

Political Economy, Ethics, Peace & Development

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Introduction

The effort to control access to information is as old as the development of the modern means of information creation and distribution – the printing press. Both the Christian Church and secular authorities in the west tried to guarantee that neither heresy nor sedition would develop from the ability to print and distribute large numbers of tracts, broadsheets, books, or leaflets even at a time when the number of literate people in western societies was a minority. Every means of communication developed since the mid-fifteenth century has faced efforts to restrict what could be published and distributed, either for moral reasons (pornography, explicit sexual portrayals, nudity, all of which might corrupt youth, or advertising for intruding on the sanctity of the home), or for politico-economic reasons (claims of national security, prevention of aid to the enemy, control of propaganda, protection of copyrights and trademarks, false advertising that would give unfair advantage in the marketplace, etc.). As the means of creation and distribution of information have developed, the dispute over who would control their use has intensified. This is where political economic analysis finds its purchase.

The significance of information and communication is laid out by Robert McChesney (2004, p. 3). “It is axiomatic in nearly all variants of social and political theory that media and communication systems are cornerstones of modern societies. . . . [M]edia is central to the emerging global economy as well as to any notion of political democracy.” McChesney calls the notion of a free press a myth that has fogged “our ability to see the actual power relations at

hand, and therefore inhibit our capacity to move toward establishing a more democratic and humane media system, and a more democratic and humane society.” (Ibid.) This is due to the rise of neoliberalism and a global media system that increasingly produces and distributes international products. This system is controlled by “the power of the dominant media corporations to defend their interests and propagate a mythology to protect their very privileged role in society.” (Ibid.)

Defining Political Economy

Political economy is rooted in ideas from moral philosophy (Balaam & Veseth, n.d., n.p.). The first full articulation of political economy is found in Adam Smith’s *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* published in 1776, with many philosophers further refining its ideas since then. As Balaam & Veseth (Ibid.) explain, “Many works by political economists in the 18th century emphasized the role of individuals over that of the state and generally attacked mercantilism. This is perhaps best illustrated by Smith’s famous notion of the “invisible hand,” in which he argued that state policies often were less effective in advancing social welfare than were the self-interested acts of individuals. Individuals intend to advance only their own welfare, Smith asserted, but in so doing they also advance the interests of society as if they were guided by an invisible hand. Arguments such as these gave credence to individual-centred analysis and policies to counter the state-centred theories of the mercantilists.”

In the modern era “The field of political economy today encompasses several areas of study, including the politics of economic relations, domestic political and economic issues, the comparative study of political and economic systems, and international political economy. The emergence of international political economy, first within international relations and later as a

distinct field of inquiry, marked the return of political economy to its roots as a holistic study of individuals, states, markets, and society. (Ibid.)

Colonialism, Political Economy and Ethics

Most countries on the globe have experienced colonialism in one form or another. The legacy of colonialism is most apparent, however, in the global south. One explanation of this legacy is provided by Immanuel Wallerstein (2006, pp. 32-33). “Notwithstanding European social ignorance of the world of the so-called Oriental high civilizations, the expansion of the capitalist world economy proved to be inexorable. The Europe-dominated world-system spread from its Euro-American base to encompass more and more parts of the world in order to incorporate them into its division of labor. Domination, as opposed to mere contact, brooks no sense of cultural parity. The dominant need to feel that they are morally and historically justified in being the dominant group and the main recipient of the economic surplus produced within the system. Curiosity and a vague sense of the possibility of learning something in European contact with the so-called high civilizations thus gave way to the need to explain why these zones should be politically and economically subordinate to Europe, despite the fact that they were deemed ‘high’ civilizations.” Assumptions about the superiority of developing European-defined modernity to the civilizations of “other” cultures preceded the rapid expansion of colonial domination as well as rationalizing its aftermath. (see Said, 1978, p. 39).

Wallerstein, continuing to reference Said, argued that “words matter, ... concepts and conceptualizations matter, ... or knowledge frameworks are a causal factor in the construction of unequal social and political institutions – a causal factor but not at all *the only* causal factor (2006, pp. 38-39). The words and concepts of colonial authority claimed a moral and cultural superiority to that practiced in their conquered territory. They established the order of things, the

modernity that eventually free states should aspire to, and the means by which authority should be exercised – in many cases with brutality. This was all the inheritance of conquered peoples.

This order and inheritance was dehumanizing – even to the conquerer, the colonialist (Césaire, 2000, p. 41). It masked the immorality of the civilizations that claimed superiority over subjected peoples, and thus confused their traditional ethics that were now deemed barbarous. Likewise, it provided the mask that conquering nations could lay over their own callousness, a mask that claimed the only history is white, the only ethnography is white, the only ethics is white. (See Césaire, 2000, p 71.) As Edward W. Said (1993, p.37) has argued concerning claims about the exclusivity of the Western literary canon, “is an indication not only of a highly inflated sense of Western inclusivity in cultural accomplishment, but also of a tremendously limited, almost hysterically antagonistic view of the rest of the world.” Frantz Fanon (1963, 2004, pp. 5-6) puts this in even starker terms: “The colonialist is not content with physically limiting the space of the colonized, i.e., with the help of his agents of law and order. As if to illustrate the totalitarian nature of colonial exploitation, the colonist turns the colonized into a kind of quintessence of evil. Colonized society is not merely portrayed as a society without values. The colonist is not content with stating that the colonized world has lost its values or worse never possessed any. The ‘native’ is declared impervious to ethics, representing not only the absence of values but also the negation of values. He is, dare we say it, the enemy of values. In other words, absolute evil.”

The ethical and cultural imperialism of colonial expansion were justified by their connection to the imperial powers’ economic and military superiority. Albert Memmi (2006) concludes, “It has always been this way between oppressor and oppressed; the culture of the oppressor goes hand in hand with its economic and political power.” (location 1305) Frantz

Fanon (1967, pp. 1-2) goes so far as to suggest that colonized people are those in whom an inferiority complex has taken hold – goaded by the assumption of colonialism that non-whites are less human than they – and who must assimilate the cultural values of the colonial metropolis, including its language, if he is to escape the bush and become a true human being.

