain issues onto the institutional agenda for decision-making and which keeps other issues off the agenda. The focus of their work was the American city of Baltimore and why the local authority in that city was routinely ignoring the issues of poor Black citizens. Given that the existing filters of the Herman-Chomsky PM are concerned with institutional bias within media entities, incorporating this power dimension – the so-called ‘second face of power’ – can help the PM to account for racism, sexism, etc. Similarly the work of British political scientist, Steven Lukes (1974), on the ‘third face of power’ – the power of ideology and its role in reproducing dominant social structures via culturally-patterned behaviours – could also make an important contribution – particularly regarding the fifth ideological filter. Although Lukes focused on the structural power of class, there is no reason why this work cannot be utilized to account for racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination in terms of media performance.

**Kristin Comeforo**  
*Beyond the News - Finding an Intersectional PM through Celebrity Studies*

In Broudy, Klaehn and Winter (2015), I explored how advertising, the second filter of the PM, provides “invisible gender cues” that create “trouble in the ladies room” for gender nonconforming women (Comeforo, 2015: 71-80). I argue that the neoliberal media, operating through the filters of the PM, produces “institutional reflexivity,” which extends biological sex differences into the rituals and displays of institutional cultures in ways that have nothing to do with sex (Goffman, 1977). My work with the PM – both in the classroom and in scholarship – has focused more on the structural aspects of the broader media product (i.e.: in entertainment and advertising) and the notion of “celebrity” more generally, rather than on the framing and production of news. As such, I have been de facto working with the PM in both an intersectional context, and as an intersectional model.

As Mandy Tröger reminds us, “the main point of entrance” into the PM is class, which positions the model as an exemplary tool for both highlighting and studying intersectionality in the real world. The PM can shine a light on the overlapping systems of oppression that inform very unequal power relations. Tina Sikka’s reference to the Combahee River Collective (CRC) provides excellent support for the PM to be applied to intersectional analysis. The CRC Statement (1977) outlined an intersectional black feminism that was distinct from mainstream feminisms employed by the National Organization for Women (NOW) and the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) in that it, in the words of CRC founder Demita Frazier, established “black women’s right to look at their material conditions, analyze it, interrogate it, and come away with an analysis that’s about empowerment” (Taylor,
2017: 125). It also demanded an analysis grounded in the “truth” of what black women were living and experiencing. The filters of the PM are designed for, and proven effective in, shining light on the truths of power inequality that underpin media products and social relations.

The economic perspective, and the emphasis on collective lived reality of the PM is problematized by the media’s reliance on “celebrities” as the “credible sources” for a variety of ideological products – whether in the news, or entertainment. By looking at two celebrities – Beyoncé and Caitlyn Jenner – who have each been both praised and critiqued for their “advocacy” around their intersectional identities, we can see how to re-imagine a more explicitly intersectional PM.

The first two filters, ownership and advertising, can be re-positioned to consider who profits from women’s work generally, and/or black women’s and trans women’s work more specifically; and what constraints are placed on women’s choices in terms of work, and how they can express themselves. Celebrities like Beyoncé and Jenner have choices that non-affluent “regular” women do not. At the same time, they are bound to the terms of celebrity in order to maintain their affluence and (ostensible) freedom of choice.

That is, while Beyoncé has power to declare herself a feminist in “Flawless,” and to critique police brutality, Hurricane Katrina and black financial power in “Formation,” she delivers much of her critique implicitly, and remains largely within the bounds of the white corporate capital “owners” she serves. Similarly, Caitlyn Jenner’s gender performance/presentation is bound, as a celebrity, by her “owners” demands for hyper, normative femininity. She appears as a buxom, vibrant, sexy, blond bombshell on the cover of Vanity Fair – selling 432,000 single copies on newsstands, and generating 3.9 billion social media impressions for publisher Condé Nast. Despite this framing of trans women as flawlessly woman, most trans women not only struggle to be seen as women (Beemyn and Eliason, 2016), but are also disproportionately targeted for violence because of their gender. Trans women live with a 1 in 12 chance of being murdered – alarmingly higher than the 1 in 18,000 chance for cisgender folk (Selby, 2015).

Beyoncé and Jenner are good examples of those “honorary” people Alison Edgely (above) identifies as allowed to inhabit a “tiny minority of positions of power and privilege” because they obey their “owners” and “do not systematically question the systems and structures that underpin power and privilege in the West.” The PM explains how celebrities are manufactured as both credible, yet containable, sources of “dissent” by the system. Jenner performs a femininity that not only upholds traditional standards of feminine beauty and body, but which also makes billions of dollars in profits for the beauty industry. Beyoncé is so rich and disconnected from the lived reality of typical black women, that when she wrote an essay on the wage gap for The Shriver Report she cited that “the average working woman earns only 77 percent of what the average working man makes” (Knowles-Carter, 2014) – white women that is. Black women are typically paid 61 percent of what the average (white) working man makes (AAUW, 2018).

For Beyoncé, and Jenner, who has had more than her fair share of gaffes with the trans community because of her affluence and white (male) privilege, the wealth of
celebrity nullifies at least some of the stigma and oppression of their marginalized identities. Thus, the PM can be seen to move from the founding ideal of the CRC – that you can’t really deal with sexism and racism without looking at capitalism. In this way, it has always already been (and will continue to be) an exemplary tool for intersectional analysis of media products.

**Jeffery Klaehn and Florian Zollmann**

**Conclusion**

The different contributions have highlighted the complementarity of the PM with intersectional approaches to analyzing society and the media. The PM operates on the central assumption, embedded in conflict theory, that discriminated and disadvantaged groups in society will also be marginalised in terms of their access to and representation in the media (see Klaehn and Mullen, 2010). The PM argues elites and their ideologies will dominate the public sphere at the expense of other actors and ideologies. This is facilitated by media institutions such as corporate ownership, advertising funding and market allocation as well as elite protection by the state and elite agents via flak campaigns and ideological closure.

As the contributors also highlighted, some of these filters apply to Communication Studies and Cultural Studies where the PM, with its substantial critique of capitalist-and elite-driven media production, has often been marginalised. An intersectional approach to the PM, however, adds further colours to the spectrum of societal bias and resulting media distortions in that it theorizes interlocking class-gender-race biases. Such a programme allows the dissection of the manifold layers of oppression as well as their connections, relationships and outcomes. Intersectionality should thus be incorporated with the PM and other critical approaches to researching and studying the media. Yet significantly, the discussants have left open the possibilities that the intersections of class, gender and race can be accounted for within the PM’s existing filters as well as by way of developing new filters.

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Introduction to Revolting Media: Why manifestos?

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Keywords: manifesto, voice, commitment, social change, neutrality

This is a time for manifestos: declarations that identify the faults and fissures of a divided world and that propose strategies to put things right, narratives that evoke a spirit of optimism and the possibility of social change, rhetorics that both diagnose and mobilise.

Our governing neoliberal economics has been widely discredited and its zombie form stumbles on with fewer and fewer supporters. Inequality and instability, discrimination and disillusion are rampant across much of the world and environmental disaster lurches ever closer. Public life has been hollowed out – increasingly administered by private companies and in thrall to a blinkered market logic – while the dream of a digital nirvana appears to have turned into a cesspit of corporate blandness and global bickering. Our systems of communication are presided over by unaccountable oligopolies deploying agendas and algorithms whose operations are shrouded in mystery. Our universities are debt machines and our systems of government are opaque to populations for whom direct democracy exists largely as a fairytale from Athenian times.

In response to the breakdown of what was always a fragile political consensus, we are now seeing both worrying levels of nativism and xenophobia as well as a much-needed enthusiasm for more radical and progressive solutions. A rising tide of racism
and authoritarianism coincides and clashes with an appetite for collectivist solutions and social justice.

And what form of writing is better placed to host imaginative and purposefully resistant writing than the not-so-humble manifesto, the choice of groundbreakers, revolutionaries and iconoclasts for just over 500 years?

Many radical political movements, artistic currents, anti-colonial struggles and liberation campaigns have both used and, in part, been constituted by manifestos that proudly declare their provenance. Communism, surrealism, dadaism, futurism, vorticism, situationism, nationalism, feminism, slow tech and open access – all have used the manifesto form as a launchpad and weapon of choice.

It’s not exactly in the spirit of a renegade literary form to attempt to systematise its formal properties but nevertheless some features stand out.

- The manifesto has to be **visionary** and to imagine a future that is fundamentally different to the present. ‘*Any manifesto worth reading demands the impossible.*’
- The manifesto has to be an **organisational tool** and to provide a means to move beyond the immediate situation. As Alvarez and Stephenson argue: ‘Highly caffeinated manifestos are resolutely activist…They itch to translate their ideals into reality, to be, to become, to make themselves manifest.’
- The manifesto is **partisan** and makes visible that which is all too often hidden though never entirely absent from polite society: the taking of positions. The manifesto cracks open the veneer of the specious neutrality of so much quasi-scientific discourse and deploys language in order to move the audience to action. It is neither disinterested nor dispassionate but, unlike much ‘common sense’ that revels in an alleged impartiality, the manifesto is clear about its commitment to change.
- The manifesto must be **vocal**: it ought to express discontent, represent those whose voices have been suppressed or ignored, and articulate new forms of speech.
• The manifesto is **performative**: it attempts to enact a future through its very enunciation. As Jane Birkin argued in her article in the opening issue of this journal, a manifesto is always both ‘an affirmation and a declaration’ that seeks to produce the very reality it conjures up through discourse.

Many of these features are directly counterposed to traditional academic language and, in particular, to tried and tested forms of academic assessment that require students to jettison notions of **affiliation and commitment** and instead to adopt ‘impersonal’ and ‘scientific’ forms of knowledge.

This has been a significant challenge for the graduate students at the Annenberg School, University of Pennsylvania, whose manifestos form the basis of this special section of *Media Theory*. Not because they are reluctant to admit to holding particular affiliations and positions (far from it) but because the academe – and in particular its publishing wing – often frowns on public displays of advocacy. I have the feeling that some students took the class on *Revolting Media* precisely because it was assessed via a manifesto while others were rather more nervous about adopting such an unfamiliar discursive style.

There is also a more deep-rooted explanation for any ambivalence students (and readers more generally) may have towards the manifesto form in the 21st century. Buffeted by the legacy of the postmodern turn against grand narratives and historical certainties, **some academics** believe that we may be in a ‘post-manifesto era’ that has superseded the ‘heroic voice’ of an earlier ‘golden age’ of manifesto writing. Others, including myself, continue to believe that contemporary challenges will require the urgency and confidence of a form that refuses to accept contingency and relativism as a structuring feature and that is not afraid to make sweeping statements and to adopt grand proposals.

Indeed, the highly unstable political conjuncture that I sketched out above suggests we ought to be living in a boom time for manifesto writing. Of course, in reality, this involves not just the radical calls for political and cultural change that have marked the narrative history of the manifesto form but competing, and far less radical, types
of discourse: after all, we now have manifestos produced routinely by mainstream political parties, individuals and, increasingly, corporations. Condemning commodification, as many manifestos have done, does not in itself inoculate the manifesto form against commodification – witness the growing number of passionate ‘mission statements’, breathless corporate social responsibility strategies and ‘inspiring brand manifestos’ that litter the commercial world.

Despite this kind of cultural appropriation, I continue to see the value of the manifesto as a potential technology of liberation. On the other hand, I also recognise the difficulties of producing work that is both intellectually informed and analytically coherent and also politically partisan and actively transformational. There is an understandable tendency in the academe always to studiously adopt competing frameworks rather than to align with a single position; to serve the god of nuance and to frown on the vulgarity of the ‘clarion call’; to avoid assertions and generalisations (such as the ones I used at the beginning of this introduction when characterising the fractured state of the world) and, instead, to back up every claim with sound evidence from accredited sources.

Of course, this kind of studied neutrality can simply be one of the ways in which academic research serves power instead of confronting it. This supposedly ‘disinterested’ form of scientific research is often deeply embedded in dominant agendas and ideological frameworks and simply cloaks its own assumptions and preferences in the language of ‘balance’ and ‘evidence’. As John Holmwood has argued, this is ‘Social Science Inc’ in which ‘objectivity [is] derived simply from the naturalisation of power relations, not from being outside them.’

In that sense, the manifesto can be a particularly effective means of stripping away false neutrality and producing both knowledge and action in the service of particular causes, movements and rationalities. The manifestos that now follow do this impressively: alerting us to the dangers of environmental destruction (Morris), the university’s role in gentrification (Jolly), the unaccountable power of big tech companies (Popiel), the collusion of journalists in Trump’s rise to power (Henrichsen), the social injustices of Indian society that are intensified by linguistic division (Prasad), the false allure of technological solutions to entrenched problems
of political organisation (Remensperger) and the impact on young people of a growing addiction to smartphones (Beren).

Readers will judge for themselves whether each contribution lives up to the performative, partisan, visionary, vocalising and mobilising potentialities of the manifesto form. I can vouch for the fact that writing these manifestos was no easy task for these accomplished emerging scholars and that a traditional academic essay would have been far more straightforward and comforting. But the situation we face – of a rising tide of insecurity, discrimination and inequality – demands that we interrogate our customs and our practices and adopt new tools to face up to our challenges. And who knows: the carefully researched, imaginatively crafted and highly motivated manifesto may yet become the preferred discursive form of a galvanised and militant academic population.

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A Manifesto for Media in a Warming World

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Abstract

Global warming is popularly visualized as distant, immaterial and abstract. Images of polar bears and melting icebergs paint climate change as a de-humanized and irrelevant phenomenon. But global warming is anything but irrelevant – it is a very real, very tangible and very material present reality "stuck" to each and every one of us. Global warming is a physical act of unresolved imperial violence – with a disproportionate degree of impact on the “formerly” colonized world. And yet, this violence often goes unnoted. A visual intervention is required. In my manifesto, I propose a set of three intercessions for the mediation of global warming. I argue that global warming should be mediated as: (1) Situated and Intimate, (2) Transhistorical Trauma of Imperial Modernity and (3) Uncanny Undulation. Mediations must overwhelm, disturb and break the binaries of self and other, seen and unseen, here and there, now and then. Recognition and resolution of the material consequences of global warming will not occur otherwise.

Keywords

global warming, trauma, visual studies, postcolonial studies

I. Paradox of Modern Perceptibility

What comes to mind when you close your eyes and visualize “global warming”? Do polar bears float by on melting icebergs? Do red, graphical lines dart up and up and up? Do flames and embers crackle and burn in a doomsday scenario? A quick Google Images search of “global warming” is revealing. Several cartoon globes engulfed in fire, gaunt polar bears, glass thermometers and an orangey-reddish hue of apocalypse color the screen. These images parallel the popular understanding of global warming as abstract, distant and apocalyptic. Climate change, as it goes, is “intangible.” It is “incomprehensible.” It is vague, hazy and opaque. It is easily ignored. But global warming is not a far-off specter – it is a very real, very tangible and very material present reality.
So why is climate change so difficult to visualize, sense and perceive? Timothy Morton proposes one answer. Morton describes global warming as a “hyperobject” or as an entity that is “massively distributed in time and space relative to humans.”

Global warming, as hyperobject, defies human perception. Empirical graphs and figures may map the ebbs and flows, spikes and dips of our warming world, but these models fail to depict the full extent of crisis. In fact, Morton contends, we are not in a crisis at all but, rather, in a new epoch of unprecedented anthropogenic environmental change – the “Anthropocene.” And in this “new world” of the Anthropocene, photographic images and journalistic narratives of rising seas, plummeting water supplies and plateauing resources fall short of the whole story. Indeed, global warming cannot be told as a tale. It defies representation. There is no clear beginning, middle or end. Climate change is far too extensive and vast for the confines of modern storytelling. Global warming is everywhere and is everything. It is “viscous” and “sticks” to each atom, arm and automobile. Nothing and no-one can escape the viscosity of the Anthropocene.
But, Morton’s “new world” vision of global warming has a serious – and often overlooked – flaw. Or in the words of Jason W. Moore, “the Anthropocene is a comforting story with uncomfortable facts.” The lens of the Anthropocene risks perpetuating the disproportionate violence of global warming. The “Anthropocene,” according to Moore, neutralizes and naturalizes the “inequalities, alienation, and violence inscribed in modernity’s strategic relations of power and production. It is an easy story to tell because it does not ask us to think about these relations at all.” And by emphasizing the “planetary” problem of climate change that requires “we” as “humankind” to rethink “our” understandings of “self” as a “species,” Morton sidesteps this necessarily “uncomfortable” engagement with global warming as a reverberant trauma of imperial violence.

