



BRILL

PERSPECTIVES ON GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT
AND TECHNOLOGY 23 (2024) 304–326

PERSPECTIVES
ON GLOBAL
DEVELOPMENT
AND
TECHNOLOGY
brill.com/pgdt

The Problem of ‘Siloed Media Blocs’: How Modes of Communication Shape Our Organizing

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Received 26 May 2024 | Accepted 15 June 2024 |

Published online 7 November 2024

Abstract

Our mass media has taken us into a realm of political crisis, dividing our people in new ways, not simply in the old ways of class, race, and gender, or liberal and conservative. The multiple new ‘media silos’ – with conflicting ideas of ‘fake news,’ ‘alternate facts,’ and myriad conspiracies – also block any simple resolutions. In this article, we will try to dig deeper into this problem, and find what solutions we can.

Keywords

conflicted consciousness – dialectic – Marxism – media silos – spectacle

1 Introduction

Media is plural for medium, which, in its secondary definition, ‘medium’ serves as a channel or system of communication. It allows the transmission of meaning and information between two or more producers or consumers – or between actors who are producers and consumers at once. Communication is common between people, although other sentient organisms can also communicate. Among people, some may want to hold other people as enslaved, but no one wants to be an enslaved person. The two thus display a different consciousness of themselves and the social order where they reside.

This handful of assertions are the self-evident propositions that this article will ask readers to accept as our opening arguments in discussing human consciousness. We will want to know how it comes into being, and how nature and the social order shape it. In the social order, we will also find many dualities, one being the 'mode of production' and the 'mode of communication.'

Like the master-slave dialectic itself, these opening propositions also all have an inner tension. They are conflicted, which enables them to unfold in various ways, for better or worse. Why are these not simply observations but also a problem for us? Today's mass media have a dual nature: they can educate us and bring us together in wider communities while, at the same time, dividing and misinforming us, isolating us with undue hostilities from one another. They can expand our consciousness while keeping us confined. We want to move forward while they hold us back.

2 What Is Consciousness?

We start with consciousness. We hope not only to understand human consciousness *but also to learn how to change it*. Moreover, we are not simply aiming to change individuals. We aim at changing consciousness on a mass level, especially that of the working classes and all the oppressed. They now exist 'in themselves;' we want to assist in their becoming 'for themselves.' Thus, we are asking not only what consciousness is in general, but also what 'class consciousness' is, and how it might become socialist and revolutionary.

To find answers we will use the works of Karl Marx, George Herbert Mead, Antonio Gramsci, Alvin and Heidi Toffler, and many others. These thinkers have taken a deep dive into both the productive and communicative sides of media.

Marx (1852) anchors what we think of ourselves and others in how we manage to live and reproduce. Moreover, he posits a 'base' and a 'superstructure,' where the latter is a realm where our new ideas gained from life and science battle it out with 'all the old muck' of ideology. As he points out in the opening to "The 18th Brumaire of Louis Napoleon:"

Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. And just as they seem to be occupied with revolutionizing

themselves and things, creating something that did not exist before, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present this new scene in world history in time-honored disguise and borrowed language (Chapter 1, Paragraph 2).

Continuing with the others named above, George Herbert Mead (1934) looks less at history and more at society and the personal. From the start, he enables us to see our consciousness as social and two-sided. He shows how we develop in phases, from awareness in infancy to gaining, through language, a fully social and individual self-consciousness. Antonio Gramsci (1971) divides our social consciousness in two, 'common sense,' as ideas widely and commonly held, and 'good sense,' as beliefs and ideas rooted in science and solidarity, which can contend with 'common sense' and create out of both a new revolutionary outlook to construct a new order. Alvin and Heidi Toffler (1980) offer us a new way of seeing what is unique about media today, explaining how a revolution in media hardware was 'demassifying' various mass media into a new 'many-to-many' mode where we are all producers and consumers.

3 The Shift from Feeling to Knowing: the Emergent Present

All sentient beings are organisms that display consciousness. On the most basic level, they avoid harm and seek nutrition in their local habitats. Many of them will act cooperatively with others of their kind to accomplish both of these tasks, even if, in doing so, the organisms are simply feeling their way through their natural environment. As the beings in question become more complex, so will the acuteness of their feelings and responses, and through this learning, they will become creatures with more complicated ways of knowing.

In their transactions with their environment, certain sentient organisms will retain the effects of previous feelings and use them to shift from feeling to knowing. Knowing is both a recalling of past feelings and an anticipating of new feelings. It remembers. It recalls a past and projects a future of pleasure or pain. It can salivate over a tasty meal of ripe berries or cringe before the heat of a fire. In short, it begins to retain past responses as patterns in the brain once removed from the more external body parts, registering the initial physical feeling. With these embedded patterns, the organism recalls and anticipates learning to thrive. Now, an organism not only feels; it also knows. Mere sententiousness is now consciousness within an 'emergent present.'

Consciousness, however, is not yet self-consciousness. How do we become self-conscious in the first place? Here, we turn to the work of Mead, who is often referred to as the father of social psychology.

