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COMMODIFICATION: CONTENT, AUDIENCES, LABOR

Introduction to Chapters 7–9

Having examined the political economy approach, the concept of communication, and the development of a political economy of communication, the book now draws on this work to offer a general theory to guide our understanding. Specifically, this chapter is the first of three to provide a conceptual framework for the political economy of communication. It starts with a philosophical foundation and proceeds to address the core ideas for thinking about the field.

We begin by considering the philosophical foundation in non-technical language and then move to a more formal presentation. The political economy of communication calls for an approach to understanding that accepts as real both the abstract ideas that guide thinking as well as concrete observations or what our senses perceive. It thereby rejects the view, prominent in some theories, that only our ideas or only our observations, but not both, are real. Political economy also rejects the position that there is no reality, that neither ideas nor observations are in any important sense real. Moreover, this philosophy means that reality is made up of many elements and cannot be reduced to one essence. Neither economics (e.g. money alone drives the media) nor culture (e.g. people's values shape the media) provide the magic key to unlock our understanding of communication. This philosophical foundation also brings to the forefront the ideas of social change, social process, and social relations which require re-evaluating the emphasis that political economy has traditionally placed on social institutions, like media businesses, or on seeing social class as a structure rather than as a social relationship.

Putting these ideas into practice, this and subsequent chapters move to identify three processes that make up the main starting points for political economy research, thereby guiding us on how to apply political economy to the world of communication. *Commodification* is the process of transforming things valued for their use into marketable products that are valued for what they can bring in exchange. A good example is the process of turning a story that friends enjoy into a film or novel to be sold in the marketplace. How does the human act of communication become a product produced for a profit? *Spatialization* is the process by which mass media and communication technology overcome the constraints of geographical space. For example, television overcomes distance by bringing images of events on the globe to every part of the world. Moreover, companies increasingly use computer communication to organize business on a worldwide basis, thereby allowing them greater access to consumers, workers, technology, and capital. It also provides them with the flexibility to move rapidly when the need arises, e.g. the availability of low-cost or better skilled labor elsewhere. What happens when communications goes global and when businesses make use of communication to create and manufacture their products worldwide? The third key concept is *structuration* or the process of creating social relations, mainly those organized around social class, gender, and race. For example, political economy describes how access to the mass media and new communication technologies is influenced by social class inequalities that divide people according to income and wealth, enabling some to afford access and leaving out others.

In more formal terms, the political economy of communications is grounded in specific *epistemological* and *ontological* principles. An epistemology is an approach to understanding how we know things. The political economy of communication is based on a realist, inclusive, constitutive, and critical epistemology. It is *realist* in the strong sense that it recognizes the reality of both concepts and social practices (see Latour, 1999: [Chapter 1](#); Shimony and Malin, 2006). In this respect, it is to be distinguished from *idiographic* approaches that argue for the reality of ideas alone and *nomothetic* approaches which maintain that ideas are only labels for the singular reality of human action. Following from this, political economy is also *inclusive* in that it rejects essentialism, or the tendency to reduce all social practices to a single political economic explanation, in favor of an approach that views concepts as starting or entry points into a diverse social field (Resnick and Wolff, 1987, 2006). To understand social reality you need to choose concepts and theories. The choice of one concept or theory over another is made because you conclude that the concept or theory is more valuable than the alternatives. However, such choices are not meant to be assertions of the one best, or only, way to understand social practices.

Additionally, the epistemology is *constitutive* because it acknowledges the limits of causal determination, including the assumption in causal analysis that units interact as fully formed wholes and in a linear fashion. Rather, political economy approaches social life as a set of mutually constitutive processes, whose units act on one another in various stages of formation, and with a direction and impact that can only be described in specific research. Finally, this approach to political economy is *critical* because it sees knowledge as the product of comparisons with other bodies of knowledge and with social

values. For example, my political economy is critical in that it regularly compares the knowledge acquired in research against alternative bodies of knowledge in, for example, neoclassical economics, pluralist political science, and cultural studies. Furthermore, this approach measures the knowledge gathered in political economic research against the social values that have guided much of it over the years, including democracy and its components, civic participation, and social equality.

In contrast to epistemology, which provides a framework for understanding how we know things, ontology describes a framework for understanding the nature of being. Specifically, ontology distinguishes seeing things as *structures* or as *processes*. Is the river a thing or a flow? It is both, but which one is emphasized? Traditionally, political economy has emphasized things or structures such as multinational media firms and the governments that oversee them. My theoretical framework calls for a departure from this traditional approach to political economy by placing social processes and social relations in the foreground. This means that research starts from the view that social change is ubiquitous, that structures and institutions are constantly changing, and that it is therefore more useful to develop entry points that characterize processes rather than simply to identify relevant institutions. According to this view, studying media institutions is important but it follows from an analysis of a social process, e.g. turning stories into films and other marketable products.

Guided by this principle, the remainder of this chapter and the following two develop a substantive map of political economy with three starting processes, beginning with *commodification*, the process of transforming use to exchange value, moving on to *spatialization*, the transformation of space with communication, and finally to *structuration*, the process of building structures with social agency. Placing these processes in the foreground does not replace structures and institutions, something that would substitute one form of essentialism for another. Rather, these are entry points that comprise a substantive theory of political economy, one preferred choice among a range of possible ways to explain social reality.

What is Commodification?

Adam Smith and classical political economy distinguished between products whose value derives from the satisfaction of a specific human want or need, i.e. use value, and those whose value is based on what the product can command in exchange, i.e. exchange value. The commodity is the particular form that products take when their production is principally organized through the process of exchange. *Commodification is the process of transforming use values into exchange values.*

Marx began *Capital* with an analysis of the commodity because he found it to be the most visible form, the most explicit representation, of capitalist production. Capitalism literally *appears* as an immense collection of commodities. Although this appearance did not go unnoticed in classical political economy, the tendency was to naturalize it, a point that marked a critical departure in Marx. What for Smith and his followers was “a self-evident and nature-imposed necessity” was instead for Marx the product of “a social formation in which the process of production has mastery over man, instead of the opposite” (Marx, 1976a: 175). One of the keys to Marxian analysis is to deconstruct the commodity to determine what the appearance means, to uncover the social relations congealed in the commodity form. As Jhally (1990) has documented, in one of the few sustained analyses of the commodity form in the communication literature, Marx took a broad view of both the commodity and the meaning of use value. For Marx (1976a: 125), commodities ensue from a wide range of needs, both physical and cultural (“from the stomach, or the imagination, makes no difference”) and whose use can be defined “in various ways.” The commodity might arise from a range of social needs – including satisfying physical hunger and meeting or contravening the status codes of a particular social group. Moreover, contrary to some interpretations, use value is not limited to meeting survival needs but extends to the range of socially constituted uses.

Some critics have not been satisfied with this formulation, arguing that the distinction between use and exchange value obscures more than it illuminates. For example, according to Sahlins (1976: 15), Marx acknowledges the social character of all value but tends to *naturalize use value*, “to trade away the social determination of use-values for the biological fact that they satisfy ‘human wants’.” Baudrillard (1981) extends this critique by maintaining that use value is ultimately left outside the sets of structures and codes that constitute specific exchange values. This critique reminds us that Marx’s chief aim was to interrogate capital and, given the primacy of this interest, he neglected detailed treatment of ideas that embody the fundamental negation of capitalism, including use value and the social contours of a socialist or Communist society. Nevertheless, the cultural critique also defines a boundary that political economy will not cross because the critique aims to do more than suggest gaps. It also substitutes an idealist relativism that defines value as whatever the cultural code specifies and, as suggested in the variability of human cultural practice, this can amount to practically anything. Political economy admits to variability, but bounds it by the understanding that uses are conditioned (in Marx’s language) or limited (in the language of Raymond Williams) by the structural properties of the commodity and take their existence from them. Drawing on Rubin, Jhally (1990) suggests the language of “partial necessity” to deal with Marx’s recognition that “usefulness does not dangle in mid-air.” Alternatively, one might suggest the mutual constitution of use values and retain the distinction between socially constituted use values and values which arise from a specific set of social arrangements, such as the market, which produce exchange values.

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Peeling back what Marx called the “onion skin” of the commodity’s appearance reveals a system of production. There are two general dimensions of significance in the relationship of commodification to communication. First, *communication processes and technologies contribute to the general process of commodification in the economy as a whole*. For example, improving the channels of communication in the clothing business, particularly with the introduction of global computer and telecommunication technologies, expands information about the entire circuit of production, distribution, and sales. This improves inventory controls, thereby saving on space and increasing the likelihood that stores stock only what customers want. Second, *commodification processes at work in the society as a whole penetrate communication processes and institutions, so that improvements and contradictions in the societal commodification process influence communication as a social practice*. For example, the international tendencies to liberalization and privatization of enterprises, which picked up steam in the 1980s, transformed public and state-run media and telecommunications institutions throughout the world into private enterprises. This turned public service communication with social commitments to universal access and content that reflects the broad range of society into commercial communication that provides access to those who can afford it and content that delivers audiences to advertisers.

