

A commentary: Communication, democracy and social change in crisis times – Disrupting power, dismantling injustices

Comentário: comunicação, democracia e mudança social em tempos de crise – desestabilizar os poderes, desmontar injustiças

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Abstract

This commentary reflects on what the actual conditions for a democratic politics might mean for media and communication scholars, as we try to make sense of the structures and nature of communication, the conditions of democracies around the world and the possibilities for social change in these crisis times. To do so will require that we focus on *relations of power* – the exercise of power as dominance as well as the potential of the constitutive power of subjects as free agents. Power as dominance leads us to interrogate the structural imbrication of injustices in a broader social, political and economic context in order to understand what might be done not only to disrupt power but to dismantle injustices.

Keywords

advanced capitalism, democracy, media and communication, social change

Resumo

Este comentário reflete sobre as condições reais para uma política democrática e o que isso significa para os estudos dos *media* e da comunicação quando tentamos dar sentido às estruturas e à natureza da comunicação, às condições das democracias em todo o mundo e às possibilidades de mudança social em tempos de crise. Para tal, será necessário que nos concentremos nas *relações de poder* – quer no exercício de poder como domínio, quer no potencial do poder constitutivo dos sujeitos enquanto agentes livres. O poder enquanto domínio leva-nos a interrogar a imbricação estrutural das injustiças num contexto social, político e económico mais amplo, a fim de compreender o que poderia ser feito não só para desestabilizar o poder, mas também para desmantelar injustiças.

Palavras-chave

capitalismo avançado, democracia, *media* e comunicação, mudança social

Introduction

As this journal celebrates 20 years of publication, I cannot remember in my lifetime a more politically difficult or politically urgent moment than we are in now. We face an unprecedented constellation of global crises.

The UK has left the European Union (in the name of sovereignty). Established political parties have been shaken as new ones have emerged and won power in France and Italy. The far-right has established leaders with Bolsonaro still in power in Brazil, Erdogan still President of Turkey and Oban re-elected in Hungary. In Sweden the far-right Sweden Democrats party now hold a crucial role in a right-wing coalition government. Neo-fascist political groups continue to gain in popularity across the US and Europe.

Across many so-called (neo)liberal democracies, broken party political manifestos pledges have become the norm. And where political lies and corruption, misinformation and illegality have always been part of the dark underbelly of political life – in the era of Donald Trump and Boris Johnson (as the most obvious examples of recent political leaders of liberal democratic states) they have now become an explicit part of political strategy. In such circumstances, liberal democracy may have very little by way of democratic character left.

Meanwhile, as of August 2022, the global pandemic has left us with over 6.4m people dead across the globe. And is still with us, despite many leaders claiming normality. Neoliberal forces have exploited the chaos of the pandemic and emerged even stronger as a result of further bail-outs for asset-holders and additional benefits for opportunistic corporations.

There are multiple ongoing wars and conflicts around the world with the head of the United Nations, António Guterres, saying that one quarter of humanity – 2 billion people – are living in conflict areas today. The world now faces the highest number of violent conflicts since the end of World War II in 1945. Russia's invasion of Ukraine is the latest war to shake the world impacting on food, fuel and fertiliser prices that hit the poorest countries the hardest. The U.N. estimates that in 2022 at least 271 million people will need humanitarian assistance. Guterres stated "the flames of conflict are fuelled by inequality, deprivation and underfunded systems" that must be addressed urgently (Associated Press, 2022).

And the latest intergovernmental panel on climate change (IPCC, 2022) notes that climate breakdown is accelerating rapidly, that many of the impacts will be more severe than predicted and there is only a narrow chance left of avoiding its worst ravages. Hans-Otto Pörtner, a co-chair of working group 2 of the IPCC has said "[a]ny further delay in concerted global action will miss a brief and rapidly closing window to secure a liveable future" (IPCC, 2022). Yet concerted global action appears a long way off.

Now, as Jameson (2003, p. 76) once said, "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism".

In these circumstances, media and communication studies has never been more relevant as a discipline just as the practices and institutions that it interrogates have never been more central to the conduct of political and social life. Trends, so readily tossed around by commentators, policymakers and politicians – from the emergence of 'post-truth' to the circulation of 'fake news' and from the ubiquity of political marketing to the importance of data mining – are seen to shape social and political landscapes as never before. The idea and practice of the social and the political is endlessly *narrated, mediated, affected, imagined and technologised*.

Yet I am increasingly struck by the fact that there are so few attempts to offer a critique of the breadth and depth of the current crises we are going through to answer the broader questions of *why* we are in this current social, political, and economic conjuncture? If we cannot begin to explain *why we are where we are*, then we cannot understand or contribute to social change.