4 Gesture, Play, and Games: Mead's Three Steps to the Social Self

According to Mead (1934), human consciousness goes through several phases, but it's important to note that these are three social phases from the start:

1. Gestures start as an infant's 'baby cries' for food or comfort, answered with nourishment or warmth. But these are also received accompanied by significant sounds, which are often returned, then imitated, and then become reflexive. These gestures are the beginning of communication, essential to self-formation and much more (pp. 144–149);
2. Play starts with vocal gestures exchanged in dyadic roles, such as 'baby babble' and a mother's 'baby talk' in return. This play begins the acquisition of language or communication with sound as symbols. Mead's theories are often labeled as the school of 'symbolic interactionism' (pp. 149–151);
3. Games grow out of play, starting with a young toddler's solitary imitative 'play role,' i.e., 'I am a firefighter' or 'I am a truck driver.' In the company of siblings or other toddlers, this develops into taking multiple 'play roles,' playing 'house' or 'school.' Here, the toddler learns rules that apply to all the other players, requiring a fuller language. The young child's sole significant other, or a small group of them – mommy, daddy, sister, brother – is seen as a wider and more plastic array of 'others.' The young child constructs and retains an imaged view of these wider 'others' internally as a 'generalized other' (pp. 151–164).

An 'I' as the protagonist agent now emerges simultaneously with a 'me,' the 'generalized other.' This 'other' is part of who we are as living social beings. It is the flexible and ever-changing internal image we project in our thoughts, one reflecting what we believe others think of us. Simply asserting 'I am,' as Descartes did in his famous 'cogito ergo sum,' 'I think, therefore I am,' sets us up as a one-sided abstract singularity. But the 'I' and the 'me' are not mere abstractions. They are the two aspects of a living personhood in an emergent present in an unfolding history. Bound together as actual human beings, their development from infancy onward means we have to be social to thrive. We all exist in time, place, and circumstance, but we contain the inner dynamics of our transactions within a sensuous lifeworld filled with other social selves, where all the

'I's' and 'me's' are interconnected. Together with other social selves, we live by forming relationships in great varieties. Any given social self, then, with all its needs and drives, broadly displays the ensemble of all these relationships, in social orders full of conflicts.

One's lifeworld is full of contradictions. As mentioned in our introduction, some others might see you only as an object for their satisfaction, and you would be assigned as an enslaved person to assist in their effort to be masters. Others would not, and we might find sympathy and solidarity. Our 'lifeworlds,' then, contain many hierarchical relationships, starting with parents, older siblings, the elders, and especially the patriarchal father (or, in many cases, the matriarchal mother). The patriarch, in turn, is subject to his foreman at work, the priest at his church, the police officers in his town, and so on. On the other hand, since no one chooses to be enslaved, a social self will find a connection with others also dissatisfied with being cast as an enslaved person or otherwise subordinated. Thus, they can become partners in a relationship of solidarity. Why is the social self-dissatisfied? The 'I' as the protagonist becomes a subordinate through no choice of its own, and its 'me' becomes populated with bullies and adversaries. In self-reflection, our would-be protagonist is still a social being but now one with an unhappy consciousness.

Thus, in its lifeworld, a young individual uses language not only to communicate with others. It can also engage in internal talks with itself. It can become a critic, not only of the 'other,' but also begin to question its 'I' and its 'me.' This sets in motion an internal debate for change, both individually and within the social order where it resides. The 'I' and the 'me,' then emerge together and co-exist within the 'mind' as a 'social self.' Using language, an individual finally becomes a 'person' residing within a 'society,' first simply as family, then to wider circles of playmates and neighbors, and more. And in today's world, it will find friends and foes, strangers and companions.

In a critical sense, the mind is part of a brain encased in a skull. However, minds cannot fully emerge unless connected via communication with other brains in other skulls. In this likewise sense, minds, or self-consciousnesses, also reside in a social space between two or more minds. This space is called 'sociality' and is not merely accidental or incidental.¹ Sociality evolves with the beginning of our species (and some other species) as a means to survive and thrive.

1 Trying to define 'mind' or 'self' restricted to one individual sends one down a bottomless rabbit hole with poor results. 'Mind' is best studied as a social reality, thus bypassing the traditional 'mind-body problem'.

In what Marx called our 'species being,' communication via language is one of three critical parts of what it means to be human. The other two are a sense of right and obligation, as group rules, along with a capacity for ritual as a practice of social bonding (see Ehrenreich 1997) As with languages, these can change and vary widely in particular times and circumstances.

5 The Social Self Is Dialectical

Why do we go into this detailed nutshell describing Marx's 'species being,' our human nature's social psychology? First, we want to assert that human consciousness is always dialectical, always conflicted. Here, we also want to reject the Left's unfortunately widespread use of the concept of 'false consciousness,' which necessarily implies an elitist and metaphysical 'true consciousness' by those using the 'false' descriptor. Marx never used the term 'false consciousness.'²

Secondly, we want to reveal how design can change self-consciousness and how this process is constantly evolving. Third, we will discuss how changing consciousness requires a mode of communication, a mediated culture. The components here range from the spoken word and song through written books made widely available via the invention of the printing press to the modern electronic media of film, video, and all varieties of Internet-based social media. The self-as-person uses any or all of these media to create a narrative about itself, from a simple story to a fuller history. This narrative need not be entirely accurate, but it should combine memories of actual events with imagined ideals or private fantasies about oneself.

6 The Mode of Communication

Marxism's elaborations on the modes of production throughout history are well known. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (1846 [1932]) introduced the theory of spiritual communication, the unfolding of *geist*, in their work, *The German Ideology*. Here, they laid the foundation for analyzing mass media and more advanced digital communication in the information age. It's also well known that Marx (1859) asserted early on that "life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life" (pp. 568–9). The materialist idea that people must be able to eat, survive, and reproduce before engaging in a battle of ideas

² Engels only did so once, but many others – Hegel (1807), Gramsci (1971), DuBois (1903), to name a few – did use self-consciousness as conflicted at its core.

seems obvious today. It was not so apparent in Marx's youth, especially in Germany, then under the influence of Hegel and his 'Young Hegelians.' In that school of thought, the mundane history of humanity's survival and growth resulted from the March of God or 'the Spirit' (Geist) through time until Geist was fully unfolded as Absolute Spirit and the end of mere history.

