IJoC | **Communication & Global Power Shifts**

The Puzzle of Media Power:
Notes Toward a Materialist Approach

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In any consideration of the relationship between communication and global power shifts and of the ways in which the media are implicated in new dynamics of power, the concept of media power is frequently invoked as a vital agent of social and communicative change. This article sets out to develop a materialist approach to media power that acknowledges its role in social reproduction through the circulation of symbolic goods but suggests that we also need an understanding of media power that focuses on the relationships between actors, institutions, and contexts that organize the allocation of material resources concentrated in the media.

It is hardly controversial to suggest that the media are powerful social actors, but what is the nature of this power? Does it refer to people, institutions, processes, or capacities? If we are to understand the role of communication as it relates to contemporary circumstances of neoliberalism, globalization, cosmopolitanism, and digitalization (which this special section sets out to consider), then we need a definition of media power that is sufficiently complex and robust to evaluate its channels, networks, participants, and implications. This article suggests that, just as power is not a tangible property visible only in its exercise, media power is best conceived as a relationship between different interests engaged in struggles for a range of objectives that include legitimation, influence, control, status, and, increasingly, profit.

Strangely, one of the clearest metaphors for media power in recent years involves a horse. After lunching in 2007 with the head of London's Metropolitan Police, Sir Ian Blair, Scotland Yard agreed to loan an aging horse called Raisa to Rebekah Brooks, then editor of Britain's best-selling daily newspaper the *Sun* and, subsequently, the chief executive officer of News International, News Corporation's UK news division. Just before he was elected prime minister in 2010, David Cameron, a fellow member of the "Chipping Norton set" (referring to a particularly picturesque area of the British countryside), went riding on Raisa with Rebekah Brooks' husband Charlie, an old friend from the elite private school Eton. The anecdote provides a powerful symbol of the network of compliant relationships between the press, politicians, and the police that have been so thoroughly exposed following the phone hacking scandal that

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Date submitted: 2013–02–18

broke in July 2011 (Mair & Keeble, 2012). It is a wonderfully lucid story of class, privilege, and influence in contemporary Britain that speaks to the entanglements of private and state power that we see in many countries across the globe.

Since journalists at the *Guardian* first revealed that staff working for another popular News International title, the *News of the World,* had hacked into the mobile phone of a murdered teenager, the British public has witnessed a series of unprecedented events: the closure by Rupert Murdoch of the offending newspaper; the resignation of two of the most senior police officers in the land along with the departure of top News Corp. executives; the abandonment of News Corp.'s bid to assume full control of Britain's biggest broadcaster, BSkyB, and the setting up of a major public inquiry into press standards—the Leveson Inquiry—which heard evidence of the complete failure of regulatory frameworks to hold to account those newspapers that breached ethical guidelines; the existence at the *Sun* of a "culture of illegal payments" involving a "network of corrupted officials" (Akers, 2012); the increasing use of other illegal practices (such as hacking and "blagging") that went well beyond the *News of the World*; and the systematic failure by the Metropolitan Police to investigate phone hacking allegations. Since the Leveson Inquiry was launched, there have now been some 100 arrests following on from the phone hacking scandal.

What is the narrative thread between these revelations? Are they the product of a rise in cynicism that, at least in the United Kingdom, has been blamed for the degeneration of both political and media culture (Blair, 2007; Lloyd, 2004)? Do they reflect, on a broader scale, an individualization of public culture leading to the dissolution of civic bonds that might have otherwise held sway (Beck, 1992)? Or are they, as some editors and journalists have argued (e.g., Kampfner, 2011), not at all representative of systemic patterns but merely the actions of a single company that was allowed to accrue too much influence and therefore to cast a shadow across the rest of the press? Do these revelations speak to a problem that goes far beyond Britain: the emergence of highly influential but barely accountable media organizations or moguls who play a central role in public life? For Nick Davies, the *Guardian* reporter who broke the original story, the whole sequence of events "never was simply about journalists behaving badly: it was and is about power" (Davies, 2012, p. 1). Indeed, it is about one specific type of power that has now entered mainstream vocabulary—*media power*—evident in the *Guardian*'s annual "media power" list, warnings against "concentrations of media power," or exhortations to "harness the power of social media" (Firstbrook & Wollan, 2011).