And there is the persistent danger in the fields of media and communications that we oversimplify by submitting to the lure of technology as it seduces the reach of our analyses and we become entranced by the platforms, actors and rituals that we seek to evaluate. So, we elevate media logics above often more fundamental (and less visible) conflicts concerning power relations and resource distribution and end up defining power in relation to the management, regulation and strategic use of symbolic spaces rather than broader political economic systems. And we run the risk of fetishizing the communicative as we turn to technological solutionism and further entrench the problems we are seeking to counter.

Part of the draw towards technology is that technological change is often associated with social change. This assumed relationality encourages us to think about how technology enabled processes and practices enhance or restrain citizen participation and civic agency. How technical affordances of particular platforms lend themselves to citizen engagement or not. How algorithms govern and automate decision making to the detriment of democratic principles. In a datafied society, these focus mostly on issues of privacy, data use and surveillance – concerns that became ever more vital during the global pandemic when so many had to rely heavily on digital communications for education, work, social life and healthcare.

With the experience of home-working, quarantine and self-isolation, the importance of our digital connections for participation (of any kind) was thrust centre stage, as well as the global, national and local inequalities that the lack of digital connection exposes. This has further revealed the paucity of and problems with the sorts of participatory engagement digital lives so often bring. But focussing on this assumes that the solutions are also digital – and this mostly translates into more and better regulation – tweaking and taming of the tech giants rather than reimagining what a transformative media world might be.

Problems of civic participation in mediated worlds – so important for this thing called democracy – have a long history as does investment of hope in new technologies to offer up emancipatory possibilities. To interrogate these approaches requires a deep contextualisation that can take account of political and socio-economic factors and the material consequences of inequality alongside a conceptualisation of power and powerlessness to tackle the multiple questions that arise:

What does it mean to participate in society as political subjects? Who is allowed to be a citizen and who is not? What types of social and political agency are recognised as relevant or credible? And ultimately, if a healthy functioning democracy is our end point, what sort of democracy are we aiming for?

Each of these large and enduring problems focuses on the key issue of social change and who has the power to bring it about? Who can intervene in and influence

the various types and forms of governance and control and for whose benefit? This is not *just* a question of who is able to exercise individual autonomy in the digital age but extends to the very possibility for social change: the forms of deliberation available to us, mutual recognition of personhood and the social fabric of trust: the actual conditions for a democratic politics of any type.

This commentary reflects on what this might mean for media and communication scholars as we try to make sense of the structures and nature of communication, the conditions of democracies around the world and the possibilities for social change in these crisis times. To do so will require that we focus on *relations of power* – the exercise of power as dominance as well as the potential of the constitutive power of subjects as free agents. Power as dominance leads us to interrogate the structural imbrication of injustices in a broader social, political and economic context in order to understand what might be done not only to disrupt power but to dismantle injustices.

Structural and infrastructural exclusions

If we want to answer the question of how we can better intervene in society and who has the power to bring about social change then we have to first answer the question of why certain citizens and forms of civil society are largely excluded. Some responses to this question, such as enduring levels of economic inequality, can be considered meta-analytical issues that re-occur in social, economic, political and technological domains and are likely to be relevant in all (neo)liberal democracies although will differ in detail in each. Others are deemed to be more infra-structural forms of exclusion that support the (non)participatory apparatuses of particular states/jurisdictions such as legal frameworks of constraint and repression. Both underpin forms of civic participation and means of exclusion and are interwoven with media and communicative practices.

Increased levels of economic inequality

Inequality makes certain political subjects less visible and excludes others altogether. Numerous analyses show how inequality damages our societies, our economies and our democratic systems. Inequality is a form of political evacuation – it pushes people out of the possibilities of political participation. The World Inequality Lab (Chancel et al., 2022) brings together the work of more than 100 researchers around the world – it shows the richest 10 per cent of the global population currently hold 76 per cent of global wealth compared to a 2 per cent share for the poorest half. Since wealth is a major source of future economic gains, and of power and influence, this signals further increases in inequality to come. At the heart of this explosion is the extreme concentration of economic power in the hands of a very small minority of the super-rich. The top 1 per cent is growing much faster than the rest: between 1995 and 2021, the top 1 per cent captured 38 per cent of the global increment in wealth. The share of wealth owned by the global top 0.1 per cent rose from 7 per cent to 11 per cent over that period as global billionaire wealth soared (Chancel et al., 2022).

Inequality is always a political choice, it is not inevitable. Income and wealth inequalities have been on the rise nearly everywhere since the 1980s, following a series of deregulation and liberalization programs which took different forms in different countries. Certain countries have experienced spectacular increases in inequality (including the US, Russia and India) while others (many European countries and China) have experienced relatively smaller rises. Over the past 40 years nations have become richer but governments have become significantly poorer. Private wealth has grown but the share of wealth held by public actors is close to zero or even negative in rich countries. In the UK public wealth dropped from 60 per cent of national income in 1970 to minus 106 per cent in 2020 – with huge implications for state capacities to tackle inequality (Chancel et al., 2022).