But Marx didn't limit the unfolding of consciousness with the development of the mode of production. What is less studied is Marx's pairing of consciousness with what he termed the 'mode of cooperation,' especially as 'forms of intercourse,' meaning the realm of culture with all the forms of media listed above, starting with the most basic, human language. Marx asserted that there are no human beings and thus no social orders without language. The modes of production were the prime shapers of changes in the modes of communication – the inventions of the printing press, the telegraph and telephone, radio, film, TV, and so on. But not always. At times, the mode of communication changed the mode of production.

7 The Domain of Social Selves, Their Narratives, and Their Theaters

Marx anchored this communication machinery in the economic base, but its products were not limited to this sphere. They were projected, consumed, modified, and recreated in the superstructure, the broad cultural theater containing all the ideologies, narratives, myths, and scientific ideas. This was the locus where all their battles raged, reinforcing or deconstructing one another. But at times, the reverse was true; the mode of communication could challenge and undermine an earlier mode of production. A newer mode of communication could also place earlier forms of media or factory machinery into a back seat. The invention of semiconductors and, thus, transistors made computers much more powerful, smaller, widespread, and capable of connecting with each other. When networked computers were soon linked to the Internet, the network of networks, these gave birth to socialized electronic media networks.

More rapidly than anyone had imagined, the world was now globally networked, and the lifeworlds of all the humans connected to the Internet were also transformed. The revolution of the mode of communication also changed the modes of production, from more automated production of commodities to the '365-24-7' online global stock market casinos. By betting on the rise and fall in prices of stocks and bonds, investors, individually or in aggregates, could 'make money' instantly without creating new wealth. Information was now the 'commodity of a new type.' The productive forces, as the mode of production, always included human labor time and nature as the source and creator of

value. But now, a new mode of communication makes labor more fully social. It starts with its role in forming the social self, but now also shapes it in a more globalized division of labor.

8 Becoming More 'Mediated'

In this new context, a child's or budding teen's forms of intercourse also become more complex with more varied 'modes of communication.' Far from the spoken word, young children add picture books and learn to read. As they grow, they go to movies, watch TV, listen to the radio, and get into music. With these new interactions via diverse media, their lifeworlds become indirectly mediated far beyond simply speaking with those in the present moment. Thus, the mediated 'generalized other' of the young also expands considerably. They acquire cousins in extended families, neighborhood playmates, schoolmates at various levels, teammates for sports, intimate partners, members of churches and clubs, workmates on jobs, and virtual 'friends' in social media.

At its most basic level, the mode of communication, as noted above, arrives with the first language acquired by the minor child from its family. But their lifeworlds are now networked electronically, starting with *Mr. Roger's Neighborhood*, *Sesame Street*, and *Captain Kangaroo*. Once smartphones are acquired, our children will enter the 'many-to-many' world and thus become consumers and producers of new mass media. Thus, their lifeworlds, social selves, and generalized others are far more plastic. They are constantly growing and changing in accelerated ways far beyond the influence of family alone. Far more 'others,' fictional, virtual, or real, enter the child's or adolescent's lifeworld. The 'generalized other' grows dynamically by speaking or engaging with them. By discarding old communicating partners (moving to a different town, leaving a chat room) and adding new ones (entering school, changing grade levels, and adding new chat rooms), our youth face many new options for self-redefinition, to good effect or otherwise. In sum, all these new actors, friends and foes, add to the constant remediation of the generalized other and, through it, to the continual reshaping of the social self as it travels through childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age.

9 The Emergence of Identity

All these experiences and social connections produce the narratives at the core of our self-reflection, our identity. Everyone has an identity, contrary to

what some critics of 'identity politics' might think. For these critics the assertion of 'identity' or the advocacy of 'identity politics' is a pejorative, belonging only to 'subaltern others,' and not themselves.

But they are mistaken. All social selves and all politics occur somewhere and in some time. As a result, all persons and their politics always contain elements of identity, often more than one, even if it's only one's nationality, biological sex, gender, skin color, and ancestry in some situations. Identity is further immediately divided into two parts: personal and social identities. The personal is more connected with the 'I,' and the social is more connected with the 'me.' The tension between the two also means our identities can grow and change.

We always have multiple identities, whether social or personal. We might see ourselves as Americans at the same time as we see ourselves as white or Black or Chicano. We see ourselves as men, or women, or in some cases, nonbinary. We can see ourselves as Protestant or Catholic or Buddhist or nontheist. We see ourselves as steelworkers, farmers, storekeepers, or business owners. We can be Democrats, Republicans, socialists, or fascists.

Some identities are in harmony, while others are not. We can have one set early in life and another later in life. Again, the result is that our consciousness is always conflicted. Since our political project aims to change consciousness on a large scale, grasping this aspect of our social nature greatly matters to this project. To understand why, we do well to look more closely at Marx and Gramsci.

