

For a Political Economy of Mass Communications

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Abstract

The mass media impinge upon people's lives in two very important ways. Firstly, in providing the facilities with which people occupy a considerable amount of their non-work time they command an increasing proportion of discretionary spending. Average weekly household expenditure on the media and on leisure activities is higher than on clothing or on household durables, and, in 1971, over L3,000 million was spent on the media and leisure (not even including drink, travel or catering). Secondly, the media are the major source of information about, and explanations of, social and political processes. The mass media therefore play a key role in determining the forms of consciousness and the modes of expression and action which are made available to people. Consequently, any adequate analysis of the distribution of power and of the process of legitimation must necessarily include an analysis of the mass media.

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A political economy of communication is therefore concerned with understanding how communication figures in. 2. political economic formations more generally. Although I understand "communication" as the movement of meanings between people and "communications" (or communication technologies) as the means by which those meanings are moved, for the purposes of this chapter I am conflating these two definitions in the term "communication". Appeals to fear; immutable laws of nature; a traumatised mass psychology; doctrines of scarce resources; work as the highest good; the necessity of being the dominant nation; racial "hygiene" and superiority; the utilitarian view of science, technology, and truth—these formed the basis of Nazi propaganda. The political economy is an important perspective in the study of processes and structures of mass communication. Many scholars have applied this approach in their works over the past decades. Understanding this critical approach benefits not only the study of media ownership and power but also the study of the entire media industry. Classical Political Economy and Critical Political Economy Political economy was a term originally for studying production, distribution, and exchange of wealth on a national level. This part of the essay will briefly introduce the classical political economy and the critical political economy, and concentrate on the political economy in media research by mainly discussing Mosco's study and Murdoch & Golding's work. Their theory on mass communications focuses on the industry as a political economy which is how an economy cycles, questioning and arguing the ownership and control of media, factors that bring together media industries with other media platforms and with other industries, as in the concentration and vertical integration of IPC and Reed Group Limited. While radio had always been a major form of mass communications, content generated programming, and audience tuning in to shows with radio jockey's entertaining, it has shifted to a more commercialized industry, resulting in big business. Although radio is a small industry, it has, nonetheless, garnered its share of revenue in the form of 30-second airtime advertisements for a business.