Given the interest in situating communication within a general political economic analysis, it is useful to start from the general process of commodification and examine how it relates to communication. From the point of view of capital, the production process begins with the capitalist’s purchase of the commodities *labor power* and *the means of production*. The total output is sold for more than originally invested and the addition is called *surplus value*, which may itself be invested to expand the accumulation of capital. In essence, capital is value that expands through processes of production and exchange. Marxian theory takes this analysis one step further by concluding that these are *exploitative* processes because the expansion of capitalist control eliminates alternative systems of production and forces labor into a social relationship wherein it takes on the status of a commodity, or a factor of production, along with land and raw materials, and is made to give up its control over the means of production. As a result, workers are made to exchange their labor power for a wage that does not compensate fully for the labor they sell. The commodity labor is reproduced through processes of absolute exploitation (extending the working day) and relative exploitation (intensification of the labor process) that deepen the extraction of surplus value. Exploitation is a *sine qua non* of the capitalist labor process, but the degree of exploitation depends on the state of class struggle. For example, when workers organize a union or otherwise resist exploitation, capital has to make adjustments in the labor process. Thus, the commodity whose appearance fills the markets of capitalism is also a congealed set of social relations that connect capital to the commodity labor in a struggle for control over the value generated from production and exchange. For example, the DVD of a Hollywood film that appears in a video store is also a set of social relations that links Hollywood producers to screen actors, directors, and writers, who struggle over who will profit from the value generated from sales in stores and from distribution over the Internet.

In the Marxian view, the commodity objectifies exploitative social relations by presenting them in a congealed form that makes them seem natural. Hence a computer appears to us as a commodity with a defined set of use values and a specific exchange value marked by its price. Its value in use and in exchange tends to mystify the ability to comprehend the computer as the embodiment of an international division of labor that stratifies productive relations along class, gender, national, and spatial dimensions. A deeper level of mystification is revealed in Marx’s analysis of *commodity fetishism*, according to which the commodity not only congeals social relations and hides the struggle over value, but takes on a life and a power of its own, over that of both its producers and consumers. For Marx, such fetishism was once limited to religion:

In order, therefore, to find an analogy we must take flight into the misty realm of religion. There the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men’s hands. I call this the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities and is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities. (1976a: 165)

In fact, for Marx, the commodity fetish is more powerful than its counterpart in religion because commodities have a material embodiment that presents itself directly to the senses in ways that religious beliefs do not.¹ In this view, the commodity contains a double mystification. First, it naturalizes the social relationship between capital and labor. It is the computer that appears and not a struggle at the point of production over, for example, how much workers who produce computers will earn. Second, the commodity is reified, i.e. it takes on a life of its own that stands against the individual and society and comes to shape both. We turn the computer into a mystical icon, the embodiment of what I have called “the digital sublime” (Mosco, 2004). The first point sees the commodity as the natural outcome of a production process, rather than the social consequence of a fundamental social struggle; the second point completely cuts the tie to a production process and situates the commodity in its own social realm. The computer appears as a power over people, as the force that shapes, determines, constrains, or otherwise controls social development. The outcome of this double mystification is that the product of a social process is given an existence of its own and the power to mold social life (Free and Hughson, 2006; Hope and Rosser, 2004).

Commodification refers to the process of turning use values into exchange values, of transforming products whose value is determined by their ability to meet individual and social needs into products whose value is set by their market price. Owing in part to the emphasis on structures and objects over processes and relations in much of political economic thought, the term commodification has not received substantial explicit treatment. Nevertheless, it is implicit in discussions of the process of capitalist expansion, including the global extension of the market (Fürsich and Roushanzami, 2004; Murdock and Wasko, 2007), the privatization of public space (Gibson, 2003; Schiller, 1989), and the growth of exchange value in interpersonal life (Ewen and Ewen, 2006) and in sexuality (Mayer, 2005).

It is important to distinguish commodification from commercialization and objectification, processes with which it tends to be associated. Commercialization is a narrower process that specifically refers to the creation of a relationship between an audience and an advertiser. For example, the commercialization of the airwaves means the growth of broadcast advertising and the development of programming to deliver audiences to advertisers. Since the market encompasses more than commercialization, e.g. the commodification of labor, we view commodification as a broader process. Objectification is a still broader notion that is often confused with commodification. For example, in his work on reification, Lukács (1971) describes the process whereby the relations between people “take on the character of a thing and thus acquire a phantom objectivity.” Commodification is a specific form of this process whereby the “thing” that acquires phantom objectivity is a commodity, that is, an object whose value is established in the marketplace. Objectification is a general process that refers to the many different ways dehumanization takes place. Political economy focuses on one important manifestation of this, the process of commodification.

The Commodity Form in Communication

The political economy of communication has been notable for its emphasis on describing and examining the significance of organizational structures responsible for the production, distribution, and exchange of communication commodities and for the regulation of these structures, principally by governments. Although it has not neglected the commodity itself and the process of commodification, political economy has tended to foreground corporate and state structures and institutions. When it has treated the commodity, political economy has tended to concentrate on media content and, to a lesser extent, on media audiences. It has paid considerably less attention to the commodification of labor in the communication industries.

The emphasis on media institutions is understandable because today's global media conglomerates are very powerful. They are able to extend that power by creating content that brings in revenue each time it is used and reused by audiences around the world. Companies then deepen that revenue stream when they take that same content and repackage it for use and reuse by subsidiaries that extend across the print, video, film, and new media sectors (Broe, 2004).

Notwithstanding the importance of institutions, emphasis on their activities has meant less than adequate attention to the commodity form of the mass media and, particularly, to the commodification of audiences and of labor.

The Commodification of Content

When political economists think about the commodity form in communication, they have tended to start with media content. Specifically, from this point of view, the process of commodification in communication involves transforming messages, ranging from bits of data to systems of meaningful thought, into marketable products. For example, consider a newspaper reporter whose job it is to apply professional skills to produce stories that contain many different use values. The history of newspaper production in capitalist society has involved numerous processes, including commodification, which make the story teller a wage laborer who sells her labor power, or the ability to write stories, for a wage. Capital turns that labor power into a newspaper article or column which, along with other stories and advertising, forms a packaged product. It sells the newspaper package in the marketplace and, if it is successful, earns a profit or surplus value, which it can then invest by expanding its newspaper business or by investing in any other venture that promises additions to capital. Marxian political economy views this as the realization of surplus value because the control that capital wields over the means of production (ownership of presses, offices, etc.) enables it to earn in profit more than it pays out in wages.

The extent of surplus value realization depends on numerous factors in labor, consumer, and capital markets. With respect to labor, Marxian political economy has examined the process of creating absolute and relative surplus value. The former involves extending the working day for the same wage; the latter to intensifying the labor process through greater control over the use of work time, including measurement and monitoring systems to get more labor out of a unit of work time. The success of these strategies depends on the ability of labor to resist, something that rests on the strength of its own organizations, and on more general social conditions, such as capital's ability to replace the workforce with new workers and new technologies. Specifically, how powerful are the trade unions representing news workers? How easy is it to outsource newspaper labor and get machines to do its work? It also depends on the extent to which government sides with capital or labor in law and public policy.

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labor in law and public policy.

Capital also aims to control consumer markets through a range of tactics that amount to achieving the status of the “natural” or taken-for-granted provider of a product. These include building a market monopoly or controlling an oligopoly arrangement, using advertising to create brand identification with the company, and diversifying its product line to achieve the flexibility to overcome changes in market demand. The ability to realize surplus value also depends on the extent to which consumers are able to resist, a consideration that depends on its history of collective action and the general social conditions that enable or retard the ability of consumers to substitute products and services. Again, it also depends on the extent to which government sides with capital or with consumers. Finally, the realization of surplus value depends on the state of capital markets, specifically, on the cost of capital which permits the replacement of labor with capital and also allows for the expansion of the commodity form (from, for example, the newspaper format to an all-news pay cable channel, or to an online service).

This brief description suggests that the process of creating exchange value in the content of communication draws an entire complex of social relations into the orbit of commodification, including labor, consumers, and capital. The general tendency in communication research has been to concentrate on the content as commodity and, by extension, to identify the connections between the commodity status of the content and its meaning. As a result, communication is taken to be a special and particularly powerful commodity because, in addition to its ability to produce surplus value (thereby behaving like all other commodities), it contains symbols and images whose meaning helps to shape consciousness. Numerous studies have documented the value of this approach and its conclusion that the mass media in capitalist society have expanded the process of commodity production by, among other things, producing messages that reflect the interests of capital. Through however circuitous, contradictory, and contested a process, these messages advance support for the interests of capital as a whole as well as for specific segments of capital (Bettig and Hall, 2003; McChesney, 2004; Meyer, 2006; Murdock and Wasko, 2007).