But this what we may call crippling set of assumptions, that eventually became part of the “being” of subjugated peoples, was part and parcel of the imperial enterprise. This enterprise was undertaken for both economic and cultural reasons. On the economic side was the assumption that raw materials and new markets would result from settling and ruling distant lands. On the cultural side was the assumption that “civilization” and the Christian faith as known and practiced by colonial powers could be exported to these lands. From the political economic perspective, however, both rationales were false. “The central nationalist/Marxist assumption is, of course, that imperialism was economically exploitative; every facet of colonial rule, including even the apparently sincere efforts of Europeans to study and understand indigenous cultures, was a ruse designed to maximize the ‘surplus value’ that could be extracted from subject peoples. The central liberal assumption is more paradoxical. It is that precisely because imperialism distorted market forces – using everything from military force to preferential tariffs to rig business in the favour of the metropolis – it was not in the long-term interests of the metropolitan economy either.” (Ferguson, n.d., locations 152 & 161) Imperialism was coercive and thus a distortion of economic and market realities – unsustainable in the long run. Considering the resultant political economy of colonialism thus suggests both an economic and cultural/moral failure that mortally wounded the moral sensibilities of colonizer and colonized alike.

International Political Economy of Media

In the 1960s and 1970s political economists warned of “cultural imperialism” at a time when western countries were swamping developing countries with cheap television and film exports that reduced the incentive to spend money on indigenous productions so far that television screens were filled with U.S.-made police dramas and westerns, and Hollywood and London based films, radio stations with western pop music, newspapers with western-based wire copy, and libraries with western novels and academic works. This concern died down when these countries began slowly to develop their own production capacity and local artists (especially musical artists) began recording their own music, although many of the formats and styles of these productions were copying or adapting western models. And despite the reduction in concern, as Riordan puts it (2004, 419-420), “Given that only a handful of industrialized nations have the ability to produce and circulate culture globally, those who create cultural commodities and how culture shapes national identities are important considerations.” In the 1990s the international push for free trade among various blocs of countries, the creation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and World Trade Organization (WTO), and the reduction in tariffs on intellectual property replaced these concerns (also, incidentally designed to protect western-based intellectual property by reducing the incentives for piracy).

Poorer countries, however, have had difficulty keeping up with the technological changes in production and distribution systems, although the arrival of the mobile smartphone has begun to provide reception service that was long denied to the majority of the world due to the cost of wired telecommunications infrastructure and expansion of electrical grids. There are, however, still significant gaps, now known as the “digital divide” (see Digital Divide Institute and “The Digital Divide, n.d.). What political economists see in such changes are the social, political, and

economic pressures and interests that influence them. It is here that the question of ownership and control of information again arises, along with issues of fair access to information resources and the various factors that play into investments and expansion of broadband access. As Seán Ó Siochrú wrote (2004, p. 23), “We stand at [a] crossroads in media and communications. At stake is the type of media environment we seek to inhabit, from [the] local to global level, for ourselves and future generations. Formidable forces propel us down one route, the commercialization of activities and outputs, subsuming media and communication ‘products’ under general market rules. The alternative route, currently much less prominent, is a road in which media are focused on fulfilling human needs and reinforcing human rights and aspirations, under a revised and invigorated structure of global governance.” Putting it somewhat differently, Siochrú’s statement suggests a movement away from negative liberty, where the freedom of media organizations is paramount, and toward positive liberty, where interests of people are superior and human possibilities are enshrined in expectations of media services.

Media trade unions have also warned of the results, not only of increasing concentration of ownership in traditional analog media sectors, but in the more recently developed digital media as well. “Digital technology has made available a host of new media services, including digital TV, digital radio and digital film and also including such things as webcasting, interactive television, MP3 music, and video-on-demand. Unlike analogue technologies, digital media are not limited by bandwidth considerations. Despite the apparent opportunities for greater choice, however, existing media groups have moved rapidly to dominate the new digital arena” (Bibby, 2003, p. 6).

Although it is to be expected that trade unions would object to developments that might threaten the employment status of their members, their concerns are not unique. The European

Audiovisual Observatory, for instance, published a paper in 2001 that related media concentration to that in other industries: “While the harmful effects of commercial concentrations in other sectors are mainly economic, journalistic aspects are also involved where media concentrations are concerned. Unlike other companies, media undertakings . . . also serve to support one of the most fundamental human rights – freedom of opinion, information, the press and broadcasting, an indispensable part of any democracy . . . The control of media concentrations is therefore a special case, reaching beyond pure competition law” (Palzer and Hilger, p. 6). The concern of political economy, then, is that freedom of information and the right to communicate (including the right to receive information) can be severely compromised by media concentration, especially when such concentration is undertaken for the purpose of increasing profits that can have the effect of disenfranchising people – especially poorer people not defined as relevant to the profit incentive. The division between the information “haves” and “have-nots” is thus continued and increasingly foundational to media operations, allowing profit to define the reality of citizenship and human rights.¹

Positive liberty from a political economy perspective is one that would alter the economic relations in society such that social justice and individual fairness could be achieved. But the economic incentives for achieving worldwide distribution of cultural materials as protected by international copyright conventions has driven consolidation of systems, and massive personal and private investments in bypassing limited technological infrastructure in many countries has made considerations of fairness and justice problematic. (See McChesney, 2004b, p. 69.) When these developments are considered alongside the increasing commodification of personal information by data mining operations in the hands of such entities as Google, Facebook,

Microsoft and Apple that are required to play in their sandboxes, considering non-economic/non-commodity concerns has largely evaporated outside academic circles. (See Mosco, 2004, p. 273.)

But this is not all. State players, including intelligence services, the military and major corporate suppliers of advanced technologies to these entities, have all increasingly engaged in surveillance activities, diplomacy and counter-terrorism operations, and the spreading of disinformation through wired and wireless internet services to assure competitive advantages in negotiations, military operations, and intercepting terror plots. At the same time those who would spread their anti-statist or ideological propaganda have become increasingly adept at exploiting the possibilities for direct access to potential recruits, funders, and the general public to pursue their objectives. Both of these activities are occurring in an increasingly interconnected global environment. (See Miége, 2004, p. 124) Governments have also sought to stop leaks to the outside, prosecute those who leak or accept leaked information, and clamp down on vulnerable systems to protect strategies in the world arena or to deny their own citizens access to information. (See Greenwald, 2014; Gurnow, 2014, *The Washington Post*, 2013) Involvement of normal citizens in democratic exercises, or even the intent to remain abreast of significant but publicly unacknowledged activities, have become increasingly difficult, essentially disenfranchising involvement in what would at one time have been seen as necessary for engagement in the public sphere and maintaining the legitimacy of national states. So Colin Sparks (2000, p 289) has argued that the impact of the developing world wide web, rather than opening up the public sphere or expanding democratic access, was more likely to exacerbate “existing tendencies to separate politics and ordinary life, and to concentrate public debate and information in just a few hands.” And Brian Winston (1998, p. 2) wrote that “historical

consciousness reveals the ‘Information Revolution’ to be largely an illusion, a rhetorical gambit and an expression of technological ignorance.”

