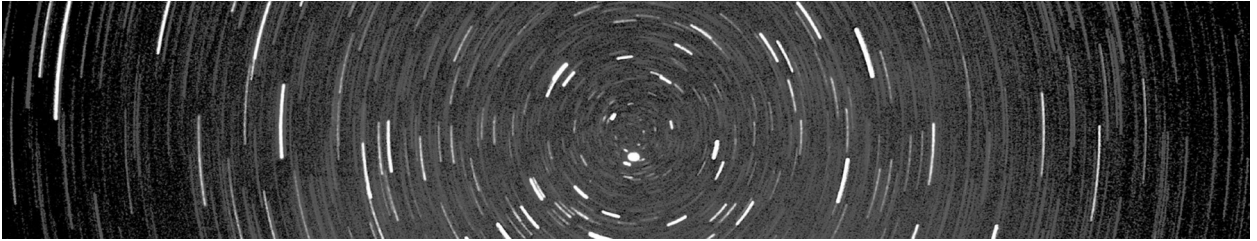


PART VI

# Cultural Dimensions





# Neoliberalism and Media<sup>1</sup>

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## INTRODUCTION

References to neoliberalism are commonplace in media and communication studies.<sup>2</sup> As in other fields, the concept is normally invoked critically; to speak of neoliberalism usually suggests a disposition that is opposed to it. Yet, the concept is not always affirmed *as* a concept, even by critical scholars. Some interrogate its ready-to-hand authority as a critical keyword (Flew, 2008). Others refer to it with a casual weariness, as if its commonplaceness illustrates its lack of descriptive and explanatory value (Grossberg, 2010). Whatever we make of the concept, it is difficult to talk about the current condition of critical media and communication studies without talking about neoliberalism. If, as Ernesto Laclau (1990) suggests, all identities are structurally constituted by antagonisms, we might call neoliberalism the master antagonist – even more so than capitalism (Garland & Harper, 2012) – of critical research in the field.

This chapter examines how the concept of neoliberalism is articulated in the interdisciplinary field of media, communication and journalism research. The literature has not generated the kind of theoretical differences evident in other fields (see Birch, 2015). Nonetheless, the primary

reference points are familiar ones. Critical political economy perspectives dominate (David Harvey's (2005) work has been particularly influential), interspersed with eclectic citations of Michel Foucault (2008), Pierre Bourdieu (1998b), Wendy Brown (2003), and many others. Instead of being a focal point of intensive theorization, neoliberalism has been most commonly deployed as a narrative and framing device – to cue a pessimistic story of how media and communication systems and cultures have changed since the 1970s and 1980s. Discussions of neoliberalism are sometimes mediated by existing theoretical differences. One is the distinction between political economy and cultural studies, which has been regarded as a defining theoretical division of the field.<sup>3</sup> Different authors have interrogated the coherence and value of the latter distinction (see Fenton, 2006). It can conceal as much as illuminate, and obscure the heterogeneous character of the work done under both headings. Nonetheless, the distinction continues to have a discursive authority in the field that intersects with a historiography of the neoliberal era. The rise of British cultural studies as a theoretical rival to political economy was 'almost exactly coterminous' (Murdock, 1995: 91) with the rise of neoliberalism, and grounded in the attempts of Stuart Hall (1988) and others (Hall et al., 2013)

to make sense of the political emergence of what later became known as ‘Thatcherism’.

I organize my initial discussion of the literature around a broad distinction between political economy approaches that conceptualize neoliberalism as a ‘free market’ ideology and capitalist formation, and cultural studies perspectives, including governmentality studies, which emphasize its political, cultural, social and discursive dimensions. I do not present an exhaustive empirical account of all the media and communication practices that have been described as neoliberal. Nor do I identify each and every critical theorist invoked by media scholars. Instead, the first two sections highlight how discussions of neoliberalism have been animated by a ‘narrative of decline’ (Dawes, 2014: 702), which highlights how media institutions and spaces have been progressively colonized by market policies and logics.

