

## Reviews

***How to Think About Information.*** By Dan Schiller. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007, 267p. (cloth) ISBN-10: 0-252-03132-6; ISBN-13: 978-0-252-03132-8.

Schiller's latest book concentrates on the constitution, development, range, practices, and repercussions of informationalized capitalism. It's an enlightening and engaging interrogation of the intellectual frameworks of information, with diachronic and synchronic emphases to fully engage the dimensions of the topic. Schiller stakes out some first principles for critical consideration of information as a business resource, source of growth for the capitalist system, and a commodity. Information is conditioned and structured by the social relations and institutions it's constituted by. And presently these relations and institutions construct capitalist organization with superlative scope and unprecedented penetration. While the focus is on the contemporary contours of informationalized capitalism—the digital architecture of the Internet, interface technologies, and expanded telecommunications structures—it's a decidedly historical political-economic exploration.

Schiller's historical arguments are the most illustrative and provocative, as they unseat a number of fallacious ideas. He argues throughout, with considerable amplification, that informationalized capitalism needs a fuller historical context. Schiller does much to dispense with the boilerplate “new” prefix, and its concomitant ahistorical blinders. He makes a persuasive case that information commodification occurred much earlier than the 18<sup>th</sup> century periodization generally employed, and notions of “intellectual property” were intertwined with the rise of industrial capitalism. Social relations of production need fuller historical accounting as do earlier cultural forms, to grasp the totality of informationalized capitalism as a general, rather “than merely a sectoral political-economic phenomenon” (p. 61). Indeed, one of the characteristics of modernity is the evolution of the corporate apparatus for the commodification of culture. And contemporary iterations build upon the foundation of older cultural industries.

The history of telecommunications also needs revision. Largely privileging the supply side impoverishes historical understanding, but, in a critical insight, Schiller notes it is consequential for thought and action. It contributed to the focus on anti-monopoly principles as the definitive framework for policy to the detriment of social needs. The needs of one particularly overlooked group—business users—were instrumental in shaping policy, institutions, structures, and practices. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, business began relying upon private wires in the nascent telecommunications network, providing the basis for a secondary system that would increase in importance in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They also influenced national and international telecommunications policy from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century—at first sporadically then organized as pressure groups. Business played a critical role in creating the U.S. and international telecommunications system after WWI, and foresaw the much-hyped “convergence” in the 1930s. Foreshadowing future thinking, users saw it as means toward profitable accumulation in a system “marked by technological dynamism

and the boom-and-bust cycle” (p. 105).

Most importantly for later informationalized capitalism, business users effectively demanded access to specialized communications structures and services outside the common-carrier sphere, and developed networking initiatives within them. Two key historical consequences followed. Business users became the driving force behind computer communications. This influenced the use of the Internet as a means for accelerated commodification of information and digital information as a business resource for command and control of far-flung operations. And this secondary system destabilized and supplanted the regulated telecommunications system.

The early 1970s are a keystone of the historical account. It’s the point when business leaders attempt to reorganize information and communications to establish a new source of growth for the accumulation process, in order to offset the stagnation of that period, the beginnings of neoliberalism, and where the outline of the contemporary landscape comes into focus. Emerging fully in the 1970s, informationalized capitalism was mutually constitutive with neoliberalism. A key road to profit was through the commodification of formerly social investments—government agencies, schools, indigenous knowledge of farming and healing—a process of severe expropriation. Akin to this move was the extension of copyrights, patents, and trademarks, re-branded as “intellectual property rights,” which during the 80s and 90s were “strengthened and generalized spatially, to cover the earth, and socioculturally, to confer additional corporate control over an expanding array of products and labor processes” (p. 46). More property means more policing of and through information—GPS, databases, cookies, etc. And post Sept. 11 homeland security oversight over “critical infrastructure” such as telecommunications, has accelerated the anti-democratic ethos of liberalization of policy begun in the 50s. And informationalized capitalism taps the digital networks as a business means. By the late 90s, “transnationally organized and operated networks” worked more and more as “big corporate capital’s production base and control structure” (p. 83). Information, as much as cheap labor, fuels the contemporary sweatshop.