Yet, despite its increased use across the political and academic spectrum, it is far from clear precisely what we mean by media power. It is the aim of this article progressively to attempt to unravel this puzzle and to identify a model that may be of particular relevance to countries with pluralist political arrangements and intensively marketized economic systems where the configuration of media power is such that it is formally separate from, but intertwined with, the state. In these contexts, does media power relate to the economic prowess of the largest media corporations or the political influence of particular media moguls? Does it refer to the media's capacity to shape attitudes and modify individual behavior or to make possible new forms of social action (or even to prevent these possibilities from taking place)? Does it suggest an ability to promote the sharing of common meanings or to entrench divisions? Does it point toward the media's tendency to interpret the world according to their own material interests

and therefore to reinforce largely privileged ideological positions, or does it refer to the growth of economic blocs—of new forms of value—that are all the more significant in 21st-century knowledge and information societies? This article attempts to answer these questions by proposing a tentative definition of media power that refers to the nexus of relationships between actors, institutional structures, and contexts that organizes the allocation of the symbolic and material resources concentrated in the media.

Elements of the Puzzle

In part, the confusion around what media power actually means relates to some well-worn debates on power in general, especially around the relationship between two key approaches to power—a more consensual power *to* and a more coercive power *over*—that express a tension between understanding power as a means of individual regulation or as a source of domination (Parsons, 1963). That power refers to a transformative capacity shared by humans is hardly headline news, but issues concerning the allocation, exercise, and impact of this power are far more contentious.

In these circumstances, Steven Lukes' (2005) celebrated account of the three "faces" of power is useful in not only focusing attention on the different dynamics of power but proposing some of the ways in which media themselves might be implicated in social reproduction and coordination. The first face refers to a pluralist conception of power as the successful mobilization of resources in visible decision-making situations; the second, to a more critical notion of the ability to influence what is discussed (or what is not discussed) in the first place and therefore directs us to examine the control of the decision-making agenda; the third (and hidden) face consists of the realm of ideology, the idea that power is associated with the capacity (but not necessarily the exercise of that capacity) to shape the preconditions for decision making to "secure compliance to domination" (2005, p. 111).

Lukes later comes to recognize that this model, first developed in 1974, is perhaps too simplistic, because it focuses exclusively on power as domination and ignores, in particular following Foucault (1977, 1980), "the way in which power over others can be productive, transformative, authoritative and compatible with dignity" (Lukes, 2005, p. 109). Yet he continues, even after this modification, to treat the media as important architects of social consensus. He mentions the media as major institutions through which "thought control" (p. 27) takes place, and he speaks of the "power to mislead," which consists of everything from "straightforward censorship and disinformation to the various institutionalized and personal ways there are of infantilizing judgment" (p. 149). Here, the power *to* mislead is combined with an assumed power *over* audiences to generate what we might call the power *of* the media to secure, in Lukes' terms, compliance to existing social relations.

This idea of the power of the media is far from new and has long been asserted in terms of the impact of specific technologies on historical events: the impact of books on the Reformation; of pamphlets on the French Revolution; of the press on the emergence of U.S. democracy, where de Tocqueville (1838/2003), for example, granted it not just constitutional but constitutive power, stating that

> . . . its influence in America is immense. It *causes* [emphasis added] political life to
> circulate through all the parts of that vast territory. Its eye is constantly open to detect

the secret springs of political designs and to *summon* [emphasis added] the leaders of
all parties in turn to the bar of public opinion. (p. 167)

The 19th-century French sociologist Gabriel Tarde attributes a similar power to the press in the
rolling out of European modernity. Newspapers, he argued, change the fabric of politics, starting new
conversations, stirring up "united movements of minds and will," nationalizing and internationalizing
private opinions and the "public mind" (2010, pp. 304, 307). According to the historian Paul Starr, media
technologies had, by the 1920s, formed a "new constellation of power" and were "increasingly a source of
wealth" and "formidable institutions in their own right" (2004, p. 385). Since then, the power of radio,
film, television, and the Internet to amuse and distract, to mobilize and publicize, to integrate and inform,
and to educate and enrage has grown exponentially. This power of specific media remains a central area
of interest.

