

CRITICAL MEDIA RESEARCH, GLOBALISATION THEORY AND COMMERCIALISATION

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Abstract

In this article, I will look at the status of critical research in contemporary analyses of the media. This kind of assessment should only be done keeping Fredric Jameson's famous injunction in mind: "always historicize!" (Jameson 1981). Critical communication scholarship is a historically evolving field of research which has, since its inception, responded to key social and theoretical developments, of which globalisation is the most significant recent example. After a brief historical overview of critical media research, I will concentrate in a more detailed way on the question of how critical perspectives relate to contemporary discussions of the media and globalisation (which are mutually constitutive). I will present several accounts of the relationship between media and globalisation and offer an analysis and criticism of these.

The critical starting point for this essay is the fact that during the last couple of decades communication research and the development of media have largely followed their own separate paths. At a time when the media has become more and more commercialised throughout the world, the field of media studies has neglected critical economic considerations of the media. Therefore, the "re-introduction" of critical economical considerations of the media is a necessity. I conclude the paper by briefly examining the question of how critical media theory should position itself in light of the changes that the current wave of media commercialisation and globalisation have brought about.

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Of Critical Media Research

An attempt to define “critical” research runs immediately into definitional problems. It is not clear what critical media (or communication) research means in different historical contexts, as it seems to be “a broad category encompassing divergent methodologies, approaches, and theoretical assumptions” (Pendakur 1995, 67). At one level it refers to perspectives that have put emphasis on the systemic characteristics of capitalism – ownership and control, the market principle and the relations of domination and subordination that follow from these. At another level it can refer to a much wider perspective of cultural studies; postmodernism, feminism and postcolonial studies – to such a degree that it starts to lose its specificity.

These ambiguities are in a sense inevitable: They reflect differences in theoretical orientation which necessarily lead to different conceptions of what “critical” means. Some interconnections do, however, exist. At a very general level, critical approaches to media, or society for that matter, call into question the way things are and express explicit scepticism towards dominant institutions, ideologies and social relations (see McChesney 1993).

This kind of radical viewpoint has a long tradition in western culture, which covers critical social and political thought of over 200 years. Radical mass media criticism – as opposed to conservative media criticism – is not concerned only with critical analysis; it has also been committed to social change and emancipation. One of the earliest examples of this kind of radical mass media criticism is *The Brass Check* (1919) by the socialist writer Upton Sinclair. The book reflected the radical views of American social movements of the Progressive Era. Besides drawing critical attention to American journalism as “a class institution serving the rich and spurning the poor,” *The Brass Check* was probably the first systemic analysis of the structural features of media – journalism, at that time – which “explained the class bias built into journalism in a four-part systemic model emphasizing the importance of owners, advertisers, public relations, and the web of economic interests tied into the media system” (McChesney and Scott 2002).

In Germany, some early historians and sociologists of the press had in the late 19th century already expressed concerns about the power of advertising over the press. The first serious theoretical attempt to combine radical Marxist perspectives with critical analysis of modern mass media began with the Frankfurt School in the 1930s. Early on, the members of the school viewed the media as well as popular culture as *Vergnügungsindustrien* (entertainment industries). These industries constituted an ideological system, whose prime function was to universalise commodity production and compensate for social alienation by providing entertainment products. This critique later developed into the culture-industry theory, which became the landmark of the cultural criticism of the Frankfurt School, a subject that is still very much debated.

All of these early radical perspectives passed into oblivion, where they remained for a long time. Starting from the late 1930s and continuing well into the 1960s and 1970s, the American media sociology tradition became the dominant paradigm in media research. The *locus classicus* of this tradition was the search for measurable and behavioural media effects on audiences. In numerous empirical studies, mass communication researchers tried to find the variables that regulated the flow of communication from message-producers to message-receivers. The main result of

these studies was the claim that the media in itself did not constitute a powerful social force which caused decisive effects on audiences. Instead, the processes and effects of mass communication were mediated by interpersonal relations and “opinion leaders.” After the discovery of limited media effects and influence, mainstream American media sociology changed its focus. It evolved into liberal functionalism, whose leading exponents argued that even though the media may have only small effects, they are still important for individuals and society. The media facilitates the functioning of society, “in terms of aiding its collective self-realisation, co-ordination, self-management, social integration, stability and adaptation” (Curran 1996, 128).

What is noteworthy about mainstream research traditions is their lack of interest in the structures of power in society and the role of media in maintaining existing power relations. Both mass communication researchers and liberal functionalists took the institutional order of society for granted. For them, society is basically a harmonious whole – though it may contain some “dysfunctional” features every now and then – which is characterised by a unity of interest among different social groups. Along similar liberal functionalist lines, the media are seen as independent and socially neutral agencies which work for the benefit of all.

