

Production in the media and journalism: An introduction to the thematic issue

There seems to be a peculiar relationship between production and social communication in capitalist societies. In the social sciences, mediated communication is typically perceived through symbolic and ideological meanings conveyed via different forms of mass communication or its political functions in the reproduction of social relations and institutions. Benedict Anderson (1983/1991) believed communication is essential in the process of imagining communities and thus constructing social identities, with the early mass media playing a vital role in these developments. This interrelation can aptly be described by the concept of *communification*, which directly links communication and communities together, while also necessarily hinting at the ideological aspects of identification and power relations concealed within them.¹ For Aristotle, human capacity to speak and reason [*logos*] is what differentiates *Homo sapiens* from other animals and makes them not only social, but also political animals [*zoon politikon*].

Language-capacity and communication may be understood as a transhistorical human universal, or what Italian philosopher Paolo Virno (2008) viewed as a bioanthropological constant of human beings as open *linguistic* animals. It is what defines us as humans and simultaneously makes us depend on communication while producing or reproducing social, cultural and political relations in their multiple forms. The American pragmatists understood this very well. Charles H. Cooley (1956: 70), for example, noted “the achievement of speech is commonly and properly regarded as the distinctive trait of man, as the gate by which he emerged from his pre-human state”, while John Dewey brought to the fore close connection between communities, communication and things that people have in common, stressing there is more than just a verbal link that ties them together (Czitrom, 1982: 102–112). Herbert I. Schiller was even more holistic in his view of the role communication plays in society, stating that:

It defines social reality and thus influences the organization of work, the character of technology, the curriculum of the educational system, formal and informal, and the use of ‘free time’ – actually, the basic social arrangements of living. (Schiller, 1976: 3)

¹ See Calhoun (1991, 108). The term was first used by Altman and later adopted by Habermas. In the latter’s view, as Calhoun notes, this term relates to the politics of identification. “People without direct interpersonal relations with each other are led by the mediation of the world of political symbols to imagine themselves as members of communities defined by common ascriptive characteristics, personal tastes, habits, or concerns” (*ibid.*).

Communication is therefore a “sine qua non of human existence” (Hardt 1979, 19). It influences and relates to all parts of social relations and necessarily traverses one-dimensional characterisations. It thus seems hardly surprising it has only sporadically been analysed as something that in varying degrees has also been incorporated in the capitalist accumulation process ever since this politico-economic system emerged centuries ago. “The commodification of culture”, says Dan Schiller (2007: 35) “has been a continuing, if uneven and conflicted, process throughout the duration of capitalist development”. Yet this varied field of culture, media and communication has rarely been analysed as something in which commodities are produced by labour like in other industries. Even though production is not ignored as a topic in media and communication studies, it therefore remains largely under-represented and under-researched compared to other moments and aspects this field also touches on.

It is clear that in recent decades information – and communication – has become indispensable in the corporate accumulation of capital (Mosco, 1982: 46) and an “increasingly significant factor of production across all economic sectors” (Schiller, 2007: 24). This applies to information being the final product of the production process (itself becoming an ever more economically important commodity) or information being a key intermediate component in organising the accumulation process (*ibid.*: 21). In the *information* or *digital capitalism* era, commodification has spread across the wider sphere of information and communication, thereby turning into a central element of capitalism. On one hand, “informatisation, data processing and international communications became core requirements for capital growth” (Hardy, 2014: 84) in this context that, apart from providing the foundational technological basis for the financialisation of capitalism, media have become vital for ensuring the expansion of consumerism, actively promoting the evolution of consumer needs and desires (Streeck, 2012: 9–12). It is notable that the media, together with the information and communication technologies accompanying it, became a way to revitalise capitalism following the economic crises of the 1970s and by providing crucial infrastructure formed a component of the overall economic expansion ever since (cf. Schiller, 1984; Hardy, 2014: ch. 4; Schiller, 2007: ch. 4).

What used to be a small and marginal sector of previous decades has transformed into one of the largest and most propulsive sectors in the global capitalist economy, leading the expansion of commodified social relations and powering the global accumulation of capital. In this issue of journal *Media Research/Medijska istraživanja*, **Graham Murdock** takes a closer look at these topics by exploring “how the leading digital companies have played a central role in the restoration of profitability and have exploited the increased degrees of corporate freedom introduced by global marketization to dominate their spheres of influence developing organisational forms and operational practices” (p. 17). Here, he notes digital corporations (like

Alphabet, Apple, Amazon, Facebook) in this highly concentrated market have not only brought about “digital despotism”, as he calls it due to their growing dominance, but are now also among the biggest companies in the world. Murdock also presents a wide-ranging historical examination of the ways the broader field of communication has been shaped in the intertwined economic, ecological and political processes by the advance of modern capitalism and explores how these dynamics have not simply been revived, but also reinforced by the return of the ‘market fundamentalism’ from the mid-1970s onwards.