In the last 70 years, however, the notion of a *holistic* media power has emerged, characterized
less by specific properties of individual technologies than by a new collective media logic that expresses
the salience of information, symbols, and knowledge in the contemporary world. Since the early 20th
century, those technologies that are now understood together to form "the media" have grown in scale
and influence, requiring a rethinking of their impact on modern societies beyond their individual histories
(e.g., Castells, 1996; McLuhan, 1964; Thompson, 1995; Williams, 1968). Today, despite the fact that
power remains unequally distributed across different media platforms, few people would dispute the
premise that the media, as a distinct entity, can, as John Corner puts it, "exert a significant degree of
power over both public and corporate perceptions and therefore bring about changes to the 'action frames'
within which they operate" (2011, p. 15).

Yet two problems follow from this. First, little agreement exists about the extent of media
influence and about the power of the media as an independent variable. There are those who argue that
the power of media power is itself overstated. Michael Schudson (1982), for example, acknowledges that
news has the ability to amplify particular perspectives and to confer "public legitimacy" (p. 19) on
individuals and institutions but nevertheless insists that this influence is too often exaggerated. "It is not
media power that disengages people but their belief in it, and the conviction of their own impotence in the
face of it" (p. 17). Media power, according to this perspective, is far more indirect and elusive, closer
perhaps to the "limited effects" theory of communication that replaced the "hypodermic model"
(McCullagh, 2002, pp. 152–153) in classic accounts of media sociology.

This line of argument has emerged recently in relation to the U.K. phone hacking scandal, where
a growing number of journalists have reacted to the current crisis by insisting that we have little to fear
from concentrated media power. According to the *Financial Times* columnist Philip Stephens (2013), "there
has always been something faintly hysterical about the charge that British politics has been held helpless
hostage to the Murdoch empire. He has never been as powerful as his enemies imagined" (p. 13). Simon
Jenkins (2011) continues this line of argument in the *Guardian*, claiming that the damage that could ever
be caused by the media is relatively minimal: "Has anyone been murdered? Has anyone been ruined? Is
the nation gripped by financial crash or pandemic, earthquake or famine?" (p. 35). For these
commentators, media power is a conspiratorial phenomenon that exists only in the mind of its accusers.

Media, after all, are only as powerful as readers and viewers allow them to be, and, indeed, it is increasingly argued that *concentrated* media influence has met its nemesis given the decentralization and fragmentation of power in the digital communications environment (Jarvis, 2009).

But there are also those who warn against underestimating media power and therefore ignoring the extent to which social relations have been increasingly "mediatized." This flows from a series of different conceptual starting points: from Foucauldian analyses that see power as an all-pervasive feature of contemporary life that operates through bodies and subjects just as much as it does through institutions and governments (Kittler, 1999); from postmodern accounts that posit media technologies as the main textures of everyday life in an age of hyperreality and simulation (Baudrillard, 1994); from post-Marxist accounts, such as those of Stuart Hall (1986), that see "ideology" as the "cement" of any late-capitalist social formation and that endow the media with tremendous definitional power; and from technologists who see digital media as innately disruptive and ultimately empowering (Downes, 2009; Negroponte, 1996). This latter expansive (and optimistic) view of dispersed media power reached its apotheosis in claims made about the revolutionary role of social media in the Arab Spring of 2011, the emergence of Twitter revolutions, and the rise of networked protest that culminated in the Occupy movement (Mason, 2012). Manuel Castells (2009, 2011) has famously described this as "media counterpower."

The media are, of course, neither omniscient nor redundant, neither all-conquering nor vanquished. We need instead a view of power that recognizes the media's own capacities for both transformation *and* misrecognition but locates them in relation to other actors who participate in struggles over the allocation of resources. As John Corner (2011) argues:

> There are very good reasons, historical, political and sociological, for seeing media institutions and processes as exercising their powers *systemically*, that is to say within the terms of a broader pattern of determining relationships with other sources of power, the vested and often elite sources of which they routinely serve to maintain, whatever the localized tensions and questioning that might also occur. (p. 19)