These perspectives came under attack from the 1960s and 1970s onwards. For seminal political economists of the media, the media were not examples of neutral social communication. Instead, it was felt that the media constituted an institutional apparatus which worked in the interests of corporate and class power, both domestically and internationally. Broadly speaking, the political economy tradition, since its inception, has been interested in the structural development of the media under capitalism. It deals with such issues as the growth of the media, the extension of corporate reach in the media and the privatisation, commodification and commercialisation of the media – as well as the social, political and cultural consequences of these economic developments. The tradition of political economy – which is still an active field of research – emphasises three aspects: interest in social change and historical transformation; interest in examining the social world as a whole (of which the media is one part), and a critical interest in promoting more just social values and a democratisation of media systems (see e.g. Mosco 1996).

Besides the rise of the political economy of the media as an area of interest, the 1960s and 1970s witnessed other challenges to mainstream media sociology. The writings of the Frankfurt School were resurrected and became a central part of the political and theoretical debates of New Left radicals in the United States, debates which also touched on the role of media and culture in maintaining social order. In Britain, researchers at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies began to analyze the media from a critical perspective. They maintained that the media was not disseminating neutral pictures of “the real,” but rather ideological constructs of a consensus that served power and authority. While British cultural studies researchers were initially heavily influenced by Marxist perspectives, very soon they started to call into question the primacy these perspectives accorded to class relations and the economic “base” in media analysis, which has led to a constant tension between political economy and cultural studies.

The criticism of these radical views has been both external and internal. Representatives of the mainstream media sociology in the United States dismissed the

studies by political economists as “Marxist interpretations” or “pure polemic.” For American mass communication researchers, who saw themselves as value neutral positivists, the political economy of the media was a politically motivated field of research, which expressed overtly theoretical tendencies and a disregard for empirical evidence. While these accusations may contain some elements of truth – in the sense that in certain classic Marxist analysis the surface phenomena of society were interpreted using economic theory alone – a more comprehensive look makes it clear that they are little more than caricatures. Political economy “necessarily engages with empirical research” (Golding and Murdock 1996, 12), and at the same time grounds this research to a theoretical understanding of the social order in which communication and culture are being studied.

A more important rift developed between two traditions that both claimed to be critical and emancipatory: cultural studies and political economy. In many cases, cultural studies has regarded political economy as a competitor in the paradigm struggle within media research, rather than as an ally (and vice versa). Attempts have been made to build bridges “across the great divide,” but the results have been uncertain at best.

The representatives of cultural studies have constantly criticised the political economy of the media for excessively emphasizing the economic sphere. Lawrence Grossberg (1991) has crystallised several of the key arguments that cultural studies have directed against political economy. He sees that the biggest mistake in political economy is that it denies the specificity of cultural practices. Cultural texts are “just commodities” and their consumption is “monolithically determined by production, and hence both cultural texts and decodings are epiphenomenal products of the ‘economic base’” (Grossberg 1991, 123). Political economists simply forget to study media reception properly – instead they assume that the reception of ideological media content leads directly to the formation of “false consciousness.” This is especially disturbing for cultural studies, which is precisely interested in the complex interaction between texts and audiences: “cultural studies situates culture within a theory of social production and reproduction, specifying the ways that cultural forms served either to further social domination, or to enable people to resist and struggle against domination” (Kellner 1995, 31). As cultural studies has invested much energy in studying the ways in which different social and cultural groups give different meanings to media texts, it has also moved towards a “multiperspectival” theoretical framework, which insists that the questions of class, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity and nationality (etc.) have their own particularities which should not be reduced to each other or (especially) to political economy.

The distance between cultural studies and political economy grew considerably after the so-called postmodern turn in the 1980s, which affected the former in many ways. The 1980s and 1990s witnessed a shift from economic-structural explanations of society and culture to a preoccupation with agency, identity and discourses. For postmodernists, the world around us should be understood as a linguistic or symbolic construction, which is constantly being formed as we attach different meanings to its features. Similarly, according to postmodernist theories, our identities are in a state of constant flux, without any clear foundations. Culture and media simply offer raw materials from which “active and meaning-oriented consumers construct multiple identities... selecting and arranging elements of material commodities and meaningful signs into a personal style” (Barker 2000, 159).

Postmodernist theory holds that the media should not be a target of ideological critique. Instead, the media is seen as a benevolent source of symbolic forms, such as advertisements, which empower us and assist us in our search for a meaningful identity – together with the consumption of material commodities, which have themselves become heavily aestheticised. Along with these theoretical currents a strange reversal has happened: the commodity culture has become the main source of emancipation and individual freedom – a curious twist inside a “radical” tradition indeed. According to Conrad Lodziak (2002, 1-86), contemporary cultural studies has adopted a “consumerist-centered account of self-identity” or an “ideology of consumerism,” which celebrates the triumphs of capitalism and a proliferation of lifestyles while ignoring sources of identity other than consumerism, or the non-symbolic consequences of it.

