

## Some Theoretical Foundations of Critical Media Studies: Reflections on Karl Marx and the Media

CHRISTIAN FUCHS  
University of Salzburg

Marshall McLuhan and Jean Baudrillard have claimed that Marx had nothing important to say on media, communication, and culture. The approach taken in this paper is different: It is argued that Marx should be considered as one of the founding figures of critical media and communication studies and that his works can be applied today to explain phenomena such as global communication, knowledge labour, media and globalization, media and social struggles, alternative media, media capital accumulation, media monopolies, media capital concentration, the dialectics of information, and media and war. The works of Karl Marx are systematically reconstructed to identify aspects of the media and communication. This reconstruction is based on Marx's circuit of capital. It is shown that Marx provided important insights for analyzing the role of the media in commodity and ideology production, circulation, and consumption and for discussing the role of alternative media production, circulation, and reception. Therefore, it is concluded that Marx provided important groundwork for media and communication theory that could be connected to the hypotheses of contemporary critical media and communication theories.

Key words: Philosophy of communication, Karl Marx, Critical media theory, Critical media studies, Communication theory

### *Introduction*

Edwin Black (2001), in his book *IBM and the Holocaust*, has shown that International Business Machines (IBM) assisted the Nazis in their attempt to eradicate the Jews, ethnic minorities, communists, socialists, gay people, the handicapped, and others by selling punch card systems to them.<sup>1</sup> These systems were used for numbering the victims, storing and processing where they should be brought, indicating their status (what should happen to them), and for organizing their transport to extermination camps such as Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen, Buchenwald, Dachau, Majdanek, Mauthausen, Ravensbrück,

---

Christian Fuchs: [christian.fuchs@sbg.ac.at](mailto:christian.fuchs@sbg.ac.at); <http://fuchs.icts.sbg.ac.at>

Date submitted: 2008-05-01

<sup>1</sup> See also the scene on IBM in the film "The Corporation" by Mark Achbar and Jennifer Abbott (Big Picture Media 2004, available on DVD), <http://de.youtube.com/watch?v=pkoM8RB-kJ0> (accessed on August 19, 2008).

and Sachsenhausen. IBM made an international business out of mass killings by making profits from selling data storage and processing machines to the Nazis. The punch cards covered information on where a victim would be deported, the type of victim (Jew, homosexual, deserter, prisoners of war, etc.), and the victim's status. Code status 6 was "Sonderbehandlung" (special treatment), which meant death in the gas chamber. Black has shown that the system was delivered and maintained by IBM, and that rental contracts between IBM New York and the German Nazi state were made. Black (2001, p. 9) says there was a "conscious involvement – directly and through its subsidiaries – " of IBM "in the Holocaust, as well as (...) in the Nazi war machine that murdered millions of others throughout Europe." He describes the IBM mindset at the time:

Solipsistic and dazzled by its own swirling universe of technical possibilities, IBM was self-gripped by a special amoral corporate mantra: if it can be done, it should be done. To the blind technocrat, the means were more important than the ends. The destruction of the Jewish people became even less important because the invigorating nature of IBM's technical achievement was only heightened by the fantastical profits to be made at a time when bread lines stretched across the world. (Black, 2001, p. 10)

Irving Wladawsky-Berger, then IBM's vice president of technical strategy, commented on Black's book: "Generally, you sell computers, and they are used in a variety of ways. And you hope they are using the more positive ways possible."<sup>2</sup> The example shows that corporations are driven by profits and that some will support the worst horrors if they can draw economic profits from it. Wladawsky-Berger's reaction is a typical one: Corporations that have committed moral crimes against humanity argue that they are not responsible for what their customers do with the commodities they sell to them. Critical reasoning such as that applied by Edwin Black intends to show in this context that corporations are not always unaware of what is going on, and that they abandon their responsibility in many cases due to their instrumental interests. The example also shows that media and the communication industry are not innocent, but deeply embedded into structures of domination. And this is exactly why critical media and communication research is needed. To understand and criticize the relationship of media and domination in general, as well as media and capitalism in particular, we need theoretical foundations. This paper is a contribution to theoretical foundations of critical media studies.

The intent of this paper is to reflect on the theoretical foundations of critical media and communication research. Karl Marx summarized the imperatives and convictions of corporations in the following words:

Accumulate, accumulate! That is Moses and the prophets! (...) Therefore, save, save, i.e., reconvert the greatest possible portion of surplus-value, or surplus-product into capital! Accumulation for accumulation's sake, production for production's sake: by this formula classical economy expressed the historical mission of the bourgeoisie. (MECW 35, p. 652)

---

<sup>2</sup> Interview in "The Corporation," a film by Mark Achbar and Jennifer Abbott (Big Picture Media 2004, available on DVD).

My argument in this paper will be that the works of Karl Marx are useful and foundational for: (1) understanding how capitalism in general and specifically media and communication are implicated in domination and; (2) finding alternative modes of existence and communicating.

The interesting thing about Marx is that his spirit reappears at moments when people least expect it in the form of various Marxisms that continue to haunt capitalism like ghosts, as Jacques Derrida (1994) has stressed. It is paradoxical that almost 20 years after the end of the Soviet Union, capitalism seems to have falsified itself, because its neo-liberal mode of development has intensified global problems, caused severe poverty and a rise of unequal income distribution, and as a result, brought a return of socioeconomic problems and with it a re-actualization of the Marxian critique of capitalism. Michael Burawoy and Erik Olin Wright (2002, p. 460) argue in this context that, despite "renewed attempts to bury Marxism," it is important to "build Marxism," which would involve seeing that "class continues to be at the core of the dynamics and reproduction of capitalism." Although a persistent refrain is "Marx is dead, long live capitalism," Marx is coming back again. "At a time when a new world disorder is attempting to install its neo-capitalism and neo-liberalism, no disavowal has managed to rid itself of all of Marx's ghosts" (Derrida, 1994, p. 37). "True ideas are eternal, they are indestructible, they always return every time they are proclaimed dead" (Žižek, 2008, p. 4). This return certainly needs to rid itself of historical errors that should not be repeated. But these errors are not prevalent in Marxian works (Fuchs, 2008), only in specific Marxist interpretations. These circumstances enable us to rediscover Marx as theorist of radical egalitarianism and "co-operative self-regulation" (Burawoy, 2000, p. 172).

The relevance of Marx today can be observed and has already been reflected in a number of ways:

- The globalization of capitalism, seen as a defining characteristic of contemporary society by many social theorists, is an important aspect of the works of Marx and Engels (Callinicos, 2003). Also connected to this topic is the Marxian theme of international solidarity as form of resistance that seems to be practiced today by the altermondialiste movement.
- The importance of technology, knowledge, and media in contemporary society was anticipated by the Marxian focus on machinery, means of communication, and the general intellect (Dyer-Witheford, 1999; Fuchs, 2008, 2010; Hardt & Negri, 2005; McChesney, 2007).
- The immizerization caused by neoliberal capitalism suggests a renewed interest in the Marxian category of class (Harvey, 2005).
- The global war against terror after 9/11 and its violent and repressive results like human casualties and intensified surveillance suggest a renewed interest in Marxian theories of imperialism (Fuchs, 2009; Hardt & Negri, 2000; Harvey, 2003; Wood, 2003).
- The ecological crisis re-actualizes a theme that runs throughout Marxian works: that there is an antagonism between modern industrialism and nature that results in ecological destruction (Fuchs, 2006; O'Connor, 1998).

- The global financial crisis that hobbled capitalism in 2008 has invoked interest in Marx's theory of capitalism as a crisis-ridden system. For example, *TIME* Magazine presented Karl Marx on its cover and posed the following question about the state of the world economy: "What would Marx think?" (*TIME*, February 2, 2009).

As a result, there has been a "renaissance of Marxist political economy" (Callinicos, 2007, p. 342), with a respectable interest in Marxian or Marxian-inspired thinkers like Giovanni Arrighi, Jacques Bidet, Nick Dyer-Witheford, Michael Hardt, David Harvey, Robert McChesney, Antonio Negri, and Slavoj Žižek. In many countries, the resurgence of Marx has already resulted in the publication of many books on Marx and the emergence of *Capital* reading groups. The displeasure over the state of the world drives the renewed interest in Marx.

Žižek (2008) has recently argued that the antagonisms of contemporary capitalism in the context of the ecological crisis, intellectual property, biogenetics, new forms of apartheid, and slums show that we still need the Marxian notion of class and "a proletarian position, the position of the 'part of no-part' " (Žižek, 2008, p. 428). This would be the only way for breaking the "sound barrier" that presents global capitalism as fate without alternatives (p. 459). His suggestion is to renew Marxism and to defend its lost causes in order to "render problematic the all-too-easy liberal-democratic alternative" (p. 6) that is posed by the new form of a soft capitalism that promises (and in its rhetoric makes use of) ideals like participation, self-organization, and co-operation without realizing them.

The core of the relevance of Marx today is normative: the radical critique of capitalism and the envisioning of real alternatives. "Building Marxism as an intellectual project (...) is deeply connected with the political project of challenging capitalism as a social order" (Burawoy & Wright, 2002, p. 461). That there is a capitalist world economy out of control, in which many are worse off than before, suggests "an opening for Marxism – a renewed critique of capitalism and its protective superstructures" (Burawoy, 2000, p. 152).

We can observe today "stark injustice reflected in the horrifying inequalities in life-chances" (Callinicos, 2006, p. 251). "Doesn't this demand from us a certain kind of partiality? In this riven world, isn't the appropriate standpoint to take that of the victims of injustice, those excluded and denied access to the resources to which they are entitled?" (Callinicos, 2006, pp. 251-252). "There have rarely been times when the intellectual resources of critical social theory were more needed" (Callinicos, 2007, p. 352). These are the reasons why Marxian theory and analysis are needed today. This applies for academia in general and in our case specifically for critical media and communication studies. The discovery of Marxian theory could allow a radical emphasis in the contemporary theory and critique of phenomena like global communication, knowledge labour, media and globalization, media and social struggles, media capital accumulation, media monopolies and media capital concentration, the dialectics of information, and media and war.