In his contribution, **Slavko Splichal** similarly argues that globalisation and the “Internetisation” of the economy had led to “Internetised media” being even more concentrated than the traditional print and broadcast media ever were. Yet Splichal states the growth of public, private and hybrid modes of communication means that Internet use can have an important impact on the future of publicness, privateness and political life in general. In a liquefied society based on “Integrated Public-Private Communication Networks”, in which the mutual determinacy of publicness and privateness are materialised for the first time in history, Splichal identifies new modes of relationship among people, new modes of agency and new venues of communication – neither strictly public nor private. While Splichal examines the tendencies within the algorithmised social communication to colonise people’s lives and reinforce institutionalised authority through the Internet of Things and smart devices, he argues that technological innovations do not suffice to overcome today’s democratic deficit – he contends that even the contrary may be argued. In this setting, he criticises the classic notion of “newsworthiness” (cf. Galtung and Ruge, 1965) and envisions the “public-worthiness” algorithm as “the exact opposite to the emerging robot-driven news production and dissemination software targeting users with customized news or generating automated news stories about niche or local topics, to be disseminated to many small audiences” (p. 52-53).

In today’s burgeoning global news and entertainment environment it is quite ironic, as **Lee Artz** argues in his article published in this issue, that the role of the primary producers of information – both news and entertainment – remains in the hands of a few global news agencies. But this dominance of a few actors producing information on a global scale merely replicates the arrangement akin to “digital despotism” that Murdock describes in this issue. It is also not that far removed from the alliance formed in the latter half of the 19th century by three European press agencies (Reuters, Wolff and Havas) that saw them divide up territories of influence amongst themselves, thereby creating a global oligopoly in the international news market (Mattelart, 2000: 24). For Mattelart (*ibid.*), this arrangement in fact marks the birth of an information market in news on a global scale. In his study published herein, Artz looks closely at the problematic implications for public discourse in a context

of the global production of news being dominated by just a few actors with biased political positions. As he notes, “global news agencies structurally and functionally serve the economic, political, and ideological needs of transnational and national capitalist clients’ intent on global socio-economic relations of production and distribution” (p. 78). He relates these issues to the political economy of attention and empirically focuses on recent reporting on Crimea, Syria and Venezuela by Associated Press, which is nowadays the largest, yet probably the least investigated global news agency.

These developments inter-relate with the fact news agencies were among the first news institutions to profess the norm of objectivity since it was economically advantageous for them not to be overtly partisan and to treat information simply as a commodity. This influenced media practices and was an early contributor to the “triumph of ‘news’ over the editorial and ‘facts’ over opinion”, observed by Michael Schudson (1978: 14) in the second part of the 19th century. These journalistic norms were later fully institutionalised in the project of the professionalisation of journalism, when objectivity was embraced as its central value and emerged as a “strategic ritual protecting newspapermen from the risks of their trade” (Tuchman, 1972: 660). By exploring the labour history of news before World War I, **John Nerone** in this volume discusses how “neutrality” was built in the occupational ideology of not only the reporters who embraced the objectivity norm, but also in the imaginaries and practices of typographers “adopting a hands-off stance to the matter they set” (p. 90). These developments reflected the larger pressures, negotiations and divisions among and within both workforces that are considered in detail by Nerone, while also examining the roles of technological innovation, social diversity and broader politics of labour in the years of industrialising the press in the United States. Nerone concludes by discussing the counterfactual possibility of journalists not settling for the professionalisation project, but instead organising themselves as craft workers in concert with typographers and by imagining “whether such a project would have offered a way of readdressing persistent class biases in capitalist news systems” (p. 83). Similar historical investigations and counterfactual discussions are rare in communication, media and journalism research, where critical studies of news production – either through diachronic or synchronic prisms – remain seriously neglected.

