

McChesney, R. W.: Communication revolution: critical junctures and the future of media

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A change in the way human beings communicate with each other, as a consequence for example of a new technology, has the potential to deeply modify social interactions and the functioning of economic and political institutions. This has certainly been the case with events like the advent of the printing press in the XV century. Robert McChesney, in his book *Communication Revolutions*, argues that we might be witnessing a communication transformation of comparable relevance with the introduction of digital technology and of the internet. “Precisely how this communication revolution will unfold and what it will mean for our journalism, our culture, our politics, and our economics are not at all clear”.¹ In any case, according to McChesney, this revolution provides “an unprecedented (rare window of opportunity in the next decade or two) to create a communication system that will be a powerful impetus (for) a more egalitarian, humane, sustainable, and creative (self-governing) society”.² Starting from this premise, while illustrating what is wrong with the current US media system, the book provides a sort of manifesto for a democratic media reform. The book takes us through a brief history of the political economy of communication from the 1970s until today, providing an assessment of the current status of communication research, ending with an invitation to communication scholars to understand the importance of the moment and to seize the new opportunities offered by these extraordinary times. McChesney is particularly sanguine on the urgent necessity to combine serious and rigorous research on mass media with normatively motivated activism for media reform (with enormous synergies to be exploited on both the political and the academic sides). This might be the very reason why this is not really an academic book, in the sense that it displays

¹ Page no. 3.

² Page no. xii and xiii.

no novel findings. But probably this was not its purpose. The book, instead, seems directed to a wider audience composed not only of scholars but also of policy-makers, activists and the like. In this sense, it certainly makes various valid and stimulating points. To communication scholars, McChesney directs essentially an invitation to embrace with enthusiasm this critical moment, to think big and exploit the momentum to increase the status of the discipline in the academic world and in terms of its influence on public policy.

The book is articulated in four chapters. The first is devoted to illustrate why we are witnessing a communication revolution and what are its potential implications, good and bad ones. According to McChesney, we are at a “critical juncture, a period in which the old institutions and mores are collapsing. (...) During a critical juncture, which usually lasts no more than one or two decades, the range of options for society is much greater than it is otherwise. The decisions made during such a period establish institutions and rules that likely put us on a course that will be difficult to change in any fundamental sense for decades or generations”.³ McChesney identifies three critical junctures for the mass media during the XX century, which shaped in fundamental ways the media system we experience today. The first occurred during the “progressive era” with the emerging of professional journalism (early XX century), the second in the 1930s with the emergence of a system of commercial broadcasting and the third in the 1960s and early 1970s with the rise and fall of popular social movements that, among other things, were radically critical of mainstream media. These critical junctures shared at least two of the following three features: (1) a revolutionary new communication technology became available; (2) the content of the media, and especially journalism, was being increasingly discredited; (3) the US were in the middle of a major political and social crisis. For McChesney, at least two, and possibly all three of these conditions, are present also today in the US. First, digital technology is having a profound impact on existing media industries and is creating new uncharted possibilities for communication. Second, journalism and broadcasting have lost a lot of their credibility, because of their excessive closeness to political power, particularly after their uncritical support for the war in Iraq. Third, excessive political corruption, growing inequality, and an impending profound economic crisis may generate the conditions for relative political and social instability.

For McChesney the current critical juncture represents a defining moment for the future of American democracy and, more modestly, for the role to be played by communication studies in society and in academia. In this respect, it is sensible to ask why communication studies is only a second tier subject in American universities today, given the crucial role played by information in the contemporary world. Although the author does not answer this question, he appears to hint at the possibility that communication programs are still lacking a unifying and defining purpose. For McChesney, the current communication revolution may provide exactly what is currently missing: the ambition to shape the future of media systems and to provide a decisive contribution to the functioning of democracy.

³ Page no. 9.

Chapter two addresses precisely this point: how did we get to the current low status for communication research? The author addresses this question by providing a sort of intellectual autobiography, mainly dedicated to the scholars and theories which influenced the author along his 25-year career. The list is very long, but it is worth mentioning the very light, but overall entertaining, pages on Marx, along with the brief history of the rise and fall of the political economy of communication between the 1970s and today (a prominent example are the works of Chomsky and Hernan). It is important to remind that the expression “political economy” can have quite different meanings across disciplines. The differences between McChesney’s idea of political economy and that used by economists do not concern the research questions, but rather the methodologies used to address those questions.⁴ While an economist would typically rely on formal models of micro-founded rational decision-making to derive predictions, that are then tested using statistical methods, political economy *à la* McChesney consists mainly of historical research, informed by familiarity with political theory, cultural studies, journalism and, occasionally, economics. Mainstream political economy is too quickly dismissed by the author: “for all their mastery of mainstream economic theory or regulatory statutes, these scholars tended to know little about journalism, culture, or democratic theory. There was almost no dialogue between these scholars and those in the political economy of communication tradition; they were living in parallel universes with very different assumptions, perspectives, and views on the critical juncture of their times”.⁵ It is hard, however, not to agree with McChesney that this is not a positive development for either side. There are instead important synergies to be exploited, especially now that the number of economists interested in mass communication is growing and the quality of economic research on mass media is fast increasing.