The Right to Communicate

Beyond these issues of fair access and surveillance is another moral concern of political economists. That is the “right to communicate.” One way to understand this right is to recognize that “communication represents an essential and very important human need as well as a basic human right. Without having the possibility to communicate and talk to other people, no individual, community, group or any other institution would be able to exist, or prosper” (“Communication – An essential human need,” n.d., n.p.) This need is met by recognizing four specific pillars that constitute the right to communicate. These are (1) communicating on the public sphere, (2) communicating knowledge, (3) using communication to exercise civil rights, and (4) communicating cultural rights (Ibid.).

This right is not yet enshrined in international law, but has been under debate for more than a decade. Article 19, an international advocacy group for the right to communicate, argues that freedom of opinion and expression, along with the right to receive information from both state and private sources are necessary for this right to be realized. The organization claims that key elements of the right include “the right to a diverse, pluralistic media; equitable access to the means of communication, as well as to the media; the right to practise and express one’s culture, including the right to use the language of one’s choice; the right to participate in public decision-making processes; the right to access information, including from public bodies; the right to be free of undue restrictions on content; and privacy rights, including the right to communicate anonymously” (Article 19, 2002, n.p.). This right, too, is endangered both several factors, including homogenization of the media and exclusion of minority voices, globalization and

commercialization of media, governmental rules and regulation aimed at exerting political control over media and telecommunications, and the increasing dominance of large media corporations around the world (Ibid.).

One difficulty of arguing for such a right is that the notion of individual rights, or basic human rights that would include this dimension, are western concepts based in a post-Enlightenment sensibility. As such this right to communicate has less legitimacy in more collectivist cultures where rights are themselves created and maintained in community, rather than on an individual basis. The question of whether such a right should have less purchase in collectivist societies as opposed to individualistic ones has not been adequately addressed. For instance, Salik Shah from Nepal, dealing with the issue of piracy on the internet, says that (2012), “The internet has played a crucial role in my life and countless others of my generation all over the world. In their attempt to prevent piracy these acts will dismantle the very medium that enables communication and the free exchange of ideas. The proponents of these acts want us to believe that piracy is an evil thing. The younger generation of the world knows very well that piracy is a necessary evil that enables revolutionary online publications like Wikileaks to perform their crucial role for democracy. They know that we can no longer trust politicians who want to control information, who want to control our lives, and worse, dictate the future of mankind.”

Michelle J. Foster’s introduction to her report to the Center for International Media Assistance (2012, p. 4) argued: “Around the globe, traditional news media—newspapers, magazines, and broadcast networks—are operating in more concentrated environments with fewer owners and less diverse voices. Growth in the number of news media outlets and channels has not resulted in a parallel expansion of viewpoints in traditional news media, especially within

local communities. This has adverse consequences for the ability of citizens and communities to hold their governments accountable. If media cannot be free and competitive, they can be neither plural nor diverse. Who owns the media and its infrastructure and who controls its sources of capital and revenue are crucial for any media system.” Patricia Lancia (2009) agrees: “If only some people are given the opportunity to express themselves in society, if some people are denied access to tools for self-expression and, therefore, denied the ability to actually exercise their rights as citizens and as human beings, then the groups that allow that to happen are acting unethically. It is the intention of this paper to show that the current media monopoly environment interferes with the right to free expression of the vast majority of people in society – by eliminating viable alternative sites of communication, by limiting direct access to media outlets as tools of communication, and by preventing the creation of independent media outlets – and is, therefore, unethical.” These are, of course, political economic arguments, demanding that the media, however owned or operated, have a positive requirement to act for the public, to enable the public to engage in meaningful communication, and to provide an environment where robust argument can occur, including not only the owners of the media, but also minority voices, the poor and otherwise disenfranchised public.ⁱⁱ

International Media Domination

Fewer than ten international media conglomerates effectively control the production and distribution of entertainment and news products around the world. All of these conglomerates operate out of wealthy western countries, although many of them deny their identification as being of a particular country, referring to themselves instead as international companies. Which ten are the largest global companies depends on how their ranking is calculated. Ranked by revenues derived from advertising support, the ten largest are Google, DirecTV, Walt Disney

Company, 21st Century Fox, Comcast, Time Warner, Cox Enterprises, BSkyB, Bertelsmann, and CBS Corporation (“Top 10 Global Media Owners,” 2014). Ranking the largest media companies by sales, profits, assets and market value yields a different ranking: Comcast is number one, followed by Disney, 20th Century Fox, TimeWarner, TimeWarner Cable, DirecTV, WPP (a UK-based holding company), CBS, Viacom, and DISH Network (a US-based holding company) (“Global 2000”, 2014). Another ranking has the five largest global media companies as Comcast, DirecTV, Walt Disney, News Corporation and Time Warner (“Top Five Global Broadcast Media Companies,” 2014). However the rankings are done, however, the conclusion is identical: western-based media companies – and especially US-based ones – continue to dominate the world’s media stage.ⁱⁱⁱ In 1997 McChesney reported that nine corporations dominate the “first tier” of the global media system. “The five largest are Time Warner (1997 sales: \$24 billion), Disney (\$22 billion), Bertelsmann (\$15 billion), Viacom (\$13 billion), and Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation (\$11 billion).” (See also Le, 2014.) In addition, social media applications and mobile telephone application development are both based in the United States, either by direct ownership – such as Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube, Vine, etc. – or by development and ownership of operating systems and control of application stores – such as those operated by Android (Google) and Apple. Windows phones are also U.S.-based, but Blackberry is a Canadian company: both of these systems, however, are very minor players in mobile telephony application development and control.