This is most helpful when considering some of the revelations uncovered in the course of the phone hacking scandal in the United Kingdom: for example, that 10 of the 45 staff members in the press office of the Metropolitan Police used to work for the *News of the World*; that Prime Minster David Cameron found time to host 75 private meetings in Downing Street with figures from the media in the 14 months from May 2010 to July 2011, 26 of which were with representatives of News Corporation alone; that News Corp. met with Chancellor George Osborne 16 times and Education Secretary Michael Gove 7 times during the same period; that Culture Secretary Jeremy Hunt met with News Corp. 7 times, including 2 meetings at the time of the proposed takeover of BSkyB by News Corp.; and that senior Metropolitan Police officers met with News International staff for lunches and dinners some 36 times in the 5 years up to November 2010, mostly during the time when Scotland Yard refused to launch a full investigation into phone hacking. Indeed, the *systemic* nature of the problem was acknowledged by none other than the prime minister, who, in his initial response to the phone hacking allegations in July 2011, declared that

> . . . it is no good pointing the finger at this individual journalist, or that individual
> newspaper. It's no good, actually, just criticizing the police. The truth is, we have all
> been in this together—the press, politicians and leaders of all parties—and yes, that
> includes me. (Cameron, 2011, para. 76)

The question that follows this concerns not the allocation but the *location* of media power: whether it is a capacity reserved for media institutions themselves or whether it is a resource hegemonized by those whose interests lie primarily outside the media—in other words, with organizations whose main output is not necessarily symbolic. Does media power refer to the "concentrated symbolic power of media institutions" (Couldry, 2000, p. 192) or to the ability of *other* state, corporate, or civic actors to use communicative activities as a valuable resource with which to assert their own interests?

This is an issue that has been taken up by Manuel Castells (2007), who provocatively suggests that "the media are not the holders of power, but they constitute by and large the space where power is decided" (p. 242). Media institutions, according to this perspective, are not the main protagonists but the hosts of power struggles, making available their platforms and channels for the genuine power holders of international finance, business, politics, and war. Castells (2009) develops this line of thought in his comprehensive account of communication power, in which he argues that, because of the centrality of information and communication processes in influencing minds and securing legitimation, "communication networks are the fundamental networks of power making in society" (p. 426). Power, a ubiquitous feature of informatized capitalism, comes to be closely associated with the ability of capital, politics, subjectivity, terror, and resistance to be programmed into these networks. Castells is clear: the media are *not* power holders themselves (they are more important than that) but, instead, "constitute the space where power relationships are decided between competing political and social actors" (2009, p. 194). This links to a classic pluralist view of social relations in which multiple actors vie for political hegemony using all the resources and channels available to them, even if access to and mobilization of these resources is far from equal.

This notion of the media providing the terrain for other actors to contest power is widely accepted. Indeed, many excellent historical accounts suggest that media have, for example, assisted in the consolidation of existing, or the emergence of new, "power centres" (Curran, 2002, p. 56), such as the rise of Catholicism in the Middle Ages; stimulated new politically motivated reading publics (Leonard, 1986); or acted as "mighty levers" (Starr, 2004, p. 402) in the development of liberal democracy. Despite their contribution, it appears as if media, intimately tied to the play of power, spend more time *servicing* power than actually accruing it for their own purposes. Media power, according to this view, is like a junior partner in a coalition dominated by more established social forces like religion, armies, politicians, or corporations. Consider the claim by Stuart Hood, in his wonderful history of British television, that the media

> . . . can make crucial interventions at critical moments in the history of a society . . . but
> they are never likely to be, on their own, the instruments of a social change which
> depends on a shift in the power structure of society. (1980, p. 116)

The questions that flow from this are: What constitutes the real power structure of any society? Do the coercive abilities of the state, the economic resources of big business, and the political authority of government somehow trump the symbolic power of institutions including the church, education, and the media? Are there primary and, therefore, secondary instruments of power in which the media fit only into the latter category? What are the specific dynamics of the relationship between media and other agents of change, and can we trace a causal or rather a more incidental or associative connection?