10 Consciousness and Class

For Marx, class is essential in shaping consciousness, even as class begins as an objective social factor independent of what anyone may or may not think of themselves. Class is a relation to production primarily in one of three ways. One can be hired (or otherwise compelled) to produce surplus value for another and thus be part of the working class. Next, one can live entirely from the proceeds of the value created by others, hence part of the capitalist class or the bourgeoisie, large or small. Then, one can exploit one's own labor and be part of the small producer class. There are also derivatives of these that are once removed. One can be a landowner and live off rents, a portion of the value created by sharecroppers or tenants. Or one can be a speculator, living off gambling by buying stocks and bonds low and selling them high. And finally, any given individual may be a combination of these at any given time or change class positions at various points over a lifetime.

For Marx, it's important to note that one's income or educational level was not a determinant of class. A capitalist with only a high school diploma could employ a few workers and earn very little. A worker with a community college degree was still a worker, 'be his payment high or low.' (See Marx 1867). However objective class might be, Marx insisted that one's relation to production deeply impacted one's consciousness, especially the worker's consciousness. As noted above, 'life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life.'

11 From Unhappy to Alienated Consciousness

Exploitation means 'used for profit,' and is not the same as oppression. For example, Microsoft workers can be highly exploited by the degree of profit they create while suffering a low level of oppression. In any case, Marx (1932) argued that all workers were alienated in three ways. First workers were alienated from their products. They were not making things for their own use but for another. Second, they were alienated from their workplace, the site of their exploitation, a place which belonged to another. Third, they were alienated from each other because the capitalists put them in competition with other workers, whether on the job or among the unemployed. So, whatever their payment or employment situation, a sharp degree of misery constantly shaped their consciousness, significantly deepening their conflicted character.

For an additional and vital exploration of the consciousness of workers, a turn to Gramsci's thinking is helpful. Gramsci (1971) divided one's social consciousness into two, 'common sense' and 'good sense.' We need to note that for Gramsci (and Italians), common sense generally meant ideas that were widely held, not in the American sense of practicality. Common sense meant family and community values, folklore and religion, belonging to a region or nation, and so on. Marx (1846 [1932]) called it 'all the old muck.' 'Good sense,' in contrast, Gramsci described as containing ideas learned from science, skills learned at work, and the sense of solidarity gained from waging battles for positive gains at work or in one's community life.

12 The Emergence of Class Consciousness

Any given consciousness, then, is a hologram of contending identities, family values, religious ideas, early experiences of given times and places, the impact of class in relation to production, and the dialectic of good sense and common sense. What can we make of these dimensions and divisions? Gramsci

(1971) held that his conception of the revolutionary party, the Modern Prince, was best seen as an organization of the organic intellectuals of the working class, its permanent persuaders. First, the key to good persuasion was gaining a mutual understanding by sharing passions and gaining insights into both the common sense and the good sense of the others concerned. Next, a 'persuader' could then, in a judolike discourse, use good sense to overcome the old ideas of common sense that might be holding a potential comrade back or preventing his or her escape from the enclosure in any particular 'media silo.' The fact that both the persuader and those being persuaded stood on the common ground of conflicted consciousness and shared common passions made their interaction more effective as a 'pedagogy of the oppressed.' In fact, Paulo Freire (1968), author of the book by this name, praises Gramsci as the source of his methods.

Gramsci advocated much more than direct talk between individuals or small groups in seeking persuasion. As a newspaper writer and editor, he widely used print media. Some of his earliest writings were as a theater critic, where he used the stage as a shared public medium. His reviews were popular for his practice of turning toward audiences and including their responses during the performances in his reviews. Using the performances on stage as his prop, he contrasted bourgeois outlooks in the plays with the views of workers in the audiences to draw out more expansive views than his own. He was also an advocate of worker schools funded by the state for work-related skills and the broader study of history and culture. Through all these means, the social consciousness of workers was to be mediated into becoming wider and deeper regarding the prospects of revolutionary change.

13 Revolution in the Mode of Communication

Political organizations have used mass media for some time. But what happens when the media, as a mode of communication, itself goes through revolutionary changes? Here, we need to look deeper at some of the abovementioned concepts. Media develops in three phases. The first phase, one-to-one communication via the spoken word, reaches back to the origin of our species. The second phase, one-to-many, starts with forums like Greek theater, but is accelerated by the invention of the printing press, followed by radio, film, and television. And in our time, a small group of editors or directors, 'the one,' could then reach audiences of millions, 'the many.' The third phase, now dominant, is called 'many-to-many.' It started with the Internet's expansive use of computers linked to each other, significantly enhanced by visuals and videos on Smartphones. While media in the first two phases is consumed by individuals,

either singly or in large numbers, the third phase enables individuals to be both consumers and producers at once. This new phase can have a powerful impact, such as that of the young girl in Minneapolis on the sidewalk using her smartphone to record a ten-minute video of the police killing of George Floyd, then uploading the result to her Internet outlets, where it was recast many times over by others across the world. She was hardly alone. Nearly everyone in China has a 5G smartphone, over 550 million and counting. In South Korea, the Internet is universal and the fastest in the world, and smartphones are universal. Africa has some 650 million smartphone users, likewise with much of the Global South.

The mass media's many-to-many phase, however, also has a downside. In his 1980 classic, *The Third Wave*, Alvin Toffler (1980) predicted its rise and gave it a name – demassification. Because of the Internet's use to access online news sources, print newspapers at all levels are compelled to put out online editions, often without charge. In contrast, those buying or subscribing to their print versions sharply decreased. It took a while for adjustments. Some continued to have free access to their online editions, while others turned to hybrid access – some parts were free, but payment was required for full access. Others, like *The Wall Street Journal*, simply required payment for any access.