Economic inequality is structurally inbuilt into societies. If we look at the digital landscape, we can detect a direct relationship between the practices of unequal capital accumulation and the politics of data, metrics and social media. The business model of our digital oligopolies concentrates economic and technological power. Currently the kings of capitalism are the digital giants – Facebook/Meta, Alphabet (the parent company of Google), Amazon and Apple. If we add Microsoft to this list then together they have a combined annual revenue larger than the GDP of 90 per cent of the world's countries (Lawrence and Laybourn-Langton, 2019). Jeff Bezos, the founder and owner of Amazon, is the richest person in history, with his net wealth increasing by \$400 million a day in 2018. During the course of the pandemic the share value of Microsoft, Apple, Amazon and Facebook reached 20 per cent of that of the 500 largest US corporations, which enriched their chief executives by tens of billions of dollars as the rest of the economy collapsed (Blakeley, 2021). Facebook, as Vaidhyathan (2018) argues, is both a “pleasure machine” and a “surveillance machine”, a “protest machine” and a “disinformation machine” that is structurally fixated on hoovering up personal data and circulating content no matter its accuracy or consequence. Together with Google, it accounted for just over 68 per cent of all digital advertising in the UK and 52 per cent in the US in 2021. Google alone earns more from advertising than the ad revenue of China and the UK combined; indeed, Google's ad revenue is larger than that of any ad market in the world with the exception of the US (Richter, 2019). We are truly in an age of “digital dominance” manifested by growing public concern with “user autonomy, user agency and the power of platforms to impact the decision-making of consumers and citizens through profiling, information control, and behavioural nudges” (Moore and Tambini, 2018, p. 398).

The marketized property relations that transform communicative goods and services into commodities for private gain diminishes their democratic value and contributes to rising inequality.

Information and technology inequalities

Ofcom research (2021) shows that 6 per cent of the UK population still does not have access to the internet at home (over 4 million people). This rises to 11 per cent of those in lower socio-economic households. In Portugal in the same year, OECD data notes some 13 per cent did not have access to the internet. In the US nearly 30

per cent of the poorest households (with an income under \$30,000 a year) don't own a smartphone (Pew Research Centre, 2019), leading to what Peter Golding (2017, p. 4313) terms a "citizen detriment": a form of harm caused by economic inequality and the resulting lower levels of disposable income that prevent poorer communities from securing access to a healthy diet of information services. Digital exclusion extends to all areas of life – access to work, quality of education, availability of healthcare, costs of goods and services and the ability to connect with loved ones as well as voice, information and political participation (Trappel, 2019). All of these exclusions also correlate to intersectional issues of race, social class, gender and disability.

Political power, privilege and influence of an executive elite

At the other end of the scale, Davis et al. (2020) notes the increasing power of a growing executive elite whose influence is often deliberately hidden from view, and situated outside of the public sphere through private networks and communication channels that are invisible to most but exert influence through appointments to board positions, committees and quangos to push the agenda in their favour. During the pandemic, these privileges came to the fore in the UK when British politicians scrambled to procure the necessary personal protective equipment (PPE), ventilators and Covid-19 tests to deal with the virus. *The New York Times* analysed 1,200 UK government contracts worth \$22 billion, 50 per cent of which went to companies either run by friends and associates in the ruling Conservative Party or to those with no prior experience or a history of controversy (from tax evasion and fraud to corruption and human rights abuses). About \$5 billion went to politically connected companies. Some had former minister and government advisers on staff other were Conservative Party donors. During the procurement process, the government created a 'VIP lane' for favoured companies endorsed by officials or politicians which became ten times more likely to win contracts than those outside that group according to the National Audit Office (NAO, 2020). These firms made extraordinary profits – one (connected to a Conservative peer) making £76m for PPE that was deemed unsafe and unusable.

The extended power of a growing executive elite favours a policy environment of "corporate libertarianism" (Pickard, 2014) where global corporations are given relative freedom to do as they please by governments who fiercely defend capitalist interests because, on the whole, capital is where their own interests lie. And so we can point to the roles of Fox news in the US in mobilising support for Donald Trump, of Globo in amplifying the insurgent voice of Brazilian President Bolsonaro, and the UK's tabloid newspapers in constantly urging their readers to 'BeLeave in Britain' ahead of the referendum on EU membership. Traditional news outlets are far from diminished in the digital age, rather they are leveraging their influence into the online world resulting in "a *shared* dominance of digital agendas by a relatively small number of institutional megaphones, be they platform monopolies, aggregators, or major conventional news organizations" (Schlosberg, 2018, p. 209).