According to Françoise Vergès, the Anthropocene narrative centers “on the threat to human beings as an undifferentiated whole” and fails to take into account the “asymmetry of power” as it persists along the lines of constructed difference forged by empire. That is, global warming is a transhistorical trauma of “colonial and racial violence” and we must “address the long history and memory of environmental
destruction” through the lens of “Racial Capitalocene” as opposed to “Anthropocene.”” According to Vergès, “we must, in our narrative of the Racial Capitalocene, integrate this long memory of colonialism’s impact” and understand global warming “in the context of the inequalities produced by racial capital.” But how can this be done? How can global warming be visualized through the lens of the “Racial Capitalocene”? How can the modern, imperial eye see what escapes its limited gaze? A manifesto for media in a warming world is of crucial importance.

II. Aesthetic Intervention

The paradox of modern (and imperial) perceptibility is of profound ethical and existential consequence and demands resolution. Nicolas Mirzoeff suggests a fundamental shift in the aesthetics of modernity. Modern aesthetics, according to Mirzoeff, stunt visual and bodily sensations – they anaesthetize. And this “aesthetic anesthesia” numbs and evacuates the senses. Mirzoeff explains how the “conquest of nature” has become so embedded within the modern visage as “natural, right, then beautiful” that “modern industrial pollution” evades perception. In other words, “the theory and practice of the conquest of nature has become [so] integrated into Western aesthetics” that toxic pollutants, fossil fuels, mine tailings, smog, oil spills, you name it – are disregarded and ignored. Mirzoeff explains how “the degradation of the air is seen as natural, right, and hence aesthetic, a key step in any visuality: it produces an anaesthetic to the actual physical conditions.” Modernity numbs, stunts and blinds. And this fallout of feeling perpetuates violence against people and place for empire or, perhaps more aptly in today’s lingo, for capital. The aesthetics of imperial modernity have effectively made the nonhuman and “non-European world a space in which there [is] ‘nothing to see here’” and therefore open for excavation and exploitation. Mirzoeff therefore concludes that “we” need to “decolonize” the modern eye and develop “counter-visualities” in order to perceive global warming and imperial violence as it pervades.
But although resonant with his call for “counter-visualities,” Mirzoeff falls into the very same trap as Morton’s fatal flaw. Mirzoeff co-opts “decolonization” as a metaphor to develop his universal call for a new, less violent, global aesthetic.¹⁷ But, as Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang make critically clear, “decolonization is not a metaphor” – decolonization is what “brings about the repatriation of Indigenous land and life” and it should not be used as “a metaphor for other things.”¹⁸ Mirzoeff’s appropriation of “decolonization” for the dissolution of modern aesthetics is problematic because his proposed intercession again privileges the Euro-American campaign for a new, planetary/global vision of the “Anthropocene.” Mirzoeff is entirely correct with his assertion that the aesthetics of modernity need to be disturbed and unsettled – but this disruption cannot occur through a universalized and undifferentiated global lens. Indigenous, non-Western perspectives and ways of seeing, sensing and being need to be centralized. And no one lens should dominate another. Recognition of global warming as a transhistorical trauma of imperial modernity cannot occur otherwise. Or, in Donna Haraway’s terms, the aesthetic anesthesia¹⁹ of modernity can only be addressed by “staying with the trouble”²⁰ and working through the “uncomfortable facts”²¹ of global warming.

Figure 3. Getty Images, “A couple walks the streets of London in November 1953; nearly a year after the Great Smog, masks were still necessary”. http://www.bbc.com/future/story/20151221-the-lethal-effects-of-london-fog
III. Mediations of the Trouble

Global warming is imperial violence. But this violence is marked by “absence” – or, that which defies the modern eye. Absence is an unseen yet intimate presence – and it is transformative because it disturbs. Absence unsettles the binary notion of intimacy and distance, or of self and other. But this disturbance is elusive in the entrenched conditions of postcolonial modernity whereby the scientifically unobservable and indeterminate are paradigmatically rejected as “false,” “illogical” and “dangerous illusion.” I therefore propose a set of three visual interventions including: mediating global warming as (1) Situated and Intimate, (2) Transhistorical Trauma of Imperial Modernity and (3) Uncanny Undulation. And these intercessions, I argue, must begin with intimacy.

I. Mediate Global Warming as Situated and Intimate

Global warming must be mediated as situated and intimate – or as viscous, “sticky” and stuck to everyone and to everything. Global warming is inescapable and pervasive – it cannot be ignored. Climate change must be mediated as very personal – affecting every atom and every fiber of one’s being. Mediations should not be abstract or distant – they should be situated. Photographs of polar bears, graphs with climbing vectors and images of flaming earths should be replaced with mediations of global warming as close and immediate – or, of intimate presence and place.

Public art in towns, cities and villages are crucial for this mediation of global warming. Visual interventions in everyday life will invoke recognition of the overlooked presence of global warming “stuck” to the dwelling places of home. The artist Jason deCaires Taylor mediates the viscosity of global warming as an intimate presence “stuck” to his hometown of London through his 2015 sculpture project entitled, *The Rising Tide*. DeCaires Taylor’s public art installation consisted of a set of four stone horses with skulls molded into the shape of oilrig pumps or “horse heads.” Atop each of the four equine hybrid beings sat a human figure of the same stone material. The sculptures were installed on the edge of the Thames near the bankside of Vauxhall Bridge adjacent to the Houses of Parliament. *The Guardian* described deCaires Taylor’s installation as “barely” noticeable, stating: “at high tide, you might barely know they’re there. But as the water level of the Thames comes and
goes twice a day with the tide, the four ghastly heads – and the horses they sit atop – slowly emerge fully into view.” In other words, the formerly unseen yet material presence of global warming was mediated through the practice of situated intimacy. The “barely” visible presence of the statues disrupted and disturbed. Key to this disruption was the situation of the figures within the daily, intimate dwelling-place of Londoners. Mediations of global warming must invoke recognition of the tangible, immediate and viscous existence of climate change – they must situate global warming as intimate and entangled within the body of self and home.


Figure 6. Ben Pruchnie, “The Rising Tide, by British sculptor Jason deCaires Taylor. The four ghostly statues will only be visible twice a day at low tide,” The Guardian, September 2, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/sep/02/underwater-sculptures-thames-london.
2. Mediate Global Warming as Transhistorical Trauma of Imperial Modernity

Global warming is diffuse and sticky yet also disproportionate in degree of impact. Peoples of the “formerly” colonized world are hit the hardest by droughts, superstorms and degraded environments. The Coast Salish peoples of Vancouver, British Columbia, for example, have been in constant battle against oil spills, pipeline construction and destructive projects of excavation ever since the first English colonists set foot on their unceded territories two hundred years ago. Global warming is a transhistorical trauma of imperial modernity – and it remains unrecognized and unresolved at scale. It is therefore essential that global warming be mediated as an unresolved, recurrent and disproportionately harmful act of imperial violence.

Marianne Nicolson, an artist and Ph.D of Scottish and Dzawada’enuxw First Nations descent, mediates global warming as a transhistorical trauma of imperial modernity through her 2016 mural entitled, The Sun is Setting on the British Empire. Positioned at the top of the Belkin Art Gallery’s exterior brick wall and in the heart of the University of British Columbia’s (UBC) Vancouver campus, a vibrant yellow face with a crown of sunbeams and two open palms leers above a flattened and horizontally elongated British flag. Nicolson painted this mural – in part – with
symbolic intent. In Nicolson’s words, the mural “reworks the elements of the British Columbian flag, restoring the original position of the sun above the Union Jack, thereby symbolically altering the economic and political relationships it signifies.”

Or, in reversal of the notion of “the sun never sets on the British empire,” Nicolson’s title asserts: *The Sun is Setting on the British Empire.*

But Nicolson’s mural mediates beyond symbolic “altering.” Transhistorical trauma defies symbolic and narrative representation. The symbolic meaning of the mural’s pictorial content cannot invoke recognition of the disembodied permeation of colonial violence. Nicolson’s mural is, therefore, crucially situated *within* the unceded Coast Salish territories – which the UBC campus occupies. The unceded Coast Salish territories, or the Land itself, is essential for Nicolson’s mediation. The importance of place for the mediation of transhistorical trauma reemphasizes the initial intervention of situated intimacy. But as an extension of the first intervention, the unresolved and pervasive presence of global warming as an act of *imperial violence* must be invoked. Nicolson’s mural, crucially, summons recognition of the unceded Coast Salish territories as a site of violent colonial occupation. *The Sun is Setting on the British Empire* was purposefully painted in conjunction with Indigenous protests against the construction of a cross-territory pipeline and the transportation of oil unjustly – and brutally – extracted from the Coast Salish Land. Global warming *is* imperial violence – and Nicolson, necessarily, positions this “uncomfortable fact” at the core of her mediation. Her mural – in mediation of imperial violence – disturbs the temporal and spatial fortifications of Vancouver’s colonial settlement.

### 3. Mediate Global Warming as Uncanny Undulation

The reverberant, material consequences of climate change grow and morph, emerging and reemerging in unexpected locations and at unexpected times – whether as pipeline, tar sands, mine tailings, etc. Global warming is therefore strangely familiar and familiarly strange – it is *uncanny*. The unpredictable reemergence of imperial violence unsettles and disrupts modernity’s linear notion of time. Global warming disturbs the myth of progress. The burning of fossil fuels, dumping of mine tailings and decimation of Indigenous lands for imperial power and profit have not stayed in the past. The violence of colonization has returned as a haunting presence...
with physical, material consequence. The past is not of the wayside. And the project of perpetual progress and growth has threatened the very well-being, health and happiness of humans and non-humans – with a disproportionate degree of impact on Indigenous life. Global warming is a situated, intimate and transhistorical trauma of imperial modernity, reemerging in strange forms and in unpredictable ways. Mediations must therefore undulate – vibrating and shifting and transforming within non-linear time.

Figure 8. Tania Willard, #haunted_hunted, BUSH Gallery, Secwépemc Nation Reserve, B.C., 2014.

Tania Willard, through her visual project #haunted_hunted, mediates the uncanniness of the recurrent, unpredictable undulation of colonial violence through an ongoing series of faceless, human figures adorned in traditional tribal blankets within her reservation of the Secwépemc Nation. Like Marianne Nicolson’s mural, these cloaked forms were initially and purposefully positioned in tandem with the construction of a highway across her reservation’s sacred grounds. This highway was built to transport oil – unearthed from unceded Indigenous Land. Throughout the construction process and thereafter, the shrouded figures emerged and remerged in unexpected locations and at unexpected times within the Secwépemc Nation reservation. These uncanny figures dwell within “undulating time.” The temporality of global warming is non-linear – vibrating, re-emerging and diverging in
unpredictable ways. The shifting, uncanny figures visually indicate a previously unseen presence – the atmospheric trauma of imperial modernity unbounded in time and space. Through depleted fish stocks, polluted rivers, mine tailings, tar sands, imperiled health, pillaged Indigenous territories – the transhistorical trauma of imperial violence persistently haunts or “acts out” with real, material consequences. Visual indicators of global warming as transhistorical trauma therefore “come and go” – whether as oil pipeline, highway or cloaked figure. But their “coming and going” is an indication of modernity’s stunted perception – not of their fiction. And by mediating global warming as an uncanny undulation, recognition of the unresolved and unpredictable emergence and reemergence of imperial violence can be invoked.

IV. From Recognition to Resolution

Global warming is an intimate, transhistorical trauma of imperial violence that emerges and remerges in unexpected locations and at unexpected times whether as pipeline, superstorm, oil spill, mine tailings, etc. But despite this tangible violence, global warming defies modern perception. An intervention is required. The paradox of modern perceptibility needs to be addressed. And a shock to the system will only occur when global warming is mediated as (1) Situated and Intimate, (2) Transhistorical Trauma of Imperial Modernity and (3) Uncanny Undulation. Mediations must overwhelm, disturb and break the binaries of self and other, seen and unseen, here and there, now and then.

Notes

2 Ibid., 4.
3 Ibid., 1.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
10 Ibid., 224.
11 Ibid., 224.
12 Ibid., 220.
13 Ibid., 219.
14 Ibid., 223.
15 Ibid., 218.
16 Ibid., 230.
17 Ibid., 230.

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Abstract

This manifesto examines the integration of the US university into processes of urban capitalism and argues its administrative and ideological functions are critical to maintaining urban hegemony. Using the relationship between the University of Pennsylvania and the City of Philadelphia as an exemplar, I base my analysis upon three bodies of empirical evidence: the interlocking directorates of university regents; publicly available urban planning reports; and newspaper coverage of development in Philadelphia. I show that the university is essential to a social process that has as its aim the erasure – both physical and symbolic – of Black and Brown bodies from urban space. In addition to its role in the bureaucracies of urban power, the university is central within strategic narratives that mythologize the white savior and legitimate crude forms of capital accumulation. Finally, I explore the university as a site for counterhegemonic urban practice, calling on academics to integrate the notion of the Right to the University with the politics of the Right to the City.

Keywords

hegemony, ideology, right to the city, universities, urban development

It is a banal truth of our times that we live in crisis. Economic crisis, political crisis, ecological crisis. Crises of leadership and of conscience and, crucially, of imagination. This manifesto is about urban crisis in relation to the current moment and, specifically, the role of the university within it.

The urban crisis I refer to here has been discussed at length by the likes of Henri Lefebvre, David Harvey, Thomas Sugrue, and many others. But it should be
evident that we do not require sages and oracles to see what plainly screams out to us in our everyday existence – that the cities we live in express so clearly the ills under which the majority suffer, and that the processes of violence, exclusion, exploitation, and dispossession are so entrenched in our society as to be inscribed in physical space and physical bodies. Our cities, now and always, express our fundamental struggles, the social confrontations that are at once existential and mundane.

To see this confrontation in action, one can take as an example the areas surrounding the University of Pennsylvania, my home institution. Let’s begin at the intersection of 40th Street and Walnut Street, the northwest border of campus, the meeting place of two very different Philadelphias. On any given day, one can observe hordes of Penn students, among the wealthiest young people on earth, as they try desperately to ignore the very presence of the poor and working-class people around them, almost all of them Black. The intersection also happens to lie on the route of the westbound PennBus, a parallel transportation infrastructure exclusively for use by Penn students and employees and composed of routes utterly redundant to the chronically underfunded SEPTA public transit.

Directly across from my office at the Annenberg School for Communication, also on Walnut Street, loom block after block of tasteless mixed-use commercial developments – the chain stores and student high-rises that have become all too familiar across city landscapes. Broken up only by the occasional row of fraternity houses, the development extends virtually the entire length of campus, foreclosing public space and cutting off the flow of people between north and south. And what, incidentally, lies on the other side? Public housing. And Black people.

Consider that here in Philadelphia, America’s poorest major city, one can always look up to find Comcast headquarters towering over the skyline. While upwards of half the city lacks home internet access, at least we can find hope in our city’s monument to a company that, despite bringing in more than $80 billion in revenue last year, received tens of millions of dollars in city abatements. Comcast Tower, Philadelphia’s very own north star.
This is not just a musing about segregation or gentrification, an increasingly abused term. Instead I am concerned with the larger process out of which segregation and gentrification emerge, indeed the very process of urban capitalism. I argue and will demonstrate that in the current moment and form in the United States, urban capitalism has as a primary strategic goal the systematic erasure of its revolting subjects, who in the case of American cities are overwhelmingly poor people of color.

One can see such erasure take form in decades of urban disinvestment and, more recently, selective reinvestment. One can see it in strategies of policing, in the distinction between who merits protection and who merits scrutiny. One can see it in the dismantling of cherished public institutions, chief among them public schools. And finally, one can see it most crudely in housing – in patterns of squalor, displacement, and segregation. This is, after all, fundamentally a class struggle over territory, over land and over space. And that some have little is itself too much for those who want more.

But oh, the naïf might respond, is this not just the natural order of things? Things are nicer, our cities are getting richer. Cities change, people move, what is old is replaced by the new. This is how free markets work, and while there may sometimes be negative consequences for some people, such is the nature of progress itself. Disruption! Innovation! To fight against the current moment is not only counterproductive, it is downright reactionary!

To such protests, no doubt reflecting the dominant view among apologists, I have two responses. First, do not misunderstand me – I welcome change. It stands as a certain fact of history that cities are continually transforming. As Harvey points out, the “freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is one of the most precious yet neglected of our human rights.” But it is a right that belongs to us all. The question isn’t whether our cities will change, it is how our cities will change. I ask only that we exercise greater imagination, that we consider alternative and fundamentally democratic ways of remaking our cities, and that we recognize that
our current approach to urban development can be called progress only in the most perverse sense.