Neglecting production can also be seen as a politically significant statement in itself. It was with good reason that Karl Marx set about to first analyse the sphere of production and not other spheres, famously writing the following words after he had analysed the commodity-form and money in volume one of his magnum opus *Capital*:

Let us therefore, in company with the owner of money and the owner of labour-power; leave this noisy sphere, where everything takes place on the surface and

in full view of everyone [Marx here is referring to the sphere of circulation], and follow them into the hidden abode of production, on whose threshold there hangs the notice 'No admittance except on business'. Here we shall see, not only how capital produces, but how capital is itself produced. The secret of profit-making must at last be laid bare. (Marx, 1976/1990: 279–280)

Production is where profits are made in Marx's labour theory of value and he viewed it as "the real point of departure and hence also the predominant moment" (Marx, 1973/1993: 94). Importantly, one consequence of what Marx (1976/1990: 163–177) called the fetishism of the commodity is that the actual production of commodities is becoming opaque and obscured in capitalism. When we buy a new iPhone or other technological gadget on Amazon, the global commodity chain underlying its existence is both hidden and ignored (cf. Murdock, this issue). We have no blood *on our hands* while holding a new technological wizardry *in our hands*, even though it may have been produced in appalling working conditions. The staggering scale of environmental destruction arising from the rapid cycles of innovation and obsolescence that rule the information and communication technology market similarly becomes veiled (Maxwell and Miller, 2012). As Murdock (2000: 51) stated almost 20 years ago, commodity fetishism thus conceals "the origins of commodities".

This amnesia is actively encouraged by a commodity culture that fixes firmly on the convenience, opportunity, and pleasure of consumption, projecting attention forwards to the moment of purchase and possession rather than backwards to the organization of production. (ibid.)

All labour is neglected in this context. Not only labour in the production of actual commodities, but also the labour needed to distribute them. In this volume, **Sašo Slaček, Igor Vobič and Jernej Amon Prodnik** focus on a particular group of news-workers, namely the people who deliver printed newspapers. Deliverers have historically received barely any attention in academic research, even though their work has been an indispensable part of the newspaper industry. In their analysis, the authors identify methods of economic rationalisation conceived and employed to cut labour costs, discipline the workforce and respond to deliverers' collective struggle. By exploring the case of a Slovenian daily newspaper, the study identifies the contradictory position of delivery labour in contemporary daily printed newspaper production. While the newspaper industry today faces falling circulations, although weaker, the revenue streams of newspapers in Slovenia still strongly depend on income from print subscriptions. The deliverers thus appear to be both redundant and irreplaceable at the same time. "Management attempts to cut newspaper delivery costs, mainly by reducing the deliverers' income, occur in a context where the newspaper's business activity is extremely vulnerable to any disruptions in the delivery process" (p. 124).

The increasing attacks on labour evident not only in this case but across industries started back in the 1980s and can be related to several processes mentioned already in this introduction, most notably to the neoliberal turn, or what Murdock in this issue calls “the return of market fundamentalism” (p. 26). In a digital age, journalism – encountered with the crises of “political adequacy” as well as “economic viability” (Blumler, 2010) – has been affected in a special way through the processes of pauperisation and de-professionalisation (cf. Splichal and Dahlgren, 2016), resulting in the normalisation of precarious labour arrangements, new divisions among newworkers, and the waning of journalism’s relevance to society. In this issue, **Fredrik Stiernstedt** shows that changes in media labour environments and employment arrangements in the media industry not only reflect economic and technological changes, but also labour law reforms that hold significant impacts for labourers in this area although they are not directly aimed at media and journalism. Namely, in the case of Sweden, as explored by Stiernstedt, labour reforms have reflected the larger neoliberal shift in European labour market policy, while being propagated as a set of changes leading to “greater employability”, “lower thresholds to the labor market” and “more incentives”. In fact, as Stiernstedt shows, “these changes have resulted in a general deterioration of working conditions with possible negative effects on journalism as such” (p. 147).

The articles published in this thematic issue address a wide range of interconnected topics. They include general questions like the structural embeddedness of media in capitalism and its role in legitimating the existing social order, but in all of the contributions herein this broader context also serves as a basis for analysing certain specific issues, amongst them the professional identity of journalists in constructing divisions between newworkers, the growing precarity in media industries or ideological role of global news agencies. What therefore binds this thematically rich issue together is not simply the fact that all contributions are both theoretically and historically strong in approach, but also in their commitment to another important tenet of critical theory, that is, to firmly base analysis in the capitalist social totality. As noted by Vincent Mosco (2009: 28), such an analysis “spans the range of problems that today tend to be situated in the compartments of several academic disciplines”. It thus goes beyond narrow disciplinarity that treats social processes and phenomena in isolation, even when they exert strong influences on each other. We feel the contributions in this issue clearly encapsulate this critical vision, which seems more than necessary in today’s troubling circumstances.

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editors

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