I then consider arguments that question the polemical value of the concept of neoliberalism. Instead of dismissing them, I suggest they underscore the need for greater refinement of how the concept is deployed as a theoretical and analytical category. I end the chapter by reflecting on how conceptualising neoliberalism as a ‘mediated’ or ‘mediatized’ phenomenon might inform the work of scholars in other fields. If, as media scholars like to suggest, ‘everything’ is now mediated (Livingstone, 2009), how might critical media studies illuminate the social and political dynamics of neoliberalization in ways that have been comparatively neglected in the wider literature?

### NEOLIBERALISM AS A ‘FREE MARKET’ IDEOLOGY

Critical media scholars of different theoretical orientations define neoliberalism as, first and foremost, an economic ideology, system and formation. This perspective has been developed most purposefully in the critical political economy literature, though references to ‘neoliberal political economy’ and ‘neoliberal capitalism’ have a wider currency in the field, sometimes in work only loosely connected to an explicitly defined political economy literature. Critical political economy begins from the premise that the analysis of economy can never be separated from the analysis of politics (Mosco, 2009). In its strongest Marxist iteration, both are theorized as regional domains of an interlocking capitalist-liberal democratic system. Nonetheless, the dominant impulse in the field has treated the economic domain as primary. Media and communication systems are

conceptualized as integral elements of a capitalist system increasingly dependent on the production of information, representations and data (Chakravarty & Schiller, 2010; Freedman, 2014). Profit-orientated media corporations function as instruments of ideological domination because of how they legitimize capitalist interests, norms and dispositions, and the one-dimensional pursuit of economic growth, within mainstream media spaces (Garland & Harper, 2012; Peck, 2015).

For critical political economists, neoliberalism represents a particular regime of capital based on a realignment of the relationship between market, state and labour (Hope, 2012). Neoliberalism signifies the political return of the ‘free market’ as a guiding ideological principle of economic and social life, in a fashion that recalls the *laissez-faire* liberalism of the nineteenth century (McChesney, 1998). The story of neoliberal ascendancy doubles as a story of the Keynesian crisis of the 1970s and 1980s, particularly when narrated from the US- and Euro-centric perspectives that dominate the neoliberalism (and media) literature. The Keynesian paradigm likewise internalized capitalist imperatives, but it saw the welfare state as a necessary bulwark against the negative social effects of the market. Neoliberal ideologues and policy advocates questioned assumptions about the necessity of state intervention in the market, and read the unemployment and inflation increases of the 1970s as symptoms of the failure of Keynesianism. Instead of positioning the state as the agent of a ‘public interest’ that opposed the market, neoliberals recast the interests of the state, public and citizens as synonymous with market competition and the pursuit of economic freedoms.

Media researchers have documented how free market ideas and policies have reconfigured media and communication systems in different countries since the 1970s (see, for example, Briziarelli, 2014; Cammaerts & Calabrese, 2011; Fenton, 2011; Freedman, 2008; Grantham & Miller, 2010; Hope, 2012; Louw, 2005; McChesney, 2015; Thompson, 2012; Thussu, 2007). Media and cultural industries were repositioned as the same as any other commercial industry; in the neoliberal imaginary, they primarily exist to make profit for their shareholders. Tensions between the commercial and public orientation of media predated the neoliberal era. Different Marxist theorists (Debord, 1995; Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002) had long decried the stupefying and depoliticizing effects of commercial mass media, and their structural complicity with the capitalist system. The specific impact of neoliberalism lay in how it altered (and continues to alter) the balance of power in favour of market forces, and weakened

the notion of state-enabled ‘public service’ alternatives to a purely commercial media system (Freedman, 2008). The ideological privileging of the market enabled the development of a media landscape that prioritized the interests of large conglomerates (Herman & McChesney, 1997) who assumed, and were given, the power to shape national media systems according to their own institutional priorities (Hope, 2012).