Refuting this kind of hierarchization of power, John Thompson (1995, pp. 13–18) suggests that there are four forms of power—political, economic, coercive, and symbolic—and argues that the ability to wield power in one area depends, at least partly, on the capacity to exert influence in another. Confidence in the political system, the ability to go to war and trust in current economic arrangements all require legitimacy and consent (or at least, following Lukes, compliance) that can be partially secured through ideological institutions like the media. "Symbolic activity," writes Thompson, "is a fundamental feature of social life, on a par with productive activity, the coordination of individuals, and coercion" (p. 16). So instead of endowing symbolic and material forms of power with different levels of impact, Thompson attempts to assess the ways in which they are mutually supportive and overlapping in "the murky reality of social life" (1995, p. 18).

How does this relate to a materialist conception of power—that, in Marx's terms, it is not "the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being determines their consciousness" (Marx, 1859/1963, p. 67). First, despite Thompson's claim that symbolic power is used to naturalize other forms of power, it does not follow that this is always the case. Governments do not always secure consent from their populations to go to war, and financial systems are not always seen as legitimate; more significantly, the existence of covert operations, private lobbying, and closed networks of privileged individuals (think back to Raisa, the horse we met at the beginning of this article) suggests that symbolic power is not a precondition for the operation of other forms of power. But we can also argue that social relations, in their entirety, ought to include ideas as well as economics, mental as well as physical production. As David Miller (2002) puts it, while ideology is neither all-pervasive nor insurmountable, that does not stop it from being productive and "constitutive of the social relations of production" (p. 252). Media power, therefore, is structurally tied (but not subordinated) to wider patterns of privilege and control: "Accounts of the world and evaluations of it emerge from material experience as well as from the media and other symbolic systems" (Miller, 2002, p. 253).

In this context, one of the most articulate accounts of the relationship between media and power (Curran, 2002) in liberal democracies is Aeron Davis' (2007) meticulous analysis of the consumption and use of media at elite sites of power: in financial markets, parliaments, and corporations. Davis examines not the large-scale impact of mainstream media on mass audiences, the basis of many media studies texts, but the precise ways in which information and communications are integrated into the decision-making processes and lived cultures of elite actors. Crucially, while the book is initially framed around a separation between media personnel and "those in power" (p. 14), Davis finds that the saturation of elite sites by media people and processes has started to break down this division. Journalists, he argues:

> . . . are not simply reporting on political and economic processes and sites of power.
> They are immersed in them. They are a physical component of the information networks
> that form in elite sites of power. In constantly going between sources, who are also key
> media subjects and audiences, they are part of the elite circuits of information exchange
> and dialogue. (2007, p. 175)

This points to the existence of a more intricate relationship between media and power that recognizes the dynamics of existing power centers and acknowledges media power as a vital (although far from the sole) factor in sustaining and reproducing current patterns of power. What is the point, therefore, of arguing that there is power first and then the mediation of power? Instead, at a time when media power (a) is increasingly the subject of public debate and (b) seems to have such a profound influence on social reproduction more broadly, it is vital to understand its dynamics, its capacities, its limits, and its contradictions by neither insulating it from nor reducing it to other forms of power.

Three Dimensions of Media Power

I have raised so far only a few elements of the puzzle of media power: whether it operates autonomously or in conjunction with other spheres of influence; whether it is always mobilized through its component parts (the power *of* specific media) or whether it refers to a more collective understanding of media as a set of institutions and processes; whether its own power is over- or understated; and whether it refers to a physical property to be possessed or a relationship to be nurtured. A further source of confusion relates to the fact that, because media operate at multiple levels of the social, media power is played out across these different fields and will therefore assume different forms. In this section, therefore, I briefly discuss three ways of framing media power in the liberal democracies of the West: through a democratic lens, through a concern with its economic potential, and through a focus on the symbolic practices and textual operations that characterize media flows.

Given the significance of ongoing controversies concerning the impact on the communications landscape of giant companies like News Corp., Google, Mediaset, Facebook, and Apple, let us start by considering how they may be affecting democratic life. Media power has frequently been seen in terms of the ability of one group or a single individual to command such a sizeable presence in and control of the media environment, and thus the public sphere, that it undermines both the pluralism of voice and diversity of opinion necessary for a democracy. This form of power is based on the notion that audiences are all too often susceptible to media influence and that too much power in the hands of a single organization or individual (or a small group of individuals) is undesirable and undemocratic. This is the view taken, for example, by the leader of the British Labour Party, Ed Miliband, in his response to the News Corp. hacking scandal, in which he argued that Rupert Murdoch's grip on the British media needed to be dismantled.