The task of this work is to make a contribution to the discussion of the relevance of the Marxian theory for communication studies and to the actualization and reloading of Marx. The research question this paper addresses is: Did Marx have something to say about the media and communication? If so, what

exactly? Methodologically, a systematic typology of Marxian thought on communication and media is worked out. This method deliberately and strongly uses quotation-based citation as a means for filling an information gap, because thus far there have been no publications that allow scholars to systematically reconstruct what Marx was exactly saying about media and communication. The most important quotations by Marx and Engels on media and communication will be integrated into a systematic typology. The quotation-based style is necessary for systematically documenting rather unknown thoughts of Marx and Engels on media and communication.

Robert McChesney (2007) stresses in his book, *The Communication Revolution*, that critical communication studies can be subdivided into the Critique of Political Economy approach and Cultural Studies. McChesney furthermore argues that Marx is very important for communication studies, but that he would not be accepted by most scholars who view themselves as being critical or he would be considered as outdated or irrelevant by them. Marx should be of fundamental importance for communication science because he would provide intellectual tools that allow for:

1. Critique of capital accumulation in the culture industry.
2. Critique of commodity fetishism.
3. Critique of ideologies that legitimate domination (McChesney, 2007, pp. 53-55).

Furthermore, Marx's own journalistic practice would be a model for critical, independent quality journalism (McChesney, 2007, pp. 55-57). Gerald Sussmann (1999, p. 86) stresses in a special issue of the *Journal of Media Economics* on the topic of "Political Economy of Communication" that critical communication studies is based on Marxian thinking: "Marx, one of the first to recognize modern communications and transportation as pillars of the corporate industrial infrastructure." This insight has thus far been hardly noticed in media and communication studies. The work at hand wants to contribute to a demystification of Marx, who is generally and misleadingly considered a mastermind of the Soviet state dictatorship, by showing that he is a thinker who is highly relevant to the critique of the contemporary dictatorship of capital in society and the media and to the struggle for democratization of society and the media.

Robert McChesney (2007, p. 235f, fn 35) says that "no one has read Marx systematically to tease out the notion of communication in its varied manifestations." He also notes that he can imagine that Marx had things to say on communication that are of considerable importance. The purpose of this paper is to contribute to overcoming this lack of systematic reading of Marx on communication and media. The central contention is that what Marx wrote about the media, communication, and culture can inform our understanding of contemporary media and communication capitalism, and that he is therefore of central importance to media and communication research and teaching. The task is also to show that it is not true, for example, as claimed by John Durham Peters (2001, p. 125), that "Marx nowhere discusses 'communication' in a sustained way" and that traffic or exchange is "the closest Marx gets to naming communication." This paper will show that Marx had quite a lot to say on what he termed the *means of communication*. This section wants to point out that Baudrillard was wrong in arguing that "the Marxist theory of production is irredeemable partial, and cannot be generalized" to culture and the media, and in saying:

. . . the theory of production (the dialectical chaining of contradictions linked to the development of productive forces) is strictly homogenous with its object – material production – and is non-transferable, as a postulate or theoretical framework, to contents that were never given for it in the first place. (Baudrillard, 1981, p. 214)

The argument will be that the means of communication have been an object of interest for Marx in the first place. Similarly, Marshall McLuhan (1964/2001, p. 41) got it completely wrong when he argued that Marx and his followers did not “understand the dynamics of the new media of communication. Marx based his analysis most untimely on the machine, just as the telegraph and other implosive forms began to reverse the mechanical dynamic.” The aim is to show that Marx provided an analysis of the means of communication, that he was theoretically aware of the machine and the telegraph and other media.

In Section 2, existing works on the addressed issue are discussed as background. The Marxian circuit of capital, which is the heart of the critique of the political economy of capitalism, is explained in section 3. On its foundation, Section 4 introduces a typology of what Marx had to say on media and communication. Section 5 draws some conclusions.

#### ***Background: Existing Works on Marx and the Media***

The silence on Marx is only broken slowly. Contributions have been made by the publication of the handbook *Media Marx* (Schröter, Schwering & Stäheli, 2007), the anthology *Marxism and Communication Studies* (Artz, Macek & Cloud, 2006) or Mike Wayne’s (2003) monograph *Marxism and Media Studies*. These accounts are valuable for breaking the silence, but they are missing a systematic reconstruction of the value of Marx’s thinking for media and communication studies. It is noticeable that approaches like the Radical Political Economy of the Media approach (Meier, 2003; Grisold & Meier, 2007; Grisold, 2004) or the Critical Political Economy of Communication approach (Murdock & Golding, 2005) hardly or do not at all directly reference the works of Marx. That these approaches argue more for reforms of capitalism than for the latter’s abolishment can be seen as symptomatic for this condition.

There are three anthologies that promise accounts of Marx on media and communication: *The Political Economy of the Media* (Golding & Murdock, 1997c), *Communication and Class Struggle* (Mattelart & Siegelau, 1979, 1983), and *Marx and Engels on the Means of Communication* (de la Haye, 1979).

The two-volume anthology *The Political Economy of the Media*, edited by Peter Golding and Graham Murdock (1997c), presents 61 contributions to the critical analysis of media and communication. The first volume presents foundational issues of communication and capitalism.<sup>3</sup> The second volume is

---

<sup>3</sup> It is structured into four parts:

- I. Defining Political Economy.
- II. Communications and Capitalist Enterprise.
- III. Communications, Ideology and Capitalism.
- IV. Communication and Global Order.

oriented on the analysis of communication as common, public good.<sup>4</sup> The anthology is a major contribution for institutionalizing critical political economy in media and communication studies. It provides an essential resource for critical research and teaching. Nonetheless, the two introductory essays fail to make clear how the various issues treated in the eight parts are connected and form parts of an overall theoretical whole. It also does not point out how capital accumulation, ideology, globalization, and public goods form parts of the overall whole of the capitalist political economy of media and communication. Only one essay by Marx, which deals with ideological aspects of the press, is included. This creates the impression that Marx only had something to say on ideology, but not about transport, communication, globalization, cultural goods, and immaterial labour. This impression is amplified by the contributions themselves. For example, one hardly finds quotations by or references to works by Marx in the 33 foundational writings presented in volume 1. The one exception is Nicholas Garnham's paper *Contribution to a Political Economy of Mass Communication* (contribution 3). Many of the papers refer to Marxian thinking and Marxian writers and stress the importance of Marxism for critical communication research (see, for example, contribution 4 by Oscar H. Gandy [1992/1997]). Overall, however, there is more indirect than direct engagement with Marx in the two volumes and more engagement with Marxist thinkers than with Marx himself.

The anthology *Communication and Class Struggle*, edited in two volumes by Armand Mattelart and Seth Siegelau (1979, 1983), provides 128 Marxist and other critical texts on communication. A strength of the publication is that it is focusing on anti-capitalist, anti-fascist, and anti-imperialist liberation struggles, as well as anti-capitalist practices (with a focus on developing countries), and therefore also provides texts on communication technologies and strategies used by revolutionary movements in the October Revolution, the Spanish Civil War, and in countries like Algeria, Angola, China, Cuba, Mozambique, and Yugoslavia.

The basic structure is quite clear: Volume 1 focuses on communication under capitalism and imperialism, while volume 2 targets the role of communication in liberation from capitalism and socialism. The task of the first volume is "to elucidate the genesis of the mode of production of communication under capitalism and imperialism" (Mattelart, 1979, p. 24), and that of the second volume, according to Siegelau, is to:

outline some experiences and tendencies in the history of the oppressed classes, stratum, groups, and – why not? – even individuals, and how in their resistance to exploitation and search for liberation, their creativity has manifested, and is manifesting, itself in the areas of culture and communication. (Siegelau, 1983, p. 12)

---

<sup>4</sup> It is again structured into four parts:

- I. Private Interests to Common Goods.
- II. Public Broadcasting and the Public Interest.
- III. Policing the Public Interest.
- IV. Institutionalizing Diversity.

So the basic division is domination/resistance. The first volume covers capitalism and imperialism, the second volume liberation and socialism.<sup>5</sup> This distinction seems to be based on the dialectical distinction between repression and emancipation from repression. While the basic division of the book into two volumes is straightforward, the two prefaces (Siegelau, 1979, 1983) and the two introductions (Mattelart, 1979, 1983) do little to explain how the book's division into sections on ideology, the mode of communication, monopoly capitalism, imperialism, global ideological control, popular culture and communication, socialist communication, and global struggle form one consistent whole that can be theoretically explained. The anthology is an important foundational reading for researching and teaching communication from a Marxist perspective, but its overall character is eclectic. The editors make clear that Marx did have important things to say on culture and communication by including four basic readings. The drawback is that these texts are very short excerpts and focus on the topics base/superstructure, ideology, and civil war communication, ignoring that Marx also had important things to say on global communication, capital accumulation based on cultural goods, immaterial labour, the role of communication in production and circulation, the capitalist press system, and alternatives to the capitalist press system.

Siegelau (1974) edited a bibliography on *Marxism and the Mass Media* five years before the publication of the first volume of *Communication and Class Struggle*. It consists of 453 entries and a subject index organized with the help of 11 topics: general, pre-print communications, print, sound, audio visual, social consciousness (propaganda, public opinion), journalism/media and cultural workers, international communications/ cultural imperialism, cybernetics/ information theory, language/ linguistics/ semiology, related topics. The aim of the publication was to "document the wealth of world Marxist thought and working-class practice concerning the mass media, and increase awareness of this collective experience" (Siegelau, 1974, p. v).