In the UK, levels of concentration of press power continue to increase. In 2015 three companies controlled 71 per cent of national newspaper readership; by the end of 2021, the same three companies – Rupert Murdoch's News UK, DMG Media

(publisher of the *Mail* titles) and Reach (publisher of the *Mirror* titles) accounted for 90 per cent of the national audience (Media Reform Coalition, 2021). By themselves, News UK and DMG, strong supporters of the Conservative Party and purveyors of anti-immigrant and anti-welfarist agendas, dominate over 70 per cent of the market share of national newspapers. Despite drops in circulation of their leading daily titles of approximately 25 per cent since 2015, they continue to have a prominent presence in online spaces where the *Sun* and *Daily Mail* alone account for nearly 38 per cent of total daily offline and online UK news brand reach (Media Reform Coalition, 2021). This guarantees them continuing attention from politicians and from broadcasters.

These trends point towards the challenge of a renewed executive power where elite groups deploy their resources – their access to capital, their political influence and their ideological congruence – to dominate and dictate the terms of contemporary media and tech systems. Whether this is in the form of tax-avoiding corporations and offshore billionaires; data brokers and infrastructure empires; market-friendly politicians and captive regulators – the end result is the increasing concentration of power and influence in ever fewer hands.

The increasing power of elites has not gone unnoticed. People feel increasingly ignored and are ever more aware that elite and corporate power often occurs behind our backs (Crouch, 2011). So it should come as no surprise that there is also a crisis of trust in institutions and particularly in the government, with 53 per cent of people in the UK saying that government leaders are purposely trying to mislead them (Edelman, 2021) in a political economy of lies. People are fully aware that their consent is now only needed in particular circumstances and even then it can be distorted by media and tech systems designed to maximize corporate profit rather than serve the public interest – systems that have been shown to exist in a sordid entanglement with political power and used for political advantage (Fenton et al, 2020). Social media, from formerly being seen as the answer to all democratic ills (Curran et al, 2016), is now subject to growing scrutiny relating to echo chambers (Sunstein, 2018), online influencers (Abramowitz, 2017), covert advertising and revelations of the role algorithms play in our daily decision-making as well as in democratic processes (Tucker et al, 2018). Edelman (2021) reports that trust in all news sources in the UK are at record lows with social media as a source of news now only trusted by 19 per cent of the population.

Legislative frameworks of constraint and repression

In a context of decreasing trust in governments and politicians as well as our systems of information and news provision, it is often claimed that the arena of civil society increases in importance. Contrary to frequently cited assumptions regarding the expansion of voice in the digital age *both* political agency *and* digital voice have shrunk in recent years for civil society groups and organisations. When we look closely at political agency in civil society, there is clear evidence that in the UK civil society has become *less* able to play an active role in democratic processes over the past decade as digital tools have multiplied. Civil society has seen a deliberate hollowing out of its ability to 'be political'. This has included legislation such as the Lobbying

Act which has had a 'chilling effect' on civil society campaigning (SMK, 2018) and New Grants Standards which have restricted recipients of public money if they engage in 'advocacy'.

These policy restrictions on civil society's ability to intervene are being further aggravated by new powers for the police over protests, and new sentences for serious crimes in the controversial new *Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill 2022*. The Bill adds to already increased restrictions on the right to protest and call strike action. The National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO et al., 2021) and other civil society groups opposed the additional restrictions to the right to protest and measures that target Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities in particular, stating that the expansive policing and sentencing powers further entrench racial disparity in the criminal justice system. The Bill is able to impose a start and finish time to static protests, set noise limits and apply these rules to a demonstration of just one person. It makes it an offence to "intentionally or recklessly cause public nuisance" a move designed to stop people occupying public spaces, blocking roads or employing other noisy and "annoying" tactics to get their voice heard.

Big data and digital surveillance technologies lend false justification to these frameworks of constraint that further disguise and cover over structural inequalities that are heavily racialised and discriminatory. Policy design by big data drives discriminatory practices – whose data is used to inform what political and policy decisions impacts directly on institutional strategies and policy decisions of governments and authorities. Research points to how software analyses of large sets of crime data are used for predictive policing to forecast where crime is likely to occur perpetuating a vicious cycle of excessive surveillance and scrutiny in non-white, poorer neighbourhoods (O'Neil, 2016) that is often strikingly unreliable and reinforces discriminatory policing practices (Angwin et al., 2016). Chun notes (2019, p. 66) that "algorithms perpetuate the discrimination they 'find' – they are not simply descriptive but also prescriptive and performative in all senses of that word".

Patterns of discrimination have of course been with us since long before the internet and data analytics. Structural inequalities have always been necessary for capital accumulation. In today's digital age this not only continues but intensifies through racially encoded algorithms that determine people's 'worthiness' (to access anything from a new job to a home loan) and entrench status differentials. Milner and Raub (2021, p. 1) refer to this as "data capitalism and algorithmic racism".