14 A Wider and More Diverse Array

But even in online media, the main income stream still comes from advertisers, and the more readers there are, the more advertisers might be charged. So, the online versions were enhanced with longer articles, more use of visuals, and more reader feedback, not only as letters to the editors but as commentary on articles. Creating online-only publications, often with substantial money for startups, led to a wider array of web publications with more diverse and divisive political content.

When cable TV went online, the same happened with web-based streaming of ever more 'channels.' Instead of just the 'big three' networks of the 'one-to-many' days, anyone could now access dozens of relatively large media sources – MSNBC, CNN, Now, Newsmax, ABC, BBC, Al-Jazeera, OAN, Daily Caller, Breitbart, and many more. To gain viewers, most outlets ceased to seek a generalized mass audience. They believed they could do better by deepening into a more defined niche – MSNBC became liberal, Fox promoted Trump and the GOP, OAN and Newsmax went further rightward. Democracy Now!, The Daily Beast, and others focused on the Left. Twitter initially was all over the map, but it turned more right when Elon Musk purchased it.

15 Media Evolves into Siloed Containers

With a wide variety of options, only a relatively few media consumers practiced getting their information from various perspectives. Most selected those reflecting their political leanings, then added a few more similar sources that placed their entire mediated experience into separate and distinct ‘media silos.’ Two families could live on the same street or block but find themselves in entirely different political-media lifeworlds. Nor did these ‘worlds’ have to be restrained by ‘fact checkers’ seeking to define more objective reporting. They could ignore traditional fact-checkers or gather up what Trump’s Kelly Anne Conway termed ‘alternate facts.’ Toffler’s ‘demassification’ prediction was now widely manifested.

But demassification didn’t mean those at the top of the transformed media were less powerful, both economically and politically. According to Macrotrends.net (nd) and Statista.com (nd), as of January 2022, the estimated net worth figures for some of the major media outlets are as follows:

- NBCUniversal, a subsidiary of Comcast Corporation, owns MSNBC. As of 2021, Comcast’s total assets were reported to be around \$272 billion. MSNBC has an estimated one million viewers in prime time.
- WarnerMedia, a subsidiary of AT&T, owns CNN. In 2021, AT&T’s total assets were approximately \$551 billion. CNN has about 700,00 viewers in prime time.
- Fox News is owned by Fox Corporation, which is part of the larger Fox Entertainment Group. As of 2021, Fox Corporation’s total assets were around \$21 billion. Fox primetime viewers range between 2.5 and three million.
- Newsmax is a privately-held media company with annual revenues of \$50 million. It has experienced significant growth in viewership and revenue in recent years. Since 2013, Newsmax and its affiliated sites have drawn 14.4 million unique visitors. It stands to the right of Fox and is deeply connected with Trump.
- The Walt Disney Company owns ABC. As of 2021, Disney’s total assets were approximately \$203 billion. ABC’s outlets are diverse, with an audience of tens of millions. But its news outlets are much smaller.
- BBC is a public service broadcaster funded by the UK government through television license fees. Its financial structure is complex, and its net worth is not typically measured in the same way as commercial media companies. Its worth is somewhere around \$5 billion. In July 2020, the BBC released some remarkable numbers: In the previous 12 months, 438 million people, most of them Americans, had tuned into BBC News, 351 million to the BBC World Service, and 137 million to BBC Global News. What many seem to find

attractive is the BBC usually tries to avoid 'polarizing' its overall political character.

- The state of Qatar owns Al Jazeera through its media conglomerate, Al Jazeera Media Network. Specific net worth figures for Al Jazeera as a stand-alone entity may not be publicly available. Al-Jazeera America attempted to sustain a US-based outlet but failed. US viewers can still reach it via the Internet, and they number about 40,000 daily.
- OAN (One America News Network) is a privately-held media company whose net worth is not publicly disclosed. It has gained attention for its conservative-leaning programming.
- The Daily Caller, launched by Tucker Carlson and backed by Charles Koch, is a privately-owned news and opinion website. Net worth figures for privately-owned digital media outlets like the Daily Caller are not typically publicly available. But it gets some 35 million views per month. It has been discredited somewhat recently by several 'fake news' stories, including one with falsified nude 'photos' of Alexandria Ocasio Cortez. When AOC counter-attacked, her status rose while theirs declined.
- Breitbart News Network is also a privately-owned media company, and its net worth is not publicly disclosed. Since Andrew Breitbart's death, Steve Bannon steered it for a while, gaining some \$48 million as a result, and connected it with the billionaire Mercer family, long-time backers of Trump. Breitbart was infamously responsible for the downfall of ACORN, a progressive community organization of lower-income, big-city residents. Later, after being caught in several online 'fake news' scandals, Breitbart lost many readers, going from 17.3 million to 4.6 million. Still, 4.6 million is nothing to sneeze at, and Breitbart closely informs Trump's inner core.

There are two lessons here. The first we have already mentioned is the ongoing diversification of mass media into silos with a distinct political character. The other is how powerful they are and how their wealth and clout spans both the base, the mode of production, and the superstructure, the mode of communication. Despite internal contending for greater hegemony within its ranks, the overall strength of the siloes continues to grow. Moreover, the scope and wealth of the major siloes also reveals how our own progressive media's relatively minuscule reach remains a severe problem:

- Democracy Now! is heard and seen on over 700 radio and TV stations across the US, including public-access television stations and satellite television channels such as Free Speech TV and Link TV. However, these stations have a relatively small reach, with Democracy Now! watched, listened to, or read by about 400,000 people per month.