Yves de la Haye (1979) has edited a volume on Marx's and Engels' writings on the means of communication that is a very good text resource. But de la Haye does not provide a systematic secondary analysis and typology. He distinguishes between texts by Marx and Engels that cover:

1. General aspects of exchange and the role of the means of communication in the production-circulation-dialectic.

---

<sup>5</sup> The detailed structure is the following one:

Volume 1: Capitalism, Imperialism

- A. Basic Analytic Concepts
- B. The Bourgeois Ideology of Communication
- C. The Formation of the Capitalist Mode of Communication
- D. Monopoly Capitalism/Imperialism and Global Ideological Control

Volume 2: Liberation, Socialism

- E. Popular Culture and Communication: Elements towards a Definition
- F. Popular Communication and Cultural Practices
- G. Socialist Communication Processes
- H. Toward a Globalization of Struggles



2. Changes of social relations linked to the emergence of means of communication.
3. The emergence of modern means of transportation and communication, especially the railways.
4. The transportation industry and its effects.

Based on this distinction, the book is structured into four chapters. Yet de la Haye's introduction does not shed light on why this structure was chosen and does not explain the criteria underlying his distinction.

A systematic account of the role of the media and communication in the works of Marx and Engels has thus far not been established. Before attempting to ground such a typology, we first need to discuss the Marxian circuit of capital.

**The Marxian Circuit of Capital**

For a systematic location of the media in capitalism, one can take as a starting point the Marxian circuit of commodity metamorphosis and the accumulation of capital, as it is described in Vol. 2 of *Capital* (MEW 24).

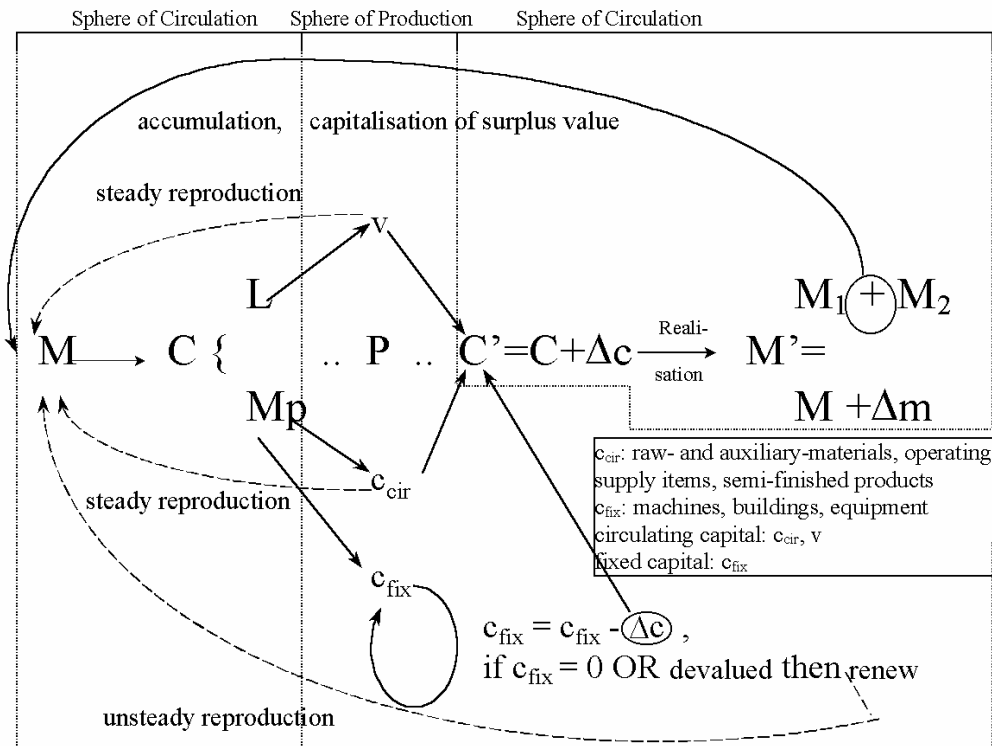


Figure 1. The accumulation/expanded reproduction of capital.

In the circulation sphere, capital transforms its value form. First, money  $M$  is transformed into commodities  $C$  (from the standpoint of the capitalist as buyer), then the capitalist purchases the commodities labour power  $L$  and means of production  $Mp$ .  $M-C$  is based on the two purchases  $M-L$  and  $M-Mp$ . In capitalism, labour power is separated from the means of production; "the mass of the people, the labourers, (...) as non-owners, come face to face with non-labourers as the owners of these means of production" (MEW 24, p. 38) in class relations.

In the sphere of production, the value of the necessary labour and means of production are added to the product. Value takes on the form of productive capital  $P$ . The value form of labour is variable capital  $v$ , the value form of the means of production constant capital  $c$ . The latter consists of two parts: circulating constant capital  $c_{cir}$  (the value of the utilized raw materials, auxiliary materials, operating supply items and semi-finished products) and fixed constant capital  $c_{fix}$  (the value of the utilized machines, buildings and equipment) (MEW 24, chap. 8).  $c_{cir}$  and  $v$  together form circulating capital: They transfuse their value totally to the product and must be constantly renewed.  $c_{fix}$  remains fixed in the production process for many turnovers of capital. The turnover time of capital is the sum of its circulation time and its production time (MEW 24, p. 157). Circulation time is the time that capital takes to be transformed from its commodity form into the money form and later from its money form to its commodity form. Production time is the time that capital takes in the sphere of production.

Fixed constant capital decreases its value by each turnover of capital. Its value is decreased by  $\Delta c$ , which is a flexible value. Fixed constant capital, like machinery, does not create value and its value is never entirely transfused to capital at once. It is depreciated by wear and tear, non-usage, and moral depreciation (i.e., the emergence of new machinery with increased productivity).

A portion of the advanced capital-value becomes fixed in this form determined by the function of the instruments of labour in the process. In the performance of this function, and thus by the wear and tear of the instruments of labour, a part of their value passes on to the product, while the other remains fixed in the instruments of labour and thus in the process of production. The value fixed in this way decreases steadily, until the instrument of labour is worn out, its value having been distributed during a shorter or longer period over a mass of products originating from a series of constantly repeated labour-processes. (MEW 24, p. 159)

In the sphere of production, capital stops its metamorphosis; capital circulation comes to a halt. New value  $V'$  of the commodity is produced,  $V'$  contains the value of the necessary constant and variable capital and surplus value  $\Delta s$  of the surplus product. Surplus value is generated by unpaid labour. Capitalists do not pay for the production of surplus, therefore the production of surplus value can be considered as a process of exploitation. The value  $V'$  of the commodity after production is  $V' = c + v + s$ . The commodity then leaves the sphere of production and again enters the circulation sphere in which capital conducts its next metamorphosis: By being sold on the market, it is transformed from the commodity form into the money form. Surplus value is realized in the form of money value. The initial money capital  $M$  now takes on the form  $M' = M + \Delta m$ ; it has been increased by an increment  $\Delta m$ .

Accumulation of capital means that the produced surplus value is (partly) reinvested/capitalized.  $M'$  as the end point of one process becomes the starting point of a new accumulation process. One part of  $M'$ ,  $M_1$ , is reinvested. Accumulation means the aggregation of capital by investment and exploitation in the capital circuit  $M-C..P..C'-M'$  in which the end product  $M'$  becomes a new starting point  $M$ . The total process makes up the dynamic character of capital. Capital is money that is continually increasing due to the exploitation of surplus value.

Which role do the media play in the circuit of capital accumulation? A systematic account can be given based on the following distinction:

- The role of the media in commodity production
- The role of the media in commodity circulation
- Media and ideology
- Alternative media

In analyzing Marx's writings, one must distinguish between specific accounts of media industries and general accounts that can be applied to the media.

### ***Karl Marx on Media and Communication***

#### *The Role of the Media in Commodity Production*

Manfred Knoche distinguishes in the media industry between media capital and media-oriented capital/media infrastructure capital. The first is used for the production and reproduction of programmes and content, while the second is necessary for the production of media-oriented production-, compression-, storage-, transmission-, encoding-, and reception technologies (Knoche, 1999b, p. 189; Knoche, 1999a, pp. 153f). During Marx's time, these capital forms were not present to a large degree, so Marx cites the number of employees in the realm of media infrastructure capital in the UK as 94,145 in 1861 (MEW 23, p. 469). But Marx remarks, with foresight, that this realm will expand due to the development of the productive forces:

The increase of the means of production and subsistence, accompanied by a relative diminution in the number of labourers, causes an increased demand for labour in making canals, docks, tunnels, bridges, and so on, works that can only bear fruit in the far future. Entirely new branches of production, creating new fields of labour, are also formed, as the direct result either of machinery or of the general industrial changes brought about by it. But the place occupied by these branches in the general production is, even in the most developed countries, far from important. The number of labourers that find employment in them is directly proportional to the demand, created by those industries, for the crudest form of manual labour. (MECW 35, p. 445)

Marx forecast the emergence of media-based capitalism. He also described the bad working conditions and the role of child labour in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century in the English printing industry (MEW 23, pp. 509, 569f).

*Media Technology as Technology of Rationalization*

Marx stresses that the invention of media technologies is advantageous for capital, because after something new has been invented, the underlying knowledge would be available for free:

We saw that the productive forces resulting from co-operation and division of labour cost capital nothing. They are natural forces of social labour. So also physical forces, like steam, water, etc., when appropriated to productive processes, cost nothing. But just as a man requires lungs to breathe with, so he requires something that is work of man's hand, in order to consume physical forces productively. A water-wheel is necessary to exploit the force of water, and a steam-engine to exploit the elasticity of steam. Once discovered, the law of the deviation of the magnetic needle in the field of an electric current, or the law of the magnetisation of iron, around which an electric current circulates, cost never a penny. But the exploitation of these laws for the purposes of telegraphy, etc., necessitates a costly and extensive apparatus. (MECW 35, p. 387)

For Marx technologies are "means for producing surplus-value" (MECW 35, p. 371). For increasing productivity, new technology is developed, and as a consequence, living labour is substituted by technology:

The machine, which is the starting-point of the industrial revolution, supersedes the workman, who handles a single tool, by a mechanism operating with a number of similar tools, and set in motion by a single motive power, whatever the form of that power may be? [10] Here we have the machine, but only as an elementary factor of production by machinery. (MECW 35, p. 376)

This process also takes place in the realm of the media. So, for example. in the U.S. printing industry, productivity measured as output per hour increased by 21% in the years 1997-2006, whereas the number of employees decreased from 1997 until 2008 from 815,000 to 615,000 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics data). The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics stresses the role of computerization: "Computerization has eliminated many prepress and production jobs."<sup>6</sup>

Engels, in his *Condition of the Working-Class in England*, reports on child labour and poor working conditions in the printing industry in Lancashire, Derbyshire, and West Scotland, where working conditions were degraded and unemployment increased as a consequence of the substitution of the hand press by

---

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.bls.gov/oco/cg/cgs050.htm> (accessed on April 13, 2008).

the rapid press. "In no branch of English industry has mechanical ingenuity produced such brilliant results as here, but in no other has it so crushed the workers" (Engels, 1845, p. 207).

