Political Economy, Power and New Media

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Introduction

In this article it is suggested that notwithstanding insights from research on new media from nearly every social science vantage point, there is only a fragmentary picture of how our experience of technological mediation is being produced and reproduced. The relative neglect of political economy analysis in research on new media means that the overall social and economic dynamics of the production and the consumption of new media continue to be subjects of speculation.[1] The rise in the number of studies that investigate the usability of new media applications and the content of new media, coupled with a strong emphasis on qualitative studies of highly situated practice involving new media, have contributed to the growth of sociologically informed studies of new media. In recent years, these have tended to eclipse contributions to the understanding of new media developments from a political economy perspective.

Recent years also have seen the rise and the decline of Internet hysteria in the new media marketplace (Coyle and Quah, 2002). The rate of entry of new dot.coms is now being tempered by disaffected investors and by a general downturn in the rate of investment in digital technologies (Javary and Mansell, 2002). There are signs of a desire for a restoration of a more measured account of developments in new media. A failure to fully experience the economic advantages of relying increasingly on digital sources of information and the difficulties of meeting targets that have been set for the development of 'information societies' mean that there may now be greater receptivity to studies of new media informed both by sociological and political economy approaches. [2]

In argung for a revitalisation of research on new media in the tradition of political economy I acknowledge the force of Peter Golding and Graham Murdock's pre-Internet observations about theories and empirical research in the media and communications field. They lamented the state of mainstream research on the media with its focus on individuals, functionalism and pluralism. They highlighted the importance of analysing "… the social processes through which they are constructed and interpreted and the contexts and pressures which shape and constrain those

constructions" (Golding and Murdock, 1978: 72). Insofar as social and economic relations are not egalitarian within society today, there is a strong case for developing insights into the political economy of new media.

This article sets out a case for a revitalisation of the political economy of media and communications in order to achieve a more holistic account of the dynamics of new media production and consumption. The ultimate aim is to develop a research framework that may help to infuse research on new media with insights drawn from the analysis of structural as well as processual power. This is achieved by drawing together several strands of current research on new media to suggest how a revitalised political economy of new media could complement them to reveal a much deeper understanding of the way articulations of power are shaping the new media landscape.

Revitalising the Political Economy of New Media

To revitalise studies of new media in the political economy tradition, there is considerable work that we can build upon in the tradition of the political economy of the 'older' media. The next subsection highlights some of the main premises that underpin this tradition. In subsequent sections, other areas of scholarly work on new media are considered. These are used to establish a basis for joining up perspectives to provide a more holistic foundation for future research.

The Political Economy of Media and Communications

There is a very substantial tendency in studies of new media to emphasise the abundance and variety of new media products and services and to concentrate on promoting access with little regard for the associated structures and processes of power that are embedded in them. There are undeniably major changes in the scope and scale of new media supply and in the ways that our lives are mediated by digital technologies and services. There is, however, continuing evidence of scarcity in relation to new media production and consumption. This condition of scarcity is being reproduced as a result of various articulations of power. These articulations are not inconsequential and they contribute to the maintenance of deeply rooted

inequalities in today's so-called 'information' or 'knowledge' societies (Mansell, 1999, 2003).

A synthesis of past and current contributions to the political economy of media and communications could encompass the works of many authors. [3] Depending on the selection criteria, different themes would be accentuated. At the core, however, there would be an interest in the analysis of the specific historical circumstances under which new media and communications products and services are produced under capitalism and with the influence of these circumstances over their consumption.

Dallas Smythe, who was a major contributor to early studies in this tradition, emphasised research on all aspects of "the power processes within society" (Smythe, 1960: 563). He focused on production, quality, and allocation, and on the role of capital, organisation and control in the media and communications industries. Although studies in this tradition are often criticised for being overly concerned with the structure of production rather than with content, meaning and the symbolic, Smythe's (1981) work did not neglect the possibility of resistance to the dominant trends in media and communications production through alternative strategies of consumption. Another central figure in the political economy of media and communications tradition, Nicholas Garnham (1990, 2000), focuses on both the structure of production of services and technologies and on the consumption of their symbolic content. Garnham's interest in the 'old' and the 'new' media has been in developing explanations for emerging social structures, hierarchies of power, and their legitimation.