Neoliberal globalization as an economic system aimed at restoring class power would not have been possible without the development of the secondary telecommunications system spearheaded by business users (Harvey 2005). As Schiller amply explains and details, as this system became global, it provided capital a means to infiltrate networked national economies for markets, resources, and cheap labor, particularly in the global South and China. Investments in networks, Internet technologies, and mobile telecommunications provide nodes for making the market for commodified culture a universal social fact. The Internet is implemented as a resource for overcoming limitations to the “transnationalization of cultural production, distribution, and consumption” (p. 141). Global advertising is increasing and the implementation of proprietary communications systems allow for new networks for more intrusive marketing. Relentlessly expansive, accelerated commodification by the “parasites of the quotidian” is a hallmark achievement.

Schiller also keenly delineates the ideologies of informationalized capitalism. Proponents of accelerated commodification attack any restrictions on selling with democratic principles. “As it is transformed into a corporate prerogative, freedom

of speech—the preeminent prerequisite for democratic self-government—is systematically degraded” (p. 153). The principle of nonproprietary information provisions—public post, libraries, schools—was attacked. And as social labor was commodified as a result, the public sphere weakened. Similarly, the principle and practice of government support for economic, social, and political welfare was assaulted. And the idea of “convergence” is wielded to agitate for relaxed rules on consolidation and cross-ownership, to target market divisions and restrictions separating media, and to develop supporting frameworks to justify regulation in businesses interest.

Schiller has crafted an imperative historical account of an overlooked dimension of capitalist organization, and broadened and deepened the political economy of communication’s terrain. The book is an urgent exposition of how thinking about informationalized capitalism is critical to organizing, agitating, and fighting for policies and institutions conducive to the social needs of a democratic polity. And while history, to paraphrase Walter Benjamin, is generally a narrative of defeat for the Left, Schiller carefully articulates principles of a socially just information-centered society throughout. Understanding how social informational needs were systematically decimated in favor of capital, the contours of capital’s apparatuses, and the ideological ideas that render it salient, are critical thinking endeavors necessary for clear-eyed engagement. Schiller’s book is a welcome contribution to these ongoing struggles.

## Reference

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***Outside the Box: Corporate Media, Globalization, and the UPS Strike***. By Deepa Kumar. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007, 237p (cloth) ISBN-10: 0-252-03172-5; ISBN-13: 978-0-252-03172-4.

I write this just after the conclusion of August 2007, the month of the 10-year anniversary of Princess Diana’s death. It was also the month of the 10-year anniversary of the Teamsters strike against UPS, one the largest and most successful labor strikes in decades.

The fact that only one of these anniversaries got a great deal of ink and airplay tells you all you need to know about the corporate media. Ten years after the car crash death of Diana, she is still a major topic in the news. The terms “Princess Diana and death” maxed out on a LexisNexis search, with 1000+ hits from the past month in both the Major U.S. and World Newspaper, and the TV and Broadcast

Radio Transcript databases. Meanwhile, the great victory of 185,000 Teamsters against UPS in 1997 has been erased from the media's memory. The search terms "UPS and strike and labor" netted exactly zero stories on the newspaper and broadcast databases.

Deepa Kumar, an assistant professor in the Department of Journalism and Media Studies at Rutgers University, would have predicted this. According to her account in *Outside the Box*, the news media coverage of the three-week UPS strike in 1997 was first framed unfavorably to workers, then turned surprisingly favorable in the second week, and finally turned back to unfavorable and disinterested by the third week. Apparently, mainstream news media interest in the UPS story hasn't recovered since that third week of the strike in August 1997.

The focus of the book is really what happened on that second week of favorably framed news coverage. How it was possible that such a thing could even happen in the corporate news media?

Kumar analyzed transcripts of 269 news reports (including morning, evening, late night, and weekend news programs) by the three major U.S. television networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC) and 191 stories from three leading newspapers (the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *USA Today*). She provides rich context to her analysis, with deep research into the details of the UPS case, particularly the political and economic conditions that gave rise to the strike and the Teamsters' superb preparations for the strike.

