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# Venture Labor, Media Work, and the Communicative Construction of Economic Value: Agendas for the Field and Critical Commentary[1]

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# The Internet's Factory Floor: Political Economy for an Era of Communicative Abundance

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This article confronts the question of how we might renew the political economy of communication for an era of communicative abundance rather than scarcity. Drawing on Jodi Dean's concept of "communicative capitalism," I argue that, if capitalism has become more communicative, then the reinvigoration of political-economic critique necessitates the analysis of, engagement with, and support of the labor that generates profits in the media and communications industries.

*Keywords: communicative capitalism, political economy of communication, labor*

The setting of the 2014 International Communication Association conference, at the Sheraton in Seattle, offers a useful way to introduce the topic of my contribution. Fifteen years ago, in December 1999, this hotel had a line of riot police protecting the front entrance as the meeting of the World Trade Organization (WTO) was besieged and ultimately undone by protests against neoliberal globalization. Around the time of the WTO demonstrations in Seattle, critical political economy of the media offered activists a tool for clarifying how and why what Williams (2005) called the "means of communication" were owned or controlled by corporations and the state. For students and academics engaged in those social movements, political-economic analysis suggested the crucial importance of generating *our own* forms of media as a response to these conditions. One of the legacies of the WTO protests was an audacious media

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[2] The image of the Internet's factory floor comes to me by way of the journalist Ellen Cushing (2012). This presentation drew on material published by Brophy and Mosco (2016) and Brophy and de Peuter (2014).

platform, through which Internet end users could, in an almost unimaginable development, upload their own content to an activist website, thereby reversing the mediatic flow entirely. The website was Indymedia, and the slogan that best captured our feeling at that time was Jello Biafra's exhortation: "Don't hate the media, *become* the media."

Expanded access to the means of communication, we felt, would help erode social injustice and inequality. Looking back 15 years later, it seems that, without wanting at all to minimize the importance of those struggles, our media democracy movements actually provided the cutting-edge innovation that social media companies like Amazon, Google, and Facebook seized upon to develop Web 2.0. Our struggles offered up the source code for these corporations as they went about installing what Dean (2009) has aptly described as a variant of capitalism that encourages "communicative access and opportunity" (p. 17). The corporate media *became us*, and the rapidity with which our dreams were captured and submitted to the production of value was striking.

In the current conjuncture, where communicative scarcity has "begun to recede," as Schiller (2007, p. 81) puts it, some scholars feel that a radical political-economic critique of the media is increasingly irrelevant. For example, Garnham (2011) recently attacked the perspective for what he calls its "tired and narrow orthodoxy" as well as its "crude and unexamined rejection of the market" (p. 42). In other words, corporate and state control of the media is not so bad because more and more of us are able to access more and more content, and it turns out that this content is not nearly as homogeneous as political economists had feared. Garnham is not the only one to raise questions of critical political economies of the media in recent years. The perspective has been taken to task from the left for focusing overwhelmingly on forms of domination rather than modes of resistance (Dyer-Witheford, 1999), for neglecting the perspectives and experience of women (Meehan & Riordan, 2002), and for remaining narrowly focused on Europe and North America (Chakravartty & Zhao, 2008).

So given that the political economy of communication was fashioned in an era of relative communicative scarcity, how do we renew our critique in an environment of communicative abundance? I would suggest that abandoning a critique of capitalism and its elites, or taking up the categories of neoclassical economics, as Garnham does, is not the right choice. Rather, in the midst of the ongoing global economic debacle produced by neoliberal governance—one that has brought unprecedented attacks on public education, health care, pensions, social services, welfare supports, public broadcasting, trade unions, and the environment in the name of austerity and the market—pursuing a thorough critique of labor in the media, telecommunications, and "creative" industries is one of the more promising ways in which the tradition and its critical approach to the relationship between media and power is being renewed.

One example among many will suffice in demonstrating the importance of this project. We all love our cell phones and are increasingly able to engage in what Castells (2009) calls "mass self-communication" with these technologies. Yet consider the interlinked and heterogeneous transnational workforce brought into being along the global production network of smartphones: Congolese diggers use preindustrial techniques to extract metals in highly informal resource economies; Chinese proletarianized migrants perform hyper-Taylorized work in gargantuan factories where mobile devices are assembled;

self-employed software engineers in the Global North design apps that are entered into the intellectual property sweepstakes; precariously employed Philippina call-center workers deploy scripted linguistic labor to service mobile consumers; cellular subscribers feed their collective intelligence and social networks into the mobile Internet economy; and at the end of the cycle, Ghanaian e-waste workers scavenge through the debris of perpetual upgrade to eke out a subsistence livelihood on the "planet of slums" (Davis, 2006). We may have access to more communication than ever before, but the price is global exploitation and inequality. This circuit of wireless exploitation along which such production occurs is strongly gendered, racialized, and not without its moments of resistance and rebellion (Brophy & de Peuter, 2014).

If capitalism has indeed become more communicative, the analysis of, engagement with, and support of the labor that generates profits in communications industries are important ways we can reinvigorate political economic critique. The "turn to labor" that Rodino-Colocino has discussed is, therefore, a very good thing, and I hope we continue to ally ourselves to workers in and outside the media industries by witnessing and publicizing their struggles and organizing efforts. The most effective path toward media democratization, it turns out, may not pass through a critique of media ownership, but rather through engagement with media work.

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