Following in these traditions, any political economy of new media must be as concerned with symbolic form, meaning and action as it is with structures of power and institutions. If resources are scarce and if power is unequally distributed in society, then the key issue is how these scarce resources are allocated and controlled and with what consequences for human action. Distinctions between the older and newer media relate to how and why scarcity conditions emerge and the extent to which they contribute to the reproduction of unequal social conditions. Without research that gives a central place to power as a 'headline' issue in new media studies,

we can only speculate about how inequality may be reproduced and then seen as the 'natural' outcome of innovations in new media technologies.

The production and consumption of new media in their commodity form means that scarcity has to be created by, for example, the use of copyright, controlling access, the promotion of obsolescence, the creation and sale of audiences, and by favouring some kinds of new media over others. In the case of the Internet, by bundling services and 'walling' off electronic spaces through the use of payment systems and the maintenance of a large number of people without capacities for informing themselves, the dynamics of the new media are infused with power relations that rarely come to light in the vast majority of studies. At the same time, there are resistances of many kinds and signs of counter-tendencies to the dominant modes of new media supply and consumption. These are visible, for instance, in some types of alternative media movements and within the open source software movement.

In contrast to a pluralist analysis of new media, a political economy of new media should seek to understand how power is structured and differentiated, where it comes from and how it is renewed (Garnham, 2000). This suggests an examination of new media to show how the structuring of global networks and digital information flows and their consumption are informed by predominant and by alternative principles, values and power relations. For some analysts of new media, however, existing distributions of power are simply taken as given. In contrast, a political economy of new media insists on examination of the circumstances that give rise to any given distribution of power and of the consequences for consumers and citizens (Mansell et al., 2002; Melody, 1994).

New media production in early 2003 had developed so that the top ten online World Wide Web 'properties' in the United Kingdom were owned by a small number of major media conglomerates, communication and telecommunication suppliers, online retailers and software providers (Van Couvering, 2003). This suggests that while this form of new media is capable of disrupting the structure of older media and communications markets, there are signs of concentration on the supply side of the industry.[4] With respect to the shaping of new media consumption and the symbolic as well as the economic implications of the broad audience reach achieved by these Web

sites, a political economy of new media would ask about what gives rise to newly emergent power structures. It would ask about the consequences for the capacity of new media to mediate people's lives in ways that recreate social and economic inequality.

A revitalised political economy perspective on new media also needs to be joined up with elements of research undertaken largely outside the conventional boundaries of the 'media and communications' field. Some of this work is discussed here to emphasise the value of a cross-fertilization of insights from a political economy of new media with these complementary strands of research.

Joining Up with Innovation Studies

It is essential to understand how social values and regimes of control are becoming embedded in the new media and their consequences for society. Studies of the economics of technical change and innovation offer some assistance and provide a complement to the political economy of media and communications tradition. For instance, Christopher Freeman and Francisco Louçã (2001) base their analysis of the information and communication technology paradigm on an understanding of the causes and consequences of technological change. Their fundamental point is that when certain enabling technologies emerge, their widespread appropriation begins to challenge the hegemony of earlier modes of social and economic organisation.