> I think it's unhealthy because that amount of power in one person's hands has clearly
> led to abuses of power within his organisation. If you want to minimise the abuses of
> power then that kind of concentration of power is frankly quite dangerous. (quoted in
> Helm, Doward, & Boffey, 2011)

The danger Miliband refers to is not simply the corruption of an internal culture—as could happen in any business—but, through the media's political influence, the ability to wield power over public life and the "national conversation" in quite unaccountable ways. The emblematic figures of this particular understanding of media power range from William Randolph Hearst in the early 20th century to more recent figures, including Murdoch himself; Roberto Marinho, the founder of the Brazilian Globo network; the German publisher Axel Springer; and, perhaps most notoriously, the Italian media mogul–turned–prime minister, Silvio Berlusconi, who, until his departure from office in 2011, best epitomized the definitional confusion between media and politics. Given the association of all the above moguls with explicitly conservative political views, media power according to this perspective poses not just small ethical or administrative problems but constitutes a major source of ideological support for existing frameworks of power and privilege.

Concentrated media power, therefore, is antidemocratic both because it hands definitional, analytical, and interpretive power to unelected organizations and because it undermines the ability of citizens to acquire and exchange the information and ideas necessary to make informed decisions about public life. It is also dangerous, because it distorts the logic of the media industries themselves, transforming them from vehicles of symbolic interaction to increasingly significant engines of capital accumulation. Consider Rupert Murdoch's response in 2009 to calls for a bailout of news organizations as they struggled to cope with the combined impact of a huge drop in advertising revenue and the structural challenge posed by the Internet. Welcoming the collapse of companies that failed to adapt to the new digital age, Murdoch argued that "they should fail, just as a restaurant that offers meals no one wants to eat or a car-maker who makes cars no one wants to buy should fail" (Murdoch, 2009). This is the same vision of media—as commodities that measure their success simply using market criteria—as that famously espoused by Federal Communications Commission (FCC) chairman Mark Fowler in the early 1980s, when he described television as "just another appliance. It's a toaster with pictures" (quoted in Horwitz, 1989, p. 245).

Media power is conceptualized here primarily in relation to economic activity—both in general terms concerning the growing share of GDP earned by the creative and cultural industries and, more precisely, in relation to forms of concentration that distort market systems rather than, as previously mentioned, simply undermine democracy. Organizations that are too large or that operate as monopolies are said to stifle competition and restrict innovation, thus interrupting the free flow of market forces. There is, therefore, a need for regulatory bodies, whether nationally based, like the FCC in the United States or Ofcom in the United Kingdom, or supranational, like the European Commission, to monitor the emergence of anticompetitive blockages in media markets and to respond with the appropriate regulatory tools: competition law, media ownership rules, or media-specific public interest obligations. The rise of neoliberalism as a political-economic regime (Couldry, 2010; Harvey, 2005) together with the enormous growth in the information and communication technology sector has, of course, radically changed what governments and regulators are likely to define as uncompetitive (or indeed unacceptable), but, nevertheless, an economic understanding of media power is increasingly deployed by policy makers, investors, and regulators.

This economic perspective on media power has been challenged on several fronts. First, there are those who argue that the digital world has shifted power away from concentrated to dispersed forms of ownership. Remember that a central part of Alvin Toffler's (1990) notion of an epochal "power shift" was the emergence of "power mosaics" where "one thing is certain: The notion that a tiny handful of giant companies will dominate tomorrow's economy is a comic-book caricature of society" (p. 232). We see an even more recent illustration of changing patterns of media with Chris Anderson's (2009) analysis of the increasing irrelevance, under digital conditions, of the traditional "blockbuster economy." Of course, these arguments do not by themselves question the association of media power with productivity, growth, and innovation but merely suggest that we should concern ourselves with how best to stimulate dynamism and creativity and not to worry about issues of size and scale when thinking through the economic implications of contemporary media. This perspective challenges the often negative connotations of media power—that it is, by definition, a *problem*, as we saw above—and replaces it with a notion of fragmented media power as something positive and, indeed, emancipatory that is evidence of the ideal competitive marketplace. Indeed, according to John Corner (2011), while concentrated media power is usually seen as "bad" and as a problem to be corrected, "good" media power has to be described in totally different terms—as "communicative capacity" (p. 37)—and is thus often not characterized as power in the first place.