The structural relation between financialized human capital, racism and oppression renders fear, insecurity and anxiety that also in turn exacerbates racism and sexism and feeds the swell of far-right white supremacist movements that are resurgent in so many of the countries that make up capitalism's historic core. Finlayson argues that while contradictory and conflicting positions have emerged across the Alt-right (from conservatism through to ethnonationalism and libertarianism), these are united in opposition to liberal ideas of the state. In particular, what unifies the Alt-right is a belief in the value of inequality. Finlayson explains: "inequality is a core concept, understood as a natural phenomenon, scientifically verified and the necessary basis of civil order, essential to the maintenance of individual freedom, economic stability and cultural coherence" (Finlayson, 2021, p. 172). Such views are consistent with those of Hayek, who was openly critical of the attempts by welfarist states to equalize natural

differences between individuals, but Finlayson observes that contemporary forms of right-wing populism go further than this as they advance “a broad-based challenge to the technocratic politics of third-way neoliberalism and globalization” and demand “yet greater marketization of ideas and ideologies, culture and consciousness” (Finlayson, 2021, p. 177) in a blend of radical conservatism and libertarianism. The “ideological entrepreneurs” of the Alt-right put their faith in the market to reveal the true capacity of individuals and the natural inequalities of talent. In this manner the concept of social justice is dismissed entirely as a lie borne of left-wing conspiracy.

The anti-equality offensive functions in perfect tandem with the social media economy of clickbait advertising because the more gratuitously extremist and pug-nacious the postings are the more they will provoke outraged reactions and the more the audience grows. To optimise performance, platforms have encouraged advertisers to group together related audiences to create affectively charged clusters who are encouraged to take the clickbait through a focus on their divisive views. Propublica’s 2017 investigation into Facebook revealed how Facebook’s self-service ad-buying platform encouraged reporters to increase their ad’s target audience size by generating outrage, suggesting that they added “How to burn Jews” and “Second Amendment” to “Jew Hater”. Facebook’s algorithm generates its ad categories automatically based on what users explicitly share with Facebook and what they implicitly convey through their online activity (Chun and Barnett, 2021). Hate has become profitable (Angwin, Varner and Tobin, 2017). BuzzFeed News reported that Google prompted them to run ads specifically targeted to people typing racist and bigoted terms into its search bar and suggested additional racist terms to extend the ads reach like “black people ruin neighbourhoods” (Kantrowitz, 2017).

Undoubtedly, in the debate above I have cherry-picked examples that reveal the structural limitations of intervening as citizens into decision making to enable social change. These examples do *not* all correlate perfectly or fit together snugly to reveal a capitalist conspiracy designed to hold back the angry masses. But they do challenge us to confront a political-economic context that has been ordered to serve capital accumulation of the few, has created more inequality and more discrimination and to pay attention to where dissenting voices are disciplined within a repressive regulatory framework in structures that are systemically racist and heteropatriarchal. It brings to the fore fundamental questions of concentration and consolidation of power and control driven by (data) capitalism.

What would it mean to democratize the datafied society, disrupt power and dismantle injustices?

The above discussion puts many of the problems of advanced capitalism front and centre of its analysis. It indicates that a democratic future that can disrupt vested power interests and dismantle injustices requires a disentanglement of the state and civil society from market entrenchment and a harnessing of our media and data for the public good and in public ownership rather than for private gain and profit. This will require not just alternative strategies and policies but also an alternative politics that begins from a concern with the problems a capitalist economy has left us

with: burgeoning inequality, precarity and poverty; global warming and the biospheric damage from a dominant economic system predicated on endless consumption and growth that concentrates economic and political power in the hands of the few.

If we accept that persistent levels of economic inequality is a meta-analytical issue traceable across social, economic, political and technological domains with extensive consequences for democracy then we must acknowledge that to change this direction of travel requires addressing means of redistribution (of power and wealth) as well as tackling means of equal recognition (for democratic politics to take place). It requires political and economic alternatives that are just and inclusive, ecologically wise and socially regenerative, shifting economic and political power back to communities and public democratic institutions. In other words, conceiving of a datafied society that supports a newly imagined democratic political economy means conceiving of a world not simply post-Covid but post-capitalism – a different kind of media and tech industry as a fundamental feature of a different kind of social system (Fenton et al., 2020). This is no mean feat.