*The Specific Process of Capital-Concentration and -Centralization in the Realm of the Media*

It is also a goal of the media industry that the share of variable and constant capital is decreased in order to increase profit rates. This is partly achieved by rationalization and automation of media products. Unequal market conditions, organization structures, class struggles, different levels of innovation, rates of the division of labour, rates of surplus value, etc, cause different fixed costs, wages, and productivity in media corporations. Corporations with higher levels of productivity can produce and sell their commodities cheaper than others, which can result in higher market shares. As a result, competing corporations can lose profit and often end up facing economic crisis. The consequence might be the takeover by another competing corporation (horizontal integration) or bankruptcy. The tendency of capital concentration in any way is supported. So, for example, the virtualization of journalism (online journalism) is a potential rationalization because knowledge production, publishing, and distribution can be combined in one or a few employee positions. Media content is an "immaterial" good. Its production causes relatively high initial costs. But once created, these goods do not have to be newly produced, but can easily be copied at low cost. To gain profits by multiple commodification, it is wise for a media corporation to try to overtake corporations that operate in related cultural industries (vertical integration).

Manfred Knoche (1997, 2005a, 2007) argues that media concentration is not an exception to the rule in capitalist development as claimed by apologetic-normative theories of competition, but an essential element of capitalism. A critical-empirical concentration theory would argue that concentration and its negative consequences could only be avoided by the abolishment of competition (Knoche, 1997, p. 134).

Marx stresses that the development of the productive forces is one of the causes of capital concentration: "The battle of competition is fought by cheapening of commodities. The cheapness of commodities demands, caeteris paribus, on theproductiveness of labour, and this again on the scale of production. Therefore, the larger capitals beat the smaller" (MECW 35, p. 626). Competition and credit would be "the two most powerful levers of centralisation" (MECW 35, p. 626). For Marx, concentration means that certain corporations control more market shares and profits in relation to others, whereas centralization means that not only the distribution of capital becomes more concentrated in the hand of fewer economic actors but also the size of the centralizing corporation increases in processes of overtaking and expansion (MEW 23, pp. 655ff). Marx points out that centralization is the imminent result of competition: "Here competition rages in direct proportion to the number, and in inverse proportion to the magnitudes, of the antagonistic capital. It always ends in the ruin of many small capitalists, whose capital partly pass into the hands of their conquerors, partly vanish" (MECW 35, p. 626). Marx did not apply the notions of concentration and centralization directly to the media and culture industry, but spoke of a general development tendency of capitalism. Given the high concentration rates that can be found in the realm of the mass media (Hesmondhalgh, 2007), one sees how important Marx's notions of capital concentration and centralization are today.

*The Specific Role of Media Capital in the Production of Media Contents*

Wage labourers in media and cultural corporations, like journalists, editors, secretaries, call centre agents, information brokers, software engineers, designers, etc., did not exist to a large extent in Marx's time. These professions are primarily mental activities that produce "immaterial" products or services — knowledge. The form of capital that Manfred Knoche terms *media (content) capital* is knowledge in commodity form that is produced by knowledge workers. Marx forecast the increasing importance of knowledge work — and therefore also of the media capital — as a consequence of the development of the productive forces. There is an economic interest in the substitution of living labour by technology to decrease the investment and reproduction costs of capital and its turnover time, which in the ideal case increases profit. The continuous overthrow and revolution of technology by science is a condition for the existence and reproduction of capital. Therefore, the importance of technological means of production (fixed constant capital  $c_{\text{fix}}$ ) — and with it, also knowledge labour — increases, and the importance of living labour (variable capital  $v$ ) decreases continuously. Marx says that the organic composition of capital (the relation  $c : v$ ) increases continuously:

The accumulation of capital, though originally appearing as its quantitative extension only, is effected, as we have seen, under a progressive qualitative change in its composition, under a constant increase of its constant, at the expense of its variable constituent. (MECW 35, p. 628)

The increase of constant capital (the value of the means of production) results in an increase of "the proportionate quantity of the total labour which is engaged in its reproduction." This is the mass of labour that is oriented on "the reproduction of means of production," which encompasses the reproduction of "machinery (including means of communication and transport and buildings)" (MECW 31, p. 113). As a result of capital's drive for increasing productivity by employing new technologies, production becomes increasingly dependent on knowledge, "General Intellect" (Marx, 1858, p. 706), the "universal labour of the human spirit" (MECW 37, p. 104), "general social knowledge" that becomes "a direct force of production" so that "the conditions of the process of social life itself [...] come under the control of the general intellect and [...] [are] transformed in accordance with it" (Marx, 1858, p. 706). The importance of knowledge in capitalism is based on the latter's imminent tendency for the growth of the organic composition of capital that, at a certain point, results in the overturn of quantity into quality; in other words, a new qualitative phase of capitalist development where media capital and culture industry are of central importance for capital accumulation.

The notion of the General Intellect that has been coined by Marx in this context in the *Grundrisse* has become important in the Italian operaistic discourse on "immaterial" labour during the past years (cf. Hardt & Negri 2000, 2005; Negri, Lazzarato & Virno, 1998). Marx points out that with the growth of technological productivity, knowledge becomes an important productive force:

The development of fixed capital indicates to what degree general social knowledge has become a direct force of production, and hence, to what degree the conditions of the

process of social life itself have come under the control of the general intellect and been transformed in accordance with it. To what degree the powers of social production have been produced, not only in the form of knowledge, but also as immediate organs of social practice of the real life process. (Marx, 1858, p. 706)

Marx's analysis of the total process of capital accumulation that is based on the exploitation of labour that generates surplus value and produces commodities (MEW 24, MECW 36) can be applied to the realm of the media. The media do not only play an indirect role in production but are also directly commodities that are produced by labour in class relations.

The formula  $M - C \dots P \dots C' - M'$ , with its result  $M' = M + m$ , is deceptive in form, is illusory in character, owing to the existence of the advanced and self-expanded value in its equivalent form, money. The emphasis is not on the self-expansion of value but on the money-form of this process, on the fact that more value in money-form is finally drawn out of the circulation than was originally advanced to it; hence on the multiplication of the mass of gold and silver belonging to the capitalist. The so-called monetary system is merely an expression of the irrational form  $M - C - M'$ , a movement which takes place exclusively in circulation and therefore can explain the two acts  $M - C$  and  $C - M'$  in no other way than as a sale of  $C$  above its value in the second act and therefore as  $C$  drawing more money out of the circulation than was put into it by its purchase. On the other hand  $M - C \dots P \dots C' - M'$ , fixed as the exclusive form, constitutes the basis of the more highly developed mercantile system, in which not only the circulation of commodities but also their production appears as a necessary element. (MECW 36, p. 60)

This analysis can also be applied to the media as direct commodities: Media capitalists invest money in the production of media content and its transmission, which is achieved by employing labour that produces the media as a commodity that is circulated and either sold by selling media to consumers or by selling the media audience to advertisers. Media as commodities contain surplus value produced by their non-owners. The goal of the overall process is the self-expansion of money, or the accumulation of capital. Nicholas Garnham argues in this context that a usual mode of how cultural production and material production are related, is the emergence of a "field where all commodities become symbolic forms, representations of the social whole and of the consumer's perception of his or her place within it" (Garnham, 1990, p. 13). These symbolic, cultural commodities are consumed in the domestic and leisure environments and serve as social co-ordinators and creators of self-identity. It is problematic to separate the material and the immaterial/cultural/symbolic because this implies that the second is not material and that there are therefore two substances in the world (matter and ideas), which is indicative of a dualistic or idealistic worldview. In contrast a materialistic worldview assumes that culture and the symbolic are specific emergent forms of matter. The products of the brain are material because the brain itself is a material system. Nonetheless, Garnham is right to point out that the production of symbolic forms is a specific subsystem of the capitalist economy. Horkheimer and Adorno (1944) spoke in this context of the culture industry (cf. also Steinert, 2003).

*The General Role of the Media in Intra-Organizational Corporate Communication*

Within capitalist organizations, communication media are used for reducing constant and variable capital by accelerating the transmission of messages. Marx speaks in this context of the "useful effect" of means of transportation, "during their stay in the sphere of production" (MECW 36, p. 159). In large corporations, production is spatially distributed; it is necessary to organize and coordinate production across distances. Transport of commodities and coordination of communication become necessary. Media are important in this context for coordinating the transport of commodities "from one productive establishment to another" (MECW 36, p. 150).

*The General Role of the Media in the Globalization of Capitalism*

Marx stresses the importance of the acceleration and enlargement of the production and circulation processes of capital. Capital with a high rate of turnover can be accumulated faster and to a larger extent. A wider expansion of capital allows potentially more spheres of accumulation and consumption and as a consequence more profit. The "feverish haste of production, its enormous extent, its constant flinging of capital and labour from one sphere of production into another, and its newly created connexions with the markets of the whole world" have resulted in the emergence of a system of communication and transportation consisting of "river steamers, railways, ocean steamers, and telegraphs" (MECW 35, p. 384).