Second, and perhaps more fundamentally, there are those who argue that, just as power in general is far too extensive and productive a concept to be reduced to primarily economic features, the power of the media—institutions, channels, and texts that rely, above all, on symbolic interactions—is even less reducible to economic imperatives. Nick Couldry, one of the most prolific recent theorists of media power, is determined to establish the "analytic separation" of media power from other domains and notes that, all too often, the concept of media power in contemporary media studies "is either absent or collapsed into its supposed determinants in economic or state power" (2003a, p. 41). Following Bourdieu (1991), Couldry (2000) argues that media power refers to the "concentration in media institutions of the symbolic power of 'constructing reality' (both factual representations and credible fictions)" (p. 4). For Couldry, media power is not a tangible object, possessed by institutions and circulated to beguiled audiences, but a social process organized on the basis of a constantly renewed distinction between a manufactured (and rather dazzling) "media world" and the "ordinary world" of nonmedia people. One of the key roles of the media is precisely to make this distinction seem entirely natural, thus legitimating their symbolic power as key institutions through which we come to make sense of the world. Couldry, in virtually all of his work, assesses the "local practices" (2000, p. 155) in which this naturalization of media power takes place, whether through the ritual of major media events (2003b) or the ubiquitous format of reality television (2009).

Couldry's work on media power is a sophisticated exploration of the interaction of institutional structures, modes of representation, access to media technologies, and broader issues of political authority and civic engagement framed by an interest, in relation to an earlier point, with the location rather than the allocation of media power. He sees power in a particularly dynamic way: as a contingent force, open to political contestation precisely because it is never settled, always in the process of being reproduced, always trying to act "natural." But what are the implications, given his argument that media power "is both a cultural and an economic phenomenon" (2000, p. 194), of an emphasis on rituals, memory, and myths over questions of economics, policy, and regulation, particularly given Thompson's

(1995, p. 18) warning that there are no clear-cut distinctions between different forms of power? Precisely to do justice to the complex relationship between the cultural and the economic—and in recognition of the material impact of ownership and corporate influence on the impact of media institutions, the capacities of media audiences and the possibilities of media content—can a robust account of media power afford not to highlight these kinds of issues?

John Corner deliberately focuses on the interaction between the political, economic, and the cultural in the play of media power, arguing that it is a kind of "soft power" with "matters of power essentially turning on issues of form and subjectivity" (2011, p. 3). While this requires great attention to textual and aesthetic detail, Corner is keen not to marginalize political or economic dimensions, arguing that there are both structural and discursive components to media power, and is quite right to locate media power in tension with, and in relation to, other forms of power. His account avoids media-centrism and, as we have already noted, contributes to a systemic rather than atomized view of media power. Furthermore, he is quite clear about the relevance of economic factors and market forces on transformations taking place in both political and media culture.

Yet Corner is preoccupied, above all, with evaluating the discursive mechanisms through which media power is reproduced. Rather than examining the interaction of institutional and text-level factors, he calls for a focus on the "localised dynamics of form and interpretative practice [that] still figure importantly within power flows and should continue to be one focus for making further conceptual and methodological progress" (2011, p. 45). Of course, this is a matter of choice and perspective (and Corner's writing on television, screen documentaries, and photography is very stimulating), but this approach tends in practice to forego macro-level analysis for an emphasis on "conditions of subjectivity, of awareness, knowledge and affective orientation" (2011, p. 15).