While there is no need to develop another critique of the epistemological or political problems connected to the postmodernist framework, some comments about its relation to critical theoretical traditions need to be made. The net result of the postmodern turn and its effect on cultural studies has been the downplaying of critical economic considerations of the media. This is due to the fact that the postmodern approach involves linguistic idealism and excessive culturalism, as well as a commitment to an extremely abstract theoretical critique of totalizing discourses and “metanarratives,” which suppress the plurality of voices and local readings. In these theories, the emancipation of the individual happens, when he/she frees him/herself from these linguistic power structures, with the help of various symbolic strategies and identity-political struggles. The problem here, of course, is the fact that agency is constrained not only by discourse, but, more importantly, by material forces. Writings proclaiming the multiplicity of a media-driven construction of identity are prone to raise ideological illusions of a boundless freedom of action and forget all about its limits. Slavoj Žižek (1999) points out that “the global capitalist system was able to incorporate the gains of the postmodern politics of identities to the extent that they did not disturb the smooth circulation of capital – the moment some political intervention poses a serious threat to that, an elaborate set of exclusionary measures quashes it” (Žižek 1999, 216-217).

The historical development of two critical alternatives to mainstream media sociology – political economy and cultural studies – has led to a divergence. While the political economy tradition has produced a substantial research record, and continues to do so, its output is still “well out of proportion to the institutional support it has received” (Mosco 1996, 70). At the same time, cultural studies has witnessed a phenomenal rise in the academy, and is remodelling teaching and research in literary studies, history, sociology and media studies. Cultural studies “is now increasingly widely relayed as a new general formula for work across the entire range of what... we may call the human sciences” (Mulhern 1997, 43). One does not have to ascribe the relatively marginal role that the political economy of the media has in the universities to theoretical developments and paradigm struggles alone. Because of its critical view on capitalism and markets as regulatory mechanisms, political economy is not inclined to receive large amounts of research money – the same could not be said of cultural studies, which flourished at a time when academic institutions faced severe financial austerity.

Cultural studies has become the new mainstream in media research, but with its rise, it began to ignore the powerful material forces that shape the media. Chris

Barker (2000, 50) notes approvingly in a recent textbook that “the narrative of cultural studies involves a moving away from economic reductionism towards an analysis of the autonomous logics of language, culture, representation and consumption” – and it is fair to say that this predicament refers not only to those truly reductionist theories that assume direct economic determination but also to critical structural-economic explanations of media and culture as a whole. The disregard for material factors and the subsequent uncritical stance has not, however, received unanimous support in cultural studies. Many researchers have struggled to divest cultural theory from overtly postmodernist and populist celebrations of commodified everyday life, and some critical cultural theorists have attempted to incorporate a materialist understanding of cultural production into a general cultural studies framework.

Overall, critical study of the economic structure and logic of the media has been marginal and this situation is even more glaring today, when “the increasing vertical integration of the culture industry by megamergers and global expansion proceeds apace, and when the cultstud myth of the rebel consumer and her transgressions has run aground” (Huyssen 2002, 53). In addition, while postmodernism is arguably in the wane as an approach, new theoretical perspectives continue to downplay questions of economic power and its role in explaining social and cultural change, questions which should be at the heart of any critical research. A recent example of this development is the rise of globalisation as a “horizon of all theory” after the 1990s, to which I will turn next.

Globalisation Theory and Media Research

The word “globalisation” has, from the outset, referred to economic processes, and it was first used in an economic journal in the late 1940s. Many definitions of globalisation are also purely economic (globalisation is about the mobility of capital). As a term, globalisation does not, however, refer only to economic developments. The noteworthy thing about “globalisation” is not its specificity, but its inclusiveness. As a word describing empirical phenomena, it refers at the same time to a bewildering array of economic, (geo)political, social, environmental, cultural and technological processes and practices. This is hardly surprising, given the fact that “globalisation” is, in much of the literature on the subject, an index of general social change, affecting just about everyone.

Because of the breadth and multidimensionality of issues that have been connected to globalisation, it is hard, if not impossible, to give an exhaustive definition of the word, although attempts have been made in this regard. It is not my intention here to wrestle with problems of definition; on this topic there is a multitude of books and articles. Instead, I want to examine a somewhat narrower theme and look at how media, and especially media theory, is connected to academic discussions of globalisation.

Even though the term “globalisation” has been used so frequently that it is engendering a certain amount of weariness, it has an enormous importance in contemporary social theory. This importance lies in the dual meaning that the term possesses in academic discourse: it is not only used as a descriptive term in discussions about the changes taking place in the world; more importantly, it has become a theory or explanation of the changing character of the modern world. Globalisa-

tion is seen by many contemporary theorists as a new kind of social phenomenon that necessitates a “spatialisation of social theory.” It is “a key idea by which we understand the transition of human society into the third millennium” (Waters 1995, 1). These assertions represent the fact that globalisation has established a firm foothold in the social sciences – so much so, that for many key theorists the central ideas behind classical social theory now seem outdated.