Although they concurred in general terms with this conclusion, some political economists, notably Garnham and Smythe, suggested alternative formulations. Both raised concerns about the tendency to emphasize the meaning or ideological dimension of media production. Throughout his career, Garnham has directed his strongest salvos against those who would, in effect, jettison the economic for the analysis of “autonomous discourses.”² Nevertheless, he is also concerned about the tendency within political economy to address the message, its meaning and ideology, to, as Jhally puts it, adopt a “consumer model of communications,” without adequately addressing the mass media as “economic entities with both a direct economic role as creators of surplus value through commodity production and exchange and an indirect role, through advertising, in the creation of surplus value within other sectors of commodity production” (Garnham, 1979: 132). In this reading, the mass media are important because they are the immediate site of commodity production *and* because they play an important, if indirect, role, through advertising media, in the process of commodification throughout the economy. The point is not that the ideological is insignificant; rather that it is thoroughly integrated within a process of production that is too often treated as instrumental to ideology (in some political economy) or autonomous from it (in some cultural theory).

New media expand opportunities to commodify content because they are fundamentally grounded in the process of digitization, which refers specifically to the transformation of communication, including data, words, images, motion pictures, and sound, into a common language. Digitization provides enormous gains in transmission speed and flexibility over earlier forms of electronic communication which were largely reliant on analog techniques (Longstaff, 2002). This has advanced to the point that a single electronic communication can now be broken up into packets and sent down different pathways along telecommunication networks to be recombined at the destination, thereby ensuring the most efficient use of networks.

Digitization expands the commodification of communication content by extending the range of opportunities to measure and monitor, package and repackage, information and entertainment. The packaging of material in the paper and ink form of a newspaper or book has provided a flexible, but limited, means to measure the commodity and monitor purchases. Challenges to the commodification of communication arose when what political economist Bernard Miège calls flow type communication systems arose, most importantly television (Miège, 1989; see also McAllister and Giglo, 2004). How does one package a television program for sale to a viewer? Initially, commodification was based on an inflexible system of delivering a batch of broadcast channels into the home with viewers paying for the receiver and for a markup or increase in the retail price of products advertised over the air. This system did not account for differential use of the medium or make any clear connection between viewing and purchasing. It amounted to a system of delivering generic programming to a mass audience which was marketed to advertisers for a price per thousand viewers.

Each step toward the digitization of television has refined the commodification of content, allowing for the flow to be captured or, more precisely, for the commodity to be measured, monitored, and packaged in ever more specific or customized ways. Early cable television improved on broadcast systems of commodification by charging per month for a set of channels. As this medium has become digitized, companies can now offer many more channels and package them in many different ways, including selling content on a per view basis. Material delivered over television, the Internet or some combination of these and other new wired and wireless systems can now be flexibly packaged and then repackaged for sale in some related form with the transaction measured and monitored by the same digital system.

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The sheer ability to expand the commodification process does not guarantee its success. Internet entrepreneurs learned the hard way that charging for content can be a risky business indeed. Technical, management, marketing, and consumer demand problems can often get in the way. Nevertheless, the growth of pay-per-view television, satellite-delivered subscription radio, video delivered over the Internet, web cams, and the rise of the iTunes pay-per-song system, which has made Apple the largest commercial distributor of music, demonstrate that new media commodification has made substantial progress (Lynch, 2004; Murray, 2003; Thrift, 2006). This progress has been assisted by intellectual property laws that permit content owners, increasingly large enterprises, to control the use of content and even the formats through which content is delivered. So a company can now control not only the entertainment delivered in the television program *American Idol*, it can profit by licensing the format for the program to companies in other countries who produce, for example, *Canadian Idol* (Baltruschat, 2008).

The Audience Commodity

Nicholas Garnham has examined two principal dimensions of media commodification: the direct production of media products and the use of media advertising to perfect the process of commodification in the entire economy. Dallas Smythe (1977) took these ideas in a different direction by advancing the claim that the audience is the primary commodity of the mass media. According to him, the mass media are constituted out of a process which sees media companies producing audiences and delivering them to advertisers. Media programming is used to attract audiences; for

Smythe, it was little more than the “free lunch” that bars once used to entice customers to drink. From this vantage point, audience labor or its labor power is the chief product of the mass media.

New media amplify the elements of Smythe’s argument (Shimpach, 2005). In addition to expanding the commodification of communication content, the recursive nature of digital systems expands the commodification of the entire communication process. Digital systems which measure and monitor precisely each information transaction are now used to refine the process of delivering audiences of viewers, listeners, readers, movie fans, telephone and computer users, to advertisers. In essence, companies can package and repackage customers in forms that specifically reflect both their actual purchases and their demographic characteristics. These packages, for example, of 18–25 year old men who order martial arts films on pay-per-view television, can be sold to companies, which spend more for this information because they want to market their products to this specific sector with as little advertising spilling over to people who would not be interested or able to buy. This is a major refinement in the commodification of viewers over the earlier system of delivering mass audiences and it has been applied to practically every communication medium today, including the Internet, where social networking sites like Facebook provide detailed information on users.

Smythe’s analysis provoked one of the more interesting and well-examined exchanges in the political economy literature (Livant, 1979; Murdock, 1978; Smythe, 1978). Rather than review the debates on the primacy of the audience as commodity and as labor, exchanges that have been detailed more than once (Jhally, 1990), it is more useful to take up the wider significance of Smythe’s argument. Neglected in the debate about whether the audience labors or whether it is the sole media commodity, is arguably the central contribution that Smythe made to our understanding of the media commodification process. For him, the process brought together a triad that linked media companies, audiences, and advertisers in a set of reciprocal relationships. Media firms use their programming to construct audiences; advertisers pay media companies for access to these audiences; audiences are thereby delivered to advertisers. Such an argument broadens the space within which media commodification takes place beyond the immediate process whereby media companies produce newspapers, radio broadcasts, television programs and films, and websites to include advertisers or capital in general. The process of commodification thoroughly integrates the media industries into the total capitalist economy not primarily by creating ideologically saturated products but by producing audiences, *en masse* and in specific demographically desirable forms, for advertisers. Smythe thereby aimed to rescue the materialist analysis of the media by demonstrating that it is the production of audiences for the general capitalist economy that is central to the commodification process rather than the production of ideology.

Putting aside the contentious and doubtfully productive argument about whether audiences constitute labor, Smythe’s deployment of the labor process concept is useful as metaphor or analogy because it offers a way to think about the triad of media company–audience–advertiser without submitting to the mechanistic thinking that such a structural argument invites. Bracketing the question of whether audiences work in the traditional sense of the term (with all of the questions it raises about the labor theory of value), it is useful to think about analogies between audience activity and the labor process because the latter is a dynamic activity involving complicity and contestation between capital and labor over control of the process and of the product. This is considerably more valuable than addressing the audience as the inert mass that so-called mass society theorists dating from Ortega y Gasset (1957) have conjured or, alternatively, as the co-producers of media products, the view on offer from pluralists like Fiske (1989) and Ang (1991), who responded to traditional criticism of a passive mass society by going to the other extreme and describing an active audience of co-producers. The latter are correct in pointing to the co- or mutual constitution of media products, *but* they neglect to situate this process within a structure of decision-making that places in the hands of capital most, though not all, of the levers on the control over decision-making about what gets produced, how it is distributed, and what it costs.

Capital, in its own manifold and contested manifestations, must actively construct audiences as it constructs labor, but even as it does so, both audiences and labor construct themselves by deciding, within a social field whose terms of engagement are primarily set by capital, how to activate their audience and their labor power. For the audience, this means a range of alternatives: attending or watching as capital would like, interpreting programming in oppositional or alternative ways, or simply not watching at all. The new media field of computer gaming offers important insights into the concept of audience labor (Grimes, 2006). As with traditional labor, which the literature on work demonstrates brings a wide range of responses to the point of production, from full compliance to withholding labor power, the audience exercises power, but also like labor, it is power circumscribed within terms largely set by capital.

Political economy extends the analogy further by examining how the relationship between capital and the audience at the point of media reception is carried on over the expansion of commercial broadcasting at the expense of non-commercial public and community broadcasting. It also does so by addressing the use of new technologies to expand the process of measuring and monitoring audience activity, and the introduction of pay-per channel, per-view, and per-song services. Moreover, political economy examines how audiences respond and resist with file sharing, blogging, social networking, and other forms of media use that aim to counter the prevailing commercial system. These activities have sparked important new work in the political economy of the audience (Andrejevic, 2003a, 2003b; Arvidsson, 2004; Carlson, 2006; Grimes, 2006; Hope and Johnson, 2004; Morris, 2005; Shimpach, 2005; Thrift, 2006).