Second, to this point about the free market, any thinking person truly concerned with freedom must reject the notion of the market as a suitable logic for human development. However, for our purposes here, let us put that objection aside. I will show that in the case of urban capitalism in American cities, there is at play not a market but a cabal. The symptoms of our urban pathologies are not emergent but engineered. The powers of finance and real estate (i.e. land speculation) fashion themselves as our gods, and in capturing the indispensable roles of the state, the non-profit industrial complex, and universities, they seek to recreate the city in their own image, warts and all.

My focus here is on the special role and operation of the university in this process. While I am discussing Philadelphia and the University of Pennsylvania, this could just as well be about Chicago or Boston or Detroit or Pittsburgh or Baltimore or St. Louis or any number of other cities.

Let’s start, reasonably enough, by looking at the structure of the university. It has always struck me as rather perverse that a woman who charted a distinguished academic career as a theorist of democracy went on to become president of the University of Pennsylvania, an institution with utter contempt for the demos. But, of course, we must remember that Amy Gutmann is but a highly competent (and extremely well rewarded) functionary of a larger structure. Despite her title, Gutmann presides over the university only at the pleasure of Penn’s Board of Trustees. As an official matter, governing responsibilities and fiduciary control of the university belong solely to them.

Who, then, are these people that truly hold the university’s reins? Surely, they must be distinguished professors like Dr. Gutmann – educators and researchers and statesmen whose experiences and public service endow them as the rightful caretakers of our beloved institution. Their title, after all, suggests they are at the very least worthy of our trust. And, therefore, the duty lies with the most trustworthy bunch of them all. Bankers.
Of the 54 Trustees of the University of Pennsylvania, 43 have made their careers in the fields of financial services or real estate. Yet even that observation understates the extent of narrow capitalist control over the university. Among the eleven other trustees are Dr. Gutmann, a Nicaraguan oligarch, the CEO of a corporation specializing in water privatization, the leaders of the luxury goods companies Tiffany & Co. and Estée Lauder, several corporate lawyers, Comcast executive David Cohen (who is the Trustee Chair), and, crucially, the head of Philadelphia’s largest philanthropic foundation, the William Penn Foundation.¹¹

While it is evident the university (and with it, the university’s influence and resources) lies firmly in the hands of a narrow financial class, it is useful still to examine not only the trustees’ primary affiliations but the spaces they occupy across Philadelphia’s political and economic landscape. That is, even a cursory analysis of interlocking directorates reveals the extent to which Penn’s trustees are integral to an elite and highly organized network across multiple local sectors.

For example, Amy Gutmann (the president), David Cohen (the Comcast executive and Trustee Chair), and Michael Gerber (a senior executive at FS Investments and trustee) all sit on the executive committee of the Chamber of Commerce for Greater Philadelphia.¹² As in other cities, Philadelphia’s chamber of commerce is an example of organized class power par excellence. In the summer of 2017, when the City of Philadelphia passed a wage equity law aimed at closing the gender pay gap, the Chamber sued to block its enactment. Among the businesses the lawsuit claimed would be adversely affected by the law were Comcast, FS Investments, and the Children’s Hospital at the University of Pennsylvania.¹³ For years the Chamber also blocked, and eventually watered down, the city’s effort to mandate paid sick leave for wage earners.¹⁴ These events lay bare the deep integration of the University of Pennsylvania within one side of a class war, wherein Penn is a chief sponsor of elite disdain for the city’s working class.

The university in this context is not merely a peripheral actor in the political economy of urban power but is itself a central site for its operation, playing a crucial
role in the accumulation of urban wealth by a self-appointed few. “Eds and Meds,” the fashionable slogan of urban development, places universities and hospitals – organizations once thought to bear some sort of public interest responsibilities (how quaint!) – at the vanguard of this process. The capture of the university by finance capital is essential, as the university becomes the vehicle and symbol by which the ruling class remakes the city at their discretion. It functions as an institutional, bureaucratic, and ideological engine for the reconstitution of the city.

These are engineered takeovers. They consist of highly coordinated efforts of investment and encroachment on surrounding neighborhoods, accompanied by a complex social process of settlement, displacement, and policing. Some may suggest I am positing a conspiracy here. I am. But fortunately for my musings, those in power have neither the shame nor respect to conceal their misdeeds. They conspire in plain sight! Take, as an example, a recent public report prepared by the prestigious Brookings Institution. The report presents a series of recommendations for how to make Philadelphia a “top-tier city,” calling for the creation of an “innovation district” in the areas surrounding the University of Pennsylvania. Unsurprisingly the report calls for coordinated, targeted investments in Grays Ferry, the working-class neighborhood just south of the university. For several years Penn has been laying the groundwork for the gentrification of Grays Ferry, most notably with the recent construction of Pennovation, a 23-acre “innovation hub” for entrepreneurs.

It is illustrative of Philadelphia’s power structure to note who was involved in the development of the report. It was sponsored by ten local institutions: Comcast, Drexel University, the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia, FMC (a chemical manufacturer), Independence Blue Cross, PECO (the private energy utility), the University City Science Center, the University of Pennsylvania, the University of Pennsylvania Health System, and Vanguard (a capital investment group). It is even more interesting to consider who was not involved: civic and neighborhood associations, local clergy, block captains, local public schools, or any other relevant person or organization actually residing within Grays Ferry. Such disjuncture reflects the extent to which a highly organized class structure has monopolized the institutional process of urban development.
A related report, called the Lower Schuylkill Master Plan, was spearheaded by the Chamber of Commerce and funded largely by the William Penn Foundation (led by Penn trustee Janet Haas). Adopted by the City of Philadelphia Planning Commission in 2013, the report laid out the development plan that is now underway – that is, the private takeover of the “Lower Schuylkill” area south of Penn, comprising the neighborhoods of Grays Ferry and Bartram’s Village. As in the Brookings report, it is the omissions that are most striking. The report makes no mention of the poor and working-class, mostly Black residents that currently reside in the area. It offers no recommendations to support the people who will inevitably be displaced. It does not bother to concern itself with their prosperity or potential. Instead, those whose neighborhoods were under discussion are rendered invisible. Even in the most generous instances, neighborhood residents are understood merely as peripheral recipients of trickledown benefits, never the center of the urban future. This is not development insofar as any kind of human progress is concerned; it’s a dressed up landgrab.

In each of the cases illustrated here, the expansion and prosperity of the university serves as a principal motivating factor. In the context of urban power, the justifying function of the university is quite practical. University administrators are satisfied because, operating under logics of capitalist expansion and abandoning any pretense of social responsibility, they grow bigger and richer, their sole metric of success. City officials feel the same, in part because they are so handsomely rewarded for their submissive compliance. And of course, developers get rich.

This is fundamentally about wealth accumulation; however, the ideological dimension surrounding such practices is worth our attention. We should not doubt that the Penn Trustees and their whole network of organized capital are in fact sincere in their belief they are performing an important public service. That is, after all, a primary purpose of ideology – to justify the exercise of illegitimate power.¹⁹ A critical task, then, is to understand how that ideology is produced and the purposes it serves.
The university performs several ideological functions that are crucial to the normalization and reproduction of urban social relations. For one, it provides cover to financial interests by embedding the pursuit of those interests in a seemingly benevolent, trusted public institution. More subtly and significantly, though, the university is essential to a process of narrativization that formulates the urban subject in a highly specific way. Hegemony sits upon collective mythmaking, the stories we tell ourselves about who we are, what conflicts we face, and where we are going. For urban development in the current moment, the hegemonic story is familiar: an entrepreneur – almost always young, white, male, highly educated, and able-bodied – who, supported by the enlightened self-interest of finance capital, innovates his way to prosperity and as a fortunate afterthought of capitalism makes the city rich. Such stories are essential to how urban development is imagined and regularly invoke the university as an essential device. These narratives underlie the logic of “Eds and Meds” and farcical initiatives like Pennovation (the “innovation hub”), and they were on excruciating display in the national race to the bottom for Amazon’s new headquarters.

Yet, in privileging one story, we erase others. Convenient to the desired outcomes of those in power, it envisions the future of Philadelphia without heeding those who live there. In practice, such mythmaking becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, legitimizing a preordained political and economic program that administers the erasure of the revolting subject. Poor people of color are erased from the stories elite power tells about the city, they are erased from the urban imaginary, they are erased from their own neighborhoods. In that sense, the dialectic of erasure is at once physical and symbolic.

Within the context of the class war underlying this discussion, a fundamental battle is necessarily the ideological determination of the urban protagonist. Here, it is useful to turn to Guy Standing’s elaboration of the precariat, the precarious “class-in-the-making.” By this formulation, the precariat is a diverse amalgamation of (im)migrants, temporary and contract workers, students, women laborers, the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated, and other categories unified by unstable and fragmented labor. In the US context, we can further specify the concept’s racialization, whereby the precariat consists overwhelmingly (though not entirely) of
Brown and Black peoples under conditions of structured white supremacy. The term is both specific and inclusive, capturing the realities of modern capitalist relations, particularly in urban settings. The precariat, therefore, provides a fitting protagonist for urban counterhegemony. That is, a key task of political action – both embodied and ideological – must be to reassert the precariat multitude as the rightful protagonist of the city.

I am concerned here with the role of academics in such a program, not because they are particularly well suited to the forefront of urban class struggle, but because they occupy strategically important positions in relation to the university. What, concretely, is to be done about their amoral and insatiable employers? As I have described, the university serves two essential functions in urban capitalism – the administrative and the ideological – and academics must agitate against both.

The history of struggle in American cities is centuries long and has multiple and intersecting continuities, from organized labor to Black liberation. The strategic questions for a viable program of action must ask where is the place of academics within that history and where should it be within infrastructures of resistance today? The latter question becomes increasingly relevant when we consider the exploitation and alienation of intellectual labor and the widening contradiction between academics and the universities they serve. And yet, at the same time, we must recognize the enormous class privilege most academics enjoy, and with it, the visibility and protection not afforded to most sectors of precariat labor.

It is the responsibility of academics to exploit that privilege in the service of conscientious struggle. They must use their resources and power to support democratic urban politics in solidarity and coalition with existing efforts. But their primary contribution to the struggle must be to reclaim the university – to seize the physical and symbolic reins of their institutions and to reoccupy and reimagine their democratic potential. In effect, I am calling for the joining of two political projects – the Right to the City and the Right to the University.23
At the forefront of these efforts must be tenured faculty members, who are least vulnerable to retribution. They must lead the way in building alternative governance structures by leveraging unions, committees, and other organizational bodies to fight back against the corporatized university. They must again embrace tactics of direct action, such as strikes and teach-ins, to redirect educational institutions to their moral purpose.

As for ideological resistance, there are multiple avenues not only for disruption but for the building of more just and creative alternatives. It may be deeper critical scholarship on urban issues, multimodal projects that engage counterhegemonic narratives, or strategic research in coordination with movement organizations. At York University in Toronto, for example, faculty members created an alternative media relations office to counter the university’s corporate public relations efforts. What York illustrates is the need for academics to commit their intellectual energies to creative and well organized political praxis. While I cannot determine what form such resistance will take, I am quite certain the revolution will not be read in a journal article.

What I am proposing here is not an easy or simple path. The committed organization of academic labor and its solidarity with urban struggle is an immense task and if successful would provoke ruthless reaction from capitalist power. Cynicism, however, is not an option, for it is merely the failure of imagination and the abandonment of intellectual responsibility. If academics are feckless and inured in the face of unrelenting urban crisis, they may as well fall back into the earth. Their fight for the university – their courage and creativity and sacrifice – is necessary to the larger struggle over the urban future. At stake is not just institutional power, but democratic control over the physical city and, for some, the right to be at all.

Notes

4 See, “The Last Store Standing,” *Daily Pennsylvanian*, February 27, 2011, [http://www.thedp.com/multimedia/18907](http://www.thedp.com/multimedia/18907). After two decades of intense gentrification efforts by the university, among the gelato cafes and luxury student apartments are just two remnants of a different past, a public library and a McDonald’s restaurant. Incidentally, the University of Pennsylvania has for years tried to shut down the McDonald’s. The article quotes local pastor Larry Falcon: “It brought undesirables into the campus community,” he said, referring to black West Philadelphia youth. “The safety issue is just a veil...It’s racism.”
8 Harvey, “Right to the City,” 23.
10 See, “Penn: Office of the University Secretary: Board of Trustees,” University of Pennsylvania, accessed December 18, 2017, [https://secure.www.upenn.edu/secretary/trustees/](https://secure.www.upenn.edu/secretary/trustees/). “The trustees delegate the responsibility for the day-to-day management of the University of Pennsylvania to the administration and, in particular, to the president...The trustees, however, seek to support and reinforce the administration in several ways. They serve as a bridge between the University and the world; on the one hand, interpreting the institution to the public, and on the other hand, bringing in experience and perceptions gained outside the University. The trustees provide leadership in the identification and development of financial resources. They oversee the University's relations with other institutions, the private sector, government bodies, and the media. In consultation with the president, the trustees determine the long-range allocation of resources, making decisions in the context of the needs and expectations of the University's constituencies and of society.”
12 “The Chamber of Commerce for Greater Philadelphia | Board of Directors,” Chamber of Commerce for Greater Philadelphia, accessed December 17, 2017, [http://chamberphl.com/about/board-of-directors](http://chamberphl.com/about/board-of-directors). The names mentioned above do not even begin to probe Penn's intertwinement with the Chamber of Commerce. Madeline Bell is on the Chamber's executive committee and is the CEO of Penn's Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. Nicholas Benevides is the former CEO of Aqua America, a water privatization company. His successor and protege, Christopher Franklin, is a Penn trustee. And perhaps most significantly, the Chamber's chair is John Fry, president of Drexel University and architect of Penn's urban development efforts in the 1990s.
17 Ibid, 3-4.
18 If such monopoly control were not clear enough, the report singles out two individuals to thank for making the report possible: “Brookings wants to express its gratitude to David L. Cohen (senior executive vice president of Comcast) and John Fry (president of Drexel) for their ongoing leadership throughout this project and their commitment to ensuring that it catalyzes impactful and enduring actions and outcomes for Philadelphia and its citizens.” Ibid, 4.

19 While the “benevolent intentions” of the elite are often used to justify the status quo, in reality they should terrify us. In their visions of the urban future, they are gods, creating the city in their own image. And evidently their image consists of luxury high rises, chain stores, and artisan cafes. That’s sad! These people are so deep in their own shit, their imaginations so bound up by what capitalism renders possible, that even after hijacking our democracy, even after fashioning themselves as urban deities, they are utterly incapable of creativity or ambition, of even considering alternative ways of doing things. You have unchecked power, and you build an Urban Outfitters!? At least Paris’s Haussmann and New York’s Moses, contemptible as they were, had some vision beyond maximizing revenue per square foot.


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The Public Panopticon

Manifesto

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Abstract

Despite occasional frictions with regulators, tech giants like Amazon, Facebook, and Google have enjoyed a relatively unfettered business climate in the U.S. and congenial, even cooperative relations with the state. Although concerns over foreign election meddling, the proliferation of fake news, and growing market power brought unwanted attention from lawmakers, the media, and policy experts, the tech sector’s imprint on social and political life remains immense and largely unchecked. This manifesto outlines the contours of this economic and political power. It frames its growth as a failure not just of policy, but also of the policymaking process and the political culture that underpins it. To address this failure, it articulates “the public panopticon” – a new policymaking structure that reimagines the power dynamics within the policymaking process, a reorientation in policy priorities, and a revived public interest at its core.

Keywords

tech sector, market power, lobbying, public interest, media policy

The tech sector shapes how we find and exchange information. It alters how we find and buy goods and services. It owns and exerts control over the technical infrastructure we use to organize ourselves politically. It runs on our data; the traces of ourselves that we leave behind when we engage in activities that increasingly constitute everyday life. Though the act of forgetting is central to human flourishing, these residues do not fade into memory – they are sold to advertisers, commodified wholesale into fundamentally discriminatory, algorithmically-maintained criteria which animate what Oscar Gandy refers to as “the panoptic sort.” As the tech sector amasses greater market power, the engine that fuels it leaves resignation and powerlessness in its wake.
It oversees itself.