What is noteworthy here with regard to media research is that the media plays a vital, even constitutive role in globalisation debates. For many analysts, the processes of globalisation can simply be reduced to the consequences of the development of media and communication technologies, which creates also a need to reassess fundamental presuppositions of social theory – presuppositions which boil down to the question of what factors are most essential in explaining social change. The idea that the development of media and information technologies should be the basis for social and cultural analysis – as opposed to, say, economy, gender or ethnicity – has gained more strength in recent years.

Not all, however, are willing to admit that the changes that the new media and communication technologies have brought about necessitate a total reorganisation of contemporary social theory. A fundamental disagreement exists between various views concerning the question of how to interpret and assess the meaning of the changes that the development of media have produced. What follows is a short description of different theoretical approaches to the relationship between the media and globalisation, which leads directly to a discussion of the status of critical media research today.

Media and Globalisation: Three Paradigms

It is important to note that there are many possible ways to discuss the relationship between the media and globalisation, and an account of the different approaches to this topic would not be unambiguous. The dividing lines between different approaches to media and globalisation are rarely clear – instead they tend to be ones of relative emphasis. However, the differences between theoretical perspectives are equally important: they point to varying ways of understanding social reality, and this has not only academic, but also political significance. Each account of the media and globalisation has a different conception of what globalisation is all about, what its constituent parts are, and what kind of effects it produces.

It is possible to distinguish three paradigms of media and globalisation, which I will refer to as the media-technological, the cultural, and the critical political economy paradigms. While these paradigms do not exhaust the field of media cultural globalisation research, they represent its main trends.

1. The exponents of the media-technological paradigm put an emphasis on the ideas – closely linked to the views discussed above – that the development of media and communication technologies has led to a historically new kind of social and cultural phase, which cannot be analyzed with old concepts and methods. This approach is represented most notably by one of the most influential sociologists of recent decades, Anthony Giddens. Giddens’ main claims in this regard are that the experience of time and space has changed considerably in the “high modern” period. Giddens has attempted to analyse society from the perspective of how

time and space structure social action. Giddens argues that in a globalising age the classical sociological theories, which presupposed a territorial boundedness of social systems, need to be replaced by a problematic of “time-space distantiating” (Giddens 1990). Especially with the expansion of new media technologies (satellite-TV, Internet etc.), social relations are “lifted out” or “disembedded” from local contexts; for the first time they become truly global. Giddens writes – in a widely-cited and celebrated text – of the “intrusion of distance into local activities, combined with the centrality of mediated experience,” which alters what the world is: “Although everyone lives a local life, phenomenal worlds for the most part are truly global” (Giddens 1991, 187).

Another central contemporary sociologist, Manuel Castells (1996), has also analyzed social and cultural changes from a spatio-temporal framework. Castells’ discussions of “the information age” and “the network society” deal mostly with empirical material, but they also contain theoretical dimensions. Castells proposes that our society is “undergoing structural transformation,” marked by emerging spatial forms and processes (Castells 1996, 410). While the interaction between members of society continues to be bounded by local circumstances, the flow of information, money, symbols and images in networks, which form an interconnected web of different places, becomes an increasingly important element of social action. According to Castells, “there is a new spatial form characteristic of social practices that dominate and shape the network society: the space of flows” (1996, 412). All of this points to a heightened sense of globalisation in everyday life. Castells has also written at length about the cultural consequences of new media technologies. He claims that nowadays most cultural expressions can be captured within the domain of multimedia. Their advancement changes radically the forms of human experience and interaction. The result is “a new symbolic environment,” in which virtuality becomes “our reality.”

Jan Aart Scholte (2000) has crystallised the theoretical consequences of the changes that the media-technological paradigm describes. For Scholte, globalisation is a qualitatively new kind of process, but its detection requires sophisticated theoretical and conceptual tools. Scholte argues that in contemporary academic discussions, globalisation has been synonymous with the following concepts: a) internationalisation, b) liberalisation, c) universalisation, d) westernisation or modernisation, and e) deterritorialisation (Scholte 2000, 15-17).

According to the first perspective, globalisation is simply a new term for cross-border relations, such as foreign trade, that exist between countries. The second definition refers to globalisation as a process which is leading towards an “open” and “borderless” world economy. The third definition of globalisation (universalisation) sees it as an expansion of local cultural forms to such a degree that they become known worldwide, as in the case of Chinese restaurants or the Gregorian calendar. The fourth idea equates globalisation with westernisation or modernisation, especially in an “Americanised” form. This points to the fact that certain social and cultural structures (capitalism, rationalism, industrialism, bureaucratism) become the dynamic features of all societies.