Chapter three illustrates what the author emphatically calls “five truths”, which he claims are “of such importance that they demand that all media scholar reconsider the core presuppositions upon which their research and teaching have been based”. (1) Media systems are created by explicit policies and subsidies. For example, it is not “natural” that monopoly licences are given for free to commercial radio and TV stations and it is also not “natural” to have mail subsidies for the printed press. (2) The celebrated First Amendment to the US Constitution does not authorize a corporate-run, profit-motivated, commercially driven media system. If the right of the citizens to be informed is regarded as superior to the right of free enterprise in the media market, then this second right can only be justified if it serves the first, and McChesney argues that it currently does not. (3) The American media system is not a free market because it is basically sustained by policies and subsidies. (4) Consequently, the policy-making

⁴ According to McChesney the “political economy of communication has two main components. First, it addressed *in a critical manner* (in Italics in the text) how the media system interacted with and affected the overall disposition of power in society. Did the media, on balance, serve as a progressive force to draw the masses into political debate as informed and effective participants, or did the media system as a whole tend to reinforce rule and inegalitarian social relations? (...) The second area in the political economy of communication tradition was largely its exclusive domain: an evaluation of how market structures, advertising support, labor relations, profit motivation, technologies, and government policies shaped media industries, journalistic practices, occupational sociology, and the nature and content of the news and entertainment”.

⁵ Page no. 80.

process plays a key role in structuring a media system. Hence, we need a political economy approach if we want to understand the world of communications and mass media. (5) The US policy-making process in the realm of communications is becoming increasingly undemocratic, as it is being dominated by powerful corporate interests with almost non-existent public participation. For example, the author claims that, behind the facade of “deregulation” introduced by the 1996 Telecommunication Act, lies a decrease in competition since, in the media industry, deregulating often simply increases the opportunities for market concentration.

In spite of the very negative assessment of the current situation of the American media industry, the book is full of hope that, at this critical juncture, things may radically improve. The recent emergence of a popular movement for media reform that has mobilized a substantial number of American citizens is therefore the object of the fourth and final chapter. Robert McChesney himself has actively contributed to the emergence and development of this movement in 2002, by co-founding Free Press, a media reform advocacy organization with the aim of democratizing the media. The movement has emerged and expanded mainly as a reaction to the media policy of the Bush administration. For example, “when the Bush administration attempted to slash funding for public broadcasting in 2005, it produced more than a million letters and petitions in protest”.⁶ Similar reactions occurred in defence of the ban on broadcast/newspaper cross-ownership (the rule that prevents the same company from owning a radio or TV station and the major daily newspaper in the same town) and of the limits to the number of broadcast stations that a company can own in a single area.

The key feature of the current juncture, however, concerns net neutrality, i.e. the policy that prohibits internet service providers from discriminating between websites. This ensures that anything travelling on the internet is treated on non-discriminatory terms by the owners of the interconnected networks that make up the internet. This neutrality provision dates back to the 1934 Communications Act. In 1996 Congress declared the internet a telecommunication service (just like telephones), and, therefore, made it subject to the non-discrimination provisions contained in the 1934 Act. Forcing the providers to give the same quality of service at equivalent prices to big commercial businesses, academic papers and remote bloggers, it is not surprising that the providers perceive these provisions as a formidable obstacle to profit maximization. In 2002 the FCC accepted an appeal by the cable companies and included cable modem service in the category of “information service”, hence removing cable broadband from the requirements of the 1934 Act (including its explicit prohibitions on discrimination). After a Supreme Court ruling in 2005, the FCC finally confirmed that cable modem would not be subject to net neutrality, fundamentally changing the legal foundations on which the internet operates. This happened with virtually no coverage in the media and no intervention by Congress, which remained the only body that could overrule the FCC. Free Press then intervened and formed the savetheinternet.com coalition, which managed to mobilize almost two million Americans in favour of reinstating net neutrality into law. Such unprecedented mobilization managed to command the attention of several Congressmen and by the time the presidential primaries began,

⁶ Page no. 178.

every major democratic candidate had come out in favour of net neutrality. Politicians became increasingly aware that bloggers can be influential on public opinion and that they cared very much about net neutrality (“if you are not for net neutrality, then the blogs will kick your rear”).⁷ When the colossal merger of AT&T and Bell South was finally approved by the FCC at the end of 2006, it contained an explicit protection of net neutrality for two years.