Building on the work of Nancy Fraser (Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018) and the Media Reform Coalition's *Manifesto for a People's Media* (Media Reform Coalition, 2021a; Fenton et al., 2020), I have tried to envisage what a politics of redistribution and recognition might mean for media/data justice to be realised hinging these prospects around three core principles. To be truly transformational, all three principles must be met:

1. Structural socio-economic parity

This speaks to Fraser's intervention on the importance of "non-domination" and refers to both external structural factors relating to the broader environment that the tech industry functions within and to internal structural factors relating to the workforce and working practices of the organizations themselves. The principle of structural socio-economic parity clearly runs counter to concentration of media and tech ownership including the fact that tech giants are now the largest oligopolies the world has ever seen. Structural change must confront and dismantle these forms of power to include both large scale forms of governance and localized forms of production and collective management.

Ownership matters but dismantling and limiting concentration of media ownership only takes us so far. It may relax the stranglehold of power that certain tech corporations exert but it does not necessarily alter the neoliberal nature of the system they operate within. So it is crucial to enable, support and sustain forms of media and tech ownership that are *not for profit* and *fully independent of commercial pressures and government preferences*, are organised co-operatively and democratically and are responsive to the needs of the communities they serve rather than at the behest of the market. The principle here is for new models of ownership, fully responsive and accountable to the needs of the communities they serve, that redistribute and circulate wealth rather than extract it.

In a context in which mainstream media industries are largely bastions of privilege for political and economic elites and operate with fierce hierarchies resistant to change, publicly-owned media organizations may appear to be a viable solution. For

example, public service media such as the BBC are often seen as the best redress for a contemporary journalism marked by hyperpartisanship and hypercommercialism with the ability to offer journalism independent of the state or market, inclusive of diverse voices and with space for more critical coverage. But, as Freedman (2018, p. 206) argues, the BBC “is a compromised version of a potentially noble ideal: far too implicated in and attached to existing elite networks of power to be able to offer an effective challenge to them”. Despite its claims to be impartial and independent, the BBC has always sided with the elite and been in thrall to those in power. Over the last three decades, the BBC’s independence has been steadily eroded and its programme-making increasingly commercialised (Fenton et al., 2020). Severe funding cuts, particularly in recent years, have also caused the BBC’s editorial culture to become more conservative and risk-averse. Mills (2016) and the Media Reform Coalition (2021a) argue that adequate, secure public funding that is fully independent of governmental control is the pathway to real political independence and insulation from the market-based approach that has eroded the BBC’s public service ethos. Rather than returning to the top-down, statist model on which the BBC was founded, to fulfil its public service promise the BBC must become a modern, democratised public platform and network, fully representative of its audiences and completely independent.

Another relevant model of democratic ownership is the cooperative: an autonomous association of people who have come together voluntarily to meet their common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned and democratically controlled enterprise. Cooperatives are based on values of self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity. As such, they aim to eschew gender, social, racial, political or religious discrimination and pursue equity through things like education and training. Cooperatives work for sustainable community development through policies approved by members. They are concerned with the nurturing of people and communities and democratic self-rule. Cooperative ownership has been argued to increase employment stability and increase productivity levels by discouraging an approach based on short-termism for shareholder return and the use of low wage labour (Davies et al., 2014). As cooperatives are collectively owned and controlled, they are also more democratic and responsive to internal demands for more egalitarian employment and working practices. There is no employer and employee but a membership of worker-owners that are no longer solely answerable to capital; rather, the idea is that capital serves the cooperative that is democratically organised and governed.

Ideas relating data to public and cooperative principles are now readily discussed by media and communications scholars: Pariser (2020) talks about building online public parks to reclaim the internet as a public space. Zuckerman (2020) has called for a “digital public infrastructure” for the widespread adoption of new public service digital media tools enabling a diversity of platforms to serve a diversity of cultures, giving communities control over governance. Both propose funding from taxing digital advertising. Murdock (2018, p. 43) proposes building a digital commons “with public service broadcasters as the central hub in an online space that would combine the holdings and expertise of established public cultural institutions with the energy and creativity of grassroots activity on the internet”. Andrejevic (2013) argues for a new public service media sector for the digital age to include social media, search and other information-sorting and communication utilities. James Muldoon proposes *Platform Socialism* (2021).

In different ways, all of these seek to remove the dominance of the tech giants and their data control with a shift away from data for capital accumulation to data for the public interest. However, as Prainsack (2019, p. 3) points out, such approaches rarely tackle “categories, practices and effects of exclusion” – whether this refers to exclusion from data and information entering a digital commons; using data in the digital commons; benefitting from or participating in the governance of the digital commons. A focus on structural socio-economic parity requires not only a levelling of the playing field but a disruption of the oppressions and injustices on which the current neo-liberal order depends to build socio-economic power that is owned and governed by those who live its effects.