Scholte (2000, 46) claims that the fifth definition of globalisation (deterritorialisation) is the most fruitful. The perspective of deterritorialisation refers to globalisation as a process which weakens the ties of culture to place. This is precisely the view that is predominant in contemporary social theory. According to Scholte, only

the perspective of deterritorialisation refers to something that is historically new, and only it can help to identify those features that have real explanatory power in terms of what globalisation is and what lies behind its emergence.

Furthermore, what is noteworthy about deterritorialisation is that it is seen to be a consequence of innovations in media technology. Scholte (2000, 47-49) argues that historical advancement in media technology and transportation (accelerated communication and travel) has meant the continuous reduction in the significance of location and distance as limiting factors, without ultimately eliminating them.

. But with the invention and expansion of “new media,” territorial distance has ceased to be of significance. It is this very feature that allegedly compels the use of new concepts and theories. Because the exponents of the media-technological paradigm have spoken most strongly about the importance of new perspectives in the study of globalisation, the media-technological paradigm could also be designated as globalisation theory. Yet, this is not the only approach to media and globalisation, even though it is the most ambitious.

2. The second approach concentrates on the cultural dimensions of globalisation. This cultural paradigm was born mainly out of a critique of the so-called cultural imperialism thesis. Cultural globalisation theorists argue that the globalisation of media is not leading to the homogenisation of global culture under the auspices of western consumerism. For Roland Robertson (1995), a key cultural globalisation theorist, cultural globalisation refers to a process in which the relations between the local and the global are being reorganised. At one level, global media corporations have to adjust their production so that it meets the standards of local markets and their needs. On another level, local cultural forms may become globally marketed phenomena. Robertson refers to this feature as “glocalisation.”

The cultural paradigm emphasises the idea that global media and cultural flows are multidirectional and that this leads to a proliferation of new cultures – to a formation of new kinds of cultural forms, in which the local and global are mixed together in various ways. Cultural globalisation forces different cultures to re-define themselves. The result of this is captured in such terms as cultural “hybridisation” or “global ecumenisation.” This process is devoid of western domination, because, for example, in popular music, new stylistic innovations can (and in many cases have) come from the “third world.” For the cultural paradigm, with its conception of global culture as a new type of “creolised aesthetic,” the earlier media or cultural imperialism perspective, which emphasised the analytic separation of core and periphery, seems now outdated.

The cultural paradigm switches attention away from mere technological change and over to the cultural problems of mediated globalisation. For its representatives, global cultural change is not a unitary process. Rather, it is a complex and often a very paradoxical development. Cultural theorists see globalisation typically in a positive light: it creates new forms of cultural expression, and it offers new opportunities for previously marginalised groups to be heard, thus promoting cultural diversification. Many cultural globalisation analysts claim that the dynamics of capitalistic markets fosters the freedom of cultural expression: globalisation “pluralises the world by recognizing the value of cultural niches” (Waters 1995, 136). Globalisation is hailed especially in the sense that it frees local cultures from narrow national contexts; something which, according to cultural globalisation theorists, the theories of cultural imperialism fail to consider.

3. The third approach to media globalisation – critical political economy – asserts that it should be understood as one dimension of the transformation of contemporary capitalism. From this perspective the analysis of media and globalisation requires a theory that addresses the centrality of the economy as the prime mover of social and cultural change. Robert W. McChesney (1998, 2) points out that the globalisation of the market economy is not possible without global media and multinational media corporations, which act as “the new missionaries of global capitalism.” On one hand, the new media and information technologies have made it possible for multinational corporations to extend their reach, and on the other hand, the media corporations (themselves global entities) create a demand for commodities and deliver audiences to powerful advertisers. Global media corporations also have an ideological function: they create and maintain consumerist values with the help of ubiquitous advertising and otherwise commercialised media content.

Representatives of the critical paradigm underscore the primacy of economic considerations. Preoccupation with technology detracts attention from those features that are constant in capitalism and from its internal transformations, which should not be mystified and confused with announcements of, say, the rise of the “information society.” Furthermore, the globalisation of media and culture should not be reduced to a cultural debate which deals with such questions as whether globalisation is leading to homogeneity or heterogeneity. This question cannot be answered by referring to the cultural products themselves. The essential question of critical cultural analysis is one of understanding the real homogeneity behind the illusory diversity of competing products, something that cultural theorists frequently fail to recognise.

From a critical political economy approach, the globalisation of media is closely linked to the economic developments of recent decades. The most important processes are the concentration of power in the hands of multinational corporations and, in connection with this, the deregulation of media systems throughout the world. While previously the media systems were primarily national, the situation has changed dramatically since the 1990s. For the first time, the media markets have become distinctly global, and they are controlled to a large extent by big conglomerates that hold considerable economic and cultural power. As well, the developments in media markets show a constant imbalance of cultural flows. The ownership of global media corporations (such as Time Warner, Disney, News Corporation, Bertelsmann and Vivendi Universal) remains firmly in the hands of a few wealthy industrial countries (the United States, Germany, France and Japan). Because these countries still dominate the culture industry, they also dominate the production and distribution of its products all over the world.

