

Editorial

Guest Editors:

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The following contributions stem from the 2015 Union for Democratic Communications (UDC) conference held at the University of Toronto. Founded in 1981, the UDC (www.democraticcommunications.org) is an organization of communication researchers, academics, activists, journalists, policy analysts, and media producers that encourages critical perspectives in communication theory and media studies. Participants at the 2015 conference were asked to engage with the conference theme, *Circuits of Struggle*, in evaluating how contemporary communication practices further a neoliberal agenda of austerity, precarity, debt, and enclosure while also providing new tools for individuals and groups fighting for higher wages, social justice, alternative social relationships, and a better quality of life. As the conference played out over May Day weekend, attendees had the opportunity to assess the relative utility of the conference theme as they sought to understand the recent economic, social, and political crises and ensuing cycles of struggle. The first two articles, by Harry Cleaver and Nick Dyer-Witheford, are adaptations from a special plenary event wherein the conference organizers asked the participants to respond to the following question: “what potential do you see for resistance, subversion, re-appropriation, and repurposing of communication technology as part of a network of global class struggle?” Also included in this issue are three articles, by John Sullivan, Ian Davis, and Patrick MacInnis, which were submitted to the conference *call for papers*. These five articles are an excellent representation of the scholarly and activist spirit embodied not only by the 2015 conference but also by the UDC more broadly.

Harry Cleaver’s *Circuits of Struggle?* explores the potential for rupture as struggles against capitalism circulate globally. Drawing from his own experience in supporting the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas during the 1990s and from his insights into the use of social media platforms in class struggle, Cleaver discusses Marx’s metaphor—*circuits of capital*—in order to understand contemporary cycles of struggle. Cleaver observes that the circuits of capital facilitate not only flows of value but also flows of antagonism. His analysis encourages us to abandon the vocabulary of economics and capitalism in order to form a new means of “organizing ourselves in relation to each other and to the rest of the planet.” Cleaver’s suggestion that we need “new vocabularies for new worlds” is a timely call to action that speaks to both the challenges and opportunities of a technological domain increasingly characterized by alternative forms of social organization and collective action.

In *Cybernetics and the Making of a Global Proletariat*, Nick Dyer-Witheford examines cybernetic technologies in the context of the 2008 financial crash and the subsequent waves of global

class struggle in 2011. In doing so, he both critiques and moves beyond existing theories of class composition and proletarianization. Dyer-Witheford recognizes cybernetics as only the most recent attempt to overcome the contradictory tendencies within the capitalist social order. Cybernetic innovations extend well beyond their origins in the computer industry, to impact upon workers in traditional manufacturing, white-collar jobs, chip fabrication, and the creative industries among many others. His analysis points to an increasing reliance on black-boxed systems over which workers have limited understanding and control. Yet Dyer-Witheford also speaks to the power of harnessing these systems for resistance as a variety of social movements exemplify the ways in which the “capitalist cyber-offensive and proletarian cyber-activism collide.”

John Sullivan’s article, *Software and Artificial Scarcity in Digital Media*, employs both a critical software studies and political economy approach to interrogate underlying issues of power, commodification and control in online media environments. Sullivan’s assertion that software protocols are developed to create and enact artificial scarcity in order to further capitalist imperatives is supported through an exploration of the invisible and ubiquitous nature of the software that we interface with on a regular basis. His call for scholars to develop a deeper understanding of, and facility with programming languages in order to interrogate how our digital media environment is arranged, influenced, constrained, and made accessible, reveals a certain urgency. These underlying systems will not easily be rendered transparent. Therefore, it falls to us as academics and activists to interrogate these black-boxed systems, and expose the embedded politics to withering criticism.

Ian Davis invites us to rethink the role and positioning of foreign press within the Canadian media environment in *International News and the Distribution Question: China, Falun Dafa and Pluralism in Canadian Media Policy*. Davis also provides us with succinct insight into Canadian media policy and foreign media regulation. He suggests that the way in which foreign media is regulated and structured within Canada is reflective of how the country treats ethnic minorities more broadly. Significantly, the inclusion or exclusion of certain voices and positions by policymakers has the power to legitimize or erase political, cultural and social identities. Thus, Davis advocates a rethinking of the concepts of Canadian ‘pluralism’ and ‘multiculturalism’ in the hope that we might move beyond previously established frameworks.

In *On Cultural Commons and Commoning in Aboriginal Street Art Murals: The Case of 7th Generation Image Makers*, Patrick MacInnis investigates the cultural function of Aboriginal street art in Canada’s largest city, Toronto. Centered on an analysis of three public murals created by the artist collective “7th Generation Image Makers”, MacInnis asserts that Aboriginal-driven public, cultural production challenges and expands our understanding of both knowledge and neighborhood ‘commons’ while simultaneously enacting a space for cultural resistance. MacInnis’ examination of the concept of ‘commons’ as part of his study reveals the political and cultural implications of creating art within a regulated urban public sphere. Perhaps more importantly, his research emphasizes the power of artwork to both evoke and sustain collective identity in the face of cultural precarity.

As a collection, we believe these articles represent a balanced inquiry into the intersections of communication practices, capitalist accumulation, and class struggle. Ultimately, it is incumbent upon us as scholars, activists, academics, artists, and students, to reassert the agency of those who struggle against capitalism into our analyses and narratives. To that end, the partnership between the UDC and the political economy section of the International Association for Media Communication Research (IAMCR) has been a fruitful undertaking. We sincerely hope that this special issue of *The Political Economy of Communication* serves as a seedbed for many more imaginative dialogues and collaborations.