Although the size of the media giants is disproportionately a function of their engagement in the American media market where both media properties and the market dwarf that of most other countries, these companies are also “often in a position to effectively compete with – and even dominate – the local media in other countries.”^{iv} [They] can draw on their enormous capital

resources to produce expensive media products, such as Hollywood blockbuster movies, which are beyond the capability of local media.” They can also adapt media products for new markets must less expensively than new ones can be created and use both existing and adapted media products to “tap a lucrative source of revenue at virtually no additional cost.” (Croteau & Hoynes, 2007, p. 35) So, as the U. S. Department of Commerce (2014) reports about American media, they “often attain shares in international markets in excess of 90 percent due to high global interest in U. S. filmed entertainment.” In recorded music, too, “The U. S. has the world’s largest performance rights market and earns half of global sync revenues” (Ibid.) By 2017 global spending for media and entertainment is projected to reach \$2.2 trillion, with the U.S. continuing as the largest single market (James, 2013).

And the efforts at further consolidation continue, with 21st Century Fox making a failed bid of \$80 billion to purchase the TimeWarner media conglomerate (“The truth about Rupert Murdoch’s new plot for world domination,” 2014). “It’s always worth taking seriously when one of the biggest and most culturally influential media conglomerates in the English-speaking world threatens to buy another of the biggest and most culturally influential media conglomerates” (Ibid.) If this sale had gone through, it was possible that the company that owned and operated Fox News would also own and operate CNN. It would also have further consolidated Hollywood film production. Susan Crawford “Makes a compelling case that both Rupert Murdoch [21st Century Fox] and Jeff Bewkes [Comcast] are well aware that their future health and prosperity requires getting bigger. . . .” (Ibid.)

Implications of Global Media Consolidation

As Chan-Olmsted and Chang (2003, pp. 213-214) put it, the implications of this consolidation depend on where you stand: those coming from a social/public sphere perspective

think of consolidation as leading to content homogenization and threats to democracy, while those coming from an economic/market perspective think of it – as a result of technological change and proliferation of media outlets – as means to minimize the threat of monopoly power. (see also Bennett, 2004, p. 126.) Winseck (2011, p. 12) suggests in his discussion of the social ecology of information that paying attention to the largest media organizations makes eminent sense since “communication, and the media of communication, provides the ‘stuff’ from which we build our sense of self-identity, our perceptions of the world, and the social ties of others; it is a source of pleasure and conviviality and the basis upon which societies are organized.” Of course this is an understandable reason for governments and commercially-driven entities to attempt to control communication as it provides them the means to direct people’s attention toward those sources of pleasure and self-construction that directly benefit the directors.

But is it the case that as consolidation of media production and distribution continues, it necessarily alters the “stuff” in ways that are detrimental to individuals and communities? After all, the media landscape has changed significantly with the arrival of the internet, creating new means of channeling information, new sources of that information, and opportunities for amateurs (what some people call “prosumers,” since they both produce and consume) to express themselves and address grievances that in the older one-way system were difficult to impossible. This is one reason among many others that countries take steps to control information. The result, even in a country with free media, such as the United States, is that the important role that media are expected to play has been crippled by corporatization. As Croteau and Hoynes (2006, p. 258) put it, “the corporate commercialism so rampant in today’s media has dramatically undermined the potential contribution of the media to our public life.”

Three results emerge from the increasing commercial orientation of the international media system. The first is a continuing and accelerating commodification of media materials. “The WTO agreement reduced barriers to trade and encouraged countries to adopt an export-driven corporate-based economic system and targeted local media content rules for elimination” (Jin, 2011, location 4286). Corporate ownership implies the necessity of meeting shareholder expectations – and thus an increasing level of profit. The reduction in local content rules would allow the multimedia corporations to make further inroads into markets with their commercially-driven programs and advertising campaigns. As Christopherson puts it (2011, location 3333-3342), “films made outside the United States do not fit into the conglomerate strategy – synergies across their multiple distribution gateways of theatrical exhibition, broadcast, cable, DVD, and ancillary markets – and so do not get distributed on key platforms, even if they are excellent films that win international awards.” This logic also applies to television programs and music production: one distribution gateway is to beget another with streamlining and predictable flows paramount in order to increase profits. There is no place for independence and insertion of alternative voices in the corporate flow: one reason that people have taken to producing their own music and video to release via the internet.

It is worth noting two things here. One is that this same process is developing within the internet itself, only instead of the same corporate interests mentioned above having control, the principal corporate agents are search engines – Google, Yahoo, Bing – social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, and retailers such as Amazon and eBay (Van Couvering, 2011, location 4581). The second is that this phenomenon is not restricted to obviously capitalist countries such as the United States, Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand and western European countries, but even to China: “The fusion of party state and market power has created a media

system that serves the interests of the country's political and economic elite, while suppressing and marginalizing opposing and alternative voices" (Zhao, 2004, p. 179).

In addition to commodification is the shift from professionally crafted to user controlled content. While this shift has been heralded as indicative of the democracy available via the internet – and a new plethora of voices – it also has a dark side when wedded to corporatization and commercialization. The growth of user-generated content, for instance, has provided the billions of photographs, videos, graphic images, music and prose that search engines identify and catalog for others users to find – along with the obligatory delivered advertising messages. Google and its competitors, as well as the applications that solicit posts, photos, videos, etc., do not create the content (or pay for its creation), but essentially sell the user-generated content to others at a profit. The efforts that some corporate owners (particularly Facebook) have made to attempt to formalize their ownership of this content – albeit unsuccessfully so far – are indicative of this development.

Finally, the user-generated content also provides the basis for the third result: rapidly developing 24/7 surveillance societies. What users post and tag on Facebook, for instance, provides the raw material for facial recognition systems that can then be employed by either governments or corporations to identify individuals. While this may assist law enforcement, it also allows continual tracking of people engaged in everyday life. Most of the focus on this issue so far has been in calls for greater privacy protections, but such activity is not merely an invasion of privacy. It is in effect an invasion of personhood.

As the global media have grown in both breadth and depth, engaged in increasing levels of convergence and synthesis to maximize profits, they have also become hungrier for means to

connect with users. This has meant expansion of technological capability such as the move from analog to digital video distribution and the push for ever-increasing data transfer to populate large screens with acceptable image quality, the push for realism in popular first-person shooter games (which puts the user in the center of “missions” and is played from his perspective), and efforts to port content from one delivery system to another to maximize return on investment.