These are not technological facts and as such they do not require technological fixes. These are social facts. These are political facts. The actors constituting the tech sector are political actors. Their goals may be economic, but their pursuit and consequences are political. They are also asymmetrical. That asymmetry underlies a fundamental political problem: the distortion of democratic policymaking. Policymaking, the essential vehicle for curbing tech power, requires transparency over surveillance. It requires participation over exclusion. It requires responsiveness over unaccountable self-regulation. It requires a disruptive reimagining of the public’s role in it.

**Disruptive Innovation**

**Market Dominance**

There is nothing natural about the tech sector’s political and economic power. Its accumulation springs from the demanding work of anti-competitive strategizing, deliberate effort, and heavy investment aimed at the manipulation of policymaking processes. It emerges out of the increasingly undemocratic nature of these processes and is legitimated by false narratives that fall upon the receptive ears of the political elites that dictate policy.

When Eric Schmidt said that “Washington is an incumbent protection machine [and] technology is fundamentally disruptive,” he was only half-wrong – there is nothing fundamentally disruptive about technology. Everyone agreed with the first part, but too many policymakers embraced the second part, waiting for the tech sector to bring unprecedented waves of competition and shake up the economy.

It ought to be tragically clear now that digital capitalism replicates rather than disrupts analog capitalism, so much so that speaking of “capitalisms” no longer makes sense. Tech giants are now monopolies, drawing power from network effects, and entrenching their dominance through technical standards and demands for strong patent protections. They are now actively engaged in the analog work of monopoly-maintenance. The only thing this work disrupts is competition, which
could have offset some of the excesses of their oligopoly and monopoly power. The government, which relies on these firms’ rich user data for its national security surveillance apparatus, often simply overlooks their practices.

Despite occasional frictions with federal regulators, tech giants like Amazon, Facebook, and Google enjoy a relatively unfettered business climate in the U.S. and congenial, even cooperative relations with the state. As the financial industry fell under microscopic regulatory scrutiny following the 2008 global financial crisis and faced significant public criticism, the tech industry assisted the Obama campaign in the election and later advised it on various policy matters, from its tech agenda to its efforts at countering violent extremism online. At the same time, Obama defended these companies against European regulators and voiced support for net neutrality, which the tech sector favored. Their evasion of taxes on foreign properties is nothing short of a government subsidy, funded by the public.

Their market dominance has become so normalized that evidence of it is now a cliché. Policymakers accept that Amazon takes in half of all online purchases. They accept that 77 percent of mobile social traffic belongs to Facebook; that Google owns 81 percent of the search engine market and a staggering 97 percent of mobile search; that 90 percent of smartphones in the world are powered by either Apple or Google operating systems; that Facebook and Google rake in 63 percent of the digital ad market, a duopoly that keeps growing under their watch. These are clichés only when we ignore the power they describe.

Yes, monopolies afford certain efficiencies. Yes, they sustain economies of scope and scale, reduce production and expansion costs, and allow firms to withstand uncertainties inherent in digital and media markets. Yet monopoly power also enables Amazon to execute predatory pricing strategies to kill off smaller competitors and thwart emerging markets, strangling crucial sources of innovation and creating unemployment. It allows Facebook and Google to buy up start-ups that pose a threat to their business models or that own data they can use as an informational advantage over their rivals. Their monopolies in online retail, social
media, and search facilitate aggressive expansion into other markets, including delivery, telecom, health, energy and utilities, travel, and financial applications. This destructive conquest is met only with “policy silence.”

**Political Power**

The problem of concentration is not an economic problem – it is a political problem. As firms consolidate, they accumulate market power and the incentives to abuse that power to guard their new market position. Their stake in legislative and regulatory debates expands, along with incentives to exert their accumulated political power to influence these debates to their advantage, at the expense of other public interest goals. Consolidation increases concentration; the absence of competing actors who may dilute that political power. The interests are more homogenous between a smaller number of firms than among many – there are fewer conflicts, fewer organizational costs, fewer coordination costs, fewer messaging and lobbying costs.

The tech firms’ dominance over digital communications coupled with their unprecedented social reach makes them naturally attractive to politicians. Tech giants feed and exploit this attraction. They donate to both parties to secure political access. They assist both parties in primary and electoral campaigns, in exchange for free advertising and political relationships. They move through the corridors of political power with growing ease: the revolving door between Silicon Valley and the government is well-documented.

Business-savvy supersedes political allegiances: these activities are about cultivating proximity and political access, which facilitate effective lobbying. The tech sector invests millions in immense lobbying power to fight regulation, outspending even the commercial bank industry. The investment yields dividends. Tech giants deployed it successfully to kill bills that would have curbed user data collection and introduced stronger consumer privacy rights. Google deployed it to beat an FTC antitrust investigation into its search business. They continue to deploy it to maintain their self-regulatory regimes and expand their economic reach.
Lobbying investments secure often private encounters with policymakers which, obscured from public view and reprimand, animate subtler dimensions of the tech sector’s influence on the policymaking process. The frequent commingling, the uncensored discussions, the growing familiarity all leave an elite imprint on regulators’ systems of belief, policy preferences, and ideological biases. Proximity becomes a channel for “cultural” and “discursive capture.” This capture is more visible in policy discourses than immediate policy outcomes because it is ideological – it injects, reinforces, and naturalizes elite values within the state.

The state, of course, must be receptive to these values. Its neoliberal inclinations, which show no sign of decline, foster that receptiveness. The state remains committed to the market as a key source of economic growth and to actively securing that growth above all other considerations. Thus, when Google lobbyists announce that “technology is such a fast-moving industry that regulatory burdens would hinder its evolution,” policymakers listen. Such capture – if one can call it that since both sides are complicit – discursively narrows the range of policy options regulators consider. Structural alternatives like breaking up monopolies and taming the sector’s power using systemic regulatory approaches are written off, like a radical overreaction to a technical problem. The ideological parameters that contour policymaker debates, then, “marginalize broader theories of the public interest, citizenship and, in particular, democracy.” Their impact extends beyond individual policy votes to the entire regulatory system.

Of course, policy and regulation can address monopoly power, but the neoliberal permissiveness toward market forces has infected these spheres for too long now. The Chicago School’s influence looms over antitrust law, and its obsession with consumer price effects of mergers becomes meaningless when tech giants offer their services for free or engage in predatory pricing to undermine competitors. The tech sector exploits these blind spots to evade regulation. Its market power is subtler, more pervasive, and invisible below the level of market structure. It is market structure that reveals devastating concentration, and it is market structure that reveals why material resources are converted into political capital.
Meanwhile economics, the other *lingua franca* of policymaking, has abandoned historical context, political considerations, and therefore its normative potential, in favor of abstracted empirical models. This abdication depoliticizes debates in a fundamentally political process. As regulatory agencies give economic reports, often from corporate lobbyists, particular weight, it introduces abstraction and exclusive, specialized discourse in the service of illusory objectivity.

**Marginalizing the Public**

At this point, it is worth pausing to ask the fundamental question: where is the public in these processes? How are the voices that constitute it represented in these debates? When meetings between tech and political elites do not occur behind closed doors, the public may learn about them in the news. It may look at publicly available lobbying disclosures that enumerate immense sums and vague descriptions. It may learn that a law has been passed, a bill has failed, a new regulatory framework has been adopted. It may receive a notification that “terms of service” have been updated, and it may even try to understand the revisions in which it had no say.

The public is too often absent, marginalized from these proceedings. And yet its members actively participate in these markets, they actively produce on these platforms, they actively consume and interact with these products. For many, these activities are inextricably embedded in their daily life. They have a stake in these debates because tech companies possess reservoirs of intimate information that they provide about themselves, often unwittingly, often as part of social interaction. They have a stake in these debates because they do not control how that information will be used, and because that information is often used to commercialize their social and political activities on these platforms.

All of us are invested in the outcomes of these debates because tech giants occupy the same economic and political sphere as the public and the perils of monopoly power touch everyone. Market concentration means the concentration of political power, which skews democratic politics in favor of the elites. It means greater concentration of wealth among the few, and greater social and economic inequality.
The public has a stake in these debates because tech elite interests are not its interests. Tech elites’ political and economic views override their social views, which so endeared them to the center-left. Yes, they support immigration reform, gun control, taxes for the wealthy, and universal healthcare. Yet they oppose labor unions, state-run social programs for the poor, and government regulation of their industry. They prefer private philanthropy over government social protections. They prioritize fast economic growth over income equality. In the aggregate, their policy preferences and political philosophies support structures that institutionalize and perpetuate social inequality.

But then, policymaking is not a representative or responsive process. The state is far more responsive to the policy preferences of the wealthy. Neoliberalism prioritizes elite governance, and therefore its interests, over those of a majority. So, it is hardly surprising that as state and corporate interests align, “[w]hat remains of representative democracy is overwhelmed, if not totally though legally corrupted by money power.” Under this system, the public benefits largely by chance. And even when the tech sector lobbies for issues of public interest like immigration reform, freedom of expression online, and broadband access, they become “economized,” gaining legitimacy only in the context of the tech sector’s priorities: technological and economic expansion. These issues are no longer worthwhile in and of themselves – tech giants subsume them under their elite interest umbrella, relegating the public interest to the status of a mere positive externality.

Policymaking is not a participatory or a transparent process. Legal and economic analysis can play a vital role in policy debates when paired with other political and social considerations, but as the dominant policy tools they only erect a barrier of specialized discourse between the public and the experts. The digitization and public accessibility of regulatory proceedings renders a semblance of transparency as illusory as the power of technology to disrupt deeply embedded political processes. Access to archives means little if the rules by which the contest of opinions is settled in favor of a policy outcome remain obscured. Regulators owe the public no explanation for how they decided to approve a merger, failed to stop one that harmed the public
interest, or ended an antitrust investigation into a company’s anti-competitive practices. The public is not invited to the private meetings where such decisions are made and their voices rarely affect the calculus of policymaking. When the public’s views are solicited, they are often cherry-picked to provide support for a policy agenda and ignored when they oppose it.

If policymaking prioritizes the interests of tech elites, then how can it address the problems inherent in their self-regulatory regimes? The shroud of obfuscation hangs over the entire tech sector. Private user data animates the industry, and even regulators do not understand the mechanisms behind its collection, aggregation, interpretation, and use. These patented secrets, these algorithmic “black boxes” are as obscure and removed from the public as the policy process itself. We are told to trust them because they are efficient and objective. But algorithmic inputs are made by people – inputs embedded in wider social, political, and economic contexts that no amount of automation can erase. They reflect the social biases of their makers. They reflect their owners’ business logics. The discriminatory search results, politically-charged false news, foreign bots, and hate speech are not algorithmic malfunctions. They are not technological problems, but political and economic problems. Unless regulators uphold the public interest, these problems will continue to proliferate. Unless the public occupies the central focus of policymaking, tech giants will continue to evade regulatory scrutiny with impunity, mock demands for accountability, and skip congressional hearings.

Yet policymakers are all too eager to accept the lie regulation will kill technological innovation. They agree too quickly with tech elites that they lack the expertise to regulate technology and they meekly allow the self-regulatory regime to continue unimpeded. Policymaking too often aligns with elite priorities, instead of reflecting the plurality of voices, representing a multitude of stakeholders, maintaining true transparency, and ensuring the accountability of those it oversees. The public is relegated too often to the sidelines; a passive observer of the impenetrable, politically-sanctioned expansion of tech power. These political inequities, and the machinery behind them, forestall decisive solutions to critical problems.
In this system, disruptive innovation becomes little more than an empty slogan that allows Silicon Valley to legitimate its concentration of market and political power. But it can be wrested from the tech giants and revived in the service of democratic policymaking. It can be applied with full force to the policymaking processes themselves, and the political culture that underlies them, to return the public interest to their core.

The Public Panopticon

The Foucauldian panopticon denotes surveillance. Like the “interlocking directorate” \(^5\) between tech and political elites, it denotes control by forces obstructed from public view. It turns the object of its gaze into “the object of information, never a subject in communication.” \(^6\) The public remains outside policy proceedings, rather than deeply engaged in them. Gestures of transparency are meaningless without the public’s ability to provide consequential input. In a self-regulatory system, what is transparency other than the pronouncement of a decree?

By contrast, the public panopticon reimagines this power relationship; the power relationship between state and corporate actors and the public, between surveillance and transparency, between self-regulation and public accountability.

The first spark of the public panopticon occurs the moment when all the eyes in it, unblinking, fall upon the watchtower. It is at this moment that the taking of the watchtower becomes a possibility. But the work of the public panopticon begins when the structure is taken. Its work begins when the public and its interests occupy the watchtower, inverting the power dynamics within panopticon. For the public panopticon, the policy process, the market behavior it oversees, and the actors who participate in both remain visible. The public panopticon demands transparency, but it also demands accountability and the legitimacy of various tools to achieve it.

To ignite that first spark requires a transformation in political culture. The public panopticon challenges the assumptions that guide our current regulatory approaches to addressing market concentration. If elite discourse and ideology constrain the field
of options considered by policymakers, the public panopticon aims to shed light on alternatives to expand that field.

Its political philosophy aligns with those who expose structural inequality, corporate power, and their consequences. It believes that economics should not begin with Hayek or Friedman, but with Piketty. It believes that antitrust law should not begin with Bork, but with Teachout and Khan. It believes that tech sector scholarship should not begin with Shirky and Howard, but with Morozov, Tufekci, and Vaidhyanathan. It aligns itself not with New America, but with Citizens Against Monopoly.\(^{61}\)

It rejects the contradictory Silicon Valley ethos, whose distaste for progressive state intervention renders its social liberalism meaningless.\(^ {62}\) It opposes the specialized and anti-democratic discourse of tech solutionism and internet centrism,\(^ {63}\) the apolitical economics that dominates policy analysis, and the neoliberal and fundamentally narrow Chicago School approach to antitrust law.\(^ {64}\) It embraces discourses that chart structural inequalities with brutal precision. It embraces a legal approach to antitrust that moves beyond price effects, and foregrounds barriers to entry, first mover advantages, network effects, and market structure.\(^ {65}\)

It recognizes that the government has always been involved in markets,\(^ {66}\) but that the government has not always been accountable to the public. The public panopticon pays close attention to policy issues because it is the key stakeholder in them. It exposes and shames the political opportunists and ideological partisans who hijack policymaking processes for private profit and political ambition at the expense of the public. It demands lobbying reform, including more comprehensive disclosures, spending limits, and accountability. It sees a vital role for information in policymaking, but a public one. It shuns politicians without a clear antitrust agenda.

It is not afraid to embrace creative destruction of black boxes that fuel tech companies’ informational advantages. It supports independent, public advisory boards to oversee privacy and content regulation on these platforms.\(^ {67}\)
The public panopticon is also not afraid to embrace creative and surgical destruction of tech monopolies. As their power extends into other spheres of economic and social life, including health, retail, energy and utilities, travel and leisure, and financial applications, it sees its dominance in its original markets as a threat to competition in others. Informational asymmetries, market power, and first mover advantages reverberate beyond search and social. While stricter antitrust can prevent further accumulation of power, breaking up tech giants along functional lines will fundamentally curb threats to competition. It is not afraid to imagine separating Amazon’s online market from its brick-and-mortar retail and delivery services. It is not afraid to imagine separating Facebook’s social media platform from its messaging acquisitions. And it is not afraid to imagine separating Google’s search from its other ventures.

It is not afraid to envision a policy sphere where a plurality of voices is respected, solutions are imagined, and power is accounted. After its initial spark, the public panopticon aims to impose democratic order upon market chaos with its collective gaze.

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Reimagining Journalism
to Help Save Democracy
and Fight Trumpism

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Abstract
This manifesto examines the discourse used by journalists in their coverage leading up to and following Donald Trump’s ascendency to the presidency in the United States. To examine this topic, I conducted a qualitative textual analysis of a sample of English language newspaper articles, collected primarily via Lexis-Nexis and Media Cloud between June 2015 and October 2017. My corpus included articles from leading national newspapers such as The New York Times and The Washington Post and metajournalistic discourse from the Columbia Journalism Review. I show how journalists discursively rely on historical analogies to make sense of an unprecedented political phenomenon known as Donald Trump and Trumpism, and how, by looking to the past, journalists seek to bolster their cultural authority at a time when trust in the media is at record lows.

Keywords
Journalism, Trump, Watergate, McCarthyism, collective memory, Goldwater

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Introduction

Democratic society is in peril in the United States, and journalists are helping to facilitate its demise. Frequently hailed as the arbiters of truth and the Fourth Estate, journalists are failing to uphold their normative contract as responsible informers of public opinion. This is clearly shown in numerous ways, but most recently through their abysmal political reporting during the U.S. Presidential Campaign in 2016.