Although the battle for net neutrality is probably far from over, the author derives important conclusions from this experience. First, that the general public can be mobilized on and become even passionate about issues that are apparently technical and removed from the everyday experience of ordinary citizens. Second, that mobilization for free media can actually be regarded as the gateway for a more general political engagement of citizens into public life. This dramatic shift in public activism has been made possible by the internet, which has changed in fundamental ways the nature of political organizing, lowering its costs and making it more effective with fewer resources.

What have this experience and this movement to do with communication research? According to McChesney “the movement grasped how important it was to have first-rate credible media research. (...) The immediate need was for traditional quantitative communication scholars, for economists, and for legal scholars. And these scholars needed to work with us so that they didn’t get swallowed up by baseless presuppositions”.⁸ Hence, the event showed the need for relevant, rigorous and policy-oriented research, to support the battle for freer and more democratic media.

McChesney’s bold claims and emphatic language beg the question: why are the media so important for democratic decision-making? What is so special about media compared to other businesses? The presumption that runs along the entire book is that the mass media can have a powerful influence on public opinion, on the perception of reality, even on general values and attitudes. This is why McChesney is also so concerned with protecting the children from commercial advertising. Although this is not a book on the effects of mass media on the public, one could argue that, if the media did not have important effects on public opinion and political behaviour, its whole argument would be condemned to irrelevance. It is therefore important to remind that quantitative research, in particular by economists, has recently provided some of the most solid evidence that such effects do exist and that they are not necessarily small.⁹ These results then bring us forward to another question: if the mass media can substantially influence public opinion, do we have a way to conceptualize and measure the bias with respect to a fair coverage of reality? Again, the use of rigorous quantitative methods has recently led to substantial progress in our understanding of media bias, particularly of the role of the media as agenda setters.¹⁰ This finally raises a number of policy questions that are extremely important for everyone that cares about the future

⁷ Page no. 186.

⁸ Page no. 172.

⁹ See e.g. [Stromberg \(2004\)](#), [Gentzkow \(2006\)](#), [Larcinese \(2007a\)](#), [Della Vigna and Kaplan \(2007\)](#) and [Petrova \(2008\)](#).

¹⁰ See e.g. [Grosseclose and Milyo \(2005\)](#), [Corneo \(2006\)](#), [Puglisi \(2006\)](#), [Larcinese \(2007b\)](#), [Larcinese et al. \(2007\)](#) and [Gentzkow and Shapiro \(2007\)](#).

of democracy. Is it possible to have a competitive media industry? What is the role to be played by public regulation of the media market? Would competition between free media businesses be enough to generate a sufficiently well informed public? What role can or should be played by public broadcasting? In short, what can we do to have a media system that serves democratic institutions? Again, there is no doubt that economists and quantitative researchers can provide fundamental contributions towards a better understanding of these issues. This is not “economic imperialism”. It is instead the recognition that truly interdisciplinary research, which goes beyond the boundaries across disciplines and methodologies, is needed today more than ever before. This also means that economists should become more aware of the work of other social scientists and recognize the complementarities between different methods. McChesney sends a message, in particular to communication scholars: “the traditional splits between quantitative-oriented researchers and qualitative-oriented researchers no longer seem severe or important”.¹¹ We can only hope that this message will resound across academic departments and professional journals where too often scholars appear much more engaged in protecting their turf than in genuinely pursuing the search for new knowledge. This interdisciplinary research agenda is very closely related to issues like the reform of the electoral system, the financing of electoral campaigns, the influence of money and lobbies on democratic life and policy decisions. Such a collective effort requires the contribution of economists and communication scholars, as well as that of political scientists, sociologists, social psychologists and many more, and would have the potential to inform us on how to improve democratic processes and, ultimately, the life of ordinary citizens. It is not necessary to share a militant view of academic research to hope that this sort of politics will be deemed more important than departmental politics in academic circles and that new interdisciplinary research on mass media will receive the attention it deserves.

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¹¹ Page no. 194.