Means of communication and transportation enable capital to expand in space and to create global zones of capital investment, accumulation, exploitation, and political influence.

The bourgeoisie, by the rapid improvement of all instruments of production, by the immensely facilitated means of communication, draws all, even the most barbarian nations into civilisation. [...] It compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilisation into their midst, i.e., to become bourgeois themselves. (MECW 6, p. 488)

The bourgeoisie would have created, by the development of the productive forces, "more massive and more colossal productive forces." The electronic telegraph is part of these forces (MECW 6, p. 488f).

Marx stresses that the globalization of production and circulation necessitates institutions that allow capitalists to inform themselves on the complex conditions of competition:

Since, 'if you please,' the autonomization of the world market (in which the activity of each individual is included), increases with the development of monetary relations (exchange value) and vice versa, since the general bond and all-round interdependence in production and consumption increase together with the independence and indifference of the consumers and producers to one another; since this contradiction leads to crises, etc., hence, together with the development of this alienation, and on the same basis, efforts are made to overcome it: institutions emerge whereby each individual can



acquire information about the activity of all others and attempt to adjust his own accordingly, e.g., lists of current prices, rates of exchange, interconnections between those active in commerce through the mails, telegraphs etc. (the means of communication of course grow at the same time). (This means that, although the total supply and demand are independent of the actions of each individual, everyone attempts to inform himself about them, and this knowledge then reacts back in practice on the total supply and demand. Although on the given standpoint, alienation is not overcome by these means, nevertheless relations and connections are introduced thereby which include the possibility of suspending the old standpoint.) (The possibility of general statistics, etc.). (Marx, 1858, pp. 160f)

Although Marx here speaks of lists, letters, and the telegraph, it is remarkable that he saw the possibility of a global information network in which "everyone attempts to inform himself" on others and "connections are introduced." Today, the Internet is such a global system of information and communication; it represents a symbolic and communicative level of mechanisms of competition, but also poses new opportunities for "suspending the old standpoint" (cf. Fuchs, 2008). Based on this foundation, one can disagree with Slavoj Žižek, who, based on the role of central banks in the works of Lenin, constructs a connection to the Internet. The first who was "developing the theory of a role of World Wide Web" (Žižek, 2002, p. 293) was not Lenin but Marx.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there is much talk on speculative financial capital that is accumulated with the help of computer networks, which allow fictive money to circulate around the globe in seconds.<sup>7</sup> Marx already forecast this development in a letter to Danielson in 1879:

The railways sprang up first as the couronnement de l'oeuvre in those countries where modern industry was most developed, England, United States, Belgium, France, etc. I call them the "couronnement de l'oeuvre" not only in the sense that they were at last (together with steamships for oceanic intercourse and the telegraphs) the means of communication adequate to the modern means of production, but also in so far as they were the basis of immense joint stock companies, forming at the same time a new starting point for all other sorts of joint stock companies, to commence by banking companies. They gave in one word, an impetus never before suspected to the concentration of capital, and also to the accelerated and immensely enlarged cosmopolitan activity of loanable capital, thus embracing the whole world in a network of financial swindling and mutual indebtedness, the capitalist form of "international" brotherhood.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> For example: "Computers and telecommunications accelerate financial flows phenomenally, permitting round-the-clock planet-wide investment activity, reducing the costs of transfers, creating a common digital medium for transactions, and spurring mergers and consolidations among monetary institutions" (Dyer-Witheford, 1999, p. 139).

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.ucc.ie/acad/appsoc/tmp\\_store/mia/Library/archive/marx/works/1879/letters/79\\_04\\_10.htm](http://www.ucc.ie/acad/appsoc/tmp_store/mia/Library/archive/marx/works/1879/letters/79_04_10.htm) (accessed on July 26, 2008).

### ***The Role of the Media in Commodity Circulation***

#### *The Specific Transmission Role of Media Infrastructure Capital*

Content has to be transported with the help of transmission technologies so that the accumulation of capital takes place in the media sector. Manfred Knoche (1999a, b) speaks in this context of media infrastructure capital. The corresponding provision and transmission technologies are institutionalized in most cases. Due to liberalization and privatization tendencies in the media and telecommunication sector, transmission technologies today are mostly profit-oriented corporations (e.g., commercial TV stations, radio stations, cinemas, online shops, telecommunication corporations, theatres, opera houses, concert houses, etc.).

Marx described the existence of a form of capital in the realm of the media that does not produce, but transports and transmits commodities. The commodity in this case is not a physical product but the provision of transmission services for which the recipients have to pay in most cases.

But there are certain independent branches of industry in which the product of the productive process is not a new material product, is not a commodity. Among these only the communications industry, whether engaged in transportation proper, of goods and passengers, or in the mere transmission of communications, letters, telegrams, etc., is economically important. (MECW 36, p. 52)

The advancing vertical integration in the media sector (cf. Herman & McChesney, 1997) has resulted in a strong convergence of content and infrastructure and the emergence of corporations that provide media content and media infrastructure. Media content capital and media distribution capital tend to converge.

Marx argues that the transport industry brings about production processes and the selling of commodities that result in the translocation of commodities (MECW 36, pp. 54f). In the case of media industries, this translocation is the transmission and diffusion of the commodity information. In capital accumulation in the media distribution industry, there is no separate physical commodity C': "The formula for the transport industry would therefore be  $M - C M_p \dots P - M'$ , since it is the process of production itself that is paid for and consumed, not a product separate and distinct from it" (MECW 36, p. 55).

#### *The Media as Carriers of Advertising Messages that Advance Commodity Sales*

Advertisement in the media is a "necessary elixir" of capital because with it media corporations gain and accumulate capital. It is necessary for the selling of media products, for the sales of services and consumer goods and for the ideological reproduction of capitalist relations (Knoche, 2005b). Advertisement is part of the circulation of capital; it propagandizes the purchase and consumption of commodities to guarantee commodity sales and the realization of profit. Engels speaks in this context of "fanfaronading advertising" (MECW 37, p. 28). For Nicholas Garnham, advertisement is the second way in

which cultural and material production are related. Here, "cultural production directly services the wider system of material production" and "the circulation of symbolic values becomes integral to the circulation of commodities." "From the earliest days, newspapers also served a more directly business function of providing direct market intelligence to their readers" (Garnham, 1990, p. 13). Dallas Smythe (1981/2006) has added the idea that, in advertising, media audiences are commodified: They are sold as a commodity to advertising clients so that media corporations can make profits. He therefore speaks of the audience commodity.

*The General Role of the Media in Reducing the Circulation and Turnover Time of Capital*

The role of the media in the circulation process is, on the one hand, the sale of transmission capacities. On the other hand, they play a role on a more general level, at which they are used for accelerating the circulation of commodities and reducing the turnover time of capital:

In the second place the rapidity with which the product of one process may be transferred as means of production to another process depends on the development of the transport and communication facilities. The cheapness of transportation is of great importance in this question. (MEW 24, p. 144)

The chief means of reducing the time of circulation is improved communications. The last fifty years have brought about a revolution in this field, comparable only with the industrial revolution of the latter half of the 18th century. On land the macadamised road has been displaced by the railway, on sea the slow and irregular sailing vessel has been pushed into the background by the rapid and dependable steamboat line, and the entire globe is being girdled by telegraph wires. (MECW 37, p. 71)

That the entire globe becomes technologically networked underlines the importance of the means of communication and transportation in capital circulation (which is just another expression for girdling of the entire globe) (MECW 37, p. 71).

Not every commodity circulation results in a translocation of commodities, not every circulation is in need of means of transportation and communication. "A house sold by A to B does not wander from one place to another, although it circulates as a commodity" (MECW 36, p. 149). In those cases, where these technologies are necessary, surplus value would be created:

But the use-value of things is materialised only in their consumption, and their consumption may necessitate a change of location of these things, hence may require an additional process of production in the transport industry. The productive capital invested in this industry imparts value to the transported products, partly by transferring value from the means of transportation, partly by adding value through the labour performed in transport. This last-named increment of value consists, as it does in all capitalist production, of a replacement of wages and of surplus value. (MECW 36, p. 150)

The communication and transport time necessary for circulating commodities (e.g., in the form of advertising time that is part of the communication time) results in costs in the form of variable and constant capital that is reflected in both the value and the price of the product. To decrease these costs and increase profits, entrepreneurs try to reduce the circulation time by making use of efficient communication technologies:

The capitalist mode of production reduces the costs of transportation of the individual commodity by the development of the means of transportation and communication, as well as by concentration – increasing scale – of transportation. It increases that part of the living and materialised social labour which is expended in the transport of commodities, firstly by converting the great majority of all products into commodities, secondly, by substituting distant for local markets. (MECW 36, p. 152)

The improvement of the means of communication and transportation cuts down absolutely the wandering period of the commodities. (MECW 36, p. 249)

#### *Media and the Globalization of World Trade*

Marx argues that new transportation and communication technologies enable to reach or build up distant markets, which would result in a globalization of world trade, as well as a global expansion of the circulation sphere of capital:

Whereas on the one hand the improvement of the means of transportation and communication brought about by the progress of capitalist production reduces the time of circulation of particular quantities of commodities, the same progress and the opportunities created by the development of transport and communication facilities make it imperative, conversely, to work for ever more remote markets, in a word – for the world-market. The mass of commodities in transit for distant places grows enormously, and with it therefore grows, both absolutely and relatively, that part of social capital which remains continually for long periods in the stage of commodity-capital, within the time of circulation. There is a simultaneous growth of that portion of social wealth which, instead of serving as direct means of production, is invested in means of transportation and communication and in the fixed and circulating capital required for their operation. (MECW 36, p. 251)

“The colossal expansion of the means of transportation and communication – ocean liners, railways, electrical telegraphy, the Suez Canal – has made a real world market a fact” (MECW 37, p. 489). The other way round, the expansion of global trade also advances the further development of communication technologies: “Modern industry has established the world market, for which the discovery of America paved the way. This market has given an immense development to commerce, to navigation, to communication by land” (MESW I, p. 35).