Implications for Peace and Development

Understanding the implications of these developments requires, first, putting them into still another context, that of modernity. I do not mean modernity as an idea, or modernity as the victory of scientific understandings over those of an earlier age, of the death of philosophy, of the victory of rationalism and order over superstition and barbarism, or even the loss of the sacred to the profane, although most academic discussions of the concept concentrate there (see Appadurai, 1996, Giddens, 2013, or Toulmin, 1990, for instance.) No, what I do mean is modernity’s practical, everyday, results; the consequences of the application of science into technology and the exploitation of technology by capitalism such that the ordinary person, if asked about modernity, is likely to offer positive examples such as indoor plumbing or electricity.

Modernity is an age of things. It is the period of human existence that resulted from the so-called age of progress introduced by the French Revolution and carried through until the outbreak of the First World War. Modernity is life in the twentieth century and beyond with, in addition to indoor plumbing and electricity, are all the devices that people have invested in based on electrical connections or batteries recharged by electricity. It is radio, television, personal computers, tablets and mobile telephones, refrigeration, kitchen appliances, air conditioning, and in addition, the ubiquitous automobile. It is life lived in the relative comfort offered by

technology. And it is life made unsatisfactory by the constant drumbeat to replace the traditional with the scientific, the “old-time” religion with the new via televangelism, the drudgery of village life with the ease of urban existence (even if it seldom works), the replacement of face-to-face connection with instant access to friends and family via mobiles, tribal storytelling and celebrations with television, walking one’s limited geography with the presumed limitlessness of transportation, traditional medicine with pharmaceuticals, and so on.

This system of modernity is based in the creation of scarcity and its satisfaction. This is the message of commercially-driven mass media, pop-up, scrolling and pre-roll advertising on social media sites, posters and brand names on mobile kiosks, the spread of mobile payment systems in the absence of adequate banking institutions, the manufacture and satisfaction of desire. Capitalist enterprise is based on growth: new market development, replacement of older systems of value with newer ones, wider distribution of product lines, new product development. Ostensibly this creates opportunities for people to have more adequate nutrition, better health care and educational opportunities, growing entrepreneurship, increasing incomes and the reduction of poverty, and so on – and there are successes to point to here as each year’s updated Human Development Index project demonstrates (hdr.undp.org).

Thomas Malthus predicted in 1798 that the planet would be incapable of supporting its geometrically expanding population in less than 200 years – when his population projections suggested that the anticipated population of 256 billion would be living on a food supply capable of feeding only 9 billion. His projections were incorrect. Currently there are somewhat more than 7 billion humans on the planet and still enough food – if distributed effectively – for everyone to have adequate nutrition. However, there are warnings: the dependence on fossil fuels and the creation of greenhouse gases are heating the planet and melting the ice caps. Coastal cities are at

risk. Water supplies may be more critical than food supplies as the climate changes. The United States, with a population of only 310 million (about 3% of the global total) uses disproportionately more resources by a large margin than most other countries on the planet. Only China approaches the U. S. consumption rate and these two countries (providing less than 20% of total population) create 40% of the planet's "global footprint" ("Reckless Consumption Depleting Earth's Natural Resources, 2008). The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) has said that there would need to be two planets to sustain the world's current lifestyles within a generation (Ibid.).

Agricultural technology has enabled the world to continue to produce food production to match population growth since Malthus' prediction, although it is unevenly distributed. But water shortages threaten continued yield rates or the ability to use increased arable acreage. In a context of limited resources, what is the ethical approach to media that exist to promote increased consumption?

Advertising as a Post-Enlightenment Enterprise

Modernity developed from the Enlightenment. As David Harvey (1989, p. 13), depending on the thought of Ernst Cassirer explains, "Enlightenment thought . . . embraced the idea of progress, and actively sought that break with history and tradition which modernity espouses. It was, above all, a secular movement that sought the demystification and desacralization of knowledge, and social knowledge and social organization in order to liberate human beings from their chains." To do so humanity's essence was defined as "creatively destructive," a singular path to "affirmation of self" (Harvey, 1989, p. 16). This creative destruction involved "religious myths, traditional values and customary ways of life" (Ibid.). Capitalism fit into this model of

creative destruction, especially the entrepreneur who pushed “the consequences of technical and social innovation to vital extremes” (Harvey, 1989, p. 17).

Capitalism, too, benefitted from the romantic movement that sought the aesthetic experience and that “generated that wave of ‘radical subjectivism,’ of ‘untrammelled individualism,’ and of [a] ‘search for individual self-realization.’” (Harvey, 1989, p. 19.) It was the task of the individual to pluck meaning from the maelstrom of ephemerality that characterized the modern age. It was the individual who, in his search for self-actualization, made himself the target of those who would “solve” his dilemmas, his self-doubts, and his imperfections through ideological panaceas, patent medicines, scientific breakthroughs, and advances in efficient production (Fordism). It was to this insecure or ambitious individual that advertising would be directed. Written artistically and with proper attention to people’s insecurities, the products advertised could freeze time by providing eternal youth, or halting the natural aging process, or solving the infirmities to which human beings are prone. It could demonstrate to people how the well-dressed person could transcend his class, how the purchase of the right automobile could raise other’s estimation of his place in the society, how – with the right credit score – he might live beyond his means in perpetuity (see Boorstin, 1973, especially Parts 3, 7 & 9). Georg Simmel, writing about the effects on mentality of living in rapidly developing metropolitan centers, said (1903/1950) that “ultimately the only means of saving for themselves some modicum of self-esteem and the sense of filling a position is indirect, through the awareness of others.” A bit later Simmel (Ibid.) explained that “in the nineteenth century, through Goethe and Romanticism, on the one hand, and through the economic division of labor, on the other hand, another ideal arose: individuals liberated from historical bonds now wished to distinguish themselves from one another. The carrier of man's values is no longer the "general

human being" in every individual, but rather man's qualitative uniqueness and irreplaceability." This desire to distinguish one's self from others, to find a handhold for individuality in a teeming city marked by conformity, to escape from what were seen as oppressive definitions of self located in religion, class, or trade, provided the psychic foundation to which those with remedies could appeal. "Our only outlet, he seems to say, is to cultivate a sham individualism through pursuit of signs of status, fashion, or marks of individual eccentricity" (Harvey, 1989, p. 26).