In the interest of examining the commodification of content and audiences, there has been a tendency to neglect the labor commodity and the process that takes place at the point of production. Braverman's (1974) work gave rise to an intellectual drive to end this marginal status by directly confronting the transformation of the labor process in capitalism.³ According to him, labor is constituted out of the unity of *conception*, or the power to envision, imagine, and design work, and *execution*, or the power to carry it out.⁴ In the process of commodification, capital acts to *separate* conception from execution, skill from the raw ability to carry out a task. It also *concentrates* conceptual power in a managerial class that is either a part of capital or represents its interests. Finally, capital *reconstitutes* the labor process to correspond to this new distribution of skills and power at the point of production. In the extreme, this was done through the application of so-called scientific management practices, pioneered by Frederick Winslow Taylor.⁵ These amounted to the precise measurement of the time and the amount of labor it takes to accomplish tasks most efficiently, i.e. to permit the maximum return on investment. In the process, management became the scientific brains of an enterprise and workers, who once possessed the craft skill to control the labor process, were turned into appendages of the machinery. Braverman documented the process of labor transformation in the rise of large-scale industry, but he is particularly recognized for producing one of the first sustained examinations demonstrating the extension of this process into the service and information sectors. Braverman's work gave rise to an enormous body of empirical examination and theoretical debate, the latter focusing principally on the need to address the contested nature of the process and the active agency of workers and of the trade union movement (Burawoy, 1979; Edwards, 1979). Much of this work constituted what the philosopher Thomas Kuhn (1970) would call "normal science," i.e. working through and expanding upon the wide range of problems and implications contained in Braverman's contribution. This included mapping the contested terrain at the point of production, documenting its history, and demonstrating how the transformation of the labor process was experienced differently by industry, occupation, class, gender, and race. Recent work, including scholarly assessments and business press accounts, has tended to incorporate an interest in how the means of communication, sharpened by steady improvements in technological proficiency, have enhanced the commodification of the general labor process (Baldoz, Koeber, and Kraft, 2001; Huws, 2003; Mosco and McKercher, 2008).

Despite a strong political economy tradition and a broad interest among economists and policy-makers in the cultural industries, communication studies has tended to situate its object within the sphere of consumption and this has contributed to a focus on the relationship of audiences to texts more than on the media labor process. Political economists of communication have paid considerable attention to the institutional control over media production and to the impact of this control on audiences, including the concept of audience labor. Although this is changing, arguably more attention has been directed to the labor of audiences than to the traditionally understood labor process in the media industries. Moreover, work in the media industries carries strong craft, professional, and artisan traditions that continue, even as the labor process is transformed (Deuze, 2007). The image of the crusading professional journalist or the high-tech entrepreneur overwhelms the less romantic reality of a media and high-tech world, most of whose workers toil under conditions that industrial workers of the past would recognize. There is an understandable tendency to emphasize the individual creative dimensions of media production which distinguish this sector from the many occupational sectors that share the characteristics of industrial production. Authors write books, some directors are the *auteurs* of film, stars make movies or television programs, etc. There are substantial grounds for this view, principally based on the relatively high level of conceptual thought that this industry requires. This is the chief reason why print workers and their trade unions have historically occupied a privileged position in the workforce. But the emphasis on individual creativity only obscures a complex process of production, one that, however unevenly, has come to look more like the labor process in the general economy.

Organizational communication and sociology have provided some of the better insights into the bureaucratic structure and production processes in the media industries. The work of Tuchman (1978), Fishman (1980), and Gans (1979), and more recently Deuze (2007) among others, has examined the system of bureaucratic controls that manage the complex process of, principally, news production. Their work highlights those simplifying routines such as beat reporting, a detailed division of labor, and regularized features that establish a template for what is potentially an open-ended production process. This body of research demonstrates that a substantial amount of organizational planning and pre-processing are used to gather, package, and distribute news and information on a routine basis. This line of research is important for a political economy that addresses the labor process because it describes in rich empirical detail the socio-technical processes that help to constitute the work of producing media even as it turns labor into a marketable commodity. Nevertheless, although this work gestures to political and economic influences, these are left untheorized in favor of a framework based on theories of bureaucracy and organization that foreground abstract administrative needs and functions. Notwithstanding nods to power and profit, this approach concentrates on how the structural pressures of bureaucracy, following on a literature originating in the work of Max Weber and Robert Michels, rationalize production in the cultural industries, just as they do throughout an economy managed by complex bureaucracies.

From a political economic perspective, the organizational literature contributes rich empirical detail but rests on an

idealist foundation that substitutes an administrative essentialism for what it perceives to be the economic essentialism of the market. It places, as the sociologist Max Weber suggested, the determining influence of the *means of administration* over that of the means of production. The challenge that the organizational literature poses to political economy is to develop a position that examines the process of production foregrounding political and economic power, specifically the commodification of labor. This would constitute an important link between institutional and textual analysis that retains the materialist strength of a political economic approach. The point is not to reclaim ground lost to one essentialism by restoring another, but to theorize the commodification of labor in the process of media production. As Chapter 6 described, the political economy literature has taken some steps in this direction, but considerable work remains to be done (Huws, 2003; Kumar, 2007; Martin, 2004; McKercher and Mosco, 2006, 2007; Mosco and McKercher, 2008; Wasko, 2003).

Immanent Commodification

Thus far we have considered three major products of the commodification process in communication: content, audiences, and labor. The chapter now turns to consider two more dimensions of commodification: how commodities produce their own new commodities, or immanent commodification, and how new commodities are produced through the associations among different commodities.

We begin by returning to the audience commodity where the political economist Eileen Meehan offers an alternative way to think about it which centers on the audience ratings services. Since “neither messages nor audiences are exchanged: only ratings,” she maintains (1984: 223) that these reports on audience size, composition, and patterns of media usage constitute the primary commodity in the media system. Meehan’s research makes a significant contribution to several dimensions of political economic analysis, including the materialist history of an industry which the A.C. Nielsen Company made famous and the social construction of a statistic, the rating, whose exchange value barely resembles its use as an empirical marker for actual audience characteristics. For the purpose of this analysis, her research is particularly valuable because, when combined with research in other areas, it points to the recursive nature of the commodification process. Audience ratings are a commodity produced by another commodity. In this case, a commodity is born directly out of the process of creating another. We call this an immanent process because one commodity gives rise directly to another.

Commodification demands the use of measurement procedures to produce commodities and monitoring techniques to keep track of production, distribution, exchange, and consumption. An example of the former is the precise length of an advertisement or the amount of commercial time produced for sale to advertisers. Monitoring is exemplified by a range of practices, including traditional business accounting, marketing studies, capital cost assessments, wage and benefit studies, customer surveys, and more recent innovations like data matching systems that link a credit or debit card purchase to demographic and attitudinal information. These practices are part of the commodification process because the information they produce is used in the production of commodities, like newspapers, television situation comedies, and social networking websites. They are immanent because the outcome of the information production process is the production of a new commodity. In this respect, ratings are immanent commodities because they are constituted as commodities in the process of contributing to commodity production. Specifically, they are produced as an important element in the commodification of content and of audiences and are themselves the central commodity of the ratings industry. This makes the ratings services important not because they are *the* media commodity, but because they represent one rather advanced stage in the general process of media commodification. They are part of a family of such commodities that grow out of the development of generalized monitoring and surveillance procedures that make use of advanced communication and information technology (Campbell, 2005; Campbell and Carlson, 2002; Carlson, 2006).⁶ In this respect, audience ratings are as important, though not inherently more so, than commodities produced and marketed from data automatically gathered on consumer purchases. Both are immanent commodities containing a secondary order of exchange value that depends on a first order.

Back in 1992 the prescient head of a major company which marketed such immanent commodities recognized their significance. For DeSimone (1992), they build on the original commodification process by shifting

from the value that is *intrinsic* in the product to values associated with the knowledge of who needs it, who supplies it and what it does. You buy a magazine and pay for it with a credit card. A simple transaction? Hardly. The *information* about who you are and what magazines you prefer – recorded by a computer – is worth as much as the return on the sale of the magazine. The information can be variously packaged. It can be marketed to others. Moreover, all the internal processes are affected by your decision – from marketing to purchase to finance. Today, all organizations are in the information business.

Notwithstanding the need to discount for the hyperbole that typically accompanies emanations from the corporate center of the information industries, one is left with the view that it is essential to move beyond the notion of finding *the* commodity in the media. It is more significant to foreground a process of commodification that connects a range of practices in a spiral

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in the media. It is more significant to foreground a process of commodification that connects a range of practices in a spiral of expanding exchange value that, as DeSimone concludes, draws all organizations into the orbit of the information business that produces immanent commodities. It is within this general framework of commodification that it becomes useful to examine the application of new measurement and surveillance technologies to expand the production of media commodities. Internet cookies, digital television recording devices, “smart” cards, etc., produce new products, in the form of reports on viewing and shopping, containing demographic details that are linked to numerous databases. But these new products are more than discrete units. They are part of a commodification process that connects them in a structured hierarchy. The implications for privacy are powerful. According to one analyst:

The driving force behind this prying is commerce. The big growth area in online advertising right now is “behavioral targeting.” Web sites can charge a premium if they are able to tell the maker of an expensive sports car that its ads will appear on Web pages clicked on by upper-income, middle-aged men.