And so, just as structural socio-economic parity means getting rid of inequalities, it is also related to the internal plurality and power dynamics of organisations. An organisation built on the principle of socio-economic parity must recognise ways in which the media and tech industries have held certain people back – black people, old people, disabled people, working class people – and will seek to counter those forms of discrimination by taking special measures to compensate for the social and economic inequalities of unjust social structures in full recognition of the different yet connected structural conditions of class, racial and hetero-patriarchal domination. The majority of mainstream media organisations are alarmingly lacking in diversity in output and in the workforce. An increasingly casualised workforce also impacts disproportionately on those from lower income families, women, minority groups, and those with disabilities. Structural socio-economic parity would require a major power shift in the general media/tech landscape away from capital hungry commercial organisations and also in how power is shared within media/tech organisations themselves. A shift that recognizes that parity is not just an economic concern but also a social and political one too.

2. Democratic media commons

Just as structural parity in the media goes beyond plurality of media ownership so a substantively meaningful democracy goes beyond liberal versions of democracy with their emphasis on individual rights and jurisprudence to reconnect with a democratic tradition premised on equality, participation and popular sovereignty – a *democratic media commons*. In practice this will also involve a strong sense of localism and community managed resources (including local media) run sustainably with mechanisms to progress equality and to prevent anyone taking unfair advantage. This fits most comfortably with the notion of “subversive commoning” proposed by Birkinbine (2018). If we see the media as part of a shared public information and communications resource necessary for a healthy functioning democracy – a form of public utility – then we have to shift from viewing them as primarily competitive corporate entities to shared resources that can be co-owned and/or co-governed by the users and media workers according to their own rules and norms as part of the commons. This relates to physical spaces that are shared or pooled; the co-production of the resource; the means of maintaining that resource; as well as the mode of governance – how decisions are made collaboratively through collective problem-solving to distribute and use the resources (Fenton et al., 2010).

Co-operatives are democratic organisations controlled by members who jointly participate in setting policies and making decisions. Media co-ops are on the rise. The Global Newsletter for Cooperatives Active in Industry Services (CICOPA) reported that in 2017 there had been a 27 per cent increase in co-ops in the field of information and communications around the world with many emerging in response to the need to preserve pluralism, escape commercial and state pressures and ensure independent journalism. Most of these are worker cooperatives with democratic governance at their core and the majority operate in Europe. Many face issues of lack of finance, regulatory complexity, tax and administrative burdens but nonetheless are increasing in number. Part of the growth is due to the emergence of platform cooperatives where users and/or workers ultimately own and control the platforms based on principles of economic fairness, training and democratic participation in the running of online businesses (Scholz and Schneider, 2016).

In the UK, *The Bristol Cable* is changing the face of local journalism as a grass-roots community-led media cooperative. It prints a free quarterly magazine with a circulation of 30,000 copies and publishes investigative and community-led journalism regularly online. It also delivers free media training equipping local people with the skills to report on issues that are important to them. It is funded by over 2,000 members, each paying a small monthly fee (who all have a say and own an equal share in the co-op), by foundation support and crowd funding. Income is also generated from advertising in the print edition regulated by an ethical advertising charter determined by members. Each year its members vote on the annual budget, the overall focus for content and who sits on the board of directors. They insist on democratic decision-making throughout the organisation. Media coops like *The Bristol Cable* are trying to figure out what workplace democracy could be in the media industry – from who gets to do what jobs, to who makes decisions on content and resource distribution.

Some of the best examples of “media commoning” today can be found within independent and community media organisations. In the UK, *Bureau Local* describe themselves as a “collaborative, investigative network revealing stories that matter to communities across the UK”. They are trying to reimagine journalism as an industry that belongs to and is representative of all of us through the sharing of infrastructure that makes it easier to design and start up new journalism projects. They aim to create a new pipeline into media ownership through investing in community newsroom leaders traditionally marginalised by the media, with shared legal, operational and production support and editorial resources for the running of equitable community newsrooms that serve the public interest. In their own *Manifesto for a People’s Newsroom* they state their collective promise as:

- We will report on inequality and the communities, institutions and services under pressure in the UK – those harmed, ignored and under-represented.
- We will do this by making our journalism open, inclusive and human-centred from start to finish.
- We will collaborate, co-create and share space, resources and experience with active members of a community – journalists, storytellers, experts and engaged citizens.

- We will harness data and evidence and use innovative techniques to find and tell stories so they are accessible for everyone.
- We are just one solution to the challenges facing local news and so we will focus our resources on stories where collaboration can make a difference.
- We will tell stories that matter to local people but are also part of a bigger picture in order to reveal threats to the public interest and challenge power at the highest level.
- We will do all of this to ensure that our journalism is useful to society and improves access to information – locally and nationally – on underreported issues.
- We will work to ensure that our reporting lifts off the page, and then returns to our communities – and those with power – to spark change. (Bureau Local, 2021)

3. Worker and environmental sustainability

Media institutions across the globe are facing multiple crises: of funding, trust, representation, accountability and legitimacy. In many of the countries that make-up capitalism's core, the newspaper and magazine industry is in serious decline as large digital intermediaries gobble up the majority of advertising revenue. Much of the debate about the sustainability of the news industry circulates around debates relating to this 'broken business model'. Local news in particular, is increasingly under threat. In the UK, 65 per cent of the population is no longer served by a local daily newspaper (Media Reform Coalition, 2021). To retain high levels of profitability, media corporations have closed or merged titles and cut jobs, often moving journalists long distances away from the communities they serve and no longer providing content of relevance to them. In short, a profit-driven response means they become ever more unsustainable.