Another important aspect of the relationship between media and globalization that Marx described is the "shortening of time and space by means of communication and transport" (MESW I, p. 309). "Capital by its nature drives beyond every spatial barrier. Thus, the creation of the physical conditions of exchange – of the means of communication and transport – the annihilation of space by time – becomes an extraordinary necessity for it" (Marx, 1858, p. 524).

*The Spatial Centralization of Capital by Means of Transportation and Communication*

Marx says that those locations that are hubs of capitalist production and circulation develop into profitable centres in which capital is concentrated. Other places are excluded:

A place of production which once had a special advantage by being located on some highway or canal, may not find itself relegated to a single side track, which runs trains only at relatively long intervals, while another place, which formerly was remote from the main arteries of traffic, may now be situated at the junction of several railways. This second locality is on the upgrade, the former on the downgrade. Changes in the means of transportation thus engender local differences in the time of circulation of commodities, in the opportunity to buy, sell, etc., or an already existing local differentiation is distributed differently. (MECW 36, p. 250)

The importance of today's spatial centralization of capital is shown by the Global Cities approach, which stresses that a few global metropolises function as centres of capital accumulation and that in these centres the infrastructure of capital, which includes the media, is agglomerated, which results in an unequal geography. Global cities like New York, London, Tokyo, Paris, Frankfurt, Zurich, Amsterdam, Los Angeles, Sydney, São Paulo, Mexico City, and Hong Kong act as command centres of capital accumulation. They are headquarters of the organization of the world economy, market places, and central locations of the leading industries and production zones for innovations (Sassen, 1998, p. 180).

***Media and Ideology***

By discussing the role of ideologies in capitalism, Marx and Engels have anticipated the fact that media function as technologies of consciousness and play ideological roles in the legitimization of capitalist domination. Engels argues that ideas are "reflections – true or distorted – of reality" (MECW 25, p. 463). If ideas can be distorted, this means that objective reality can be represented in false, non-identical forms in consciousness. By comparing ideology to a camera obscura, Marx points out that ideology misrepresents reality so that fictive ideas are considered as primary and the world is turned on its head:

If in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside down as in a camera obscura, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life process. (MECW 5, p. 14)

A controlled press is, for Marx, a civilised monster, a perfumed abortion (MEW 1, p. 54). Marx stresses the importance of ideologies that distort reality in the context of the discussion of the German press:

The German daily press is certainly the flabbiest, sleepest and most cowardly institution under the sun! The greatest infamies can be perpetrated before its very eyes, even directed against itself, and it will remain silent and conceal everything; if the facts had not become known by accident, one would never have learnt through the press what splendid March violets have been brought into being by divine grace in some places. (MEW 6, p. 351)<sup>9</sup>

For Marx, ideology is the expression of dominant class interests and the attempt to control the dominated:

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e., the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. (MECW 5, p. 59)

Morality, religion, metaphysics, and all the rest of ideology are characterized by Marx as "phantoms formed in the human brain" (MECW 5, p. 36). In the well-known *Introduction to a Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Marx already saw religion as ideology that results in "an inverted consciousness of the world" and functions as "opium of the people" (MECW 3, p. 175).

The insight that ideology distorts reality was later preserved and expanded in the chapter on the *Fetishism of Commodities* in *Capital, Vol. 1* (MEW 23, pp. 85-98).

A commodity is therefore a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men's labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour. (MECW 35, p. 72)

Marx assumes that the commodity character of goods conceals that these goods exist only because they are produced by human labour within class relations. The "phantasmagoric" impression that commodity, capital, and money are natural forms of existence that do not have societal foundations is created. Marx here again speaks of "mist-enveloped regions of the religious world" (MECW 35, p. 72). His initial critique of religion is extended to capitalism to show that the forms of commodity and capital are

---

<sup>9</sup> English translation from: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1849/03/15b.htm> (accessed on September 30, 2008).

manipulative and distort reality. The fetish character of commodities also applies to the capitalist mass media: The forms of domination of capitalism are naturalized by the media and are portrayed as being unchangeable. It is concealed that they have a historic character, can be transformed by social struggles, and are the result of societal development and social relations.

Marx's notion of ideology has been further developed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Hungarian philosopher Georg Lukács (1923/1972) has argued that the bourgeois ideology tries to present the existence of capitalism as an unhistorical law that cannot be changed. Ideology is also imminent in the economic forms of capitalism itself. What Marx termed the "fetish character of commodities" is, in turn, identified as "reification" by Lukács. The Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci added to Marx's theory of ideology; he offered the insight that ideology is not simply imposed by dominant groups on the dominated, but that the latter also agree to domination by refusing to resist, by hoping to gain advantages by supporting domination, or by not seeing through the presented lies so that, as a result, they consent to their own oppression. Gramsci has used the term "hegemony" in this context (Gramsci, 1971, p. 266). Louis Althusser (1971/1994) stressed that ideology is a "system of the ideas and representations which dominate the mind of a man or a social group" (p. 120) so that "ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (p. 123). The Frankfurt School has argued that with the establishment of 20<sup>th</sup> century capitalism, mass media and culture have taken on commodity form in a way that simplifies and distorts reality and keeps people calm by preoccupying them with light entertainment. Consciousness becomes instrumental like any machinery, reflection gets substituted by standardized automatic reactions so that potential alternatives to existing society are no longer imaginable and therefore become unlikely. Herbert Marcuse (1964) spoke in this context of the emergence of one-dimensional consciousness and, as a result, of a one-dimensional society. Much more could be said about the Marxist theory of ideology (cf. the contributions in Žižek 1994), but within the scope of this paper it needs to be limited.

### ***Alternative Roles of the Media***

Marx and Engels spoke of the possibility of alternative usage, interpretation, and production of media and their content. For Marx, the press acts critically under ideal circumstances. Such a press today (termed an "alternative press") would be the "public watchdog, the tireless denouncer of those in power" (MEW 6, p. 231).<sup>10</sup> At the content level, alternative media would have to argue in a progressive and radical way: "It is the duty of the press to come forward on behalf of the oppressed in its immediate neighbourhood. (...) The first duty of the press now is to undermine all the foundations of the existing political state of affairs" (MEW 6, p. 234).<sup>11</sup> In his characterization of the "true press," Marx anticipated the idea that alternative media should be non-commercial and non-profit so as not to become corrupted by capitalist pressures: "The primary freedom of the press lies in not being a trade" (MEW 1, p. 71).

---

<sup>10</sup> English translation from: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1849/02/07.htm> (accessed on September 30, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

Engels stressed in his discussion of revolutionary posters that a radical interpretation of media content is possible and politically important:

And what is more conducive to keeping alive revolutionary fervour among the workers than posters, which convert every street corner into a huge newspaper in which workers who pass by find the events of the day noted and commented on, the various views described and discussed, and where at the same time they meet people of all classes and opinions with whom they can discuss the contents of the posters; in short, where they have simultaneously a newspaper and a club, and all that without costing them a penny. (MEW 6, p. 440)<sup>12</sup>

In the *Manifesto*, Marx and Engels speak of an alternative usage of the media that allows the networking and uniting of humans in social struggles:

Now and then the workers are victorious, but only for a time. The real fruit of their battles lies, not in the immediate result, but in the ever expanding union of the workers. This union is helped on by the improved means of communication that are created by modern industry, and that place the workers of different localities in contact with one another. It was just this contact that was needed to centralise the numerous local struggles, all of the same character, into one national struggle between classes. But every class struggle is a political struggle. And that union, to attain which the burghers of the Middle Ages, with their miserable highways, required centuries, the modern proletariat, thanks to railways, achieve in a few years. (MECW 6, p. 493)

Engels demanded that the media and other means of transportation should have a public character, i.e., should be available for all humans for free: "All means of transport: railway, canals, steamships, roads, post, etc., shall be taken over by the state. They are to be converted into state property and put at the disposal of the non-possessing class free of charge" (MEW 21, p. 217).<sup>13</sup>

Engels argued that alternative media could make important contributions to general education:

Only as uniform a distribution as possible of the population over the whole country, only an integral connection between industrial and agricultural production together with the thereby necessary extension of the means of communication – presupposing the abolition of the capitalist mode of production – would be able to save the rural

---

<sup>12</sup> English translation from: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1849/04/22c.htm> (accessed on September 30, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> English translation from: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1847/communist-league/1885hist.htm> (accessed on September 30, 2008).



population from the isolation and stupor in which it has vegetated almost unchanged for thousands of years. (MEW 18, p. 280)<sup>14</sup>

### **Conclusion**

This work has tried to show that the claim by Marshall McLuhan, Jean Baudrillard, and others that Marx had nothing to say on media, communication, and culture is wrong. It has been suggested that Marx and Engels have provided intellectual categories that allow the analysis of the various aspects of the media, such as their commodity character, their ideological character, their effects on capitalist production, the alternative ways of organizing and doing media, and the ways of interpreting media content in the context of social struggles. These insights today could be connected to a wide range of critical media. The conclusion from the discussion is that Marx should be considered as a founding figure of critical media and communication theories/studies, and that his views can be applied today to explain phenomena such as global communication, knowledge labour, media and globalization, media and social struggles, alternative media, media capital accumulation, media monopolies and media capital concentration, the dialectics of information, and media and war.

We can summarize the following areas of production, usage, and effects of media as they are found in Marx's works.

#### *In commodity production:*

- Specific: Media technology as rationalization technology in the media industry
- Specific: The process of capital concentration and centralization in the media sector
- Specific: The production of media capital, knowledge workers as wage labourers in media corporations
- General: Communication technologies for the spatial and temporal co-ordination of production in order to reduce constant and variable capital shares
- General: Communication technologies as means for the spatial expansion of capitalist production

#### *In commodity circulation:*

- Specific: Transmission technologies as means of accumulating media infrastructure capital
- Specific: Media as carriers of advertisements
- General: Communication technologies as means for reducing the circulation and turnover time of capital
- General: Media as means and outcomes of the globalization of world trade
- General: Media as means of the spatial centralization of capital

---

<sup>14</sup> English translation from: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1872/housing-question/ch03.htm> (accessed on September 30, 2008).