There are some wonderful findings here, especially as Kumar answers the question "How Did the Teamsters Win" in Chapter 5, extending the earlier accounts of Matt Witt and Rand Wilson (both who worked on the Teamsters communications team during the strike).<sup>1</sup> The International Brotherhood of Teamsters, under the long shadow of Jimmy Hoffa, had not been known as a paragon of democracy. But, as Kumar notes, corruption and links to organized crime spurred the formation of an internal caucus, Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU). The reform-minded members of the TDU finally helped bring a progressive candidate, Ron Carey, to head the Teamsters in 1991. Carey fended off a close re-election challenge in 1996 from James P. Hoffa (Jimmy's son), representative of the entrenched old guard at the union. After that close victory, and with a UPS contract up for renewal in a year, "Carey recognized that that to succeed in the UPS contract negotiations he would have to go *around* the leadership of the old-guard locals and mobilize the rank and file," Kumar says.

Thus, a full year before the strike, Carey and the UPS leaders engaged in a contract campaign, communicating with locals, but going directly to workers when old guard local representatives threw up roadblocks. The Teamsters used surveys, newsletters, videos, and rallies to communicate with workers, and appointed ("for the first time in the union's history," Kumar notes) rank-and-file workers to the negotiating committee. When the Teamsters went on strike on August 4, the members were prepared to explain the issues of inequality to customers and the news media: full-time work at part-time status, a two-tier wage scale (lower for more recent hires), and a pension fund that UPS wanted to take over.

After the expected news frames about strike-caused inconveniences in the first week, something changed. By the second week, news media surveys indicated that

a majority of Americans supported the Teamsters in the strike. “The working class, which is barely conscious of its class identity because of an ideological environment dominated by corporations, recognized that the experiences of the workers were similar to their own,” Kumar writes. “By mobilizing class consciousness, the Teamsters won public opinion, which then influenced the tone of the strike coverage in several national news media outlets” and headed off political intervention.

Breaking through the news media’s narrative frames is difficult. One of the most pernicious frames is the powerful “nationalist” narrative. Kumar points out the terrible irony of such coverage: “While we are told, on the one hand, that nation-states no longer have the power to control MNCs [multi-national corporations] or to insist on labor and environmental standards, on the other, citizens are routinely asked to sacrifice for the “national interest.” This news media frame was in full force in the U.S. media as the rationale for Reaganomics in the 1980s. Kumar notes that “by 1987, in the midst of the Reagan boom, almost three-quarters of all contracts covering one thousand or more workers included concessions; for manufacturing workers, the figure was 90 percent.” So, workers (including UPS workers who agreed to contract concession of a two-tier wage system in the 1980s) make sacrifices for the national economy, while corporations work to lower their tax rates, export jobs to low-wage countries, and slacken health and safety standards to boost corporate profits. Ahh, it’s morning in America again.

Kumar recommends readers skip Chapter 6 (titled “Rethorizing Resistance in Communication and Media Studies”), unless they are interested in media theory. Still, despite the intimidating title, this chapter is a nice introduction to media theory concepts, as it clearly explains how resistant action like the UPS strike is interpreted from the standpoints of cultural studies, liberal pluralism, and political economy. Kumar critiques the first two views: “if postmodern cultural studies downplays the need for material transformation, liberalism sees no necessity for it. Liberalism’s position on media and democracy is based on an acceptance of the fundamental soundness of the current media system, despite all of its limitations.” She sides with the political economy camp, and endorses a more radical approach in which “the struggle to create a public sphere must be located within the larger struggle against the structures of oppression and exploitation.”

The book also includes an appendix, a wonderful historical record of the author’s 2004 interview with Ron Carey. After the 1997 strike victory, Carey was removed from the Teamsters over a finance scandal in his 1996 Teamster reelection campaign. The allegations against Carey seemed like payback from UPS and the old guard, Carey said. Carey was acquitted of all charges in 2001, but not before James Hoffa became president of the union in 1998. Carey remains a critical voice in the labor movement, embracing a global labor movement, and—what must be directed to today’s Teamster leadership—union democracy, “where members are free to stand up at meetings and speak their minds.”