One explanation of transition is provided by T. J. Jackson Lears (1983): "'On or about December 1910,' Virginia Woolf once said, 'human character changed.' This hyperbole contains a kernel of truth. Around the turn of the century a fundamental cultural transformation occurred within the educated strata of Western capitalist nations. In the United States as elsewhere, the bourgeois ethos had enjoined perpetual work, compulsive saving, civic responsibility, and a rigid morality of self-denial. By the early twentieth century that outlook had begun to give way to a new set of values sanctioning periodic leisure, compulsive spending, apolitical passivity, and an apparently permissive (but subtly coercive) morality of individual fulfillment. The older culture was suited to a production-oriented society of small entrepreneurs; the newer culture epitomized a consumption-oriented society dominated by bureaucratic corporations."

Advertising was also rooted in the sensibilities that emerged from these developments. Advertising was a means to define the way out of conformity (despite the conformity that it promoted). It was a method of distinguishing one's self from peers and to redefine the individual self in a post-Enlightenment reality that redefined personal significance apart from the herd. (See Benhabib & Bisin, 2000.) In the early days of mass media advertising (the 1920s) it broke away from the older forms of intelligence that had supported the commercial focus of newspapers. It began to appeal outside the limited orbit of businessmen to that of

ordinary people – often promising them opportunity to solve chronic aspects of the human condition occasioned by its fragility. But it was every man or woman for him/herself. Individual investments were required to acquire the requisite solution. “Advertising offered itself as a means of efficiently creating consumers and as a way of homogeneously ‘controlling the consumption of a product.’ . . . To create consumers efficiently the advertising industry had to develop universal notions of what makes people respond, going beyond the ‘horse sense’ psychology that had characterized the earlier industry.” (Ewen, 2001, p. 33) “The vanguard of the business community found the social psychology of such men as Floyd Henry Allport extremely useful in giving an ideological cohesion to much of what one sees in the advertising of the twenties. Explicating the notion of the way in which man develops a sense of himself from infancy, Allport asserted that ‘our consciousness which others have of us My idea of myself is rather my own idea of my neighbor’s view of me.’ This notion of the individual as the object of continual and harsh social scrutiny underscored the argument of much of the ad texts of the decade.” (Ewen, 2001, p. 34)

After the end of World War II in the United States, and later in Europe once it had recovered from the devastation created by the war itself and disposable income began to rise in the post-war boom, expenditures on advertising began a rapid ascent. In 1946 3.34 billion dollars was spent on advertising in the United States. By 1950 this had more than doubled and a decade later it had doubled again, to nearly 12 billion dollars. By 1975 the total spent on advertising had reached nearly 28 billion dollars, in 1985 nearly 95 billion, in 1995 162.93 billion, in 2000 247.472 billion, and in 2007 almost 280 billion dollars. (from Coen, n.d.) A similar increase in advertising expenditures, but at a lower level, also occurred in Great Britain despite the lack of consumer goods available for several years after the war. (See Clayton, 2010). Throughout the

period from 1946 to 2000 the United States was targeted by roughly half of all the advertising expenditures worldwide. This percentage began to fall a bit after 1988, but in 2005 the U. S. still accounted for 48% of worldwide expenditures (Assadourian, 2007).

The global dominance of advertising expenditures in the United States is explainable by the fact that the U. S. had the largest economy in the world over this period and was the largest single consumer market. According to the United Nations, the U. S. consumer market was 29 percent of the world's consumer market, compared to the European Union's 27 percent. The world's two most populous nations, China and India, provided 5.3 percent, and 2.1% of the global consumer market in 2009 (see "World's 25 largest consumer markets!," 2011.)

Manufacturers of consumer goods responded to this Western economic reality by creating advertisements in tune with the cultural tropes of a rapidly changing economic, psychological and artistic landscape. Ads appealed to different mentalities with content aimed at market segments (children, youth, women, sport addicts, the upwardly-mobile, the insecure, etc.) with content that could respond to their various interests and desires. And this was all done within the west's post-Enlightenment individualistically oriented mindsets. "Popular culture is used as a resource [by advertising practitioners]. . . . [A]dvertising is reactive and relies on siphoning off ideas from culture – practitioners strategically raid new cultural trends they see appearing across a range of sites (fashion, art, popular music, design, television) and put selected elements of them to work in their campaigns" (Cronin, 2004).

The Growth of Global Advertising

One study published in 2008 indicated that economic growth in a national economy was closely related with rising advertising expenditures, which were a measure for aggregate

advertising demand (van der Wurff, Bakker and Picard, p. 28). As the effort to expand businesses has increasingly become global, so has the development of advertising. Since the development of an increasingly commercially-subsidized international media regime has occurred, it has been necessary for the advertising used to pay for the production and distribution of “free” content to develop apace. This has meant, too, that the cultural values of acquisition, material comfort, and the solution to personal and community problems by purchasing products and services has also been introduced to new cultures. “Advertising lies at the juncture where culture and the economy interact: its [advertising] primary purpose is to sell products and services by stimulating purchasing power and it does this by using strategies that rework culture, creating aspirations and new desires for products. . . . Advertising is itself a cultural product which increasingly affects social attitudes, defines social roles, and influences cultural values. . . . In recent decades advertisers from the industrialised nations have increasingly targeted international markets, expanding the consumption of foreign products and bringing about widespread cultural change” (Ciochetto, 2004, p. 1)

One question that we should ask about the export of advertising as a medium from those countries that are part of the post-Enlightenment tradition to those that are not (especially Asia) is whether this export is, on its face, ethical. As discussed in chapters 2 and 3, the philosophical traditions undergirding ethics in the post-Enlightenment world are largely individualistic in orientation, matching the cultural shifts that were occasioned by the Enlightenment itself. But Asia is far more collectivist in its philosophical traditions. Can advertising that is premised on the role of the individualist self, personal choice, and the acquisition of consumer goods to support ideas of success, self-worth, and status appropriately be ported into collectivist-oriented cultures without doing serious ethical damage to their foundations?^v Kelly, Lawlor and

O'Donohoe (2005, p. 645), remarking on the pivotal role of advertising in ascribing symbolic meaning to consumer goods, suggest that "The discourse of advertising has a dialogic and reciprocal relationship to other cultural institutions and social systems such as family, religion, arts, literature and music, and through this interactive and fluid relationship advertising has developed into a potent 'cultural system' which shapes and reflects consumers' sense of social reality."