The information, however, gets a lot more specific than age and gender – and more sensitive. Tech companies can keep track of when a particular Internet user looks up Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, visits adult Web sites, buys cancer drugs online or participates in anti-government discussion groups (Cohen, 2008).

Immanent commodification not only produces new commodities; it creates powerful surveillance tools that threaten privacy.

Externalizing Commodification

One can also observe a process of expansion that extends commodification to areas that, for a range of social, political, cultural, and economic reasons, were historically left outside the process or only lightly affected by it. These include numerous information and cultural areas that have been taken up prominently in communication and cultural studies (Murdock and Wasko, 2007), geography (Graham, 2002), urban studies (Gibson and Lowes, 2006), development studies (McDonald and Ruiters, 2005), and environmental studies (Dorsey, Steeves, and Porras, 2004). This work describes how the process of commodification has been extended to institutional areas that were once resources available to all irrespective of market power. These include media and telecommunications, but also water, education, streets, playgrounds, museums, libraries, and other objects, locations, and services that were certainly created out of a range of contested forces and motives, but which nevertheless had preserved principles of use value and universal access irrespective of one’s ability to pay.

The manifestation of extensive commodification takes many notable forms, though this is not the place for a detailed discussion of each. Declines in economic growth and the rightward shift in political power have prompted funding cutbacks for public information institutions, such as libraries and public schools (Monahan, 2004; Tracy and Hayashi, 2007). We have also witnessed the broad-based privatization and commercialization of public information, postal, broadcasting, and telecommunications systems and the introduction of the neoclassical economic logic of “cost-based” pricing or what amounts to governance in the interests of those with market power. Extensive commodification also includes the transformation of common spaces, from public parks to privately governed shopping malls, and the increasing reliance on commercial sponsorship of museums, sports, and festivals (Gibson, 2003; Gibson and Lowes, 2006; Gittings, 1998; Negra, 2001). The growing power of branding and the tendency for people to wear corporate logos and other advertising commercializes the body and personal identity (Arvidsson, 2005; Klein, 2002; Rajagopal and Bojin, 2004; Riordan, 2001). We are also seeing the commodification of privacy itself, as people are required to pay to maintain anonymity (Deery, 2004a, 2004b). These developments suggest that the process of commodification has extended into places and practices that once tended to be organized according to a different social logic, one based on universality, equality, social participation, and citizenship, which, for all of its well-chronicled shortcomings, broadened the grounds of social action that is now increasingly reduced to a market logic that equates rights with market power.

One of the important contributions of a political economy perspective has been to document the process by which government and corporate power extend commodification. What this perspective needs to address more substantially than it has is how the process is linked to what takes place, as it were, at *the point of extension*. The use of political and economic power holds considerable explanatory value for understanding the success of commodification. The process reduces the resources, the time, and the space available to alternatives, so that commodification is perceived not as a process of power but as the natural order, common-sense, taken-for-granted reality of social life. This is an important argument, but the process of arriving at it foregoes an important step that takes us to the border of political economy and cultural studies. Institutional power, promoting one logic and eliminating alternatives, is central to the construction of a dominant view or *hegemony*. But there is also the question of the link between institutional power and the power that works on the multilayered relationship between use value and exchange value. Exchange value expands not only by undermining use or non-commodity values, but also by using these values to enhance its own attraction and, in the process, by transforming use to exchange values.

to exchange values.

Consider how Crawford (1992) describes this process at work in a shopping mall. Research based in political economy documents the use of institutional power to change transportation, land use, investment, media, and other institutional policies to reconstruct patterns of shopping and, more generally, of social interaction around the shopping mall. Crawford gestures to this literature but concentrates on how the process of commodification works *inside* the mall. She offers an example from a shop window display that sets an ordinary pot in a Moroccan harem scene. This, she argues, decontextualizes the pot, thereby turning it into something unanticipated, exotic, and hence, stimulating. As she puts it:

This logic of association allows noncommodified values to enhance commodities, but it also imposes the reverse process – previously noncommodified entities become part of the marketplace. Once this exchange of attributes is absorbed into the already open-ended and indeterminate exchange between commodities and needs, associations can resonate infinitely. (Crawford, 1992: 15)

The reference to infinite resonance exaggerates by turning an interactive process into runaway feedback. Numerous processes, including the recollection of our mundane experience with pots, can short-circuit this one. Moreover, the description of the process as “retail magic” idealizes something that is mutually constituted out of material use and images of association. Nevertheless, Crawford’s description gives texture and nuance to the process of commodification by suggesting how it takes place at the point of extension where use value meets exchange value. It provides one means to deepen the analysis of a process whose general structure has been well described by political economists.

If Crawford’s example provides a useful broadening at the boundary of political economy and cultural studies, two other tendencies are less productive. Since these bear directly on the process of commodification, it is useful to address them here rather than wait until [Chapter 10](#) which takes up general challenges at political economy’s borders. One unproductive tendency is to conflate commodification with universal tendencies to social reciprocity. The latter refers to a generalized sociality that binds people in exchange relationships. Proponents of this view (Davis, 1992; Schudson, 1984) tend to reference the anthropological literature on gift exchange rituals, such as the Potlatch, which suggests that the construction of markets and the development of exchange value are deeply rooted in more general processes of social group formation, i.e. the market is natural. From this vantage point, rather than a principal entry point for comprehending the social field, commodification is merely one among many expressions of a universal tendency to social exchange. This view is valuable in that it directs attention to the layers of ritual that adhere to social processes and contributes to their constitution (Davis, 1992).

In political economy, Veblen (1934/1899) put this approach to use in what are best appreciated as the anthropological insights of an ethnographer among the leisure and business classes. But Veblen recognized and steered clear of the temptation to conflate the general tendency to ritual exchange with its specific manifestation in the commodification process. He recognized that the former is an idealist trap, suggesting, in its abstract universality, that the dynamic processes of social transformation, which gave rise to capitalism, are less important than the general similarities among tribal, feudal, and capitalist societies. Veblen would appreciate this powerful irony: today academics aim to de-historicize exchange, diminish the concrete significance of the transformation to capitalism by referencing tribal practices in societies that capitalism has all but eliminated. Political economy acknowledges that the process of commodification involves ritual practices that can serve to tighten or loosen social bonds. Indeed, one of its primary criticisms against orthodox economics is the tendency to eliminate the power of custom and morality in economic life. However, political economy also aims to avoid idealism by focusing on the power contained in the historically specific substance and form that the process takes in mutual constitution with a capitalist society (Rucinski, 1991).

Another problematic tendency does the reverse by arguing for the universality of commodification in a form that replaces its traditional connection to the transformation of use to exchange value and the production of goods with the production of codes and the hegemony of sign value (Baudrillard, 1981). Offering the converse of an approach that would fold commodification into tribal ritual, Baudrillard proposes a radical mitosis in which objects and the labor process that gave rise to them break off and dissolve before the free-floating power of the sign. All is absorbed within a transformed process of commodification. He could not be more emphatic:

The super-ideology of the sign and the general operation of the signifier – everywhere sanctioned today by the new master disciplines of structural linguistics, semiology, information theory and cybernetics – has replaced political economy as the theoretical basis of the system. (Baudrillard, 1975: 122)

This is not the place to examine the widespread debate over Baudrillard’s position (see Gane, 2006; Kellner, 1989). Rather, it is more useful to consider the implications for the specific process of commodification. Here Baudrillard appears to support the view that the commodity has swept aside alternatives to its universal power and won out – a view that is shared by political economists of communication. However, political economists take issue with two fundamental dimensions of the argument. First, whether framed in the modernist discourse of universal contamination or the triumphalism of post-structuralist thought, the argument for the emergence of commodification suggests that there are no alternatives to this all-encompassing process. Commodification is everything, so make the best of it. Such an argument lacks

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alternatives to this all-encompassing process. Commodification is everything, so make the best of it. Such an argument lacks a sense of the contradictions that emerge in the process of commodification and of alternative processes. Moreover, it is not clear just what the victory of the commodity actually means because the sense of the term changes fundamentally in Baudrillard's analysis. Particularly in his later work, Baudrillard replaces the process of using commodified wage labor to turn use into exchange value with a generalized social process that creates sign value. But to the extent that it holds a specific meaning, sign value is limited to the needs of capital to produce a dense, hierarchical system of meanings, of status identifications, in order to cement its power. However warranted as one reading of political economy, it purchases this warrant by eliminating two fundamental considerations of political economy – the existence of human needs, which emerge in use values and which constitute the standpoint of political economy from the viewpoint of the working class, and an institutional system organized around transforming use into exchange value for the purpose of producing surplus value or political economy from the standpoint of capital.