- Six Pacifica stations and 100 additional FM outlets. The six core stations of the network had hundreds of other stations – local FM, college station, classical music, etc. That gives Pacifica a reach into several millions. They are popular in niche markets around college towns or in major urban centers.
- Free Speech TV, in recent years, gained a television footprint, reaching more than 40 million homes. The network's monthly viewership nearly doubled to more than one million households over a two-year period between 2012 and 2014. It may be included in Roku devices, and the viewer may have to go through several steps to get to the programming.
- Industry magazine Talkers estimates that the Thom Hartmann Program has seven million unique listeners per week. Thom Hartmann's talk programs are excellent from the Left perspective. They are most immediately available through Sirius FM in car radios. They can also be combined with the online Hartmann Report as text media.
- Left-liberal print magazines – *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, *Mother Jones*, *Jacobin*, and *In These Times* – usually reach under 100,000 each in their weekly, biweekly, or monthly formats, but their online versions can reach many more, even 500,000 and above. The Left news aggregators – Common Dreams, Altnet, and Truthout – each reach around one million.

The persistence of the dominant major silos, dividing up the working class and the general population, makes the work of the Left's persuaders more difficult. We not only have to be familiar with a less-generalized mass media, supplemented by a few more nuanced major magazines – *Time*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News* – we now must know at least something about the political content and spin of at least four or five more, as well as many more web-based magazines and major news aggregators – Yahoo, AP, Reuters. We can find out what our work and neighborhood contacts think using the 'mass line' method of deep questioning and a critical summing up. We can ask where those we are talking with get their news and which are their favorites. In some cases, we may have to learn more about those media silos unfamiliar to us, just as we would with their religion, ancestry, school, and work experience.

But in deep questioning, what are we looking for? Only rarely will we find someone where the central conflict they are wrestling with is socialism vs. capitalism. More likely, they will have a variety of conflicts, and we will have to determine which is critical at a given time. Among some who have flipped from Obama to Trump, we might find, on the one hand, they are serious about their evangelical Christianity, but on the other, they might hold a cluster of fascist ideas, not even necessarily knowing they are fascist. Here, we might ask them, on immigration, "Who is your neighbor?" so that they know it's about the Parable of the Good Samaritan, not who lives next door. Then, we can ask if Trump might agree with their answer. Naturally, it won't be simple or even

one discussion. We might pose questions differently if they were Catholic and ask what the Pope's and the Church's stand might be.

If our contacts are, on the one hand, solid trade unionists and, on the other, regular Democrats, we might ask what they think of Bernie Sanders or the AOC-led Justice Democrats under the Dem tent. Then, follow up more, digging deeper. In every case, however, we want to use a progressive side of their identity to challenge others and introduce new ideas. Most of all, we want to use these methods following a joint activity, finding how it might best be summed up, looking toward future gains. Ideas are best discussed as praxis, when our ideas are linked with common practice. And we will learn new things ourselves. It's not a one-way street.

One of the chief theorists of third-wave media is Manuel Castells (1996), author of *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, in three volumes. In his preface to Volume 2, Castells tells us,

I proposed in my trilogy on The Information Age was anchored on the dynamic contradiction between the Net and the self as an organizing principle of the new historical landscape. The rise of the network society and the growing power of identity are the intertwined social processes that jointly define globalization, geopolitics, and social transformation in the early twenty-first century (pp. xvii–xviii).

Castells argues that the world became 'networked' relatively quickly, in only a few decades. In a networked society, individuals gradually make choices, picking the movies, channels, and online publications they like. But this picking was not a one-way street. The owners of networked media had a record of these choices and all the related demographics. By studying this mass of data, they could detect patterns of social values. And with these in hand, they could shape new segmented media that could match these diverse consumers in more effective ways for advertisers. As Toffler predicted back in 1980, a universal mass media was being demassified into separate silos containing various social selves. With their interactions with siloed media, the identities of the selves concerned were remediated into narrower lifeworlds that could be separate and opposed to the lifeworlds of those in other silos.

16 The Mediated Self

One way to get a deeper look into the mediated self is to explore the rise of fandom – as in sports fans, music fans, and soap opera fans – as a subset of the social self-shaped by media. The topic here is informed by "The Mediated Self:

An Exploration of The Subjective Experience of Mass Media Celebrity Fanship,” a PhD Thesis by Michelle Louise Gibson at Simon Fraser University. Gibson (2000) states she “explores fans’ technologically-mediated and in-person interaction with favorite celebrities and like-minded fans through intra-personal and inter-personal interaction.” She also notes that North Americans are ubiquitously connected to print and electronic mass media and, on average, spend about three hours a day or more viewing TV or movies.

It’s widely known that from age ten onward, young people begin to peer-bond in fan groups around their favorite musical genres, singers, and bands. They can develop over time, moving from R&B to rock to rap. Some may last a lifetime, such as with Dylan, Marley, Aretha, or Springsteen fans, and be passed down from one generation to another. Some groups will form within specific nationality or regional identities – Appalachians with country and western, rap with urban centers, and African Americans. Some may be multiracial, such as reggae or Tex-Mex. Young males may start as fans of sports and then subdivide into teams, with their choices lasting into middle age and beyond. Others, male or female, may be fans of certain film stars, taking aspects of their style, dress, or personality to shape their own persona in small ways.