Of course, this is already happening and Asia is expected to outpace the European Union in advertising growth within a few years as household incomes and levels of urbanization increase. Is this the triumph of post-Enlightenment philosophy over collectivist traditions, or do these traditions have the resources to adjust or accommodate a shift toward consumption-based economies? To return to Ewen (2001, p. 35), in the early days of advertising in the United States, "advertisers were concerned with effecting a self-conscious change in the psychic economy. . . ." (See also Burroughs and Rindfleisch, 2002, p. 348). Since, as we have seen, the "psychic economy" of collectivist cultures significantly differs from that of individualist cultures, we may also expect that different approaches would have to be taken in the two systems. If the same strategies or assumptions about people's relationships with one another are identical in the two cases, we may expect psychic damage in at least one of them. In India and Sri Lanka one study indicated that advertising and television programming had "transformed public culture and resulted in mass consumerism," a result conforming to earlier research in the Middle East and China (Speck & Roy, 2008, p. 1211). In Romania and Turkey a further study indicated that those studied believed "that materialism is the way of the modern Western world [and] legitimates an entire culture's escalating materialism" (Ger & Belk, 1999, p. 196).

The change in psychology, whether “damaging” or not, can be seen in several studies of the developing consumer cultures of Asia. In India, in two studies – one of older middle-class informants in Baroda and the other of younger informants in Bangalore – although they differed in their degree of moralizing about a materialist ethos, in both cases consumption was “an embodied marker of status – whether in the addition or the lack of a mobile phone, Nike trainers, a sari and gold jewelry, or a twinset and pearls. The established middle classes are always more likely to moralize against the materialist urges of the newly moneyed – and there is certainly a lot of new money circulating amongst the liberalization-era Indian middle classes” (Nisbett, 2007, pp. 943—944).

A tearing of the social fabric in Asia has been noted by several commentators as a result of the headlong rush into urbanization and the rapid creation of a consumption class. (See Doctoroff, 2012, on China and Richardson, 1994, on Malaysia. And for Africa see Wirekoh-Boateng, 2010. On the relationship between wealth and modern slavery see Bales, 2012.) There has even been a backlash in China against the pell-mell rush to embrace Western consumption values as Chinese consumers began to “re-instill Chinese culture in the consumption process” (Wang & Lin, 2009, p. 400). These cultural values include frugality, and social status (related to face) that inspires conspicuous consumption. “When conspicuous consumption is coupled with low disposable income and frugal habits, it influences the use of counterfeit products” (Wang & Lin, 2009, p. 402). Chinese consumers also respond more favorably to advertising emphasizing relational ties with significant others and relational interdependence rather than the individualism, independence, uniqueness and autonomy of ads that are more typical of Western ads). (Ibid.)

Of related interest is the anticipated boom in economic growth and internet access in Africa. Although internet penetration in Africa was only sixteen percent in 2013, largely due to the large number of rural citizens, the vast expanse of Africa, the lack of electrical-grid and landline infrastructure, and poverty, the McKinsey Global Institute has predicted that Africa “is poised to make a digital leap” on par with the rapid rise of mobile devices already experienced (Al-Jazeera America, 2013). While this appears to be a positive development for a continent that has lagged behind all others in economic development and communication, if the prediction is correct then the one billion Africans expected to encounter this change by 2025 will also face unprecedented advertising for consumer goods on both social media and information platforms that were designed for and supported by advertising aimed largely at more developed consumer societies. Africa, like many countries in Southeast Asia that have already crossed the threshold into mass use of the internet, will find its citizens eager to use a system that they will not understand due to the low levels of education generally, and media literacy specifically. Advertising will blend with the sites visited, not as a separate stream of ignorable content, but as an integral feature of the sites visited. In other words, the new consumers who will encounter these sites will do so as naïve netizens (“babes in the woods”) and not the savvy consumers of developed countries that have gradually been engulfed in advertising and have developed cynical skins to ward off the continual chant of “buy, buy, buy.”

In Africa as in Asia the communal orientation of society will face severe challenges. Modern advertising assumes an atomistic society comprised of individuals each deciding how to respond to individual consumption messages. People may see the intrusion of advertising as annoying as it finds ever more nooks and crannies in the media system to insert its pitches, but a long history of encountering such messages – at least among those with secondary educations or

above – knows that the buyer is to beware – not only of the shoddy overpriced product but also of the pitches that encourage consumption beyond one's means. Even then, however, the debt load of millions of people in these societies increases virtually every year. In cash societies the first requirement will be not education about the systems encountered but the acquisition of a debt mentality. In countries where people care for one another, share one another's burdens, often eschew personal fulfillment to care for their family or clan, there is the distinct possibility that the debt of one will become the debt of many with the potential to wrench tight-knit communities asunder.

There is little doubt that consumer societies will continue to spread around the globe. This appears to be one of the underlying premises of globalization itself. Globalization is not merely about free trade, or the movement of labor and capital, but the spread of capitalism that is dependent on the development and growth of markets for consumer goods. This makes the question of ethics in this rapidly growing consumerist world so crucial.

However, this system also heightens the sense of discrepancy: what others have that any individual lacks. This is where modernity bites. This is where the reality that everyone on the planet cannot live at the same level of material abundance, even when people learned under colonial rule that what mattered most about their location on the planet was not their history or connection to the land, but what the land could offer up to feed the engines of capitalism. From the rubber trade of Belgium's King Leopold to the mining for coltan and other rare earth minerals in the Eastern Congo to support the burgeoning global electronic world, what mattered most about place was what could be removed from it. And thus there was conflict over natural resources, and the despoliation of the earth from mining, clear-cutting, over-fishing, factory farming, and new exotic technological developments. The peculiar political-economic

foundation of capitalism, with more-developed economies seeking greater access to the natural resources of other less-developed ones through trade agreements, reductions in tariffs and quotas, access to cheaper labor resources, multinational corporate movement of manufacturing plants, a greater thirst for cheap power with its consequent increase in air and water pollution, diversion of water resources for manufacturing and agriculture from more traditional human needs, even concentration of ethnic groups who supposedly shared common values at the expense of others who had often lived there for centuries – all of these developments were created or exacerbated by the political-economy of profit under capitalist systems dominated by wealthy countries.