*In the circulation and reception of ideas:*

- Media as carriers and circulators of ideologies

*In the production, circulation, and reception of alternative media:*

- Alternative media that are alternatively produced, distributed, and interpreted and function as means of class struggle

**Table 1.** A systematic account of the role of media in the Marxian circuit of capital.

Circulation	Production	Circulation	Consumption
M – C (Mp, L)	.. P ..	C' – M'	
	Media Technology as Means of Rationalization: $s/v \uparrow$ The process of capital concentration and centralization in the realm of the media Knowledge workers as wage labourers in media corporations Media as means of inter-organizational corporate communication and co-ordination: $v \downarrow, c \downarrow$		
	Media for the spatial distribution and extension of capitalism Media as carriers of advertisements Transmission media as forms of capital Media and trade globalization Media and spatial centralization of capital		
			Media as carriers & diffusion channels of ideologies
			Alternative media as negating forces in media production, circulation, and consumption

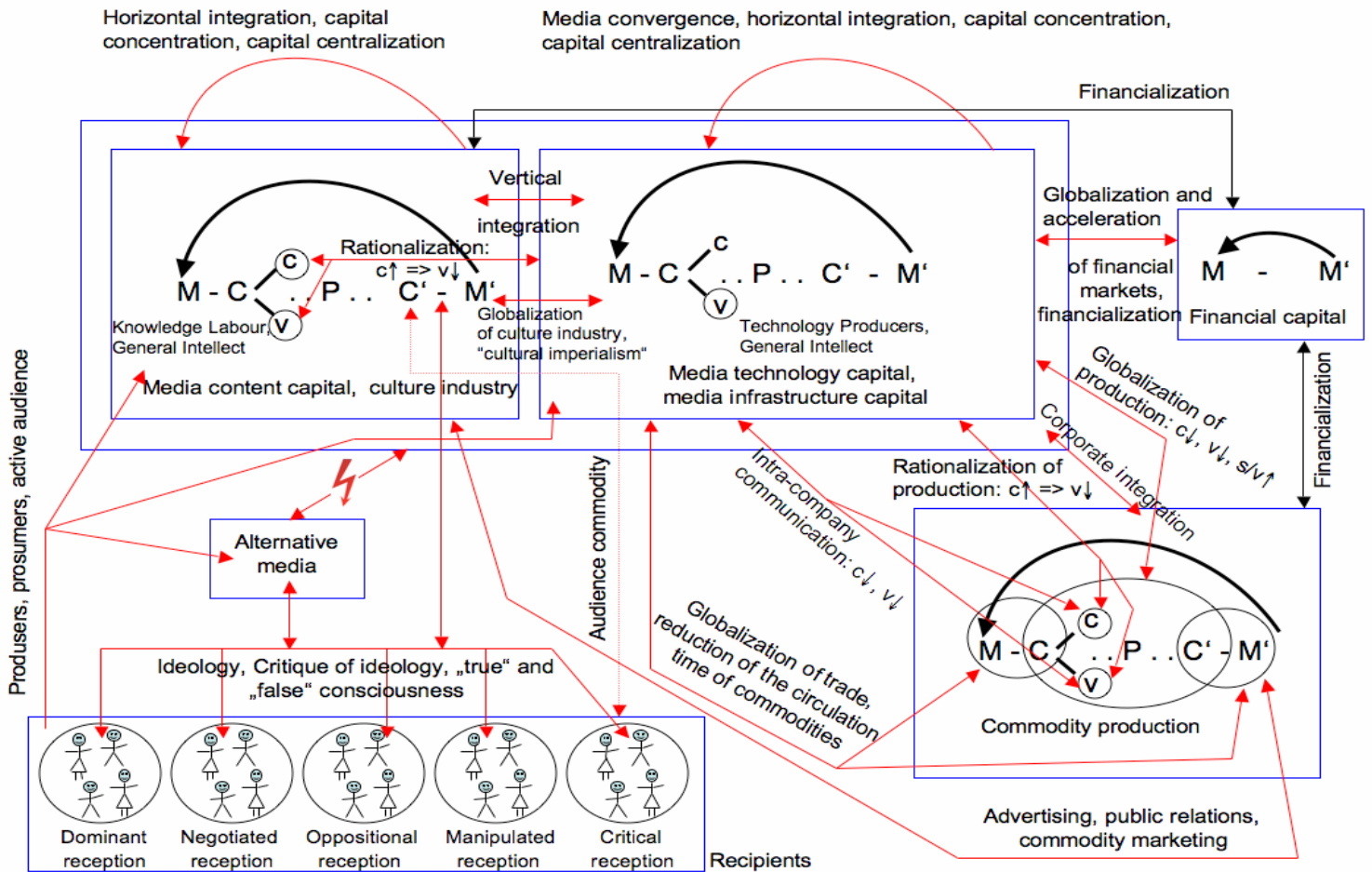
The model in Figure 2 summarizes the connection of four aspects of the media, i.e., four roles of the media in the capitalist economy: 1) the commodity form of the media, 2) the ideological form of the media, 3) media reception, and 4) alternative media (Fuchs, forthcoming). It focuses on the role of the media in the production, circulation, and consumption processes of the economy, not on the relations to

the political system (state, civil society, laws, etc.) and cultural institutions (education, family, religion, etc.). Capital accumulation within the media sphere takes place in both the media content sphere and the media infrastructure sphere. These two realms together form the sphere of media capital. The Marxian circuit of capital is shown for each of the two realms, which indicates that they are oriented on capital accumulation.

The commodity hypothesis can be visualized as the following processes that are shown in Figure 2: vertical and horizontal integration, media concentration, media convergence, media globalization, the integration of media capital and other types of capital, the rationalization of production, the globalization of production, circulation, and trade, and intra-company communication, advertising and marketing. Processes of vertical integration make the boundaries between the two systems fuzzy. Concentration processes and horizontal integration, which are inherent features of capital accumulation, shape each of the two spheres. Media convergence is a specific feature of media infrastructure capital. The two realms together are factors that influence the globalization of the culture industry. The realm of the economy that is shown at the bottom right of Figure 2 is the one of capital accumulation in non-media industries and services. It is partly integrated with the media sector due to corporate integration processes. Media technologies advance the rationalization of production in this realm as well as in the media content industry. Furthermore, they advance the globalization of production, circulation, and trade. These globalization processes are also factors that, in return, advance the development of new media technologies. Media technologies are also used for intra-company communication. Rationalization, globalization, and intra-company communication are processes that aim at maximizing profits by decreasing the investment cost of capital (both constant and variable) and by advancing relative surplus value production (more production in less time). The media content industry is important for advertising and marketing commodities in the circulation process of commodities, which is at the same time the realization process of capital in which surplus value is transformed into money profit.

The ideology hypothesis is visualized in Figure 2 by media content capital and its relation to recipients. Media content that creates false consciousness is considered as ideological content. Media content depends on reception. The reception hypothesis is visualized in the lower left part of Figure 2. Reception is the realm where ideologies are reproduced and potentially challenged.

Figure 2. The processes of media production, circulation, and consumption in the capitalist economy.



Alternative media is a sphere that challenges the capitalist media industry. The alternative media hypothesis is visualized in Figure 2 by a separate domain that stands for alternative ways of organizing and producing media whose aim is to create critical content that challenges capitalism. Media content depends on reception. Five forms of reception are distinguished in the left lower left part of Figure 2. Reception is the realm where ideologies are reproduced and potentially challenged. In some types and parts of media content capital, capital is accumulated by selling the audience rate as a commodity to advertising clients. Dallas Smythe spoke in this context of the audience commodity. As advertising profits are not a general feature of all media capital, there is a dotted line in Figure 2 that signifies the audience commodity. In recent times, recipients have increasingly become an active audience that produces content and technologies. In this context, the notion of "producers" (producer + user) and "prosumers"

(producer + consumer) can be employed. "Produsage" and "prosumage" can advance both media capital accumulation and alternative media production.

The use value of media and media technologies is that they allow humans to inform themselves and to communicate. In capitalist society, use value is dominated by the exchange value of products, which become commodities. When the media take on commodity form, their use value only becomes available for consumers through exchanges that accumulate money capital in the hands of capitalists. Media and technologies as concrete products represent the use value side of information and communication, whereas the monetary price of the media represents the exchange value side of information and communication. The commodity hypothesis discusses the exchange value aspect of the media. The ideology hypothesis shows how the dominance of the use value of the media by exchange value creates a role for the media in the legitimization and reproduction of domination. The two hypotheses are connected through the contradictory double character of media as use values and as exchange values. The media as commodities are in relation to money use values that can realize their exchange value, i.e., their price, in money form. Money is an exchange value in relation to the media. It realizes its use value – i.e. that it is a general equivalent of exchange – in the media commodities. Consumers are interested in the use value aspect of media and technology, whereas capitalists are interested in the exchange value aspect that helps them to accumulate money capital. The use value of media and technology only becomes available to consumers through complex processes in which capitalists exchange the commodities they control with money. This means that the use value of media and technology is only possible through the exchange value that they have in relation to money. Commodification is a basic process that underlies media and technology in capitalism. Use value and exchange value are "bilateral polar opposites" (MEW 13, p. 72) of media and technology in capitalist society. Once media and technology reach consumers, they have taken on commodity form and are therefore likely to have ideological characteristics. The sphere of alternative media challenges the commodity character of the media. It aims at a reversal so that use value becomes the dominant feature of media and technology by the sublation of their exchange value. Processes of alternative reception transcend the ideological character of the media — the recipients are empowered in questioning the commodified character of the world in which they live.



