

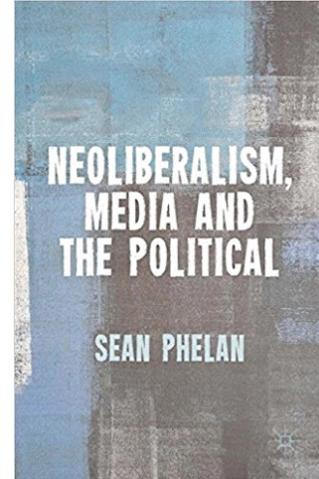
Sean Phelan, **Neoliberalism, Media and the Political**, New York, N.Y. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 242 pp., \$100.00 (hardcover), \$29.70 (paperback).

Reviewed by

Oliver Boyd-Barrett

Bowling Green State University, USA

Neoliberalism, Media and the Political is a masterful critique of the grand neoliberal narrative and its relationship to the work of media. Sympathetic to the importance of neoliberalism as a concept, the author urges scholars to move beyond its use as mere shorthand for the dominating ideology of our times. At the time of writing, Sean Phelan was senior lecturer at the School of Communication, Journalism and Marketing at Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand.



Accepting that the concept of neoliberalism signifies the colonization of the logic of the social by economic logics, and that social life is consequently disfigured, Phelan then asks how the media contribute to this disfigurement. The political effectivity of neoliberalism requires that it be embedded in the common-sense assumptions of domains beyond the economic, as various social actors make it their own through selection and modification.

Neoliberalism is likewise embedded in the practices of journalism. Awareness of this embedding is obscured by the routinized nature of professional practices, so that journalists mostly cannot see beyond the existing social architecture. Their “realist” rhetoric engenders identification with neoliberal logics that disavow their political and ideological commitments. In essence, Phelan focuses on a site of cultural politics within the sedimented logics of neoliberal media regimes. These fool journalists into underestimating the capacity of the neoliberal state—whose declared purpose is to enable neoliberalism, if necessary by interventionist strategies—to depart from ideological orthodoxy. This it must often do with the help of mainstream media, for the purposes of ideological repair—not transformation—since “human nature” does not automatically embrace neoliberalism but rather needs to be constituted through a strategy of bio-political governmentality. If journalists paid more careful attention to their own organizational environments, they would pay closer heed to the disconnect between neoliberal rhetorics of media competition on the one hand and the actual extent to which media are dominated by large corporations practicing oligopolistic market control on the other.

Both the state and the media internalize neoliberal logics. Different iterations of neoliberalism share an antagonism to a collectivistic orthodoxy that constructed the state as an agent of societal welfare, and whose ambition is to reconstitute the state as an agent of market order. Following Laclau, Phelan notes that ideology sometimes disavows the politics of ideological antagonisms in the form of a “third way” version of neoliberalism, a postideological or postpolitical imaginary in which the end of the Cold War is interpreted as an end to ideological antagonism and its replacement with the harmonious working together of market and State as technocratic and managerial domains. Here, the State becomes

the facilitator of market regime and the bulwark against the detrimental effects of market forces. This third way is even more effective as ideology. Its fantasy of holistic reconciliation privileges the market: The State asserts its agency by internalizing the interests and rationality of monopolistic corporations, and politics is replaced by the ideological of political marketing.

Neoliberal logics are always articulated with other social logics, often in messy and paradoxical ways. Neoliberal logics are articulated with media as logics of market determinism, commodification, individualization, competitive ritual, and self-interest. Phelan applies his analysis of neoliberalism to four case studies of journalistic reconstitution of narratives in ways that privileged neoliberal logics:

- (1) post-“Rogernomics” in New Zealand and how journalists misleadingly interpreted the “post-coup era, —following the cooption of New Zealand as a laboratory for neoliberal experimentation—as a *rupture from* rather than as a *continuation of* neoliberalism;
- (2) the “Climategate Affair” following the hacking of e-mails from the Climate Research Unit at the University of East Anglia in 2009, whose media coverage Phelan believes normalized a culture of political cynicism, positioning agents in both political and scientific fields as self-interested actors;
- (3) media framing of the UK’s Leveson inquiry—following revelations of systematic phone hacking by the *News of the World*—not as a welcome push-back against corporate media overreach but as a dangerous violation by the State of principles of “press freedom”;
- (4) media discourses surrounding the phenomenon of the “Celtic Tiger” that placed the Irish economy at the heart of a nationalist narrative—a form of nationalism already locked in to neoliberal internationalism—and whose logic has managed to survive the actual disaster of the Celtic Tiger era and Ireland’s supposed “recovery” from neoliberal excess without much to show by way of substantial transformation of the policies that brought about the disaster or substantial challenge to the role of global corporations in Irish life.

Helping to coordinate these case studies is Phelan’s chapter on the journalistic habitus and the realist style, which asks how mainstream political journalists identify with neoliberalism. Inspired by Bordieu, Phelan argues that journalistic dispositions are socially embedded in the structure and institutional practices of the journalistic field. Critical scholars usually argue that mainstream journalism is neoliberal because it is produced within a corporate media infrastructure governed by the ideology and priorities of neoliberal capitalism. But there is a residual tendency to treat journalists’ practices as epiphenomena of their structural location in the capitalist system and to represent neoliberalism as a singular force or ideology acting on the world of journalism in a way that leaves nothing else to be explained, at the expense of examining how media and journalistic logics are themselves neoliberalized. These reservations lead Phelan to a discussion of how centring media and journalistic logics naturalize “post-ideological neoliberalism” whose social authority must be understood with reference to the “journalistic habitus” or the cognitive and affective dispositions generated and naturalized in the journalistic field. This is a field whose commanding focus—as a result of neoliberalism—is on gaining attention as an end in itself, and where the capacity for field autonomy is undermined by audience ratings

and market share as measures of value. Such factors impose limits on what becomes possible or thinkable in journalistic spaces. Journalists practice the codes of objectivity and impartiality in ways that construct some perspectives as more agreeable and reasonable than others. Political differences are foregrounded in ways that assume the existence of a fundamental social consensus, sometimes invoked by the appeal to a "God-term" —the public—that represses the conflictual logic of the political. Economic arguments are rhetorically and affirmatively styled as pragmatically "realistic," a form of realism that obscures its rhetoricity. Ideas of ideology and rhetoric are signified as the enemies of journalistic truth. This normative vision of journalism privileges a logic of unity and consensus over division and conflict, and is embedded within a conventional, pluralist idea of liberal democracy, one that is grounded in a faith in the utility of registering the arguments and considering the "facts." Journalistic ideas of the "common good" and the "national interest" have internalized the logic of market determinism.

Phelan's analysis is an important contribution to the literature on neoliberalism and an inspiration to media scholars for further research on the ideological character of modernist discourses of journalistic practice.