Mediated social identities, of course, are not simply formed by fan groups or stars. They can be connected by trade unions, religious denominations (or lack thereof), high schools, sports teams, universities, and fraternities. In a country of immigrants, one can have an ancestry of several combined nationalities. And while ‘race’ is a ‘social construction’ using skin color as a signifier, some, such as black or darker brown, can be closely connected to nationality, or ‘brown’ with Mexican or Puerto Rican. Here, identities can be shaped by social exclusion or inclusion, more so than by being in siloed media alone.

However, the convenience of digital communication has also led to a growing sense of detachment and alienation in interpersonal communication. At its worst, alienated detachment manifests as cynicism. This attitude often presents itself among people seeking to avoid politics of any sort. It can be described as a situation where the ruling class plants a little cop in your brain, whispering two lies: ‘nothing ever changes’ and ‘you have no power.’ Here, we have to make a case for two counter-truths: ‘Everything is always changing’ and ‘You have a great deal of power if you can work in solidarity with others.’ Using arguments and discussions rooted in joint praxis, cynicism can be diminished if not dissolved.³

3 An excellent and popular book on this subject is *Everybody Knows: Cynicism in America* by William Chaloupka (2001).

In keeping with Marxist theory, what is the commodity being sold by the owners of media siloes? It divides into two. On the one hand, the owners sell 'defined audiences' not just any random slice of the general population. We should note that even 'general' has limits: they speak a certain language, they live in a certain country or geographic 'media market' subdivision, and they have regular access to a device – radio, TV, cable link, computer or smartphone – that can connect to the media silo. For advertisers, however, the more qualified the audience, the better. They want to know age, gender, school levels, sexual orientation, race signifiers, class and income sectors, political views, religion and so on. They may not get everything they want, but they can come close. On Facebook, for example, when advertisers select their desired audience, they take note that it grows smaller with each added parameter and often at a higher cost rate per viewer. On the other hand, silo owners sell access to entertainment and information. In purchased access, it may range from viewers of Telenuovos, sports channels, stock market reports, or various combinations. In 'free'-access media siloes like Facebook, consumers 'pay' by giving their attention to some of the ads that always enter their screen. At the same time, Facebook devotees also get to build a 'yellow pages' book ad presenting their own 'advertisements for myself' or their own political or social projects. There's one important thing that goes on behind the screen. With every click of the mouse, the consumer-producer hands over ever greater self-definitions, enabling the silo owner to provide ever more defined audiences. Often without knowing it, any given user of siloed media will find themselves 'enclosed' within the silo, and cut off from critical or opposing perspectives. They can end up finding themselves acting as the proverbial 'Thanksgiving Uncle' stirring up a hornet's nest with those relatives in other siloes, or more rarely, no silo at all.

Work and culture, the mode of production, and the mode of communication, are not separate human processes. They are a unified whole, identical and different in any given human being. In his early philosophical works, such as *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (Marx 1932) and *The German Ideology* (Marx and Engels 1846), Marx asked himself what the human being is and how capitalism cripples the human being. He built his critical theory of capitalism on these foundations. A basic insight into these works is that human beings are part of society. "The individual is the social being" (Marx 1932:299). Humans shape and are shaped by the social relations they enter in everyday life: "Not only is the material of my activity given to me as a social product (as is even the language in which the thinker is active): my own existence is social activity, and therefore that which I make of myself, I make of myself for society and with the consciousness of myself as a social being" (Ibid.:298). But Marx also insisted that our social being was also one of internal conflict, an alienated

state where groups, from local workplaces and communities to entire industries and populations, were set against one another. Fear of “The Other” is used to divide and hold down all the subalterns in submission.

Here we must acknowledge Christian Fuchs’s (2016) work, *Reading Marx in the Information Age: A Media and Communication Studies Perspective on Capital Volume 1*.

Marx and Engels argue that communication is a production process. There is a dialectic of work and communication: humans communicate productively and produce communicatively. Communication aims to produce a specific social use-value, namely that humans understand the world and each other. Therefore, communication is productive. The production of use-values that satisfy human needs cannot be achieved individually, but only in social relations. Communication is the process that organizes social relations. Therefore, humans produce communicatively.

The media system in capitalism is fivefold: it’s a sphere for the sale of communication commodities; a sphere that helps with advertising commodities and stimulating commodity consumption; a sphere of ideological legitimation; a sphere that helps reproduce labor-power; and finally, a sphere that stimulates the purchase of media technologies.

Advancements in technology have undoubtedly revolutionized how we communicate today. It’s crucial for everyone, especially the ‘permanent persuaders’ of the revolutionary instrument, the counter-hegemonic political party or a cluster of allied parties and groups, to critically examine their relationship with technology, balancing engagement with real-life experiences to ensure subjectivity and authentic human interaction isn’t lost along the way. The great danger is to succumb to the cynicism of postmodernism, where any narrative will do as well as any other, or to exclusive containers, like ‘the white race’ and others of its ilk. Here is where the dialectic and the prospects of a new socialist order are suppressed by the ongoing containerization of our social selves. Here is where we are thus divided and subjugated by those who own the containers for the sake of private wealth and the imprisonment of the rest of us.

Breaking away from the siloes, the echo chambers of the mass media of the upper-crust political factions and their blocs contending on top, can be challenging, to put it mildly. However, there are several strategies we can promote for people in or base communities to use to diversify their sources of information and avoid being locked into a single viewpoint.