*Outside the Box* is optimistic about the lessons of the UPS strike. Kumar concludes “the UPS strike showed what is possible in the context of growing class polarization and anger today.” But, Kumar continues, “what is necessary is a labor movement that can channel this anger and turn it into action.” Indeed, class polarization and anger still persist today. Yet, given the excellent case study lesson out-

lined by Kumar, what has the labor movement learned? To date, the Teamsters and other unions broke from the AFL-CIO (in 2005) to form the Change to Win federation, but one would be hard-pressed to find much change or many major wins since UPS.

In fact, the most successful labor action to penetrate the mainstream media in the U.S. since 1997—aside from the protests against the World Trade Organization at its 1999 meeting in Seattle—were the immigrant rallies in Spring 2006. Millions of immigrants across the country, mostly from Latin America, demonstrated for immigrant rights and helped to move the debate in their favor. But, organized labor's role in these protests was small and lacked a clear voice.

Kumar rightly observes the possibilities of a larger umbrella movement for social justice, noting, "the immigrant rights movement has the potential to revitalize the labor movement in the U.S." But for the labor movement to prevail, she argues, it needs to link with a larger movement of progressives, refusing the limits of the corporate media and mainstream politics and pushing their own agenda into the public sphere.

## Reference

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***War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death.*** Written and directed by Loretta Alper and Jeremy Earp. Produced by Loretta Alper. Based on the book by Norman Solomon. Narrated by Sean Penn. Media Education Foundation, 2007, 73 min.

Since 1991 the Media Education Foundation (MEF) has produced a series of films and supporting materials which have become widely used in media studies and other college courses. *Dreamworlds: Desire, Sex and Power in Music Video* (now in its third edition, 2007) and *Tough Guise: Violence, Media and the Crisis in Masculinity* (1999) are among the best known, but other notable recent titles include *Hijacking Catastrophe: 9/11, Fear, and the Selling of American Empire* (2004) and *Class Dismissed: How TV Frames the Working Class* (2007). Founded by Sut Jhally at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, the organization has grown in size and sophistication, and its catalog ([www.mediaed.org/](http://www.mediaed.org/)) now includes a wide variety of films on media and gender, health, diversity, commercialism, war, peace and other topics. Although some MEF films are mostly (very effective) illustrated lectures, the quality, organization and production values of its films are

steadily improving.

A good example is one of MEF's most recent films, *War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death* (2007). Based on syndicated columnist Norman Solomon's book of the same title published in 2005, this 73-minute film analyzes the striking parallels in how Presidents, the Pentagon and the U.S. news media have repeatedly sold wars to Americans since the beginning of the Cold War more than fifty years ago. Focusing primarily on the spurious rationales for the Vietnam War and the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq, but including many other instances of selective history, and some outright lies, from Presidents Johnson, Nixon, Reagan, Clinton and both Bushes, the film documents, with scores of well-organized television and film clips, a consistent pattern with repeated components. First, presidents and others beat the drums of war, preparing public opinion by "withholding information about the actual reasons and potential costs of military action, again and again choosing to present an easier version of war's reality....A steady and remarkably consistent storyline designed not to inform but to generate and maintain support and enthusiasm for war." Appeals based on fear buttress this selective view of reality, and the U.S. is presented as acting from only the most virtuous of motives. The "rhetoric of democracy" repeats endlessly, until "bombing other people comes to seem like an act of kindness, of altruism." This war propaganda blends into the conventional wisdom of commercial media coverage, and not just by Fox and other obviously right-wing sources. The dominant media become "team players" with the government leaders they are supposed to be covering, a role which Norman Solomon notes pointedly is "directly counter to the idea of an independent press." During the run-up to the invasion of Iraq, the false claims about Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction in Secretary of State Colin Powell's UN speech were greeted with skepticism by much of the European press, but the U.S. press was overwhelmingly uncritical, continuing their usual role as stenographers to power, mostly just writing down and passing on the administration line. Now, after U.S. public opinion has turned against the war, we get the muted admissions from some journalists that "we should have been more skeptical," while they continue to insist that "the system worked." But it's too late; too much damage has been done, the problem is structural, and it only awaits another presidential propaganda initiative for the whole cycle to start all over again.