*Christian Fuchs is an associate professor at the University of Salzburg. His fields of teaching and research are critical social theory, critique of the political economy of media, information, communication, technology; ICTs and society. He is author of more than 100 scholarly publications, including the monograph "Internet and Society: Social Theory in the Information Age" (Routledge, 2008).*

**References**

- Althusser, L. (1971/1994). Ideology and ideological state apparatuses. In Slavoj Žižek (Ed.), *Mapping ideology* (pp. 100-140). London: Verso.
- Artz, L., Macek, S., & Cloud, D. L. (Eds.). (2006). *Marxism and Communication Studies: The Point is to Change It*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Baudrillard, J. (1981). *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*. St. Louis: Telos Press.
- Black, E. (2001). *IBM and the Holocaust: The Strategic Alliance Between Nazi Germany and America's Most Powerful Corporation*. New York: Crown.
- Burawoy, M. (2000). Marxism after Communism. *Theory and Society*, 29(2), 151-174.
- Burawoy, M., & Olin Wright, E. (2002). Sociological Marxism. In Jonathan H. Turber (Ed.), *Handbook of Sociological Theory*, (pp. 459-486). New York: Kluwer.
- Callinicos, A. (2003). *An Anti-Capitalist Manifesto*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.
- Callinicos, A. (2006). *The Resources of Critique*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.
- Callinicos, A. (2007). *Social Theory*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.
- de La Haye, Y. (Ed.). (1979). *Marx and Engels on the Means of Communication*. New York: International General.
- Derrida, J. (1994). *Specters of Marx*. New York: Routledge.
- Dyer-Witheford, N. (1999). *Cyber-Marx. Cycles and Circuits of Struggle in High-Technology Capitalism*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Engels, F. (1845). *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. New York: Penguin Classics.
- Fuchs, C. (2006). The Dialectic of the Nature-Society-System. *TripleC*, 4(1), 1-39.
- Fuchs, C. (2008). *Internet and Society: Social Theory in the Information Age*. New York: Routledge.
- Fuchs, C. (2009). Media and Globalization: An Empirical and Theoretical Analysis of the Role of the Media in the New Imperialism. *Globality Studies Journal* 13.
- Fuchs, C. (Forthcoming). A Contribution to Theoretical Foundations of Critical Media and Communication Studies. *Javnost-The Public*.

- Fuchs, C. (2010). Class, Knowledge, and New Media. *Media, Culture & Society* 32.
- Gandy, O. (1992/1997). The Political Economy Approach: A Critical Challenge. In Peter Golding & Graham Murdock (eds.), *The Political Economy of the Media Volume I* (pp. 87-124). Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Garnham, N. (1990). *Capitalism and Communication: Global Culture and the Economics of Information*. London: Sage.
- Golding, P., & M., Graham (1997a). Introduction: Communication and Capitalism. In Peter Golding & Graham Murdock (eds.), *The Political Economy of the Media Volume I* (pp. xiii-xviii). Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Golding, P., & Murdock, G. (1997b). Introduction: Communication and the Common Good. In Peter Golding & Graham Murdock (eds.) *The Political Economy of the Media Volume II* (pp. xiii-xviii). Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Golding, P., & Murdock, G. (Eds.). (1997c). *The Political Economy of the Media*. 2 Volumes. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the prison notebooks*. New York: International Publishers.
- Grisold, A. (2004). *Kulturindustrie Fernsehen: Zum Wechselverhältnis von Ökonomie und Massenmedien*. Wien: Löcker.
- Grisold, A., & Meier, W. A. (2007). Die Verlockungen der Macht: Zur Machtfrage aus Sicht der Politischen Ökonomie der Medien. In Christian Steininger (ed.) *Politische Ökonomie der Medien* (pp. 115-134). Münster: LIT.
- Hardt, M., & Negri, A. (2000). *Empire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hardt, M., & Negri, A. (2005). *Multitude*. London: Hamish Hamilton.
- Harvey, D. (2003). *The New Imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Harvey, D. (2005). *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Herman, E. S., & McChesney, R. W. (1997). *The Global Media: The New Missionaries of Corporate Capitalism*. London: Cassell.
- Hesmondhalgh, D. (2007). *The Cultural Industries*. Los Angeles: Sage.

- Horkheimer, M., & Adorno, T.W. (1944/2002). *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. New York: Seabury.
- Knoche, M. (1997). Medienkonzentration und publizistische Vielfalt. Legitimationsgrenzen des privatwirtschaftlichen Mediensystempp. In Rudi Renger & Gabriele Siegert (eds.), *Kommunikationswelten. Wissenschaftliche Perspektiven zur Medien- und Informationsgesellschaft* (pp. 123-158). Innsbruck: StudienVerlag.
- Knoche, M. (1999a). Das Kapital als Strukturwandler der Medienindustrie – und der Staat als sein Agent? In Manfred Knoche & Gabriele Siegert (eds.) *Strukturwandel der Medienwirtschaft im Zeitalter digitaler Kommunikation* (pp. 149-193). München: Fischer.
- Knoche, M. (1999b). Kapitalisierung der Medienindustrie aus politökonomischer Perspektive. In Rudi Renger & Gabriele Siegert (eds.), *Kommunikationswelten* (pp. 177-194). Innsbruck: StudienVerlag.
- Knoche, M. (2005a). Medienkonzentration als Macht- und Legitimationsproblem für Politik und Wissenschaft. Kritisch-empirische Konzentrationstheorie versus apologetisch-normative Wettbewerbstheorie. In Petra Ahrweiler & Barbara Thomass (eds.), *Internationale partizipatorische Kommunikationspolitik* (pp. 117-140). Münster: LIT.
- Knoche, M. (2005b). Werbung – ein notwendiges "Lebenselixier" für den Kapitalismus: Zur Kritik der politischen Ökonomie der Werbung. In Klaus Arnold & Christoph Neuberger (eds.), *Alte Medien – neue Medien* (pp. 239-255). Wiesbaden: Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.
- Knoche, M. (2007). Medienkonzentration. In Barbara Thomass (Ed.) *Mediensysteme im internationalen Vergleich* (pp. 122-144). Konstanz: UVK.
- Lukács, G. (1923/1972). *History and class consciousness*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Marcuse, H. (1964). *One-Dimensional Man*. New York: Routledge.
- Marx, K. (1858). *The Grundrisse*. New York: Penguin Classics.
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (MECW). *Collected Works*. New York: International Publishers.
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (MESW). *Selected Works in 2 Volumes*. Moscow: Progress.
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (MEW). *Werke*. Berlin: Dietz.
- Mattelart, A. (1979). Introduction: For a Class Analysis of Communication. In Armand Mattelart & Seth Siegelau (eds.), *Communication and Class Struggle. Volume 1: Capitalism, Imperialism* (pp. 23-70). New York: International Mass Media Research Center.



- Mattelart, A. (1983). Introduction: For a Class and Group Analysis of Popular Communication Practices. In Armand Mattelart & Seth Siegelau (eds.), *Communication and Class Struggle. Volume 2: Liberation, Socialism* (pp. 17-67). New York: International Mass Media Research Center.
- Mattelart, A., & Siegelau, S. (Eds.). (1979). *Communication and Class Struggle. Volume 1: Capitalism, Imperialism*. New York: International Mass Media Research Center.
- Mattelart, A., & Siegelau, S. (Eds.). (1983). *Communication and Class Struggle. Volume 2: Liberation, Socialism*. New York: International Mass Media Research Center.
- McChesney, R. W. (2007). *Communication Revolution. Critical Junctures and the Future of Media*. New York: The New Press
- McLuhan, M. (1964/2001). *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. New York: Routledge.
- Meier, W. A. (2003). Politische Ökonomie. In Klaus-Dieter Altmeppen & Matthias Karmasin (eds.) *Medien und Ökonomie. Volume 1/1* (pp. 215-243). Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag.
- Murdock, G., & Golding, P. (2005). Culture, Communications and Political Economy. In James Curran & Michael Gurevitch (eds.), *Mass Media and Society* (pp. 60-82). London: Hodder.
- Negri, A., Lazzarato, M., & Virno, P. (1997). *Umherschweifende Produzenten. Immaterielle Arbeit und Subversion*. Berlin: Edition ID Archive.
- O'Connor, J. (1998). *Natural Causes. Essays in Ecological Marxism*. New York: Guilford.
- Peters, J. D. (2001). *Speaking Into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Sassen, S. (1998). *Globalization and its Discontents*. New York: New Press.
- Schröter, J., Schwering, G., & Stäheli, U. (Eds.). (2006). *Media Marx: Ein Handbuch*. Bielefeld: transcript.
- Siegelau, S. (1974). *Marxism and the Mass Media: Towards a Basic Bibliography*. New York: International Mass Media Research Center.
- Siegelau, S. (1979). Preface: A Communication on Communication. In Armand Mattelart & Seth Siegelau (eds.), *Communication and Class Struggle. Volume 1: Capitalism, Imperialism* (pp. 11-21). New York: International Mass Media Research Center.
- Siegelau, S. (1983). Preface: Working Notes on Social Relations in Communication and Culture. In Armand Mattelart & Seth Siegelau (eds.), *Communication and Class Struggle. Volume 2: Liberation, Socialism* (pp. 11-16). New York: International Mass Media Research Center.

Smythe, D. W. (1981/2006). On the Audience Commodity and its Work. In Gigi Durham Meenakshi & Douglas M. Kellner, (eds.), *Media and Cultural Studies KeyWorks* (pp. 230-256). Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Steinert, H. (2003). *Culture Industry*. Cambridge: Polity.

Sussman, G. (1999). On the Political Economy of Communication. *Journal of Media Economics*, 12(2), 85-87.

Wayne, M. (2003). *Marxism and Media Studies*. London: Pluto Press.

Wood, E. M. (2003). *Empire of Capital*. London: Verso.

Žižek, S. (Ed.). (1994). *Mapping ideology*. London: Verso.

Žižek, S. (2002). *Revolution at the Gates: Žižek on Lenin. The 1917 Writings*. London: Verso.

Žižek, S. (2008). *In Defense of Lost Causes*. London: Verso.