Consider, once again, Veblen, whose influence Baudrillard acknowledges but whose analysis of status he treats as an independent ground of social organization

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without what Veblen saw as its fundamental foundation – the existence of human need and an institutionalized political economy that supports and subverts it. In Baudrillard, the process of commodification is reduced to the free-floating circulation of symbols, an outcome obscured by the misappropriation of political economy's conceptual apparatus, itself reduced to a set of free-floating terms, torn from their historically constituted and specific meanings, to add weight to an otherwise light argument. Instead of escaping into the hopeless conclusion that commodification is everything, it is more useful for political economy to firmly establish its understanding that the commodity is not everything, that genuine alternatives exist and that they should be pursued.

Alternative Processes in Private and Public Life

Critics of political economy, including those who resist its use in communication studies, have consistently raised concerns that it has tendencies to essentialism. The argument is put in many ways, but, with respect to communication research, it rejects the idea that one can reduce all communication and cultural practices to an underlying or more fundamental political economic reality which encompasses the process of commodification (*Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 1995). Earlier chapters offered evidence that this view is overstated. Both general political economy and its application in communication contain rich, diverse, and comprehensive bodies of research that are not at all reducible to simple categorizations or simplistic charges. Specifically, commodification transforms media content, but does not reduce it to a singularity that would allow one to interpret media content directly from the commodification process. By beginning with commodification, this chapter has established a theoretical frame of reference, even as it recognizes the multiple determination and mutual constitution of all processes. The chapter now proceeds to identify additional processes and their accompanying structures that are made up of alternative and oppositional practices.

One of the more valuable theoretical suggestions in this area addresses the role of the state in what Offe calls the process of “administrative recommodification.” For Offe, a period of *laissez-faire*, which emphasized the market as the solution to most problems, is inevitably followed by *decommodification* or the “socialization” of political economic life. This takes place in response to instabilities and conflicts brought about by failures in the overwhelming reliance on the market mechanism. The collapse of banks and investment firms which succumbed to the crisis in housing and lending in 2007–08 led to government intervention to nationalize or otherwise assist failing financial institutions like Northern Rock in the UK and Bear Stearns in the United States. It also included assistance to homeowners unable to meet mortgage payments. Decommodification involves the creation of social policies and programs to protect the economic existence of social actors, in the ranks of both capital and labor, including those who are by and large incapable or unable to participate in commodification. However, the transfer payments and other sources of income that prevent these people from “dropping out” of the process prove to be fiscally unsustainable in the longer term. Moreover, Offe maintains, the process proves to be politically unsustainable because it is practically impossible to politically regulate the economy without materially politicizing it (Offe, 1984: 35–64). As a result, Offe sees capital responding with *recommodification*, that is, “to solve the problem of the commodity form by politically creating conditions under which legal and economic subjects can function as commodities” (Offe, 1984: 124).

Specifically, this calls for a set of programs intended to enhance the market value of labor, integrate and concentrate transnational capital, support those with the propensity to consume, and permit the exclusion of those who fail the market test. However, according to him, these are only partially successful because the state is caught up in trying to use non-market means to advance the market and must pay, however indirectly, the price of exclusionary practices, e.g. crime control and prison expansion. Moreover, as critiques of bureaucratization dating back to Max Weber have demonstrated, the result is often that non-market mechanisms, initiated as a means, become ends in themselves and undermine the recommodification process. This brings about its own government response, particularly prominent in the 1990s and the early years of this century, that amounts to the application of market principles to the state in the expectation that if the state took on the look of a market enterprise, it would advance market principles. The problem, one that Offe returns to time and time again, is that although the state can be made to *look* like a market enterprise, there are fundamental limits on its ability to *act* like one, primarily because the state is ruled out of direct accumulation. In other words, when the state succeeds as a capitalist, i.e. by making money, capitalism pressures the state to cease competing with private enterprise.

Offe's arguments, echoed in others (Jessop, 2001), take a step toward correcting the essentialism inherent in the assertion of a simple, deterministic process of commodification. Nevertheless, it is limited to the demonstration that social change comes about from the limits of commodification and the limits on genuine social change in a capitalist society always lead back to commodification. Are there genuine alternatives to commodification in private and in public life?

Social Process in Private Life

The remainder of this chapter draws out tendencies in contemporary social thought and communication scholarship that point to alternatives to commodification. They suggest that commodification, although powerful and pervasive, is not a singularity. These alternatives are each generally linked to use value and specifically to what we typically call private and public life. Private life refers specifically to the process of face-to-face interaction, what Habermas (1989) calls the domain of the life-world (*lebenswelt*) or, in phenomenological sociology, the realm of intersubjectivity. Processes based in private life are typically affective ones that center around identity formation, friendship, and kinship. The emphasis is placed on how people and objects, both material and symbolic, are valued as ends in themselves and not for their market value. Those that emanate from public life tend to be civic processes that bring people together to exchange ideas, govern themselves, support, resist, oppose, and attempt to create alternatives to what Habermas (1989) calls the organization of power and money in the “system” world. One of the central alternatives to the process of commodification in the private sphere is the constitution of friendship and kinship; in the public sphere, it is citizenship.

One of the challenges facing the attempt to address the relationship between commodification and social processes at work in private and public life is overcoming the inclination to mechanized thinking embodied most powerfully in the general tendency to reduce the discussion simply to the dichotomy between private and public. One of the major problems with this is that the term private has taken on the burden of including both the most intimate of human experience and the market behavior of the transnational business system. Both are part of the private sphere. It is easy for the idea to collapse under such weight and it seriously constrains the ability to comprehend the wider implications of commodification. We would be much better off to eliminate the term “private sector” and reserve private for the sphere of intimacy and identify business with the “market sector” or something similar. The division among private, public, and market spheres is not perfect but is certainly an improvement over the private–public dichotomy. But given the power and the inertia of popular usage, it is not easy to be optimistic about remedying the problems associated with the term private and with the mechanical dichotomy between private and public life. Consider this one small step in the direction of doing so.

The structure of communication studies, reflecting divisions within the social sciences, makes it particularly difficult to conceptualize the relationship between private processes and commodification, as well as those that mark public life. This is because the discipline tends to be organized along levels of social complexity which set apart interpersonal from organizational and institutional communication. Although there are exceptions, it is generally the case that interpersonal communication, like microsociology, is set apart as the sphere within which one can examine affect and intimacy. Affect and intimacy gradually lose their significance as one leaves the interpersonal level of analysis. By the time one reaches political economy, located at the upper levels of social complexity, the issues taken up at the micro or interpersonal level virtually disappear. This is significant for the broadest conception of political economy’s mission because it restricts both theoretical comprehensiveness and social praxis (Eagleton, 2003). Without a direct encounter with the interpersonal, political economy has little to say about that realm of experience, the realm of affect, and therefore little to say about the consequences for action among people who experience an enormous gap between what takes place at the institutional levels of power, the traditionally central focus of political economy, and their daily existence as a series of encounters in small groups, with mediated presentations of word and image, and with themselves.

Over the years, the concern over mediating the institutional and the personal has taken up considerable theoretical reflection. Back in 1959, the sociologist C. Wright Mills began one of the classic works in sociology by identifying as a central problem in modern society the inability of people to connect private well-being and problems with “historical change and institutional contradiction ... the big ups and downs of the societies in which they live.” It is hard, he went on, to live up to our potential to change history when we are unable to connect our lives to it (Mills, 1959: 3). To remedy this problem, we continue to observe the growth of work within social science on identity, including the politics of identity and self-identity (Calhoun, 1994; Castells, 2004; Giddens, 1991; Hall, 1989; Van Galen and Noblit, 2007; Woodward, 2004). There are numerous reasons for this, including a tendency which Hall (1989: 12) observes, that “the great social collectivities which used to stabilize our identities – the great stable collectivities of class, race, gender, and nation – have been, in our times, deeply undermined by social and political developments.” Globalization is frequently cited as the major socio-political development propelling this destabilization. Moreover, the rise of feminism, especially the political and intellectual drive to overcome the prominent division in social thought under patriarchy which separates the personal from the political, has played a leading role in the ensuing ferment over these developments and the process and possibility of reconstitution. Finally, the growth of new media which enables the creation of virtual worlds in cyberspace makes possible the development of many persona situated throughout virtual communities.

There is considerable room to debate the issues raised by this literature. For example, given globalization, the feminist movement, and the digital media, one can understand how Hall was correct to call attention to the destabilization of subjective identities. But it is also the case, as political economy has demonstrated, that *capitalism has always destabilized identities* and that, in terms of education, income, power, and general life chances, social class, race, and gender matter now as much or even more than they ever have.