Following Donald Trump’s surprise electoral victory in November 2016, journalists and media organizations, pundits, and pollsters have been scratching their heads trying to figure out how they got the anticipated electoral result so spectacularly wrong. Since then, journalists have sought to report on an unpredictable president in an increasingly fractured, foggy, and “fake news” infused news landscape filled with frenetic tweets by the president. They have also sought to defend themselves and their importance as meaning-makers following an election they failed to predict and accusations that they facilitated Trump’s rise as well as Trumpism: a unique political phenomenon comprised of an attachment to celebrity, nativism, the outsider, and populism, which extends beyond Trump.1,2

The Commercial Imperative of Spectacle

Journalism facilitated the rise of Trumpism in part because commercial imperatives of media organizations reward coverage of spectacle.3 The more spectacular and unusual, the more attention-grabbing it is, which in turn, results in higher advertising dollars and revenue for media organizations. Trump is the king of spectacle – purposefully saying outlandish and culturally insensitive comments to cement his visibility in the media and play to his image as an outsider to retain support from his base. Media organizations have been more than willing to oblige such antics and thus have helped to cement Trump’s dominant place in the news.

Indeed, Trump received nearly double the amount of nightly broadcast network news coverage than his democratic opponent Hillary Clinton4 and he received between two to three billion dollars of free media coverage throughout his campaign.5 Yet, Trump was not the only person who benefited from such coverage. Cable-news organizations scooped up an unprecedented amount of money to the
tune of 2.5 billion dollars during the election cycle\textsuperscript{6} and the networks were willingly complicit in the money-making scheme. CBS president, Leslie Moonves, infamously remarked during the election that even though Trump might not be good for America, he has been “damn good for CBS.”\textsuperscript{7} Trump squarely met journalists’ story needs like no other presidential candidate in recent history.\textsuperscript{8} A Harvard report from the Shorenstein Center said that the “car wreck” of the 2016 election “had many drivers, but [journalists’] fingerprints were all over the wheel.”\textsuperscript{9} Some journalists warned that the media’s opportunistic approach to covering Trump, “betrayed an inability to recognize that Trump is not a standard candidate but rather the kind of polarizing, knowledge-proof opportunist whom the Founders worried might one day come to power in their fledgling nation.”\textsuperscript{10}

The symbiotic relationship between polarizing political figures and the media companies that report on their behavior has deeply entrenched commercialized imperatives and logics. As a result, the watchdog function of the American news media is marginalized while sensational coverage is prioritized, ultimately contributing to an unfit individual obtaining the American presidency.

**Financial Crises, Local News Deserts, and Diversity Gaps**

The incestuous relationship between politicians and the media is not the only factor threatening the relationship of journalism and democracy and giving rise to Trumpism. Journalism continues to face significant financial difficulties, stemming in part from the inability of news corporations to obtain as much money from digital advertising as they used to and social media companies’ abilities to scoop up most of the profit. Although some legacy media organizations like *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* have experienced a “Trump bump” within the last year, such an increase in subscriptions won’t save journalism.

In addition to the financial challenges hobbling the news industry, the body politic of journalism has also shifted from rough-and-tumble journalists who went to mostly non-elite colleges to journalists with elite pedigrees and a penchant for power, putting them at odds with the celebrated journalistic maxim of “speaking truth to power.” U.S. newsrooms are primarily white and male, eliding diverse perspectives that would arise with enhanced socio-economic, racial, and gender diversity in the newsroom. Adding to the re-entrenchment of hegemonic values vis à vis white male
dominance is the abyss of local news which has dried up across the United States leaving many communities without trusted information about public issues of import. These systemic issues contributed to the media’s failure to understand and explain Trump’s supporters and led many journalists to instead ridicule and dismiss them. Journalists’ failure to maintain a pulse on America’s voters and the media’s inability to forecast a Trump election is a crucial test for the journalistic field arising at a critical moment in our nation’s fledgling democracy. As the editor of the Columbia Journalism Review put it: “In terms of bellwether moments, this is our anti-Watergate.”

**When Threatened, Journalists Create Boundaries and Turn to the Past to Reassert Their Cultural Authority**

In response to challenges and threats to journalism from insiders or outsiders, journalists push back via discourse. They set boundaries about who is a journalist and what constitutes journalism. Such metajournalistic discourse aims to determine boundaries of acceptable behavior and to control what constitutes journalistic activity. In their discourse, the media also seek to reiterate their authority by turning to past events to reconstruct and maintain collective memory, or “society’s retention and loss of information about its past in the familiar terms of individual remembering and forgetting.” Journalists invoke the past “to delimit an era, as a yardstick, for analogies, and for the shorthand explanations or lessons it can provide.” Journalists’ decisions to connect to past events provides a way for them to reassert their cultural authority and to strengthen their position as members of interpretive communities at a time when trust in media is at historic lows.

**Boundary-Making and Discursive Distancing Through Linguistic Choices**

Yet boundary making via linguistic choices, adherence to traditional journalistic norms, and reliance on historical memory can discursively distance journalists from the ability to clearly see the present and pivot when necessary. By staying steeped in the past, journalists also flatten potential futures.
Misunderstanding Trumpism Through Generic Classifications

Journalists tended to treat potential Trump voters in rather narrow and generic terms during the election campaign. By grouping supporters of Trump into the category of the white, working-class, journalists misrepresented Trump’s wide appeal and helped obscure his eventual victory. By utilizing an inaccurate genericization, journalists discursively distanced themselves and their imagined readers from the cognitive conflict of being part of a society that facilitated Trump’s rise to power. In so doing, they elided their responsibility as journalists to present a comprehensive and accurate narrative of a complex socio-political phenomenon and thus facilitated its rise.

Reliance on Traditional Norms Obscures Journalistic Responsibility

Journalists also discursively distanced themselves from the idea that they may have facilitated Trump’s rise through rhetorical strategies of objectivity and balance. Balance, or better known critically as false balance or false equivalence, is essentially “what happens when you are led to believe that two things should be given equal weight in your considerations as you come to any given decision, while those two things are not in any way actually equivalent.”

During the presidential campaign, reporters allowed candidates to speak for themselves without any added judgment or analysis and regardless of the facticity of the information. Journalists cited polls that showed Trump and Clinton were considered untrustworthy by citizens, but did not provide analysis about “the sources and consequences of the public distrust for each candidate,” thereby treating them equally according to journalistic standards but doing a disservice democratically by leaving the public ignorant and misinformed. Such engagement with journalistic norms is “an abdication of news judgment and a disservice to readers.”

Yet, when called out on these issues, the (now former) public editor of the New York Times, Liz Spayd, argued that journalists, and The New York Times in particular, covered the campaign in a fair and journalistically-responsible way. Said Spayd, “The problem with false balance doctrine is that it masquerades as rational thinking. What
the critics really want is for journalists to apply their own moral and ideological judgments to the candidates.” Yet, such thinking is problematic when covering an outlier like Trump whose behavior is unprecedented in U.S. presidential history. Journalist Jack Shafer called on Spayd to “reject the chimera of journalistic balance altogether, and enjoin reporters to worry less about the nitpicking of partisans and more about whether they’re aggressively chasing good stories.”

**Connecting to the Past to Make Meaning in the Present**

While many journalists desperately cling to traditional norms of journalism in the hope that doing so will maintain their authority and credibility in the public eye, journalists also steadfastly stick to the past in the hope of bringing meaning to the present. In their coverage of Trump and Trumpism, journalists consistently invoked historical analogies of Goldwater, McCarthyism, and Watergate to bring meaning to an unprecedented and mercurial presidential candidate, a surprising and historic presidential election, and a seemingly endless deluge of controversial and norm-breaking behavior by Trump during the first 10 months of his presidency.

**Norm Deviation and Mental Instability vis a vis Goldwater**

Journalists invoked the former conservative Republican, Barry Goldwater, to describe how Trump’s campaign and brand of Trumpism deviated from the Republican norm. By connecting Goldwater’s resurgent conservatism campaign which ultimately failed, to Trump’s distinctively anti-Republican campaign, journalists were suggesting that Trump and Trumpism would ultimately fail because it deviated too spectacularly from the status quo. When Trump was able to obtain the nomination, and was not completely repudiated by the Republican establishment à la Goldwater, journalists turned to concerns about Trump’s lack of mental fitness for office with the expectation that such concerns would ultimately have a similar effect as they did on Goldwater, and lead the public to consider him unfit for office. Yet, Trump continued to surprise journalists, Republicans, and members of the public by winning the nomination and ultimately becoming president of the United States.
Trumpism as Twenty-First Century McCarthyism

Following Trump’s presidential win, journalists leveraged the historical analogy of McCarthyism, or the persecution of innocent, often elite individuals, on spuriously ideological grounds (popularized by the late Senator Joseph McCarthy), to warn against the dangers of Trumpism and to call out McCarthy and Trump’s symbiotic relationship with the press corps as well as the “objective” journalism that fueled the leaders’ demagogic tendencies. In other words, journalists invoked the ghost of Joseph McCarthy to warn their fellow journalists and the public that history was about to repeat itself unless Trump’s rise was examined critically, analytically, and rigorously.

Upholding Cultural Authority by Holding onto Watergate

Journalistic references to Watergate dramatically increased the longer Trump spent time in office. Journalists invoked Watergate to remind each other and the public that they’ve been in this position before and have an important role to play in ensuring Trump’s presidency is evaluated and investigated by hard-hitting reporting. Through their use of local and durational modes of interpretation they were able to reassert their cultural authority by arguing that President Trump’s time in office would eventually end like Nixon’s—an end which journalists helped to facilitate through their investigative and persistent reporting on the Watergate scandal.

As hostility from Trump increased, journalists invoked the myth of Watergate to inspire the next generation of journalists. The day after Donald Trump was elected president, Columbia University journalism professor Ari Goldman reminded his stunned journalism students that America had been here before with the election of Nixon. Like Trump, Goldman said, Nixon “was an ardent foe of press freedom. He wiretapped journalists’ phones, unleashed the Internal Revenue Service on them, and featured them prominently on his ‘enemies list.’” Goldman told his students that, “Nixon won by a landslide that night…but most important…He was forced to resign less than two years later because of two young and smart reporters at The Washington Post.” By leveraging Watergate in this way, Goldman reiterated the myth of journalism in Watergate, or the belief that journalists alone brought down the former president and the same could occur with Trump.
Seeking Calm in Chaos

Utilizing historical analogies can be reassuring to the public because it suggests an ending that is predictable. Such reassurance may reduce visceral discomfort of the citizenry, but can also be problematic for the public imaginary because it suggests a knowable ending. Analogies which view the past as static can prevent individuals from fully anticipating and imagining a future that is different than the past. As a result, individuals may become complacent because they are comforted by the belief that the patterns of the past will occur in the present if they just wait long enough for them to appear. Such thinking is dangerous because it can result in a failure to imagine.

The ferocious cacophony that Trump constructs and wields through his tweets and Trumpisms serves to inculcate fear and anxiety and squash space for imagination and an ability to know oneself in temporal reality. In the media’s race to keep up, they fall back on their ingrained tendency to search for historical analogies to current events. Rather than “looking for the future in the misty past…we should be looking for it in the inchoate patterns of the present.”

A 10-Step Plan to Reimagine Journalism to Save Democracy

If journalists are going to have even a slim shot of upholding their watchdog role amidst an unprecedented hostile environment in the United States, where physical and verbal attacks are occurring against journalists with increasing frequency by Trump and his cronies, as well as a broader war waged against the notion of truth, journalists and supporters of journalism need to take the next 10 steps.

1. Urgently create a new business model that does not rely on advertising to be successful. Separating commercial imperatives from the selling of salacious spectacle will serve to enhance the public’s trust in media because journalistic coverage will inform the public about critical and urgent issues necessary for robust public debate.
2. Increase diversity in the newsroom through creative partnerships with foundations, which could sponsor fellowships to introduce and support journalists from different socio-economic, gender, racial, geographic, and political backgrounds.

3. Foster greater collaboration between “liberal” and “right” legacy media (e.g. The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal) by facilitating an exchange between opinion columnists on a monthly basis. Doing so would increase diversity of thought and ideological perspectives for readers, while still maintaining high standards of quality journalism.

4. Reassess traditional journalistic norms of objectivity and balance in light of their contribution to the rise of the destructive phenomenon of Trumpism. Such a reassessment could occur through the creation of a working group within the auspices of the Society for Professional Journalists (SPJ) and could inform SPJ’s Code of Ethics.

5. Motivate and encourage technology companies and platforms (e.g. Facebook, Google, etc.) to support local journalism efforts by appealing to the concepts of human rights in business and public responsibility.

6. Foster the open-source creation of technology tools that journalists and their sources can use for communication so they don’t have to rely on proprietary software from companies incorporated in the United States, which are subjected to national security letters (NSLs) accompanied by gag orders.

7. Open more bureaus in rural places throughout the United States to increase diversity of coverage and thought and facilitate opportunities for people who have been ignored to have their voices heard. Simultaneously encourage journalists to reflect critically on how they represent and give voice to diverse populations in order to avoid obscuring the environment and the people in it.

8. Continue to support fact-checking on platforms to decrease the dissemination and believability of fake news.

9. Partner with non-profit organizations like Free Press to take the net neutrality fight, which the FCC recently voted to squash, to Congress and the courts. By acting to retain a free and open internet, news organizations are helping to ensure access to
information and freedom of expression to all individuals; not just those who can afford it.

10. Keep historical context in news articles, but work to avoid an overreliance on historical analogies, which can stifle creativity and prevent imagination of potential futures.

Toward New Imagination in Journalism

While these actions are crucial to reimagine journalism to save democracy, it is essential that the media change their journalism into “an agent of prospective memory” to remind readers and the broader public what needs to be done. Media could move beyond their agenda-setting function to provide “reminders of collective commitments, promises, and intentions” and provide a “to-do list” of what could be done. Tying prospective memory to imagination could be an important way for journalists to move beyond limited historical analogies to more accurately and creatively encapsulate the chaotic and embryonic patterns of the present and to provide space for change amidst the confusing and deliberate cacophony of Trumpism(s). Doing so could pave a way for journalists to give “presence and visibility to issues and people when information, images, or visible developments are not available” and thus more accurately and comprehensively articulate our current temporal reality and allow us to imagine a different future.

Notes


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No More English Medium-
Hindi Medium:
Getting Hindi and English
Journalism on the Same Page

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Abstract
English-language media in India retains and exercises an outsized power that not
only carries forward a colonial legacy, but also contributes to a balkanized media
sphere. This manifesto argues for and imagines a way out of the entrenched language
divides within Indian media, calling for at the very least a merger of English and
Hindi language news media online. I argue that establishing parity between languages
within newsrooms and on news websites will open a third space that unburdens
English of some of its immense privilege in the production and distribution of news.
Language is how we traverse the world, and multilingual news could speak to and for
a wider group of Indians, transcending some boundaries and creating more common
ground.

Keywords
India, English, language politics, third space, news media

It’s 25 years almost to the day that Babri Masjid was demolished, 25 years to the day
when the foundational fiction of a secular India was systematically dismantled, brick
by brick.

The pace of preparations in the weeks leading up to it was frenetic. Two lakh¹ Kar
Sevaks poured into Ayodhya. The Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Rashtriya
Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) handed them pickaxes, hammers, and rope, and then
showed them how to raze a 15th century mosque to the ground. Just to be sure they
were up to the task, they even did a little practice run on an 18th century dargah a few
days before the main event. The ever-obliging state, Congress-led for what it’s worth, absented itself, hiding behind the reassurances that this was to be a “symbolic” event.\(^2\)

Instead, in a decidedly material fashion on December 6\(^{th}\) 1992, over six short hours, egged on by Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leaders, armed and organized by the Sangh Parivar, the Kar Sevaks pushed and shoved\(^3\) and toppled one prevailing narrative of who we were, and ushered in a whole new one, one of a Hindu Rashtra.

25 years on, we all bear witness to the aftermath: Brand New Histories.\(^4\) Love Jihad.\(^5\) Beef Lynchings.\(^6\)

The writers of this new narrative of India had been at work for years, decades really. Occasionally they would irrupt into the national consciousness but mostly they tinkered and toiled on their myth-making away from the spotlight. The national press either missed them or misrepresented them. The very day of the demolition, the *Times of India* and the *Indian Express* reassuringly reported that the shrine would not be stormed, that the people assembling in Ayodhya, with their saffron headbands and demands for a temple to Ram, would make a ruckus but then sense would prevail.\(^7\) The center would hold.