Emergent paradigms involve new principles or common sense practices. An examination of these emerging principles and practices must be at the core of any assessment of the determinants and consequences of new media if we are to understand their influence in society. To accomplish this, we need comparable empirical studies of the many contexts in which new media are being developed and experienced. Case studies of new media using a rich variety of methodologies are being undertaken in the field of innovation studies. However, they rarely provide us with insights into the articulations of power or the principles that are being embedded in the new media. This is because questions of power and authority are rarely posed. A substantial number of studies simply fail to make explicit the assumptions that are

being made about the 'theory of society' that is shaping the research questions that are asked and the interpretations of the results.[5]

In the growing field of 'Internet Studies' there is also little explicit treatment of power. There are many assertions that implicitly assume that the construction and use of the Internet automatically involve a major change in social and economic relationships. The Internet is sometimes characterised as a post-modern, ironic, cosmopolitan, hybrid medium or as a progressive technologically-enabled medium (see Van Couvering, 2003). Sometimes it is portrayed as a new public space of possibility for individuals and communities and, at other times, as a commercial space for advertisers and new media businesses. It is alternatively revolutionary or evolutionary. It is conceived as a medium that is being socially constructed and as a medium where the technology architecture itself favours certain social outcomes (Castells, 2001).

What the Internet means and for whom it has meaning is debated in a way that is detached from the way power is embedded in and experienced through the new media. Of course, the 'Internet Studies' research tradition – both within the academy and in the commercial marketing domain - is monitoring the growth and composition of the Internet audience (Batty and Barr, 1994; Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2003). Firms such as Nielsen//NetRatings and Forrester Research provide considerable data at least for some areas of the world (Van Couvering 2003). But there is typically little attempt to analyse the consequences of the developments that are being monitored, much less to ask critical questions about what is giving rise to these developments.

Examination of a substantial number of academic journal articles broadly covering media and communications research and focusing on the Internet by Kim and Weaver (2002) suggests that very little of this research is theoretically informed. It has very little to say about people's perceptions of changing relationships of power in an intensely technologically mediated world. Like the administrative tradition in the study of the older media (Melody and Mansell, 1983), the main emphasis is on providing an unproblematic account of the Internet's growth. This does not

acknowledge the need for, or foster, inquiry into how the process of new media innovation is infused with new relationships of power.

Yet studies of mediated experience and the way the new media are implicated in a restructuring of time and space, in changes in domestic rituals and in enabling or disabling various forms of sociability suggest that power relations are very much at stake (Livingstone, 2002; Meyrowitz, 1985; Silverstone, 1999; Silverstone and Hirsch, 1992). This work suggests that there is considerable latitude for social actors to make choices about their engagement with new media. The new media may be altered, abandoned, or subordinated to very diverse cultural, social and economic values. As Silverstone (2003 forthcoming) argues, "mediation is a fundamentally dialectical notion which requires us to address the processes of communication as both institutionally and technologically driven and embedded".[6] We need to understand better how power is being articulated in highly situated contexts and also within the broader contours of society.

One line of research that would complement a revitalised political economy of new media comes from the tradition of information systems analysis. In studies of communities of practice, and especially in those focusing on software development processes, issues of power, with a few exceptions (Fox, 2000), are being addressed only indirectly and partially (Berdou, 2003). Lave and Wenger (1991: 42), for instance, acknowledge that "… unequal relations of power must be included more systematically" in the analysis of communities of practice. The open source software movement is a phenomenon that is enabling innovation within new media. Rather than addressing issues of unequal participation and power in the open source communities of practice, for the most part, the presence of an all-pervasive gift-giving reciprocal, non-hierarchical economy and culture is assumed. Bergquist and Ljungberg (2001: 315) argue, in contrast, that "some of the user/developers experience power relationships that are expressed as an elitism of the inner circle and exercised as the right to hinder a person in contributing to the common good".

The open source software movement which, for some observers, exists as a counterpoint to the hegemony of the power of new media commodity producers is often characterised in ways that do not make relations of power explicit. This

movement is sometimes examined as a revolutionary method that could alleviate the software 'crisis' of insufficiently numerous or trained software developers. At other times it is treated as a platform for user-driven innovation or as the basis for a new business model (see Berdou, 2003). Amidst a profusion of studies of this movement, only a few researchers such as Weber (2003) or Healy and Schussman (2003) set out to explicitly consider power relations. Research is needed on the principles and practices around which the open source community is organised to discern the structure and process of power that underlies this software movement. Research in this area can be used to augment studies of the political economy of new media in the 'media and communications' field.