Here, it's helpful to use Gramsci's (1971) strategic tool, the concepts of the 'war of position' and the 'war of movement.' The war of position involved building extended trenches connected to the supply lines connecting distance sources and gaining ground only in small ways. The war of movement was when the soldiers went 'over the top' for a major gain. The most spectacular example was the storming of the Winter Palace in Russia in 1917. The two were not mechanically separated. Depending on the conjuncture, one could be waged within the other, with one being strategic and the other being tactical.

Our war of position against the big media siloes has several components. First, understand them. Learn how far they reach and who controls the money behind them. Study them for the difference between 'spin' and overt lies. If they allow posted responses, post one simply zeroing in on the lie. See how people respond to you. Carefully intervene in any ongoing debates. You are not trying to win, but to understand the terrain. Zero in on any commentary on the area where you live and what politicians they may support there. Second, keep a record of the writers and staff of the silo. See if they are unionized or might be interested in a union. Not all workers in these outfits share the anti-union and other reactionary views of the owners. We are looking for inside sources of inner conflicts. Third, keep track of advertisers. Some may not be happy with certain stands and can be subject to pressures. Fourth, if you find a pattern of overt lies and corruption, talk with some savvy lawyers to see if a civil case can be brought against them or whether the FCC will hear proposals to correct them. This is where you can shift to a war of movement, even a campaign for their expropriation. In the 1960s, the German SDS, with Rudi Dutschke as a leader, waged a powerful campaign to Expropriate Springer! Alex Springer owned the media conglomerate and its inflammatory and pro-Vietnam War tabloid newspaper, the *Bild-Zeitung*. The far right shot Dutschke in the brain, but he managed to survive, although much weakened.

On engaging the Left media, we can use them more directly in the war of movement. But first, we must learn who they are, how they can work in our local campaigns, and how we can provide information and stories back to them.

Seek diverse sources. Consciously consume news and opinions from various sources across the political spectrum. This includes reputable and un reputable newspapers, online news platforms, international news outlets, and independent journalism websites. Exposing yourself to different perspectives can give you a more balanced understanding of complex issues.

- Fact-check and verify: Develop the habit of fact-checking information before accepting it as true. Look for reliable fact-checking organizations

- or use multiple sources to verify news stories, especially those that seem sensational or controversial. Understand that narratives are often more influential than facts alone, but narratives also include facts, and some facts, when acknowledged, can cause a shift in narrative or even the adoption of a new narrative. Critical thinking is key to avoiding misinformation.
- Limit exposure to opinion-based programming: While opinion-based shows can be entertaining, they often prioritize sensationalism and ideological narratives over factual reporting. Balance your media diet by including more fact-based news reporting and analysis in your consumption habits.
 - Engage in media literacy: Educate yourself and others about media literacy principles. Study the class character of various siloes. Learn to identify biased language, spot misinformation techniques, and understand how media outlets frame stories to influence public opinion.
 - Support independent journalism: Support independent journalists and media outlets that prioritize objective reporting and investigative journalism. These sources often provide a refreshing alternative to mainstream media narratives and can offer valuable insights into underreported issues.
 - Participate in constructive dialogue: Respectfully and constructively engage in conversations with people with different viewpoints. We all share a conflicted consciousness, but with different sets of ‘common sense’ and ‘good sense,’ as described in our account of Gramsci’s hypotheses above. Listen actively, ask questions, and seek common ground where possible.
 - Promote media literacy in your community: Advocate for media literacy education in schools and community organizations. Encourage discussions about critical thinking, digital citizenship, and responsible media consumption. Empowering others with media literacy skills can contribute to a more informed and resilient society.

17 Conclusion: Where Do We Go from Here?

By taking these steps, individuals can reduce their susceptibility to being locked into a single media narrative and cultivate a more nuanced and informed understanding of the world around them. But as socialists and revolutionaries, we must create and support media instruments far beyond these individual choices. Most important was the question raised by Lenin (1961) in “What Is To Be Done: Burning Questions of Our Movement,” “Can a newspaper be a collective organizer?” He answered yes, not only in the sense that a newspaper provided information needed by the workers, but more importantly, that

the paper and it means of its distribution provided 'the scaffolding' needed to build the worker's party and other organizational instruments. In his conception, every factory would have one or more 'worker correspondents' along with reading groups and additional workers skilled in secret means of distributing the paper under conditions of Czarist illegality. This last point may not apply to us currently, but the rest do. In our time, we might ask "can a web page or YouTube Channel be a collective organizer?"

Our answer would be "Yes!" but in far more expansive ways than Lenin might have imagined. (We should note that he was no media 'Luddite' of his time and fully supported the implications of radio and especially film, backing all the experimental efforts of Sergei Eisenstein.) Today, we can have not only national newspapers on websites, but easily establish new sites in every city or even large factories or schools. Likewise with a daily news service, including video, via TikTok or YouTube. Lenin had to find wealthy donors to fund the purchase of printing presses. While we may still want printed media, those familiar with the writing, editing, and translating tools and secure email list management skills needed for computer-generated mass media are more important to us. Ultimately, it still boils down to Alvin Toffler's discovery: in the many-to-many world, we are all consumers and producers simultaneously. But here we also have to take note of Gramsci: We were all philosophers since we pondered our fate, but he added that just because we could fry an egg, we weren't all chefs. We might all be consumer-producers of media, but it will take a bit of work to become good at it. If we are to develop a counter-hegemonic media for us to challenge and overcome the established media siloes and the class behind them, we have a ways to go.

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