But that was the national press, and by the national, of course, I mean the English press. Because the Hindi papers told a different story, one of the inevitability of the coming destruction. In fact, on the day of, they said the only protection the mosque could hope to have would have been from Lord Ram himself.\(^8\)

It wasn’t just that the Hindi papers knew what the English papers didn’t. It was that they had come to champion the cause of the Hindu nationalists, exaggerating or fabricating reports, stirring up communal frenzy.\(^9\) As the Ram Janmabhoomi movement gathered steam, Hindi newspapers became Hindu newspapers, locating a common enemy in the secular, liberal state, one that seemed to deny them indigenous culture in favor of high-minded modernity. Driven by their sense of exclusion, they asserted an essentialist identity marrying Hindi and Hindu. It was an insurrection against the reigning order, and the reigning order spoke English.
25 years on, we have not closed the distance between the Hindi and English publics. In fact, the dynamics that took a divided public and created an even more divided polity remain ever present. For those of us who raise cries of “not in my name”, we need to understand how we got here, reckon with the power of language and our specific language of power, so we can find new ways to tell stories about who we are and what India is.

The Language of Power

India was always going to have a language problem. That much was readily apparent all through the anti-colonial struggle. The European nationalisms that may have served as models for us had unifying languages in which they could craft a shared narrative of nationhood. How would we speak to each other, collectively tell our story, when we all spoke in different tongues? We had no language that could claim a majority of speakers. Hindi offered a plurality, but how would we cohere a sense of national identity for the remaining 60% of the country? And if it was going to be Hindi, which Hindi would reign supreme – the plainspoken colloquial Hindi that Gandhi preferred or the Sanskritized high-Hindi that the RSS advocated for? And what of Urdu, with its whiff of the Mughal empire? What place could it have? Gandhi and Tagore also famously tussled over the place of English in India, how it could serve the independence movement and then an independent nation. But it was Nehru’s narrative that won the day post-1947.

English was the solution

The idea of India that Nehru authored was one of a syncretic nation-state that had encountered and absorbed multiple empires, cultures and religions, like an ancient palimpsest. There was a mystical unity in our apparent diversity that wove together these plural strands in a beautiful tapestry. While the *Ek Chidiya, Anek Chidiya* story had great power against the British bird catcher we were going to defeat by working together, what then? What of governance?

The deal they struck, after much language politicking, was to allow separate linguistic identities in each of the states, and then technically, but only technically, Hindi would be how we spoke across states. But as a practical matter, the lure of English was too strong. The emphasis on central economic planning meant bureaucracy had a fundamental role to play in nation-building, and the elite bureaucrats in Delhi relied
on English. Politically as well, retreating to English as the default allowed us to paper over a lot of divisions. The particularities of region, caste or religion, all of which had been central to the language debates, all could seem equally remote from an English perch.

It was a handy shortcut but not without its costs. While English shored up its position in an independent India, drawing on both its functional and symbolic power, the bilingualism of the nationalist movement began to wither away. In the lead up to the demolition of the masjid, English media, with its inherently limited reach and its technocratic approach to politics and policymaking, carried and conveyed the colonial legacy of subordination. In its status, substance and style, the gulf between English media and Hindi media widened, and in that chasm Hindi media and Hindu nationalists formed an alliance of the aggrieved.

**English media was national**

Carrying over its privileged position from the colonial era, English-language media retained its higher status. English newspapers reached a fraction of the population but were inherently “national”, while Hindi press, with a far wider reach, was relegated to the “regional” or “vernacular”. English media spoke to the elite within the state and the business class that depended on the patronage of the developmentalist state, and as such was entrenched and invested in the status quo, unable or unwilling to apprehend the change to come.

**English media was rational**

Religion proved tricky for English papers to cover. They were committed to a rational, critical discourse, concerned with planned economic progress – the stuff that mattered, the stuff which was going to transcend these irrational primordial differences. For editors and reporters in and of Delhi, the Ram Janmabhoomi movement was something “out there” literally and figuratively. What did they make of Ram? They took solace in a historical approach. Did Ram exist? Where and when had he reigned? Had he, in fact, been born in Ayodhya? It was either a sociological inquiry or a matter of communal politics leading the masses astray, with no avenue to explore the lived religiosity that resonated with so many.
**English media was professional**

English language news served a critical-rational elite public, which meant they adopted the professional norms of Western journalism. They emphasized objectivity as a core value, the voice from nowhere, once again underlining their remove from the remainder of the country. They sought out the official source – the court rulings and the legal developments. They went to the official spokespersons for the BJP, who offered the moderate statements, and failed to capture the more extreme, and more accurate, rhetoric of the activist VHP leaders.\(^{21}\)

Taken together, English media missed the magnitude of the threat, and clung to a belief in the existing liberal political order, even as it was being undone. English and the Hindi press presented different worlds, and operated in these worlds differently. While English media was state-centric, deriving its power and legitimacy from its proximity to the capital, Hindi media was socio-centric, deriving its legitimacy from a proximity to “the people”. Hindi news was not written at a remove. It could be objective, but it could also employ some dramatic flourish. Religion as a subject was close to life, and after all the Ram Janmabhoomi movement was a movement of the Hindi belt. Derisively described by English language journalists as “cunning small town businessmen in safari suits,” many Hindi journalists were not paid regularly and were expected to wheel and deal for the economic survival of their papers, which made them pay close attention to local power formations and learn how to work with(in) them.\(^{22}\)

Enter the BJP and its supporters, who were able to make deft use of both English and Hindi language media. English media provided the foil. They welcomed any criticism because it offered a counterpoint to rally supporters against. And because English media saw the movement as a monolith, missing the nuances and divisions, their charges were easy to dismiss or disprove. Hindi media, they wooed – free lunches, political favors and a pride of place at events and rallies – and secured favorable coverage.\(^{23}\)

**Language Today**

A quarter of a century later, much about our country and its media has changed. The neoliberal reforms of the early ’90s, together known as LPG (Liberalization, Privatization and Globalization), have created a cacophonous media environment.\(^{24}\)
We’ve gone from our solitary government-run Doordarshan to, at last count, 800 TV channels, half of which are purportedly news. And we’re all familiar with the remarkable story of growth for India’s newspaper industry – over 90,000 newspapers and continued growth in vernacular languages.

So, what of the dynamic between the English and the vernacular media today? It is true that English and vernacular media do not exist independent of each other, but rather in relation to one another. In fact, the dynamics of commercialism, corporatization and a growing concentration of ownership are present across both regional and national media, vernacular and English media. And together, we are all in thrall to Brand India. If Hindi media could once claim to be “close to the people”, the people has come to mean something quite different. Rural India and poor Indians don’t feature much in our billboards and TV screens. The consumerist good life, championed by the urban middle class, propelled by a technology industry – that is the dream of New India regardless of language.

But access to that dream remains inequitable. Here we focus on language, but language of course does not stand divorced from the structures and strictures of oppression that compose India. That English media is also an upper-caste media, for instance, is neither happenstance nor without consequence.

Globalization continued what colonialism first wrought, the reification of English as the path to economic advancement, as the path to progress. And in the realm of media, it still incites an antagonism. In Bangalore, our most global of cities, it is present in the tension between “upmarket hi-fi English readers” set against the “common Kannada man”. Or consider for a moment, the invective around Lutyens’ media. The charge of Lutyens’ media is mobilized in a wide variety of ways. You can be corrupt. You can be a communist. You can be pseudo-secular. You can be a “presstitute”. The exact flavor may vary, but whomsoever is denounced as Lutyens’ media, you can bet they speak English. It is again a charge against the proximity to power that is encoded in the language itself.

The Power of Language(s)

What we talk about when we talk about language is fundamentally about who communicates, with whom, and how, and, by the same measure, who doesn’t.
divisions in our media matter, because they impact who tells which stories to whom. In what may at first seem banal or benign, stories about airports – those are for the English folks$^{38}$ – while stories about finding chutney in China – those are for the Hindi folks.$^{39}$ (Never mind, for now, the many stories that don’t get told at all. That’s the subject of another contention, for another day.)

Because language is how you access the world, how you traverse space, it is also fundamentally about how you possess and wield power.$^{40}$ And the undue power and privilege we accorded to English, and its pernicious effects on our polity, is undeniable. If we can acknowledge it, can we begin to address it? Of course, the conundrum of 1947 remains: how?

The solution I propose is about dismantling the lie at the heart of any essentialist ideology. Neither Hindi nor Hindu can make a convincing claim to all of India, just as exclusive claims to English have always rung suspect (and more than a little pretentious). We are not a monolingual public.$^{41}$ If Nehru was right about anything, although that also gets more dangerous to say everyday too$^{42}$, he was right about our stubborn plurality.

The solution to the world riven with divisions will not lie with a master language that would magically transcend the social distance between us. The only way we make progress on the unfinished promise of a multicultural India is if we grapple with the immense differences amongst us. English media has been laden with its own self-importance, and Hindi media burdened by its slight. I propose a third space, an interstitial of sorts, that would operate online.$^{43}$ This wouldn’t be a space absent of difference, but one that foregrounds the differences and asks us to engage with them.

I want to start with online media because its embedded values align with the vision of a syncretic India, because it would be easy, and because I cannot see a reason not to.

Many digital outlets have English versions – the official versions – and then separate Hindi or Urdu versions. When any of these sites feature video content, the language can be an informal mishmash, reflective of the way we speak. But when we write, we unthinkingly follow the model of print, and then television. Why are Scroll$^{44}$ and Satyagraha$^{45}$ different websites with separate staff? Separate channels of production
are firstly founded on an erroneous assumption that the channels of reception will also be separate, and, secondly, they only serve to exacerbate the divides that do exist.

My vision is radically simple. Merge newsrooms and news products. *Youth Ki Awaaz*, a citizen journalism website, has already pioneered a workable model for this. They wanted to value people’s voices and didn’t see how you could do that without also valuing their language. So, Hindi and English stories appear side by side. Neither is the default setting.

For reporters, my vision means English and Hindi journalists would work together, able to cover more ground, talk to more people, different people, and examine issues and events from angles they do not possess alone. Perhaps in time, they would forge a new newsroom culture less tied to the provincial attitudes that plague us today.

For the readership, it means a single picture of the news of the day, written in Hindi or English, depending on the language the reporter prefers, or perhaps the language their sources prefer. Rather than report the same story twice, with markedly different sensibilities, write them once, but offer a translation into the other language.

It isn’t difficult. Well, at least not technically so.

Nor is it without precedent. When Gandhi and Tagore tussled over the place of English, they spoke to and from Gujarat and Bengal respectively, but also the wider intellectual world. Our Hindi poets taught English literature. Or perhaps we can think of Munshi Premchand, whose *Godaan*, the apogee of Hindi literature, was first outlined in English.

As it happens, it’s a novel about donating a cow.

Here is where I admit that this will not fix what is broken. In part, because less than a third of the country is even online and able to access my proposed digital third space. And, also, because what was broken was a lie to begin with, a utopian lie where a benevolent managerial state would transcend differences through economic progress, making the messy world of politics unnecessary. Language and politics, each separately and enmeshed as they inevitably are, are messy and unavoidable.
There won’t be an easy way out to find or forge an India that works. But this would be a first step, a move to start with what you can, your own profession, your own privilege. Like the man said, if we could change ourselves....

It is a small but urgent first step, in the face of a problem that looms larger every day.

When I think back to Babri Masjid, there are very few images of that day, and hardly any of the demolition itself. That day reporters were assaulted, their cameras smashed, their lives threatened. 25 years ago, the planners and the perpetrators wanted no evidence of their crime. Today, the latest chapters of the Hindutva narrative are awash in evidence. Photos and videos of the brutality collected and shared by the brutalizers themselves.

And once again, in this climate of mounting intolerance and hate, language remains central to the notions of identity. In December 2017, in Uttar Pradesh a Muslim man newly elected as Comptroller wanted to take his oath of office in Urdu. After all, it is the second official language of the state after Hindi. For that temerity, he was threatened and beaten by a faction of the Hindu right, and then for good measure, arrested by the Aligarh police for “trying to outrage religious feelings”.

That’s our reality today.

Not least because, it has the support or the silent assent of the highest levels of power. Since the BJP rode the Modi wave into a majority government, it would be hard to argue that speech hasn’t been chilled. From arrests, to attacks, to assassinations, journalism in India is increasingly in peril. Once again, though, it is necessary to disambiguate whose journalism it is that’s in peril. It is rarely national media that comes under threat. Journalists in Chhattisgarh are run out of town. Telugu channels have been yanked off the air. Malayalee journalists are not allowed into the Kerala High Court.

Multilingual news, because Hindi and English would only be a start, may seem woefully inadequate as a response, but it is simultaneously an attempt to address the balkanization of our politics and our media. Our digital third space wouldn’t just address the English-vernacular divide, but also the national-regional divide, allowing
as to map new relations within India. What happens there, in Tamil Nadu or Odisha, could be reframed as what happens here, in India.

The physical and social distance cannot be erased, but it can be negotiated. And a digital third space could be the beginnings of the process of building a new foundation for India, brick by brick. It won’t solve all our problems, but at least it’ll help us understand them.

References


Notes

1 200,000
3 On the day, one of the BJP leaders present exhorted the Kar Sevaks to “Ek Dhaka Aur do, Babri Masjid Tod Do”, which translates to “Give it one more push, break the mosque” but in rhyme.
8 Agi headline on December 6th, Viradhit Dhanche ka ab Ram hi Rakhwala (Only Ram Can Protect the Disputed Structure Now) in Rajagopal, 2001
14 Jawaharlal Nehru, The Discovery of India (Delhi; New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).
16 Short animated film played on Doordarshan for many years about the importance of a united India, despite our differences. This was one of many such campaigns.
18 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
37 Lutyens Delhi refers to the planned, central part of New Delhi with government buildings and astronomical real estate.
38 Ibid.
49 The fervor around “cow protection” is a current iteration of the culture wars that has led to a number of deaths of Muslim.
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Downgrading Data and Opening Up the Democratic Party

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Abstract

The U.S. Democratic Party’s over-reliance on consultants and technocrats over the last several decades has created a chasm between the party’s leadership and its voters, the consequences of which have only begun to be revealed via the 2016 election. Through the adoption of digital technologies and fetishization of data above all, it has centralized its strategies in the hands of an elite class of overconfident political experts and number-crunchers whose practices are characterized by the rapid platformization and professionalization of party processes. Placing these changes in the context of the party’s long history of control, this manifesto critiques these practices, particularly the use of predictive analytics and the inability to see volunteers beyond tools to gather and input data. It argues that the party needs to focus on collaborative, grassroots party-building activities and leadership development of local volunteers. Its focus must shift from one of control to one that encourages and emphasizes contention and pluralism as positive aspects of democracy rather than as problems to be obscured or controlled.

Keywords

platforms, parties, technocracy, data, politics

The Democratic Party is in denial. It has spent a decade practicing a religion that has blinded it from the changing priorities of the electorate and from the needs of state parties. In service to this religion, it has centralized its strategies in the hands of an elite class of overconfident political consultants and number-crunchers who, like their financial brothers and sisters who ten years ago brought about the collapse of the housing market and started a global recession, have used complex models to create a political bubble that has now burst, bringing the Democratic Party into a precarious position that will take years to repair. This religion is political technocracy
and its basic tenets are that the electorate is a puzzle to be solved and that it can only be solved by specialist experts. One need only compare the expansion of Democratic and Republican digital and data firms over the last decade to see the rapid overdevelopment of a class of elite consultants aimed at servicing the party with hundreds of data and analytics products. The practices of these elites are characterized by both data fetishism – in which “techniques and numbers are... put on a pedestal for what they are rather than what they do” – and the rapid platformization – in which practices are consolidated via software products that “become the nexus of an ecosystem of partners that are dependent on its product” – of party processes. While these specific practices are relatively recent phenomena, they are in line with the long-standing tradition of political parties subverting their own democratic rhetoric with systems that prioritize the decisions of political insiders over those of voters.