These more culturally focused accounts of media power focus on detailed exploration of textual processes and discursive mechanisms. For Couldry, this involves the investigation of practices such as framing, ordering, naming, spacing, and imagining (2000, p. 42), while for sociologist Ciaran McCullagh, media power operates through the practices of agenda setting, imitating, sourcing, and representing, all of which help to "shape the nature of social consciousness and the nature of public opinion" (2002, p. 151). However, given that media power is also about owning, regulating, censoring, controlling, decision making, and profiting, then how do we incorporate these processes into a full picture of the significance of communicative activity for the contemporary world? Indeed, given the huge questions currently being posed about the ethical basis, financial sustainability, political influence, and democratic implications of contemporary media activity, is there an argument actually to *privilege* macro-level analysis to get to grips with the underlying dynamics of media power?

Given the exposure in the Leveson Inquiry of the antidemocratic relationships between police, press, and politicians; the continuing scandal over campaign finance in the United States; and the popular mobilizations in Mexico against the grip of the two main TV channels on public life, we need to make a strong case for moving beyond the local and the textual and to turn our attention to the major social institutions and processes that circulate and embody media power in the world today. This involves a focus on, for example, ownership patterns, resource allocations, governance arrangements, and policy and

regulatory regimes in conjunction with an analysis of the means by which these embodiments of media power work to naturalize their own status and legitimate their own interpretations. Effectively, this is a plea to combine Lukes' emphasis on the ideological dimension of power with a detective-like obsession with the dynamics of the material environment in which media are produced, distributed, and consumed. Analysis of media ownership and control is not, as Stuart Hall pointed out, "a sufficient explanation of the way the ideological universe is structured, but it is a necessary starting point. It gives the whole machinery of representation its fundamental orientation in the value-system of property and profit" (1986, p. 11).

Conclusion

I started this article with the assertion that, while references to media power are increasingly frequent both inside the media and in public debate more generally, there is a slipperiness about the term that is seldom acknowledged. It is too often used as shorthand for the political influence of a particular media mogul *or* the cultural impact of a specific technology and viewed largely as either an irrepressible force *or* a diversion from more substantial threats to democracy and citizenship. What I have attempted to demonstrate is that media power, particularly as found in neoliberal societies of the West, is not reducible to a single characteristic nor traceable to a single source (despite the undoubted impact of a Murdoch or a Berlusconi); it does not "belong" to Hollywood, Silicon Valley, Madison Avenue, or what used to be known as Fleet Street (although it is most certainly mobilized in all those contexts); neither does it emerge spontaneously out of the communicative interactions of ordinary people (even though many people may claim to be "empowered" by their use of media technologies). It refers instead to a set of relationships that, in conjunction with other institutions and processes, helps to structure our knowledge about, our ability to participate in, and our capacity to change the world.

The crucial point, however, is that these relationships are situated in an environment in which access to the media—as with access to all kinds of resources at institutional and societal levels, including health, education, and employment—is fundamentally unequal and reflects structural disparities of power in wider society. Not all audiences are equally desirable to advertisers; not all individuals have the same capacity to start up a publishing venture despite being formally "free" to do so; not all readers have the same access to editors and owners should they wish to complain about something; indeed, not all citizens are able to afford the £250,000 necessary to secure a private dinner with the British prime minister David Cameron to discuss urgent matters of public policy (Leigh, 2012, p. 1).

Nick Couldry is, therefore, absolutely right to argue that media power needs regularly to be reproduced to naturalize its authority to make its news credible and its fictions relevant, and he is completely justified in focusing on the "universe of beliefs, myths, and practices that allows a highly unequal media system to seem legitimate" (2003a, p. 41). But media power refers, quite crucially, to more than the cultural processes by which established patterns of media power come to be accepted. It is also about the material relations that underlie this inequality and which then structure the complex operations of media as power holders in their own right. Just as we need to concentrate on the more intimate parts of media power—the circulation of meaning, the production of texts, the characteristics of media forms—we need to highlight and evaluate those elements that are crucial in shaping the role and impact of media in public life more generally: questions of ownership and control, policy making and

regulation, corporate strategy and the public interest. This emphasis on the material is partly to avoid duplication (and, no doubt, an inferior version at that), but it is also the result of my conviction that the best way to challenge what Couldry describes as the fundamental inequality of media power concerning "who can effectively speak, and be listened to" (2000, p. 192) is to focus on those sites where power is most overwhelmingly concentrated: in the operations of the state, the belly of the market, and the transactions that take place in elite networks—which brings us back to Raisa the horse, where we began.

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