We can identify three broad themes in the political economy of media that highlight the damaging effects of neoliberal policies, and which are often interrogated from critical normative perspectives that affirm the ideal of a democratic, participatory media system that challenges corporate norms (see, for example, Andersson, 2012; Titley, 2013). These themes transcend any distinctions between ‘old’ and ‘new’ media, journalistic and entertainment media, and broadsheets and tabloids. They capture trends and patterns that are global in scale, even if the impact of neoliberalism has varied across national and regional contexts and been given variegated expression in different media practices and genres.

First, scholars highlight how neoliberal policies have reshaped the dynamics of media ownership and regulation. Before the neoliberal era, media policies in liberal democracies were typically governed by a mix of market and protectionist logics. The precise configuration of the policy regime depended on the national context and medium. Pickard (2014) describes how the US media system, institutionalized in the 1940s, was governed by corporate libertarian assumptions that anticipated the neoliberal era, and which departed from the social democratic policies then gaining ground elsewhere. In contrast to broadcasting, newspapers in most countries have been historically run as advertising-based commercial operations, even if the self-image of newspapers as quintessential ‘free market’ institutions was masked by various forms of public subsidy (McChesney, 2012). Nonetheless, consistent with the wider assumptions of the Keynesian era, states generally asserted themselves in protectionist ways that constrained the autonomy of commercial media or, in the case of broadcasting, simply assumed the prerogative of monopoly state control. The nation state assumed the mantle of representing a public interest that could not be entrusted to a purely commercial media system (even if the argument sometimes masked – especially in the early days of state-owned broadcasting (see Hope, 2012) – a political desire to exploit the propaganda benefits of the new mediums of radio and television, as a counter to the power of privately owned newspapers).

The neoliberal era institutionalized a very different policy vision. A commitment to the

‘privatization, deregulation, liberalization and globalization’ (Pickard, 2007: 121) of markets became the *raison d’être* of media and telecommunication policy both within individual states and in transnational bodies like the European Union and the World Trade Organization (Hesmondhalgh, 2008). Publicly owned media and telecommunication companies were sold and privatized. Legislative restrictions on foreign and cross-media ownership were removed. Competitive mechanisms were introduced in broadcasting markets previously controlled by the state. And national media systems were increasingly subsumed into transnational capital networks, giving international media corporations’ enormous political power and authority over the organization of the public sphere in different countries. Some suggest (see Freedman, 2008: 49) that characterizing these neoliberal policy shifts as a process of ‘deregulation’ is a misnomer, because, instead of withdrawing from media regulation, states embraced ‘light-touch’ (Mansell, 2011: 22) regulatory regimes that positioned media corporations as the best guarantors of customer choice, media plurality and media freedom. The neoliberal era did not completely override the principles of earlier regulatory regimes. Some media remained in public ownership, and some governments attempted to introduce regulatory initiatives to counter the extreme free market logic of first-wave neoliberalism (Thompson, 2012). Nonetheless, the forces of market competition assumed a new authority over the institutional governance of publicly owned media organizations like the BBC (Freedman, 2008, 2014). And in extreme cases, such as New Zealand, the principles of public service media were largely renounced, even when the national television broadcaster remained in public ownership (Thompson, 2012).

Second, media scholars have examined how neoliberal logics have changed the conditions of media production, in tandem with a wider structural shift to a digital media universe that undermined the viability of traditional advertising models. Media content is increasingly produced based on calculated assessments of its likely commercial viability and ratings potential, rather than on any distinct normative evaluation of its potential to enhance the quality of the public sphere. Broadcasting schedules are a case in point. Primetime is reserved for commercially lucrative programming, while public interest content is increasingly relegated to ‘graveyard’ slots, reimagined as products for niche audiences. The reconfiguration of media production practices has been accompanied by a normalization of precarious work regimes, and the emergence of online surveillance and commodification mechanisms

(Roberts, 2014) that treat page hits as the primary measure of value. Fenton (2011: 64) describes how the production of journalism under neoliberalism has become reliant on the ‘creative cannibalization’ of public relations source material, because of deprofessionalized work regimes where journalists are expected to produce more with less. Journalists’ ability to assert their professional autonomy, and produce genuine ‘public interest’ news, is progressively undermined by the imperatives and logics of the economic field (Benson & Neveu, 2005; Bourdieu, 1998b).