In the process of analyzing this institutionalized compulsion to repeated, unnecessary and immoral military actions, the film destroys several cherished myths about U.S. wars and war reporting over the last half-century. Many Americans believe that support for the Vietnam war eroded because reporting on that war was so tough, because we got tired of watching brutality on television. But Solomon notes, and the film demonstrates, how exceptional was the tough reporting: Walter Cronkite's new public skepticism about official claims of the war's successes in early 1968, for example, showed Lyndon Johnson that he was losing the struggle for U.S. public opinion, but the film shows Cronkite and other journalists repeatedly fawning over U.S. weaponry and firepower. And while grotesquely expensive high-tech weapons are continually fetishized, very little of the violence done by American soldiers was or is shown.

The related notion of "the Vietnam syndrome" also comes under critical scru-

tiny here. Supposedly Americans become skittish if a war goes on too long, and the first President Bush imagined we had “kicked” this mythical problem with the Gulf War. But a comparative graph of public support for wars over time shows clearly that support for World War Two always remained high, while support for the Vietnam and Iraq wars steadily declined because they couldn’t be won quickly and were based on deception. Most Americans aren’t as ignorant or distracted as our myths or our leaders often purport. Thus a key component of the repeated storyline: military withdrawal must be made unacceptable. Don’t “cut and run.” “Stay the course.”

This film is not just a talking-head adaptation of Norman Solomon’s book, repeating his message in a different medium. It is a distinctive work of its own, creatively developing Solomon’s very important work in new ways and with different kinds of evidence. It uses a wide variety of specifically cinematic (and rhetorical) devices to construct a well-supported argument which is also concrete, vivid and carefully paced. In particular, writer-directors Loretta Alper and Jeremy Earp have learned from recent developments in contemporary documentary films on political and social issues. Documentary filmmakers have been constructing so-called “compilation films” since at least the thirties, when the development of large-scale international photograph, sound and film archives made possible the compilation of previously-recorded material into new nonfiction and propaganda works which changed the meanings of the earlier images and sounds by recontextualizing them. More recently the archives of television news at Vanderbilt University and elsewhere give contemporary documentarists access to vast new databases of public, visible evidence, and the doctrine of “fair use” provides legal protection for educational and other work that incorporates this evidence into new discursive and political frameworks. And relatively inexpensive and speedy digital editing decks make it possible to organize and manipulate all this material much more easily. Gradually nonfiction filmmakers, especially independent left political filmmakers, have learned to use these tools to construct critiques of the commercial media using the images and sounds of those same media. They comb through digital archives, finding ideological patterns hidden by the priorities of dominant media; over time, they have learned to condense through editing these found materials into fluid, complex, even graceful structures of argument, counter-argument, illustration and evidence. In the recent explosion of political and other documentaries, many a film editor has learned how to construct a damning and often hilarious montage sequence that shows multiple news anchors and pundits speaking with virtually one voice, or contradicting themselves, or repeating now-discredited wisdom. Michael Moore, Robert Greenwald and others have popularized this as a quasi-Brechtian practice, and variations show up regularly on *YouTube* and *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart.

*War Made Easy* uses these now-familiar montage sequences with an ethical precision and facility at the service of serious, even devastating arguments. One president after another not only says virtually the same things, but also uses similar gestures in similar backdrops. Sometimes split screens emphasize these patterns; sometimes slow-motion helps defamiliarize the powerful images and sounds of parades and patriotism to reveal their ritualistic functions. This is structuralism for

beginners, demonstrating through close and intricate visual/sound parallels a relatively unchanging structure within apparent historical change. A montage of Bush administration officials repeating lies about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction receives its echo a few minutes later in a montage of media channels repeating lies about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. The rhythm of voice-over exposition by Sean Penn and Norman Solomon carefully slows, then accelerates in coordination with evidentiary images. And the film wisely saves for silent intertitles, fading in and out slowly one by one, one of its most memorable points. The percentage of casualties who are civilians: World War One: 10%. World War Two: 50%. Vietnam: 70%. Iraq: 90%.

*War Made Easy* is an impressive and accomplished work which should spark lots of informed discussion in and out of classrooms and elsewhere.

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