**A History of Control**

The embrace by the Democratic National Committee (DNC) of technocratic practices – in which the decisions of elites and experts are valued above popular democracy grows out of wider party traditions of both over-centralization of processes and attempts to exert control over party members and partisans. Since the 1970s, the party has resisted popular attempts to wrest control of the party’s nomination process from the party elite which sees its own expertise as invaluable. Nowhere is this clearer than in the continued existence of superdelegates to the Democratic National Convention. Superdelegates – party insiders who vote at the Convention but are not bound to a popular vote – were created in 1980 to return some power over the nominations process back from primary voters to party elites, allowing them a technocratic failsafe in the event that they find a popular candidate to be undesirable. Despite the fact that superdelegates have only impacted the outcome of a nominations process in one election held over three decades ago, the party has not moved to get rid of them despite intense pressure from partisans and elected officials. And yet, in the current political and media environment, it is implausible to imagine the party elite replacing the candidate who enters the convention with the most pledged delegates with its preferred candidate. Such an act would undoubtedly be seen as antidemocratic and the party would incur a rapid exodus of angry voters. As such, superdelegates only exist as a symbol – a reminder
to the party’s more ideological members of who truly controls the party. They serve no practical purpose other than to confer current and former elected officials or high-level party members with status. This status comes at the price of the controversies and legitimacy issues that emerged during the 2008 and 2016 primaries that, along with other issues like data fetishism, continue to threaten the party’s viability.

Data Fetishism

After Hillary Clinton’s 2016 loss to Donald Trump, party elites and pundits published numerous reflections, analysis, and postmortems about how the party lost a general election to an inexperienced demagogue who bucked his own party’s long-standing positions on issues related to trade, foreign policy, and social security, while simultaneously making platitudes to long-standing rival nations and fending off several accusations of sexual misconduct. Rampant finger-pointing emerged between the Clinton campaign who blamed the quality of the party’s data and the DNC’s current and former data gurus who defended the data and accused the Clinton team of building inferior statistical models with said data. Both these arguments depict a party engaging in data fetishism, in which data is seen as inherently objective and true. If the Clinton campaign did indeed ignore states like Wisconsin and Michigan, two states that proved decisive for Trump, because her analytics saw it as waste of resources, it is irrelevant whether the raw data was the problem or whether the statistical models left out key variables. The problem is that predictive analytics should not have been driving that type of decision. Predictive analytics is a misnomer, particularly in the context of a high-risk scenario like a nationwide election involving a high-variable population like the U.S. electorate.

Predictive analytics – in which statistics are combined with large data sets, machine learning techniques, and algorithms – has exploded in the last decade across a variety of fields including marketing, financial services, and risk management. According to the Harvard Business Review, predictive analytics has brought about significant improvements in fields like supply chain management and marketing. But U.S. politics is not a supply chain. A failure in predictive analytics might lead an auto
manufacturer to produce an excess of vehicles that need to be sold at cost. The losers of elections simply go home and their constituents pay the price.

In a 2012 article in *Wired*, statistician Nassim N. Taleb, the author of the book *Black Swan*, a popular work on predictive failure, argued that “big data, and the many variables involved, can easily lead to spurious relationships and prediction errors.” The Obama campaign built a huge predictive analytics system that was used to drive fundraising targets, decide where to purchase advertising, and predict turnout. It is this last category, predicting turnout, that failed Clinton and, based on Taleb’s concerns, very well could have failed Obama. And yet, the Party’s failings have done little to change the minds of the technocratic political class.

While the DNC and the Clinton campaign have looked to blame each other’s data processes for the recent electoral failings, the Democratic consultant class has been busy writing think-pieces to shore up support for data-driven campaigns that might have diminished as a result of Clinton’s unexpected loss. A recent piece entitled “An Open Letter to DNC Chair Candidates on the Future of Tech for Our Party,” by two former DNC Directors of Technology who have since moved into the consultant class, ensures party leaders of the value of the party’s digital infrastructure and recommends the party “take a leadership role in figuring out the next generation of opinion research so Democrats at all levels have accurate intelligence on what voters are thinking.” They also recommend the creation of a Democratic Tech Fellows program and an increased focus on promoting the party’s smartphone apps. From their data fetishist perspective, data-related failures in the 2016 election were the failures of technological systems, and the only solutions to them are better technological systems.

A review of the DNC’s 2017 job postings makes it clear they are continuing to double down on data. The job description for a ‘Data Science Lead’ position states the Democratic Tech department’s mission “to optimize the future of the country.” A recent interview with Raffi Krikorian, the party’s new Chief Technology Officer who was hired away from Uber, touts the party’s new investments in real-time analytics, artificial intelligence, machine learning, and data science tools. The party is pruning the tree of its technocratic practices without realizing the roots are weak and
rotted out. Its leaders are blinded by their continued faith in engineering and complex systems. As such, all of their solutions to the party’s failures involve creating systems and maintaining the philosophy that data must be the nexus of political campaigns. One of the primary ways in which they evangelize this philosophy nationally is via platforms.

**Platforms**

The processes of identifying and reaching out to voters via phone calls and door-to-door canvassing were historically overseen by the state party in concert with candidate campaigns. This was not without its problems. Campaign staffers who worked for John Kerry’s presidential campaign in 2004 explained how volunteers and staffers canvassing on election day were going to every house on the block attempting to turn out Democrats but likely turning out many Republicans in the process. By contrast, the turnout machine engineered that year by Republican strategist Karl Rove for George W. Bush and the Republican Party was lauded by pundits as the most sophisticated in modern history. As a response to this, the DNC adopted a nationwide data regime in 2005 that centralized in Washington many of the field practices and voter data previously left to state parties. The cornerstone of this project was contracting with the Voter Activation Network (now NGP VAN) to create Votebuilder, a nationwide voter database for tracking individual contacts with voters and generating maps and lists for contacting and turning out voters.

While it is without question that Votebuilder has resulted in more efficient campaigns, any digital platform “imposes specific constraints on the communication process.” In the case of VoteBuilder, its affordances and its limitations are one in the same. It is inherently about narrowing the electorate and placing voters into baskets. One basket might contain seniors likely to be concerned about Medicare, while another contains millennials with concerns about student loans. Using these baskets in messaging campaigns can help campaigns connect with voters. But there are intra-party power dynamics in the process of organizing voters into baskets. A basket containing people who supported Obama in 2008 but say they plan to vote for Romney in 2012 is placed aside by the campaign, and regardless of whether people in it might still support other Democrats on the ticket, its voters are likely to
be excluded from voter turnout efforts. As such, the path to victory of down-ballot candidates is secondary to the needs of the candidate at the top of the ticket whose campaign generally controls the “coordinated campaign,” a partnership of all party campaigns that come together for a large turnout effort in the final days of an election cycle.

Persuasion campaigns are also problematic. Campaign staffers and volunteers spend six months prior to elections going door-to-door querying voters about who they plan to support and what issues are of concern to them. Hesitant voters are re-contacted a few weeks before the election with a talking point ready for that voter’s previously stated concern. If the voter says they plan to support the candidate in question, the database is updated and the campaign’s data team sees this movement as a successful persuasion. Whether this voter would have ended up supporting the Democratic on their own is irrelevant. They have been “persuaded” by the low-level campaign staffer and are included in the aggregate metrics that campaign managers obsess over. If their stated concern was not one of the eight to ten pre-determined choices available to the field organizer, it likely never makes its way to anyone in the campaign concerned with public opinion or messaging. Even if the staffer writes it down, at best it ends up in the database’s “notes” section which is rarely, if ever, looked at in any aggregate way. This is both a problem of the platform – in that information is lost in the process of narrowing complex voter opinions into simple categories – and another example of data fetishism as managers ignore data that cannot easily be quantified and plugged into complex models. The task-centered aspects of the platform (generating phone calls and door-to-door canvasses), combined with the post-campaign exodus of the staffers who manage it, also fail to produce creative leaders ready to build and maintain the party between elections.

**Party Building**

Though the public shock of Clinton’s loss brought a barrage of scrutiny to the strategies of both the Clinton campaign and the Democratic Party writ large, its electoral problems pre-dated the 2016 campaign. The previous six years (2010 – 2015) saw the party take repeated losses in Congress while its control of both state legislatures and governorships reached their lowest points in almost 100 years. The thousands of volunteers that worked on Obama’s 2008 and 2012 campaigns were
not melded into any kind of party structure between elections. The number of registered Democrats nationwide fell from 38% to 36% during Obama’s first year in office, reaching a low of 32% in 2015\(^{14}\). Effectively, Obama was able to win voters but unable to develop partisans.

Recent articles by a key member of Obama’s 2008 new media team\(^{15}\) – tasked with creating digital content to tell the stories of Obama and his supporters – and one of his 2008 senior policy advisors\(^{16}\) explain how Obama’s grassroots organization was “mothballed”\(^{17}\) after the 2008 election, squandering opportunities for a greater digital-based movement to rally public support for Obama’s agenda. For them, the fact that the movement-style enthusiasm of Obama’s supporters petered out in the absence of any post-campaign direction is one of the great failures of Obama and the DNC under his leadership. It is also completely in line with the technocratic ideology of the party and its embrace of platforms.

In his recent works on “platform capitalism”, Nick Srnicek argues that “data is the basic resource that drives...firms, and it is data that gives them their advantage over competitors. Platforms...are designed as a mechanism for extracting and using that data.”\(^{18}\) Applying this to the structure of political campaigns, volunteers are not people with individual identities and creativity, but rather an extension of the platform itself. Volunteers are widgets – applications or components of an interface that enable a user to perform or access a service\(^{19}\) – that provide access to additional volunteers (widgets) via their personal networks and access to voters (data) via phone calls and door-to-door canvassing. In her book, *From Widgets to Digits*, Katherine Stone observed similar dynamics in the workplace as employers shift from a focus on employee longevity to one of employee flexibility, discouraging long-term attachment between employees and firms\(^{20}\). While firms might realize some tangible benefits from an increase in short-term or temporary employees, parties do not. They must seize the opportunity to channel some of the excitement and enthusiasm of campaign volunteers into building and expanding the local party structure.

Following the 2016 election, such an opportunity emerged around the progressive activists who are often referred to as the “Sanders Wing” of the Democratic Party.
This group maintains an enthusiasm for Sanders and progressive politics but many of its members remain angry at the DNC for what they see as the rigging of the 2016 primary campaign toward Hillary Clinton. Limited efforts to repair the relationship between the party and Sanders’ supporters have included a “Unity Tour,” in which DNC Chair Tom Perez and Sanders toured the country doing rallies together, and a “Unity Commission” including representatives of both campaigns, set up by the national party to address his supporters’ grievances and recommend changes to party processes. This commission recently released recommendations about voter registration for primaries and transparency in elections for state party leadership, as well as a 60% reduction in superdelegates. And yet, the Party has taken steps to neutral the efficacy of these projects.

In April, Perez dumped the bulk of Sanders’ allies from party leadership positions. The rules and bylaws committee that will eventually decide whether or not the recommendations of the Unity Commission are adopted is stacked with long-time party insiders who will likely be hesitant to adopt the commission’s reforms. Additionally, a recent report in Wired revealed that left-leaning Democrats, who have come together under the moniker “Justice Democrats” to challenge incumbent centrist Democrats in primary elections, have been refused access to the Party’s voter database. An Illinois state party official was quoted as saying, “Why would you want to give it to outsiders who may or may not be Democrats?” Democrats (and Republicans) have a long history of withholding resources from potential primary challengers that long predates voter databases. Doing so in this case makes it clear that while party leaders may want Sanders’ supporters in their coalition, they want it on their terms only.

Towards a More Democratic Party

The Democratic Party needs urgently to exorcise itself of the technocratic culture that is creating blind spots in its perceptions of voters, discouraging new participation in local and statewide parties, excluding minority views, undermining its legitimacy, and losing elections. It needs to embrace contention and pluralism as inherent and positive aspects of democracy rather than as problems to be obscured or controlled.
Over the course of the last decade, the party has elevated predictive analytics and data science to the point where it plays an unsustainable role in party decision-making. Like the supposed whiz kids who crashed the financial markets in 2008, the Democratic Party’s data consultants have a faith in these systems that, given their continued evangelism even after the 2016 election, can only be described as hubris. The use of predictive analytics should be relegated to activities, like fundraising and making ad buys, where the level of risk is appropriately balanced with the potential fallibility of these practices. Predictive analytics should not be used to make large-scale strategic decisions. Critical safeguards, such as training of staff in the limitations of these systems, should be implemented to protect against future over-reliance on analytics.

The Democratic Party has generally failed at motivating its voting base in the absence of presidential elections. Votebuilder, the party’s platform for its voter contact programs, should not be the be-all and end-all of a party’s ground game. Throughout campaigns and between election cycles, it should be replaced with a robust effort to develop community leaders who engage with voters about local issues, a practice that is simply impossible to do well using campaign organizers who parachute into localities for six months and leave after election day. The party must encourage volunteers to develop into party activists rather than squandering their presence during election cycles by thinking of them only as widgets that can be set aside between campaigns. Following campaigns that draw new volunteer talent, the party should reach out to its newly committed volunteers with opportunities to get involved locally or to participate in online activities that expand their experience with the party. Encouraging nascent leaders to participate in such projects would help them develop as party members while also making sure the party is in touch with the views and priorities of its newest partisans.

This investment in party building should not solely be a conduit from localities back to the national party. In response to a long overdue need to build excitement and engagement for the party as a community institution rather than an organization that exists solely for its candidates and goes largely dormant between elections, the party should connect with nationwide and local interest groups and social movement
organizations both outside of and during election cycles. Democratic Party offices should be re-envisioned as community spaces where party members can connect with one another, and get information not only about the party and its candidates, but about events and opportunities with partner organizations like Planned Parenthood Action, BlackPAC, Indivisible, and Everytown for Gun Safety. This will not be without contention. An organization as large as the Democratic Party has many entrenched interests that may be resistant to a more open and inclusive party. However, ignoring battles between party interests that are already playing out in party conventions and in the media will not make them go away. Allowing them to play out at the local level may promote greater understanding between partisans and prevent issues from lying dormant until large-scale events like the presidential nomination process expose them.

The Democratic Party must also reduce its control over the primary process at the presidential level. The party leaders on the rules and bylaws committee need to admit that it will never be politically feasible to substitute their will for that of the millions of voters who cast ballots during the presidential primaries. Also, while there are no superdelegates in congressional, state and local elections, the party practice of protecting incumbents from intraparty challenges by providing them with resources – endorsements, money, and data access – amounts to the same problem and should be stopped.

Engagement with voters in primaries will help counter this trend and keep people engaged. Allowing challengers access to Votebuilder will engender goodwill between intra-party factions, and, despite handwringing from elites, will likely do little to counter the built-in advantages of incumbency. Primaries are one of the very few formal processes through which partisans express their values and exert themselves democratically in relation to their own party. Given the systematic entrenchment of the two parties and the related lack of viability of third parties in the U.S., parties have a public interest responsibility to be open, transparent, and malleable to the changing concerns of their constituents. Intra-party primary elections will act as a way to keep the views of representatives in line with those of their constituents. If incumbents are in line with the views of the voters they represent they will be much less likely to face such a challenge. There is indeed precedent for a party that both
has formal factions and functions properly. In the 1930s and 40s, some state parties had formal subgroups within the party that ran their own slates of candidates and pushed the party on specific legislation. Some current state parties already have such groups. For example, California has an active Progressive Caucus that, despite lacking a majority of state party members, earlier this year drafted and pushed the state party to adopt a resolution to outlaw “money bail” in the state court system due to its disproportionate impact on the poor. A subsequent bill is currently being debated in the California Legislature.

Many of these proposals require reconsidering the structure and practices of the Democratic Party. The party’s over-reliance on consultants and technocrats over the last several decades has created a chasm between the party’s leadership and its voters, whose true consequences have only begun to be revealed via the 2016 election. If the party wants to fight for the rights of those it claims to represent, it needs to abolish systems that exist to protect itself from its own voters, place leadership in the hands of diverse partisans at the state and local level, and create open systems that allow competing priorities to be represented by its members. Most importantly, it needs to reject its veneration of the technological and embrace democracy for what it is—collaborative, contentious, and unpredictable.

Notes

10 Whitaker and Hendler.
17 Sifry.
23 Lapowsky.

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“Look Up”:
The Cell Phone Manifesto

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Abstract

The world around us is slowly insulating itself through rapid technological advancements. At the forefront of this change is the onset of a dangerous smartphone addiction. As of 2017, 46% of Americans say they could not live without their smartphones, and this glaring statistic is the impetus behind this call to action to take steps towards cell phone regulation. With substantial scientific research, society is slowly beginning to understand the omnipresence of cell phone addiction; however, society has not yet fully understood the gravity of this issue. Excessive smartphone usage has shown linkages to other behavioral addictions and ultimately creates an imbalance in the brain. An intentional regulation of smartphone technology, especially for younger children and young adults, will prevent future generations from developing the same cell phone addiction and alleviate the numerous perils and side-effects that accompany the overuse of cellular phones.

