

Editorial

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The following articles and commentaries together constitute an overview of our field – the political economy of communication. Thus, John Sinclair’s discussion of Rupert Murdoch’s *Australian* newspaper involves a longstanding PEC theme – the politics and ideology of corporate media ownership. Although the publication is not profitable, it is a central ‘actor in the business, politics and culture of the nation’. In this context, Sinclair examines the control and influence exerted by the Australian’s former Editor-in-Chief, Chris Mitchell. Aside from advancing the standard neoliberal policy agenda, Mitchell and his senior writers purveyed a binary discourse of ordinary people versus elites. The latter grouping was defined as tertiary educated, inner-metropolitan, latté-drinking, “politically correct”, left-liberal proponents of identity politics and environmentalism. In editorials, articles and reports, such people were routinely positioned against the mainstream of patriotic Australians. Here, Sinclair detects a discursive strategy typical of NewsCorp publications. So-called progressive views are stigmatized just as conservative positions ‘masquerade as occupying the middle ground’. Meanwhile, the power of business and political elites remains unscrutinised.

Jeffrey Blevins draws upon Oscar Gandy’s classic work *The Panoptic Sort* (1993) to critique the growing capacity for undivided surveillance, aggregate data mining and targeted advertising. Amidst these practices, individuals can be misrepresented through mismeasurements or ‘missorts’ of their private information. The discrimination and exploitation that results cannot be adequately redressed under current US privacy law. Thus, Blevins calls for a rethink of US privacy policy such that victims of panoptic missorting have the power to correct their records and negotiate terms of service with data brokers and service providers. Without such reform ‘the subjects of digital media surveillance will remain misrepresented to prospective employers, health insurers, friends and associates’.

Alan Heresco’s analysis of Kickstarter, the internet-based crowdfunding platform resituates another PEC thematic – the tension between capital logics and civil society. Kickstarter ‘furthers the incursions of yield hunting capital’ yet it opens up finance itself as a resource for escaping ‘the limitations of the value chain’. Crowdfunding in general may foster neoliberalism by disintermediating civic projects and the people involved in them while allowing donors to ‘fund beloved shows or major music, film, print or video game projects’. For Heresco, the diverse manifestations of Kickstarter and its central ambiguity is best understood if ‘the standard practices and critiques of political economy’ are integrated with ‘other intellectual trajectories, among them cultural economy and the social studies of finance’.

The next two articles proffer an extension and a reconstruction of our field. Núria Almiron argues that the political economy of communication must extend its moral concern with justice, equity and the public good beyond human life. In her view ‘not assigning individuals of other species the same moral consideration we do human beings has no ethical grounding and is actually deeply entangled with our own suffering in capitalist societies arising from human inequality, power relations and economic interests’. To remedy this shortcoming, Almiron puts the case for Critical Animal Studies (CAS), an interdisciplinary field which advances radically engaged research on human-animal relations. In principle, PEC and CAS should together oppose ‘hegemonic power and oppression from a non-anthropocentric moral stance’.

Dwayne Winseck’s reconstruction of the PEC foregrounds the contributions of European and North American scholars such as Karl Kries, Karl Bücher, Albert Schäffe, Ferdinand Tönnies, Charles Horton Cooley, Edward Ross, Albion Small, Franklin Giddings, Richard Ely and Thorsten Veblen. In their work, communications and media had already become significant objects of inquiry within a loose, cross-Atlantic political economy tradition. Winseck argues that this tradition ‘predated the differentiation of the social science disciplines in the early to mid-20th century and the emergence of PEC in its contemporary Marxist form’. He also discusses those economists, legal and regulatory scholars and business historians, who dealt with issues of monopoly, anti-trust and regulation across the communication and media industries. Winseck integrates these intellectual strands with the better known PEC writings in order to reassess longstanding debates and to thematise ‘the broad structure and finer details of the telecoms, internet and media industries’.

In this vein, Ben Birkinbine considers the proposed AT&T-Time-Warner merger, an eventuality which would ‘combine the content and production strengths of Time-Warner and the distributional strength of AT&T’. Legal and regulatory concerns about vertical concentrations in the production and distribution of content are complemented by a civil liberties critique. AT&T has already been accused of collusion with the National Security Agency (NSA) in the monitoring of domestic and international communications. The proposed merger highlights this concern.

Victor Pickard’s account of Donald Trump’s recent presidential campaign builds upon PEC critiques of US news media. Network television’s constant coverage of Trump’s candidacy generated huge commercial returns. The proliferation of fake news via Facebook precluded accurate scrutiny of his statements and performance. Meanwhile, the disintegration of American newspapers’ business model, as readers and advertisers migrated to the web, reduced the livelihood of journalists. This has meant less investigative press reporting and the creation of ‘news deserts’ whereby entire regions and beats remain uncovered. All of these factors have precipitated what Pickard calls ‘the age of Trump’.