Conservative and liberal thinkers have offered their own specific solutions to the problem of the divided self (Bell, 1976). The former call for a return to traditions that historically provided moral anchors for the self in private life. The latter tend to argue for more communication, viewing participation in networks of flows, including the social networking sites that form digital communities today, as improvements on the more rigid and absolutist ties that bound people in the past (Castells

digital communities today, as improvements on the more rigid and absolutist ties that bound people in the past (Castells, 2001; Jenkins, 2006). Since the 1970s, more radical forms of thinking, embodied in the movements called postmodernism and post-structuralism, have addressed the problems of private life by accepting the inevitability of fracture, division, and deconstruction and, instead of attacking these with old values or new communication, they value the freedom it provides. This includes the freedom from the need to construct and maintain a single identity (McGowan, 1991; Newman, 2007).

Political economy has struggled with these issues. Better equipped to examine commodification's assault on private life than to figure out how to resist and create alternatives, it has suffered the consequences of being left out of an important debate. When it has engaged these issues, it has been to chide the varieties of cultural theory for choosing to focus so intensely on how everything solid seems to melt into air, on how all grand narratives are dissolving, that they tend to miss the 800-pound gorilla in the room, capitalism, which is more alive than ever as a solid global force and as a grand narrative.

A more positive alternative would be for political economy to return to the anchors of critical social thought by creating alternatives to commodification in a lived experience that includes the moral, the libidinal, and the aesthetic. These interact with more distinctly social forms like social class, race, ethnicity, gender, and the social movements with which we might identify. Provided that we view these not as rigid categories given to us but as social relationships that we create to make both history and ourselves, they can help us to make the connection between the personal and the political (Eagleton, 2003: 222). This would enable political economy to speak of a contested terrain in which the processes at work in private life meet commodification in a contested terrain of ongoing tension. Furthermore, one can push beyond the mapping of this tension to the point of resistance, which O'Connor describes in this way:

This moment of crisis is precisely when transformation into a social individuality becomes possible. ... At this moment, one can externalize the internal struggle, or know and feel that the ways in which one suffers are also the ways in which others suffer, grasp suffering as a social process, externalizing suffering through social and political struggle. (1987: 181–2)

Two significant problems continue to confront the political economist of communication regarding this resistance. How is it organized and how is it expressed? For this we turn from private to public life.

Social Process in Public Life

Social theory and communication research have taken up public life as a set of processes that advance fundamental characteristics of democracy, i.e. social equality and the fullest possible participation in the decisions that affect our lives. It is thereby a form of resistance to commodification and provides guidance on the development of alternative social practices. The work of Habermas (1989) on the public sphere is particularly important because it has examined the idea critically and has provided the conceptual tools that help to restore an historic debate on public life and citizenship. His work attracts the attention of communication scholars partly because he maintains that communication, or the "ideal speech situation," provides the foundation for a flourishing public sphere. He also concludes that the contemporary commodified mass media, along with the general expansion of consumerism and of the bureaucratic state, are root causes of its decline. Habermas began a debate on the public sphere and others have improved on the idea by incorporating women, the non-Western world, and other features that would give it a more universal or cosmopolitan scope (Crossley and Roberts, 2004; Negt and Kluge, 1972; Peiss, 1991). But not all are satisfied with this. Some would discard the notion as hopelessly compromised, reduced as Derrida (see Keenan, 1993) says of public opinion to the "silhouette of a phantom." Another attempt to critically advance the idea views the public sphere as a set of principles, including democracy, equality, participation, and citizenship, that point to an alternative to the set of practices bound up with commodification. The latter has been the most prominent position taken in communication research, particular by those with an interest in political economy (Calabrese and Burgelman, 1999; Calabrese and Sparks, 2004; McChesney, 2007). This work addresses the use of the press and new media, as well as systems of regulation and policy, to create oppositional spaces for the development of a public sphere. Communication research has also been interested in the concept of the *public interest*, a term with roots in the law governing regulation of the communication industries. The notion has received extensive treatment, including criticism for ambiguity, particularly when set against the seemingly clearer test of the marketplace. The public interest idea nevertheless survives in law, though the process of commodification has weakened its standing. It also survives in research as an extension of the public sphere notion to refer to those interests that transcend commercial gain and consumerism.

The debate on the public sphere is undeniably one of the more significant intellectual currents in social thought today. This is partly because it constitutes a widespread movement to develop substantial alternatives in social life to the market and the process of commodification. But it is also an exasperating debate because the public sphere umbrella covers the widest range of definitions and positionings. For some, it opposes both the state and the market; for others, it is aligned with one or the other. For example, Herbert Schiller (1989) offered a powerful critique of the state, but also pointed to the value of government-operated public institutions, such as public libraries and public schools and universities, that have suffered from the attacks of commercialism. On the other hand, Andrew Ross (1993) made the case for viewing the market as an

oppositional force to repressive forms of regulation. Depending on the theorist, the public sphere encompasses civil society, is encompassed by it, or is distinct from it. It can occupy physical space, institutional space, or electronic cyberspace. It includes the widest range of social behavior from debate on central public issues to shopping and music videos. Notwithstanding these problems, the alternative, scrapping the idea altogether, is less appealing.

The problem is how to address whatever *it* is. Or, since it is popular to think of it as a sphere, *where* it is. My view is that the latter question raises a critical problem with the notion of a public sphere. The tendency is to think of it as an object that occupies a specifiable space, whether physical, social, electronic, or mythical. Defenders of the public sphere sound like they are protecting a territory from a powerful, hostile invader whose goal is conquest. The analogy works to help one comprehend how the market and the public are opposed. But it suffers when it leads one to think of the market and the public as objects that occupy specific places, that are themselves difficult, if not impossible, to pin down. As a result of this difficulty, positions change about what is in or out of the public sphere. The term “public” is far from unambiguous, but the problem appears to be less with it than with the idea of a sphere, however it is specified.

One way to address the problem is to define the public sphere as a set of social processes that carry out democracy, namely advancing equality and the fullest possible participation in the complete range of economic, political, social, and cultural decision-making. These processes are distinct from those centered in private life, which promote interpersonal intimacy, and from those of the marketplace, which advance the creation of exchange and surplus value. The value of thinking in process terms is that, while there may be a greater likelihood that equality and participation adhere to some institutional forms and spaces rather than others, it does not rule out, by definition, any structural embodiment or location. The latter are better viewed as contested terrains, whether the state, the marketplace, or those structures, such as social movements, that manage to distance themselves from both state and market, in which the processes of commodification and democracy contend. All can be sites of the struggle between one’s identity as, for example, a consumer and as a citizen.

Thinking in terms of a public process is difficult because the alternatives, clearly distinguished institutions and structures, give a concrete sense to what can otherwise be viewed as an idealist abstraction. More than that, they provide a road-map which, however often it needs to be revised, offers guidance on getting from one point to the next, suggesting what course to follow and what to avoid. Nevertheless, institutions and structures can also offer false security. It is now fashionable to argue that the state in advanced capitalist societies, to which many once turned for alternatives to commodification, is hopelessly compromised, if not thoroughly market-contaminated and bureaucratized beyond any likelihood of realizing anything more than formal democracy. And, as the US presidential elections of 2000 and 2004 demonstrated, even the formal democracy of voting in elections appears compromised. As a result, the search for oppositional and alternative forms, including media and culture, must be found outside, in places that have managed to maintain some distance from both state and market. There is considerable substance to the charge against the state and much to be said about finding uncontaminated spaces. Depending on how you define free, i.e. how much contamination can be absorbed before free space turns into market or state space, the free spaces in communication include traditional forms, such as the alternative press, public service (as opposed to state controlled) broadcasting, as well as new forms, like public access cable channels and computer networks that open an electronic meeting place through blogging and social networking. The problem with seeing these as embodiments of free space is that, in non-trivial ways, they are neither free nor spaces. The alternative press may be the most free but, depending on state practice, makes use of mail subsidies and direct government grants, as well as market support mechanisms that include subscription fees, advertising, and commodified labor processes and distribution networks. Again, depending on the jurisdiction, public service broadcasting depends on user fees, government grants, commercial advertising, and government appointment of major management personnel, who are often required to demonstrate their ability to meet either political or market criteria of success. Public access cable channels produce demonstrably more diverse content, but they are limited to those who can afford a cable subscription fee and, again, depending on the jurisdiction, are subject to the oversight of both the cable operating company and government regulators. Interactive computer networks are particularly constrained by market and class considerations. They require access to computers and to telecommunications, and either the ability to pay for communication charges or the privileged access of the university professor whose charges are underwritten by the state, by universities (which are the recipients of considerable state support), or by companies trying to create a market in new forms of communication.

