

Janet Wasko's Legacy

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Book Review: Randy Nichols and Gabriela Martinez (eds) (2019) *Political Economy of Media Industries: Global Transformations and Challenges*. London: Routledge (314 pages)

A new, diverse selection of essays related to the political economy of (global) media industries is always welcome, not least because the field is in a perennial state of fluctuation. It seems that we are forever in a battle to keep up with ownership change and technological advances while resisting market pressures forcing us to keep pace. A historically grounded political economy of communication approach counteracts these difficulties. Such analyses, which are also sensitive to current trends, are needed in the classroom environment amongst students who are constantly pressured to be “in the now”. The present title as part of the Routledge Studies in Media and Cultural Industries fulfils this need, while presenting other qualities as well.

For those not in the know, the motivation and direction for this book will come as a (pleasant) surprise. Dedicated to Janet Wasko for her inspirational contributions to the field of communication and political economy, it features numerous scholars citing and referring to her in their articles. The volume, edited by Randy Nichols, Assistant Professor in the School of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences at the University of Washington, and Gabriela Martinez, Professor in the School of Journalism and Communication at the University of Oregon, seeks not only to recognize her role, but to “join her in the continued critical examination of media and communication” (p. 1). The frame for the book thus reflects Wasko's range of research as well as contemporary themes in the political economy of communication. A sense of urgency is offered with the suggestion that we are presently in a key point in history, “in which capitalist control of media and communication is the default status” (p. 2). An emphasis on current developments is clear: “New methods of production and distribution are fundamentally altering the relationships between a variety of social institutions while building on long-term trends – globalization, environmental devastation, and a shifting role of the State among them” (p. 2).

The book is divided into three parts, the first focusing on the film industry and the second on other media industries ranging from web television and telecommunications to iTunes and Wikipedia. The third section is entitled “New and enduring challenges” and includes private sector journalism, media labor, the development of the media in the context of digital capitalism, the media and the climate crisis and the global resonance of time and commodity fetishism.

The opening chapter in the film industry section entitled “The Hollywood Trilogy, The Disney Duo” is, perhaps appropriately, a tribute of sorts to Wasko’s ground-breaking work on Hollywood and Disney. Eileen Meehan tries to “get into Wasko’s head” in order to describe her approach and identify its effectiveness. Ben Birkinbine’s “Movie Theaters and Money: Integration and Consolidation in Film Exhibition” explores consolidation in the cinema industry in the context of technological change (a timely analysis given the recent economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic). In the third case study, Catherine McKercher and Vincent Mosco examine the lessons learned from the 2012 merger of the Screen Actors Guild and the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists in “How Hollywood Workers Unite.” The final chapter in the film industry section, by Rodrigo Gómez, “The Mexican Film Industry 2000–2018: Resurgence or Assimilation?” is a structural-historical analysis of the Mexican film industry using a Wasko-defined approach.

The second section features five diverse case studies of media industries. “The New Holy Grail” by William Kunz looks at production incentives in a cross-industry study of television. Mary Erickson’s “Old Strategies in the New Paradigm” examines the extent to which web television companies use traditional strategies in production in order to maintain their positions. In “State Monopoly of Telecommunications in Ethiopia,” Téwodros Workneh and Leslie Steeves analyze a particular case of a domestic monopoly in telecom, despite the predominant global movement to privatization. “Through Being Cool” by David Gracon aims to unpack the overwhelming dominance of Apple by examining its practices and procedures in relation to the iTunes store over a nine-year period. “In Practice and Theory?” consists of a meta-discussion of critical scholarship on Wikipedia by Randall Livingstone.

The final section, also featuring five cases, begins with “Bribe and Journalism” by Jörg Becker. He compares and contrasts three historical novels from three cultural backgrounds to reveal the impact of commerce on journalism. “Labor in the Age of Digital (Re)Production” by Gerald Sussman considers how political and ideological paradigms have been shaped by the growing economic centrality of the service sector compared to manufacturing. “Power Under Pressure” republishes Dan Schiller’s classic analysis of recommodification in the digital media environment. Graham Murdock’s essay “Minutes to Midnight” explains how communications industries in the context of global capitalism accelerate the global climate crisis. In the final chapter, “Time, Globality and Commodity Fetishism,” Wayne Hope argues that political economy of communication research concerning commodity fetishism and labor relations, should also examine global capital’s unheralded depletion of ecological nature from a time-based perspective.

In assessing the strengths of a new academic publication, it is impossible not to consider who the book is for, especially if that question is not addressed from the outset. In this volume, timely themes, ranging from the monopolistic practices of Apple, to the political economy of Wikipedia, the media and climate change and ownership consolidation in the cinema industry sit next to classic political economy of communication frameworks. The latter includes a mapping of digital capitalism and Marxist interpretations of media labor. This thematic range, combined with an accessible writing style, makes the text an attractive choice for political economy of communication-oriented courses. A common criticism of edited volumes – that they entail a patchwork of thinly related themes – cannot be made here. The menu of themes for any new student is made relatable by the strong political economy of communication framework. One hopes that the normalization of such approaches will be enhanced by this collection. There is of course no need to

convince readers of this journal about the need for integrating political economy approaches with the study of communication, globalization and technology in general.

One common criticism with edited volumes in general is the tendency to seem international/global by adding a chapter or two focused outside of the US-EU-UK context. This book, on the surface, seems guilty of this attempt as well, having two chapters with an explicitly local case study approach. One of course could argue that since the book deals with global media, it has a de facto global scope, and of course Wasko's greatest contributions have, arguably, been within this global approach (for example Wasko, 2001; Birkinbine, Gómez, and Wasko, 2017). However, Workneh and Steeves' examination of Ethiopian telecommunications, for example, is by no means a case of adding a non-western case study to give the volume international credibility. One of the highlights of the book, this article brilliantly emphasizes a particular point concerning global privatization of telecommunications. Likewise, Gómez in chapter 5 provides a complex study outside of this framework, whereas Jörg Becker in chapter 11, Graham Murdock in chapter 14 and Wayne Hope in chapter 15 provide uniquely global perspectives. Another typical criticism of the edited volume approach – a lack of connection between themes – is not suffered by this volume; the chapters flow seamlessly.

Earlier, I pointed to a lack of relevant, diverse readings featuring political economic analyses of the global, digital media environment for classroom use. Such views are not new of course (see Mansell, 2004, p. 96; McChesney, 2013, p. xii). It might be worth noting here that Wasko herself reflected not long ago that this was not the case. Stimulating and relevant readings have existed for decades, and today are plentiful (Wasko, 2014, p. 259). Regardless of where you stand on the issue of accessible political economy resources for the classroom, a central value of this book is that it provides approachable themes for today's students. In comparative context, there is little doubt that the volume of material for use in the classroom related to political economy of media has increased in recent years, although that does not mean that we necessarily are capturing the imaginations of students in an age of rapid technological change.

If students are to engage with political economy approaches in their media studies courses on a regular basis, then Nichols and Martinez' collection should be required reading.

References

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