Keywords

smartphone, addiction, regulation, behavioral addiction, technology

Put the phone down. Try to read the entirety of this piece without glancing, nay, touching a nearby cell phone. This may be an impossible ask, as adults on average touch their cell phones 2,617 times per day, but that’s just the “average user.” The top ten percent of extreme cell phone users touch their phone more than 5,400 times daily.1 Whether on the street, at the gym, in the classroom, on transportation, in the home, or beyond, take a moment to zoom out. Everyone in on their cell phones. For young adults especially, mobile devices cause more harm than benefits, both from a scientific and a social standpoint. Over 81% of American adults now own, and spend more than four hours a day on smartphones; the ways in which society interacts with
this “machinery” are therefore becoming increasingly important.² As technology becomes more and more advanced, society continues to grow more and more addicted to the physical device that is a cell phone. Since mobile phones have already embedded, solidified, and over-saturated themselves in everyday culture, where does one draw the line, before it’s too late? A rigorous regulation of smartphone technology, especially for younger children and young adults, will prevent future generations from developing the same cell phone addiction and alleviate the numerous perils and side-effects that accompany the overuse of cellular phones.

To begin with, let’s look at the general assertion that cell phones are harmful. It is important to present some of the different examples that provide context for such an assertion.

(i.) Cell phones interfere with everyday life. They have become a part of people’s routines, displacing previously made active time with scrolling and texting.

(ii.) Cell phones limit face to face interactions. The device stays glued to your hand and your eyes follow suit.

(iii.) Cell phones are distracting. As soon as the screen illuminates out of the corner of your eye, you tend to lose focus. Even in conversation, your phone takes precedence.

(iv.) Cell phones are lowering the age barrier to entry for media use. Children are substituting cell phone use for play and are increasingly active on social media.

(v.) Cell phones promote instant gratification. With high-speed internet features, rapid texting, flashy notifications and more, rapid cell phone use diminish values of patience. “Like! Click! Purchase! Share!” If one of these actions does not take place within seconds, is it even worth it anymore?

(vi.) Cell phones are health risks. Not only do the small screens cause eye strain, but they also affect sleep patterns, due to the blue light emitted, which can decrease levels of melatonin.³ In addition, cell phones emit radiofrequencies and cause back related problems, as
people tend to hunch over when operating their devices. In fact, there are more germs on the average cell phone than a toilet seat.\(^4\)

(vii.) Cell phones are an excuse: an excuse not to respond, an excuse not to show up, an excuse to avoid eye contact. Cell phones have become an excuse not to be present in any given situation.

(viii.) Cell phones limit physical activism. With the rapid diffusion of social media, our world has entered the sphere of “hashtag activism.” No longer is it necessary to be out in the trenches, protesting or campaigning for a movement, you can simply tweet or post the hashtag of the movement and feel that you have fully participated.

(ix.) Heavy use of cell phones has been linked to mental health problems.\(^5\) The more you hide behind your device, the more you prevent yourself from sustaining real relationships. In addition, the constant scrolling on social media sites can cause you to seek out ‘mood repair’ as the current culture of social media is to display only your most ‘perfect’ parts, hiding the full story of what you’re feeling or experiencing.

(x.) Cell phones are much like drugs: addicting and all-consuming. Research summarized below will uncover the linkages between cell phone use and other behavioral addictions.

With this list in mind, we can start to uncover the structural properties of cell phone addiction. Cell phones alone will soon become the most powerful and versatile tools routinely carried by ordinary people.\(^6\) Beyond the reasons presented above, substantial research now exists that show linkages between excessive cell phone use and other addictions. This research is important in realizing the gravity of the issue of cell phone addiction and in understanding the reasoning behind this call to regulate cell phones all together. Cell phones, first and foremost, change the way people walk. When pedestrians use cell phones, they experience reduced situation awareness, which increases unsafe behavior. This increased cognitive distraction is an example of a symptom that is often heard when examining effects of drugs on pedestrians.\(^7\) For example, walking and texting can interfere with working memory
and result in ‘walking errors.’ This dual-task has been found to impact executive function to the point where it may compromise safety.\(^8\)

In addition, young adults do not even realize their level of dependence on their cellular devices. Media use has become such an integral part of their day-to-day lives that cell phone addiction has become second nature. Emotional instability is related to problematic cell phone use as well, oftentimes causing individuals to turn to their cell phones as a means of coping.\(^9\) These, much like other substance addictions, the incessant checking of emails, surfing the web, tweeting, and sending of texts can potentially act as a mediator for a more unstable individual.\(^10\) These are actions to distract us from other daily challenges: to provide solace through the world that is open to us through our fingertips on a smartphone. This notion of ‘escapism’ through a device is problematic, because the alleviation of stress or anxiety through this obsessive cell phone use is only temporary for a user.\(^11\) This is a sentiment typically shared with drug abuse, as using drugs only provide a temporary feeling of relief for the user, before spiraling back into a bad place.

Beyond being used as a coping mechanism, cell phones are sometimes used compulsively, which is a trait found in other behavioral addictions.\(^12\) Younger people tend to experience a high sense of irritability when waiting for a response to a text message and describe the possibility of no cell phone access as “anxiety provoking.”\(^13\)

On the other hand, compulsive cell phone use can become a means of feeling socially connected to others. Young adults in particular tend to seek out reassurance of their social media identities through their phones, and these devices assist in facilitating young adults’ social lives.\(^14\) This need for validation can turn into social anxiety, which is another trait traced in other addictions. Cell phones are typically held in easily accessible places so that we can instantaneously reach for our phones to avoid direct communication with people around us. This difficulty of abstaining from looking at your cell phone in social situations is linked to compulsivity, again, found in most behavioral addictions.

Not only do young adults demonstrate dependence on their mobile devices, but they also experience attachment, due to the extreme proximity of their cell phones each day. Young adults constantly sleep beside their phones, operate them while driving,
and physically bring them, in hand, wherever they may go during the day. This attachment has caused young adults to experience “separation anxiety” when they are without their phones. Scientists even describe those who hyperventilate after realizing their phones are missing as having “nomophobia,” the fear of having no mobile device. All roads lead to addiction. A study examining the feeling of “separation anxiety” and cell phone use revoked another characteristic of a behavioral addiction. Mobile devices have come to symbolize more than just a cell phone. This attachment has been found to remain, even when the phone is in ‘silent mode,’ potentially giving cause to “phantom phone signals.” Phantom signals are benign hallucinations experienced by people who are addicted to their cell phones. For example, if you glance down at your device because you think you’ve received a message, even though there is no message on the screen, then you have experienced a phantom phone signal. Intensive phone usage makes people more vulnerable to potential phantom phone signals, which can be thought of as a form of hallucination, a frequent side-effect of substance addiction.

If the previous research findings were the be-all and end-all of current scholarship surrounding cell phone addiction, we could still make a substantial case to regulate cell phones. However, recent findings have found that smartphone addiction creates an imbalance in the human brain. Researchers used internet and smartphone addiction tests to find out the extent to which their use affects daily routines, social life, productivity, sleeping patterns, and feelings. The findings reported that technology-addicted teenagers had higher scores in the feelings of depression, anxiety, insomnia severity, and impulsivity. Beyond these important emotional markers of addiction, the researchers also found increased neurotransmitter levels in technology-addicted individuals. Specifically, the researchers measured higher levels of gamma aminobutyric acid (GABA), a neurotransmitter in the brain that inhibits or slows down brain signals, and higher levels of glutamate-glutamine (Glx), a neurotransmitter that causes neurons to become more electrically excited. In plain terms, previous studies have found the same neurotransmitters to be involved in vision and motor control, and the regulation of various brain functions, including anxiety. This direct scientific evidence is crucial in further cementing an argument to intervene in excessive cell phone use.
If direct action is not taken now to amend this addiction, cell phones will do much more to damage the social fabric of society. China, for instance, is taking the whole concept a few steps further. The Chinese government is building an omnipotent “social credit” system that is meant to rate each citizen’s trustworthiness. By 2020, everyone in China will be enrolled in a vast national database that compiles financial and government information, and distils it into a single number, ranking each citizen.21 Citizens using the “social credit” system are encouraged to show off their credit scores, especially those who have good scores, to make friends, and even find significant others. In reality, China’s biggest matchmaking service, Baihe, teamed up with Sesame to promote clients with good credit scores, giving them prominent spots on the company’s website. Though this global surveillance system might seem far away for many, it is actually in its incipient stages here in the United States. In New York, Skedaddle is launching the “Kudos Project” which is supposed to get rid of tipping in the service industry. This project allows customers to rate every transaction they make, and those ratings are immediately published to a database that allows for anyone using the service to see the ratings and follow an employee from one job to another.22 These ratings range from Uber drivers, to one’s restaurant waiters, to grocery store cashiers, and more. The credit system in China and the “Kudos Project” in New York are thought to build trust amongst all citizens and incentivize workers to receive amenities based on their rankings, but can quickly lead to a dystopian universe in which one’s particular “ranking” or “rating” could dictate one’s entire destiny.

These devices are capable of much more than society currently realizes. Are young adults even capable of making choices without a cell phone present to reassure them? As cell phone addiction intensifies amongst young adults, society must take a stand. Cell phones are significantly lowering the access barrier to adolescents and are damaging the public sphere. Nowadays, one can access public discourse and express dissent through social media from one’s cell phone. Cell phones allow for universal access to the ‘online’ public sphere, for those who own devices, whereas in the past the public sphere was primarily available to the interests of bourgeois society.23 Conversely, it appears that this might not be the case. When one has such a privatized and controlling device, tethered to particular systems, does one truly have
increased access to the public sphere? Cellular devices establish an oppressive hierarchy of corporations over device users, determining social norms and ideals to which users must conform. For example, social media create a more apparent example of which societal ideals are most important and which products users should consume. Social media ‘scrollers’ believe that they are freely contributing to a public sphere; however, they are subscribing to norms imposed by this hierarchy. Therefore, a question society must consider amidst the presence of a cell phone addiction is: “Is this, in fact, the end to the public sphere altogether?” It is evident that the public sphere is not what society thinks it is.

In thinking about the best way to address these concerns, I want to think about young adults as the most vulnerable victims of cell phone addiction. Adolescents are in a growing phase in which their brains are still developing and, if this addiction continues, cell phone abuse could interfere with their proper brain growth. In proposing a five step “Recovery Plan,” society would finally be able to point young adults in the right direction, sans cell phones, to prevent susceptibility to a dangerous cell phone addiction moving forward.

The first step to recovery would be to call upon the government to regulate mobile phones for young adults under the age of eighteen. If the research presented previously substantiates the claim that cell phones are addictive, then the government should have cause to decide the extent to which its citizens interact with the phones. Just like any other drug, cell phones should be controlled by the government, so that teenagers and younger children can reach their full potential, without the harmful side effects that come with excessive cell phone usage. Similar to how alcohol is restricted among teenagers because of safety and brain stability issues, the government would be able to decide how young adults could interact with cell phones, or not have them at all. This regulation would be a mandate that provides a timeframe in which young adults are allowed to operate their phones during the day and other rules governing access to social media accounts. Young adults no longer feel secure, as phones have assumed the “enemy object” position. Sports, play, sleepovers, birthday parties, classrooms, lunch-time, and recess are all affected by cell phone abuse. Having too much access to these devices is warping the way young
adults understand friendship, body image, inclusion, and more. Why would a parent want his or her child to play in a virtual playground, when there’s one outside waiting for him or her? Exploring an intentional cell phone regulation imposed by the government would be a powerful first step in addressing the addiction.

In order to functionally ensure this regulation, the second step to recovery calls on the cell phone industry to instate this change. Apple and Android software developers would be called upon to engineer a button that shuts off certain features of the cell phone at certain times. For example, each device would track a young adult’s usage, and after an approved upon length of time is over, the phone would turn off. In addition, these companies could pre-program a software similar to “SelfControl” in which users under a certain age would be restricted from accessing certain sites, such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat. Media industries are protective of their free-speech rights, under the First Amendment, but shifts in public opinion could help increase the likelihood of this regulation. If the public were more aware of the harmful nature of cell phone addiction, then perhaps the industries themselves would preempt policy initiatives and implement guidelines for their users. Corporations could invent a sensor to identify age-appropriate content and activities, and pre-program devices to prevent certain young adults from accessing particular content. Having this push from the larger corporations would be a big step forward in standardizing cell phone usage for teens.

Next, school regulation must be implemented across the nation. The classroom is a dangerous area to introduce mobile devices, because cell phone addiction truly undermines scholastic achievement. Some elementary and middle schools have already taken the decision to ban cell phones from entering the building for this reason. That particular system is set up well, as students who are caught using cell phones on certain school properties are issued detentions. The reasoning behind this is that using technology has been found to be inversely associated with Grade Point Average (GPA). Students use phones to remove themselves from present classroom activities and distract from the work at hand. When a student infiltrates the learning environment with a cell phone, it becomes increasingly difficult to break the association that child has created with the room being a place in which he or she
uses his or her cellular device. Attention impulsiveness was also a factor found to have a significant relationship with cell phone addiction, which is a trait that intensifies an adolescent’s inability to focus on the subject at hand.\textsuperscript{27} These phones are also used to cheat on tests and to destabilize school environments as a student can spread word or gossip about another student instantaneously through a tweet or text. In an ideal world, it can be imagined that schools would enforce faculty to leave their cell phones in the school office during the entirety of the school day. This mandate would help reverse the trend that the simple presence of a cell phone, even when it does not belong to anybody who is in the room at the time, can negatively affect face-to-face interactions and can decrease the quality of conversation, both affecting the teacher and the student in this case.\textsuperscript{28} With this in mind, it is important to rely upon educational institutions to begin and continue this movement against cell phone use for adolescents, especially in a learning environment.

Parents are a large part of the addiction problem, as parenting often spans a large spectrum of various techniques and some parents do not see fit to monitor their children’s usage of mobile devices. Oftentimes, parents will freely hand their child an iPad or iPhone to keep them busy and distract them so as to give themselves a break. In addition, parents might be oblivious to cell phone addiction, and might not be even monitoring their child’s activity. For example, if a cell phone is being used for ‘sexting’, or ‘cyberbullying’, this is an opportunity for parents to step in and prevent the problem from continuing. Parents have a unique opportunity to advise their children on all of the bad things that can happen from too much cell phone use, and particularly improper cell phone use. This is also an educational opportunity for parents to prevent future misuses of a cell phone and teach their child the right ways to operate these devices, and perhaps take the phone away as punishment if the phone is used in a less than satisfactory way. Therefore, parental intervention is a key step in helping young adults ‘recover’ from this addiction. If parents can advocate for moderation and disrupt social media usage, then young adults have a better chance of avoiding the addiction all together; moderation is key.

The last step to recovery will also call upon educational institutions, like schools, for expertise and authority. There needs to be a formal space in which all of this data on
cell phone addiction is uncovered and presented to young adults. Most schools have an “anti-drug” curriculum, therefore schools should begin implementing a new series to this existing education, presenting the warning signs for excessive cell phone use. This preventative method will, at the very least, spread the word about this phenomenon and provide ways to productively address excessive cell phone use.

Current children’s media policy is designed to increase children’s access to beneficial content, and to decrease their exposure to harmful content. These guidelines easily translate to cell phone use and educators can partner with children’s media policy pioneers to begin the process of implementing this new awareness education campaign. Additionally, the scientific research that currently exists in this field should help boost the formation of an anti-cell phone addiction curriculum to span schools across the country. In addition, scientists should help advocate for changes to the system, in accordance with their data; it is critical that research be used in the evaluation of current media policy and media literacy education. Young adults are malleable; introducing media literacy education can help students approach media, in general, in a more intentional way.

Rapid technological developments have truly led to enormous gaps in society’s thorough understanding of cell phone and media addiction. As of 2017, 46% of Americans say they could not live without their smartphones. This glaring statistic is proof enough to begin taking steps towards regulating cell phones, in the hopes of reclaiming a society that would be no longer defined by its status on social media or by its attachment to a physical piece of technology. Cell phones were just a means of connecting people when they were invented and now they have turned into a means of insulating people. Is this an ultimate form of privatization? What are cell phones a manifestation of? This paradox is a crucial piece of the puzzle in understanding how cell phones are harming individuals around the world. If policy makers, industries, schools, parents, and researchers could combine forces to address cell phone addiction, the world could rapidly diffuse information that could save the minds of the next generation. Now “look up!” There is a bright, real-life, high-definition viewing experience waiting, beyond the bandwidth of a cellular phone.
Notes

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