The globalisation of media is more than just a structural change. It has many consequences in terms of media content (in particular) and culture (in general). For critical political economists, the essential feature of the globalisation of media is the ongoing commodification of culture. For this reason, critical political economists have no need to address the globalisation of media or culture in terms of its “Americanisation” or even simple “homogenisation.” In summary, the chief argument made by critical political economists is that globalisation is about the formation of a worldwide capitalistic system that promotes the interests and values of powerful corporations – especially those who produce well-known “brands.” As

global media becomes more and more simply a vehicle for advertising and the promotion of brands, culture and consumerism become increasingly synonymous. As Jameson notes, the failure of communism and the triumph of global capitalism has involved a more comprehensive commodification than ever before (Jameson 1998). He puts the recent stage of global capitalism into a historical perspective: “whatever was the case at earlier stages and moments of capitalism (where the aesthetic was very precisely a sanctuary from business and the state), today no enclaves – aesthetic or other – are left in which the commodity form does not reign supreme” (1998, 70).

Discussion

How should one assess the relationship between the three approaches to media and globalisation that have been presented here? First of all, one should pay attention to the ways in which these perspectives conceive societal change. Representatives of the media-technological and cultural paradigms alike see that globalisation refers to the emergence of a new kind of society and culture, which displaces the old. According to theorists of the cultural paradigm, globalisation leads to a new form of cultural dynamics, which they try to analyze with the help of such concepts as “hybridisation” or “glocalisation.” In a similar vein, technologically oriented globalisation theorists like Giddens (2002 10) proclaim that globalisation “is in many respects not only new, but also revolutionary.”

As a result of these conceptions becoming so dominant in the field of social and cultural theory, there is a risk of falling into an unproblematic acceptance of globalisation theory. James Curran notes that globalisation “is not quite the unqualified intellectual advance that it appears to be” (Curran 2002, 167). Although “books about globalisation are pouring off the press,” this has not led to a broadening of media theory. When one examines the matter more closely, the aforementioned approaches to the relationship between media and globalisation are informed by perspectives that are familiar from earlier theoretical discussions in media research. The media-technological paradigm is clearly indebted to the so-called “medium theory” (from members of the “Toronto School”, that is, Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan), within which the role of media was assessed in terms of how different media (both old and new) affect the spatio-temporal constitution of society and culture. The cultural paradigm is founded on the theoretical starting points and developments in cultural studies. For its part, the critical political economy approach to mediated globalisation – as the name implies – is based on the insights of political economy of the media, and also on the critical theory of the Frankfurt School. These varying views reflect different conceptions of the role of the media in society, but they also reveal fundamentally conflicting ideas about the basis of social determination and change in general. It is not surprising, then, that each of these approaches has attracted criticism and that many tensions exist between them.

One cannot avoid the impression that the most important distinguishing feature between the perspectives is how they regard the economy as a determining factor in society and in culture. Here the dividing lines are very sharply drawn. Both the media-technological and the cultural paradigms base their arguments polemically against critical political economy as an explanatory model.

Manuel Castells (1996, 14) – an exponent of technology-driven globalisation theory – argues that social change is based especially on the informational mode of development, which is something that needs to be analytically separated from the mode of production (capitalism). Despite the fact that there is an unresolved tension in Castells’ thought, in the sense that he simultaneously stresses the profundity of change that is connected to innovations in information technology as well as the persistence of capitalism (which he speaks of as “informational capitalism”), ultimately he sees technology as the actual driving force of “the network society.” Castells writes that “the new information technology paradigm provides the material basis for its pervasive expansion throughout the entire social structure.” “Furthermore,” he continues, “this networking logic includes a social determination of a higher level than that of the specific social interests expressed through the networks: the power of flows takes precedence over the flows of power” (Castells 1996, 469). In other words, global “informational capitalism” is devoid of any ruling capitalist class. According to Castells, the new axis of class division is not, as it used to be, between labour and capital. Rather, people become members of different classes according to their position in the networks of the informational society. Castells sees that society’s new ruling class consists of the informational elites, who operate the networks and are responsible for running capitalism today (1996, 415). This view fits well with “Third Way” political thinking – the ideological heart of which beats to the pulse of globalisation theory – stressing the centrality of well-educated informational labour and new forms of social stratification that transcend former class divisions.