However, if we shift our perspective from one of media as a source of profit to media as a resource for the public good, then the question of financial sustainability becomes a rather different one: a means to pay journalists a decent living wage in good working conditions to deliver journalism in the public interest rather than maximise shareholder profitability. *The Bristol Cable* most closely fits the description of a multi-stakeholder cooperative (MSC) whose membership includes both the workers and readers. MSCs offer a means of financial sustainability through membership payments. *The New Internationalist*, a magazine dedicated to human rights, politics and social justice, describes itself as one of the largest media cooperatives in the world. Founded in 1973 it became a workers co-op in 1992 and then an MSC in 2017. By 2019 it had over 3,600 investor members who have a say in how the magazine develops. Becoming an MSC has given it long-term financial sustainability and enabled it to do more investigative and long form journalism. *The Ferret*, based in Scotland, is also a cooperative run by its members and funded by subscriptions, donations, paid for stories or material and grants and gains its following from being democratic and having a clear public purpose.

Infrastructural support for media plurality needs to go further than simply recognising the necessity of guaranteeing citizen's access to a wide range of diverse information and debate for a flourishing democracy. To be fully sustainable we need to put

citizens at the centre of democratic media governance too. An approach based on the commons is aimed at strengthening the collective solidarity of workers and offering mutual life support to all inhabitants. A media *commons* is by definition sustainable.

Milner and Traub (2021, p. 28) note that in the US “activists and community groups are organising against geographic and economic displacement by tech companies – including opposition to public subsidies for corporations that siphon resources away from community needs, tech-driven gentrification that displaces lower-income Black and brown residents in favour of more affluent and whiter tech employees, and the anti-union stance of many tech companies that degrades job quality [...] Communities have also taken action against the local environmental impact of massive data centers located in their midst.” Systemic change means addressing the structural causes of poverty and economic inequality through redistributive mechanisms of wealth including ideas such as the 4 day working week and universal basic income. It means foregrounding class, gender and racial subordination and political domination by sharing and redistributing power through processes of radically substantive democracy. It introduces a new logic of de-commodification of the social commons where our institutions are reclaimed as part of the commons for the public good. It means refusing ever-increasing levels of extraction, production and consumption promulgated by media and tech companies.

Conclusion

The contemporary characteristics of advanced capitalism have brought to the fore structures of inequality and discrimination that are part of our social order. They result in who owns what, the forms of labour we have, the nature of production, the means of exchange, the operation of the markets and the various stresses and injuries these exert on daily lives lived in debt, insecurity and in fear – all of which are deeply uneven. In this commentary, I have tried to point towards the multiple ways in which structural and infrastructural inequalities are embedded in political, economic and social relations. And to suggest the many ways that accumulation of capital infiltrates all elements of a population’s existence through the dispossession of public power and control in systems of data communication, mediation and cultural reproduction.

The three key principles identified above, on which change could be premised, situate our media and tech futures in a broader, visionary and emancipatory politics for social, political and economic transformation. Without pushing for change that can realize these principles, our media and tech worlds will become ever more concentrated in fewer hands, more susceptible to market pressures and distorted by commercial priorities, less diverse and less able to realize the potential of digital platforms for public purposes. We need to continue to imagine media systems that prioritize the value of the public over profit and collaboration over competitiveness and to develop economies that go beyond capital. Operationally, this means that we have to formulate mechanisms of inclusive citizen participation and democratic control of the spaces we inhabit. Rethinking and rebuilding our media and tech worlds according to these principles will require enormous energy and enthusiasm. We will need to learn from other social struggles and solidarity movements that sought to

advance economic equality, civil rights and social justice on the basis that there can be no meaningful democracy without media reform.

In the UK I am a founding member of the Media Reform Coalition where we have developed a *Manifesto for a People's Media* (Media Reform Coalition, 2021a) that translates these ideas into a vision for a media sector that is truly independent, wholly democratic, fully accountable and for everyone. I urge everyone to join the movement for a People's Media, mobilise and organise for media reform wherever you are, and work towards media and tech systems that not only disrupt unequal power relations but also dismantle injustices and bring hope for democratic social change in crisis-ridden times.

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