Conclusion

Towards the end of the decade of the 1990s there were signs of scepticism about the potential of new media. The spread of new kinds of information societies – and specifically the Internet – clearly had not heralded a dissolution of conventional forces of power. More attention was being given to the interplay or dialectic between on- and off-line symbols, actions and their consequences. In policy circles in western Europe, and to some extent elsewhere, greater emphasis was beginning to be placed on encouraging 'user-friendly information societies'.[7] There was a slight shift from a supply to a demand-side examination of the implications of new media. However, the contribution of new media from the perspective of the articulation of power relations remains opaque.

This article emphasises the need to construct not only an interdisciplinary research agenda for the study of new media, but an explicitly critical (in contrast to a mainstream) research agenda. Such an agenda is necessary to investigate the new media from vantage points that make issues of power explicit in the analysis of mediated experience. Insights from a political economy of new media could be joined up very fruitfully with other strands of research as illustrated in the preceding section.

On the one hand, we need to foster an understanding of pressures towards the commodification of new media and its consequences for the way power is distributed through the material conditions of the capitalist system. This suggests a revitalisation

of a political economy of new media, an agenda that would also highlight issues of citizenship and democracy, governance, and globalisation. On the other hand, we need to encourage the accumulation of insight into the way power is embedded in new media practices and the way this influences how peoples lives are being mediated by new media.

Only a tiny fraction of research on new media makes explicit the researcher's own conception of the way power is articulated in society and its consequences. This unproblematic approach to new media must change in the future if we want to ask questions about how technological mediation is being fostered, about its structures, its processes and its consequences. Perhaps the most important questions are: what dominant principles, values, and perceptions of power are being embedded in our technologically mediated interactions? What are the alternatives? How is technological innovation in the new media field being structured; by whom and for whom is it being negotiated? What are the alternatives? Research informed by the traditions outlined in this article could offer new insight into the alternatives. This might ultimately enable the academic community to contribute more effectively to ensuring that the new media landscape is consistent with enabling people to benefit from their mediated experiences.

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Notes

1 A conference on 'Political Economy of the Internet: Critical Perspectives' in Hull in June 2002, for instance, encompassed studies of the role of the state and democratisation, globalisation and transnational networks, and issues of governance, URL (consulted 23 Aug. 2003): http://www.hull.ac.uk/pas/internet_workshop.htm. Apart from one paper on the labour process there was little sign of the economic as the main orientation was within the disciplinary boundaries of Politics and International Studies. Similarly, although there are Master's level teaching programmes in the United Kingdom on the political economy of new communications media (Sussex University), on new new media, information and society (LSE), and on the Internet and the new economy (Hull University), readings for these programmes appear to emphasise predominantly sociology or political theory; comparatively little is drawn from outside the neo-classical economics tradition. Jakubowicz (2001) laments the absence of political economy perspectives in education syllabi in the United States and elsewhere.

2 The definition of 'new' media and communications is contested and depends on the historical time frame within which discussion is situated. This article broadly follows Lievrouw and Livingstone's (2002: 7) definition: '… by new media we mean information and communication technologies and their associated social contexts'.

3 There are, in fact, many 'political economies' of media and communications as is the case in other fields (see Mosco, 1996).

4 The top 10 included MSN, Google, Yahoo!, Microsoft, AOL Time Warner, Wanadoo, BBC, British Telecom, E-bay and Amazon.

5 See Golding and Murdock (1978) for the use of this phrase in a similar context.

6 Silverstone elaborates on the work of Thompson (1995) and Martin-Barbero (1993).

7 This was the terminology used in the European Commission's Fifth Framework Programme that ran from 1998 to 2002. Some would argue that this change in terminology was little more than a shift in rhetoric intended to

promote investment in the construction of the European Information Society (Mansell and Steinmueller, 2000; Robins and Webster, 1999).