The fundamental tenet of Castells’ thought is that the basis of social determination has shifted from the economy towards technology. This is the central feature of contemporary globalisation theory in general, and it is often founded on a critique of “economic reductionism.” According to Giddens, globalisation is theoretically significant because it identifies many types of processes and global relations (technological, cultural, political, etc.), not just the “traditional” political-economic world system. However, when Giddens tries to explain the dynamics of globalisation, he accords a central theoretical role to the problematic of “time and space distantiation,” which leads to a claim that globalisation “has been influenced above all by developments in systems of communication, dating back only to the late 1960s” (Giddens 2002, 10). In place of economic reductionism, then, we find another type of reductionism, this time in the form of technological determinism.

The same kind of rejection of economism is evident in the cultural paradigm, but it comes forth in another fashion. For culturalists, the globalisation of media and culture does not lead in any essential sense to the reproduction of capitalism. The cultural consequences of globalisation are, according to them, in many ways unpredictable. Exponents of the cultural paradigm deny the idea that global cultural flows involve a one-way domination (culture imperialism) or an expansion of homogenisation resulting from the actions of global media corporations. Instead, they emphasise the conflicts, ambiguities and mixing of influences caused by the interaction between global culture industries and local contexts. For this paradigm, and for cultural studies in general, shared meanings and beliefs are the foundation of society and culture, not the mode of production.

While the media-technological and cultural paradigm apply different explanatory models with regard to social and cultural change, their common rejection of

structural economic explanations puts them side by side as alternative theoretical frameworks to critical political economy. For this reason, James Curran lumps them together as the “new orthodoxy”, which “emerged in the 1990s, in tune with the neo-liberal climate of the time” (Curran 2002, 171). Curran holds that the central argument expressed by this orthodoxy is threefold. First, globalisation is a “decentred” process (there is no clear centre of global domination), which transforms all of humankind. Second, globalisation is bringing into being a more interconnected and cosmopolitan world. The third key argument of the new orthodoxy is that globalisation fosters multiple identities and greater social diversity, and with that, is also a more diverse media system. According to Curran (2002, 174), “these arguments command the terms of media and cultural studies debate. Textbooks now narrate a linear account of intellectual progress in which those mired in the error of cultural imperialism dogma have been corrected by the sages of cultural globalisation theory.”

However, both the media-technological and cultural account of globalisation have serious shortcomings, which are political as well as theoretical. Justin Rosenberg (2000) has offered an insightful critique of technologically oriented globalisation theory. He especially attacks the notions that globalisation necessitates a “spatialisation” of social theory. In the logical structure of globalisation theorists’ argumentation, globalisation as the outcome of historical process – that is, a matter whose existence needs to be explained – is transformed into the explanation: “it is globalisation that now explains the changing character of the modern world.” As a result of this, theoretical discussions of time and space – “time and space compression,” “deterritorialisation,” etc. – and the alleged technological reasons for these processes take priority over other issues. The problem with this perspective is that it “decontextualises technology, editing out the various forces and fields that both bring it into being and deploy it” (Schirato and Webb 2003, 47).

In contrast to globalisation theorists, Rosenberg argues polemically that the concepts of time and space do not carry much theoretical weight. According to him, the various earlier theories of capitalism already offer the theoretical tools that are needed in understanding the changes that globalisation theory tries to explain (Rosenberg 2000, 87-155). The logic of capitalism is in itself expansionist, as Marx noted in *Grundrisse* (1973, 524): “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.” Rosenberg elaborates on this in a contemporary setting: “supraterritoriality [deterritoriality] is not something that has happened to capitalism as the result of late twentieth-century technological advances. It seems rather to be something intrinsic to capitalist social relations themselves. Would it be too much then to suggest that it is rather these social relations which ultimately lie behind the emergence of the communications satellite?” (Rosenberg 2000, 33).

The recent theoretical developments in media theory have once again undermined critical economic considerations of the media. As media-technological theories are preoccupied with the consequences of new communication technologies, the cultural theorists have as their starting point the multidimensionality of globalisation in which economic factors appear only in a very ephemeral form. This reflects a blind spot in both the media-technological and cultural theories of globalisation (and of the media): “the reluctance to engage critically with economic

power... presented as a virtue, born out of a sophisticated rejection of ‘reductionism’” (Curran 2002, 175). Perhaps all of this arises out of the fact that, following Terry Eagleton (1997, 24), “the power of capital is now so wearily familiar that even large sectors of the left have succeeded in naturalizing it, taking it for granted as an immutable structure.” Every attempt to put economic power under systematic critical scrutiny attracts the familiar charges of reductionism with such certainty that they can only be seen as intellectual reflexes.

The crucial word “reductionism” deserves individual treatment here. It is somewhat bizarre and certainly annoying to critical communication scholars that political economy has traditionally been singled out as the main target for this kind of criticism. If we change the word “reductionism” to “determinism” – most critical political economists do not claim that the economy is all there is – we can safely say that all theories or models of explanation involve deterministic elements. Those who explore the media from the viewpoint of media-technological theory know in advance that technological change is the ultimate explanatory factor; cultural theorists know in advance that the cultural context is in the end the most important; and political economists, for their part, hold that the economy is the determinant. The problem is not that all theoretical approaches have different views of determination. The question is: What kind of a theoretical perspective do we need in order to understand the current social and cultural situation?