Age-old enmities could serve this political-economy. So could migration and urbanization. So could civil war, ethnic or tribal conflict, religious animosities, even the reconfiguration of geo-political boundaries, democratic impulses in the face of despotism, the elimination of economic sanctions, or collaboration with odious regimes. Everything could work to the benefit of the political-economic convictions of an amoral capitalist system that carried not for human flourishing but for increased profit margins and expanding markets.

Peace in a Capitalist-Driven and Communication-Dependent World

Peace is not merely a political issue, as much of the news media or even well-meaning academic analysts would have people believe. Gadi Wolfsfeld (2004, p. 1), for instance, suggests that, “The news media can play a central role in the promotion of peace. They can emphasize the benefits that peace can bring, they can raise the legitimacy of groups or leaders working for peace, and they can help transform images of the enemy. The media, however, can also serve as destructive agents in the process. They can emphasize the risks and dangers associated with compromise, raise the legitimacy of those opposed to concessions, and reinforce negative stereotypes of the enemy.” Yes, they can. But such understandings also do much to obscure the

political-economic systems in play. Animosities are exploited. Legitimacy is narrowly defined. Concessions are merely corrections to temporarily defuse conflict if its underlying realities are not resolved – and many of these find their foundation in the quest for resources or markets. Even positive results in ameliorating conflict can have destructive consequences.

What I am suggesting here is that the political-economy of unregulated capitalism poses severe challenges for efforts to encourage peaceful co-existence between historical enemies. It also increases the likelihood that new rationales for conflict will develop as the global economic system continues its trajectory in reducing regulatory oversight. Engaging ever greater numbers of people in consumption economies fueled by advertising aimed not merely to provide goods for basic human needs, but to expand access to non-essential goods and to exploit technological development in the quest for profit all militate against sufficiency and satisfaction among people. The hunger for lifestyle equality across nations or goods parity with one's neighbors is a fulcrum for expanding conflict and a disincentive for developing or maintaining peaceful neighborly relationships.

American social media providers, too, led by Facebook are continually attempting to monetize their user base – swelling as people invest in the requisite technologies and seek to practice their “right to communicate” – and facilitate efforts of other economic entities to do so as well by allowing multiple data access and acquisition activities. Although Facebook took steps to restrict access to user data in 2015, ostensibly to promote privacy, many of its apps routinely transmit data about their users to third parties, including their names and the names of their friends “to dozens of advertising and Internet tracking companies, including people who have set their profiles to Facebook’s own strictest privacy settings (Steel and Fowler, 2010). The 2015 changes by Facebook only applied to its own sale of data, not to ancillary applications that

users had presumably agreed to allow data collection in exchange for using the apps. The information collected can be collated with other public and proprietary data sources to construct user profiles that are of use to marketers and advertisers. MasterCard signed an agreement to access user data from Facebook in 2014 “to serve up tailored online offers for MasterCard customers. The aim is to drive online sales” (Head). Advice on the web about how to access user profile data is also available (Opentracker.net). Twitter, too, sells promotional tweets to its users and generated \$32 million by licensing its data to others just in the first half of 2013 (Luckerson, 2013). As the consumer economy expands around the world the problems currently faced largely in economically-powerful countries will envelop such sites’ emerging user base and put their data up for sale, too. The greater their disposable income, the more they will be worth – and the more they will be subject to the blandishments of consumerism and the potential for increased conflict with others who may be lagging in the competitive consumerist race. The prospects for peace will dim as the competition ratchets up, especially in countries with relatively lower levels of sophistication about these systems and where competition for scarce commodities is manifest.

Conclusion

Political economy warns us about the subtexts of media practice. Media can exploit anything for commercial purposes, engage in propaganda for political authority, commodify people’s lives, even provide the foundation for surveillance by clandestine agencies. One does not have to be a conspiracy theorist to recognize that the quest for profit may result in situations that do not serve the public, or that even good causes can sometimes lead to results that are both negative and unanticipated. We must also recognize that good causes do not necessarily justify all means, even if they are in the non-profit sector and the harm might be reduced as a function of the poor access that victims may have to the communications systems that otherwise might tip

them off. Given the power asymmetry between governments and elites versus the common citizen, might we excuse the appropriation of their images for a good cause or to respond to an atrocity? Recognizing the situation as uncovered by political economists may assist in traversing this difficult terrain.

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ⁱ Eli Noam (2013, p. 5), examining the net number of voices (controlling for cross-ownership of media properties) across thirty countries, reports that the United States – where concentration of ownership questions have been most sustained – actually has the most voices (71) compared to others. Noam looked at all companies within each country that had more than 1% of market share. Three countries had fewer than thirty voices (Poland, Finland, Chile), Another seven had less than 40 (Brazil, Ireland, Italy, Portugal, South Africa, Australia, South Korea and Belgium). China had approximately 58 voices, India 56. The world average (based on these thirty countries) was approximately 46 sources, but this overstates the actual world average, which included almost no countries from subSaharan Africa, Latin America or Southeast Asia. When the number of net voices is compared to population, providing a net per capita voice total, the eight lowest countries include Egypt, Japan, Russia, Mexico, the United States, Brazil, India and China, all with less than 0.5 voices per million population – not particularly comforting for the right to receive information. (Noam, 2013, p. 7)

ⁱⁱ One source for seeing the concentration of ownership in the media can be found on the *Columbia Journalism Review* website: <http://www.cjr.org/resources/>. Accessed July 16, 2014. Discovery Communications, which claims (2014) to be the world’s number 1 pay-TV programmer, has 2.5 billion cumulative subscribers in more than 220 countries and territories, including over 200 different television networks. Report available from the Discovery Channel: *Discovery Communications*.

ⁱⁱⁱ 20th Century Fox and 21st Century Fox are the same media organization.

^{iv} The media and entertainment industry in the United States represents one-third of the global industry, with a 2014 market of \$546 billion, according to the United States Department of Commerce.

^v One study of the differences in advertising appeals in the United States and Korea did suggest that appeals based on individualistic benefits were not as persuasive in Korea as in the U.S. (Han & Shavitt, 1994).