It is important to emphasize that these media provide major forms of alternative and oppositional communication. Nevertheless, by looking at them as free spaces, we tend to miss the significant ways in which the unequal structure of representation, of hierarchies organized according to class, gender, and race, are replicated, admittedly with specific variations, within each of these media forms. Additionally, it also draws attention away from struggles that take place over resistance to commodification in both state and market. Here is where the contributions of political economists are so telling because they have addressed media, communication, and information issues in the contested terrain at the heart of state activities, including public education, public libraries, government information, and the social welfare system. Furthermore, research on commercial speech and design describe the contested nature of the commodification process within the innermost regions of the market. It is, above all, research that starts from the lived experiences of people who today confront the clash of opposing processes in schools, in shopping malls, in social service agencies, and on the job, as much as they do in alternative media and computer networks. Moreover, one of the central lessons of this work is that the market, the state, and the public are, in a real sense, located everywhere and therefore have no fixed coordinates. This should discourage the

and the public are, in a real sense, located everywhere and therefore have no fixed coordinates. This should discourage the tendency to think about finding free space, or about looking for that ideal social form, whether located in a privileged class, or in a new social movement, that might represent a particularly stronger or purer manifestation of social opposition.

This should also encourage thinking about social processes, those vectors of social action that form different relationships in different dimensions of social life. The public sphere is more usefully conceptualized as a set of processes constituted out of the agency of people organized and identified as citizens, and which promotes equality and participation, the core of democracy. These processes exist only in relationship to a social field whose primary entry point, commodification, gives it pattern and initial shape, but a relationship that is nevertheless continuously reconstituted out of the interaction between commodification and social processes in public and private life. It is a social field from the standpoint of commodification, but a standpoint that is mutually constituted by private and public life. What we call the public media is public, not because it occupies a separate space, relatively free from market considerations, but because it is constituted out of a particular patterning of processes that privilege the democratic over commodification. To the extent that it does not, the expression *public media* diminishes in value.

Whereas resistance to commodification in private life is founded on building alternatives based on intimacy and personal relationships, like friendship, resistance to commodification in public life is founded on democracy and citizenship. Democracy is another complex notion, one that is also often conflated with technology. The more people use the Internet or the cell phone, the story goes, the more likely they are to participate more actively in social life. In addition, the definition of democracy is often narrowed to a particular practice, voting, that is merely one embodiment of democracy. We need to approach democracy, as we approached communication, as socially grounded and profoundly broader than the act of voting. Specifically, this means seeing democracy as the fullest possible public participation in the decisions that affect our lives. This includes the political arena, but it also means the fullest possible participation in the economy, in society, and in culture. Certainly, the act of voting is an important social assertion of political democracy, but its ability to bring about democracy is limited when wealth is concentrated in the hands of a few. In other words, concentrated market power diminishes the popular power that voting is supposed to bring about. Similarly, when cultural power is concentrated in the hands of a few, as is the case when a handful of companies own a nation's major newspapers, broadcasting, telecommunication, and computer companies, voting is also distinctly limited in what it can accomplish. This means ideological hegemony is perpetuated and defended by the same power brokers who control the most substantial means of communication. For democracy to flourish, society needs to create the conditions for relative equality and civic participation across the political, economic, and cultural spheres. Extremes of wealth and deep divides in power make full public participation in decision-making nearly impossible, including participation in worker organizations and trade unions. But even when relative equality applies, societies face a risk that democracy will stagnate without the institutions and traditions that make widespread participation possible.

Democracy is mutually constituted with citizenship. T.H. Marshall (1964) made what has become the standard contribution here and political economy has built upon it. He noted that citizenship began as a legal notion that conveyed certain rights, including such fundamental ones as habeas corpus, due process under the law, the presumption of innocence, and the right to a trial by a jury of one's peers. Over time and much social struggle, these legal rights were extended into the political arena, with the right to vote and to participate in political life. Today, the struggles center on extending these rights to new areas, such as the economic, to include ideas like the right to a job, to membership in an organization that represents the interests of workers, and to a standard of living that meets basic needs. These struggles are also addressed to expanding social citizenship, which includes the right to community and to the existence and use of public space. Finally, trade unions and social movements have connected citizenship to a set of communication rights, including the right to communicate (not just to receive information) and to those services that make the right to communicate possible, such as the right to education and to the means of communication, including universal public postal services, universal access to the telephone, and now to the Internet. It is worth noting that citizenship may also be used as an exclusive concept, not just an inclusive one: in other words, as a way of dividing "us" from "them." This can be done positively, in order to build internal solidarity, or negatively as a means to exclude people from the benefits of membership in a collective. However, on balance, the struggle over citizenship in the political, economic, and social realm more often represents a struggle for inclusion, focused on the effort to extend the right to fully participate in all areas of society.

Conclusion

The political economy of communication accepts the reality of the abstract ideas that guide our thinking, as well as the concrete observations that we perceive with our senses. It declines to accept the position, prominent in some theories, that only our ideas or only our observations, but not both, are real. Political economy also rejects the view that there is no reality, that neither ideas nor empirical observations are, in any important sense, real. Moreover, this philosophy means that reality is comprised of many elements and cannot be reduced to one essence. Neither economics (e.g. money controls the media) nor culture (e.g. people's values shape the media) contains the only key to unlock our understanding of communication. This

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nor culture (e.g. people's values shape the media) contains the only key to unlock our understanding of communication. This philosophical foundation also places in the foreground the ideas of social change, social process, and social relations. Doing so requires re-evaluating the emphasis that political economy has historically placed on social institutions, like media businesses, or on seeing social class as a thing or structure, rather than as a social relationship.

Commodification is the entry point from which to begin to theorize the political economy of communication. Commodification is defined as the process of transforming goods and services, including communication, which are valued for their use, into commodities which are valued for what they will bring in the marketplace. There are three types of commodification that are important to communication: the commodification of content, of audiences, and of labor. Commodities give rise to new commodities, in what is called immanent commodification, and they are created in association with non-commodified goods and services, in what is called external commodification. There are alternatives to commodification in private life through the cultivation of intimacy, friendship, and kinship and in public life through the development of democracy and citizenship. Building on this foundation, the next chapter takes up a second entry point, the process of spatialization.

1 One might dispute this contention as an unwarranted conflation of the real and the material. A spiritual being can be real without being material. Nevertheless, the argument for commodity fetishism does not rest on agreeing that the commodity is somehow more real than religious faith.

2 In his influential 1979 "Contribution to a Political Economy of Mass Communication," Garnham wrote:

Thus economism, the concern for immediate physical survival and reproduction within the dominant relations of exchange, is an immediate and rational response to the determinants of social being. What E.P. Thompson has recently dubbed "lumped bourgeois intellectuals" too easily forget this, both because their material conditions of existence are often less immediately determinant and also because of a guilty conscience concerning the subjective relationship of exploitation in which they stand *vis-à-vis* productive material labour. (1979: 126)

And in his *Capitalism and Communication*, Garnham attacks first "the tendency which privileged the text," (structuralism and post-structuralism), for its unanchored romanticism (a "bacillus"), a view "perfectly designed as an ideology of intellectuals or cultural workers for it privileges their special field of activity, the symbolic, and provides for cheap research opportunities, since the only evidence required is the unsubstantiated views of the individual analyst" (Garnham, 1990: 1–2).

3 Braverman's work was especially timely in that it appeared in 1974 at the start of the economic decline following the sustained postwar boom. It also corresponded with the start of intense use of computer communications systems to control the factory and the office.

4 The distinction between conception and execution corresponds to Marx's view that it is the potential to conceive or imagine and not just carry out or execute what our genes dictate that distinguishes the human architect from the bee. Both can produce great structures but only one can unite conception with execution.

5 In the hands of Lillian Gilbreth (whose husband, a follower of Taylor, developed the unit of worktime measurement, the "therblig") this process of Taylorization was applied to the home, thereby enabling mainly women to manage the household "scientifically."

6 Giddens' work has been undoubtedly valuable in calling our attention to the development of institutional surveillance systems. Nevertheless, by locating surveillance in an institutional realm occupied with the "control of information and social supervision" and separate from capitalism, which he describes as primarily taken up with "accumulation in the context of competitive labour and product markets," he and many other social theorists miss the central contribution that the accumulation process makes to the development of surveillance systems and the necessity of these systems for the expansion of capital accumulation. Giddens does speak of interpenetration, but accumulation and surveillance remain separate realms, their boundary reinforced in his *identification of surveillance with the nation state*. The latter is certainly implicated in the constitution of surveillance, but, by locating surveillance in the state, Giddens foregoes the point that surveillance, in the form of rationalizing production, distribution, and consumption, is integral to and propelled by business corporations in the commodification process (see, *inter alia*, Giddens, 1990: 55–63). For a thorough analysis of corporate and state forms of measuring and monitoring transactions, see Andrejevic (2003a, 2003b) and Lyon (2006, 2007).