The rejection of the critical political economic approach on the basis of its reductionism has effectively led to a situation in which the main approaches of media theory avoid dealing with economic questions at all, or do it hopelessly inadequately. At a time when theoretical discussion revolves around heterogeneity, hybridity, decentralisation and difference – all of which have been household words ever since the postmodern “turn” – “the social reality of capitalism is ‘totalizing’ in unprecedented ways and degrees. Its logic of commodification, accumulation, profit-maximisation and competition permeates the whole social order” (Wood 1997, 11). These developments “cry out for a materialist explanation” (Wood 1997, 13).

Conclusion

Thus far, I have described theoretical positions and the differences between them. How, though, should we move on? While I think that the processes of global capitalism and the media can best be theoretically understood from the perspective of political economy, some qualifications have to be made. First of all, a materialist explanation of social and cultural change (and also of the continuities within these spheres) should not lead to applying of monistic theories in which the economic domain is seen as the necessary explanatory variable of all social and cultural phenomena. Besides the economy, social life consists of cultural and communal activities, sexuality, and politics, and the interconnections between these and the media need to be studied as well. All of these spheres are socially necessary, but their relationships can be hierarchical, in the sense that some form of dominance can be more important than others.

Given the extraordinarily intrusive logic of neoliberal late capitalism, greater attention should be given to the ways in which the economy determines culture and the media. Following Golding and Murdock (1996), one can argue that eco-

conomic determination is operating in the first instance: “We can think of economic dynamics as playing a central role in defining key features of the general environment within which communicative activity takes place, but not as a complete explanation of the nature of that activity” (Golding and Murdock 1996, 15). In other words, critical political economy of the media cannot, from this perspective, provide an exhausting explanation of the media, but it is still needed in assessing current developments within the commercialised media environment of today.

From a critical political economy approach, the role of the media in global capitalism needs to be understood from a perspective which combines historical and structural analysis with political and cultural criticism. Firstly, the development of the media needs to be assessed in light of the general development and dynamics of capitalism. This points to those theories that see capitalism as an internally contradictory – albeit very elastic – system, which expresses constant crisis tendencies in each of its stages, of which globalisation is only the most recent. In overcoming its systemic crises, capitalism has resorted to two basic strategies: the expansion of the system and the production of radically new types of commodities. After the recession of the mid-1970s, these strategies have been exercised especially with the help of the media and new information technologies. The proliferation of multinational corporations and financialisation of accumulation have become possible only with the help of the advances in computer technology. The global media drives accumulation forward by offering space for an endless display of new products and ubiquitous commercialism – a growing feature of media systems worldwide. The media, as well as advances in marketing, “speed up the circulation of material goods through advertising, which reduces the time between production and consumption” (Sklair 2002, 108).

Secondly, an indispensable part of critical media research is a structural analysis of the media itself. This is political economy’s traditional area of research, which I have already referred to in this paper. The crucial question regarding media institutions is whether they pose limitations or promote human development to the maximum extent possible. Understanding the changing institutional contours of media industries (resulting from mergers, integration and concentration of ownership) is vital for critical communication research, as these material dimensions of social reality reveal the unequal distribution of material and symbolic resources. The current balance of power in contemporary societies makes the media primarily an agent of the privileged classes. From a critical perspective, “emancipation depends on the transformation of the structures” and “unwanted sources of determination” (Bhaskar 1989, 6). It should be noted that this view is not exclusively a normative or a political one. It can also be seen as a “realist” view in the sense that modern societies are obviously characterised by an uneven distribution of power, and to the extent that the media is compatible with the interests of the powerful, it must be studied (and criticised) as an example of this kind of imbalance. These structures are not solid and permanent, and they can be altered through social action, although in practice they are relatively enduring. Transforming the media requires and depends upon a knowledge of their underlying structures.

Finally, critical media research needs to be informed by an understanding of the cultural issues that result from the economic logic of media commercialisation. This requires a renewed focus on commodification and consumerism. These phenomena formed the main target of the Frankfurt School’s critique of the culture-

industry, and this approach should also be – one way or another – a part of critical media research today. From a contemporary perspective, a look into commodity reification would deal with such questions as the changing nature of advertising and control, new forms of commercial strategies used by the media giants and, in general, the rise of promotion and brand marketing to such a degree that culture has today largely become synonymous with business.

The predominance of technological and cultural explanations in media research calls for a critical response. These perspectives consciously deny the need for a totalising view of the social and cultural world. At the same time, they bypass a central question of critical social and cultural research, namely, what is the most important target of criticism today? The shift of power to the global economy, with all its ramifications, is surely a major research question, and failing to take it into account leads to a gross underestimation of the power of capital.

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