Third, scholars document the corrosive effects of neoliberal cultures on the content published and disseminated in media spaces. Sensationalized, PR-driven and celebrity media become emblematic of a dumbed-down public culture, where the normative obligation of media organizations to keep citizens informed is displaced by the need to entertain consumers. Tabloid-driven practices and formats proliferate (Louw, 2005), and ‘infotainment’ is embedded as the default genre of news and current affairs coverage. The most affluent demographics become the primary targets of media attention, and those who deviate from some preferred set of middle-class archetypes and lifestyles are more readily demeaned and scapegoated (Erikson, 2015). The neoliberal era has admittedly seen a significant expansion of content options, especially for audiences with the purchasing power to access the most critically acclaimed media content. Nonetheless, critics see the rhetoric of ‘consumer choice’ as simply a cover story for a more stratified and fragmented media landscape, dominated by the profit-making imperatives of a small number of media corporations (Freedman, 2014; Herman & McChesney, 1997). Dean (2009: 230) suggests that the very notion of a democratic public culture is debased by a ‘technological infrastructure of neoliberalism’, and the ‘big data’ economy and ‘quantified self’ of online media (Beer, 2015). All content and contributions, no matter how radical their political intent, are subsumed into an undifferentiated logic of market exchange, and the value-generating mechanisms of digital media platforms like Google and Facebook (Compton & Dyer-Witford, 2014; Roberts, 2014).

Neoliberalism is conceptualized across the political economy literature as the ideology of global capitalism: the self-serving doctrine of a transnational ruling class who own and control most of the world’s media corporations; a power elite who move easily between state and corporate universes (Briziarelli, 2014; Freedman, 2014). This ideology justifies itself in the name of consumer choice, media pluralism, and individual freedom. Yet, instead of creating a mythical ‘marketplace of

ideas’, neoliberal policies have institutionalized a media landscape that is oppressive of ‘non-market forces’ (McChesney, 1998) and which largely precludes any significant departure from a neoliberal consensus in media coverage (Mercille, 2014). Or when the neoliberal order is challenged, the threat is domesticated – diluted into an ideologically palatable set of reformist measures, or narrated as a story of individual moral corruption – as it was during the financial crisis in 2007 and 2008 (Chakravarty & Schiller, 2010; Silke & Preston, 2011). Freedman (2014) cautions against crude functionalist readings of the relationship between neoliberalism and media. Contrary views are voiced and circulated (see also Cammaerts, 2015), and a one-dimensional production of neoliberal propaganda would be untenable both politically and commercially. Nonetheless, corporate control of the media system imposes clear limits on the possibility of a sustained political interrogation of neoliberal assumptions within mainstream media spaces, because of media outlets’ own embeddedness in capitalist culture and values.

## THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF NEOLIBERALISM

All discussions of neoliberalism in media research are in some sense informed by a political economy approach; no one would argue that neoliberalism’s cultural and discursive dynamics can be understood separately from its economic bearings and logic. Moreover, the theoretical heterogeneity of the political economy literature (Wasko, Murdock & Sousa, 2011) troubles the notion of a unitary political economy analysis of neoliberalism. Nonetheless, political economy has been primarily understood as code for analytical approaches that see mainstream media practices as epiphenomena of their capitalist and economic foundations. The emergence of British cultural studies<sup>4</sup> represented a challenge to these economic tendencies, and especially Marxist frameworks that saw little more than a media propaganda system that served the interests of the ruling class. Rather than disavowing the Marxist tradition, Hall and his colleagues at the Birmingham School of cultural studies (Hall et al., 2013) looked to a different set of Marxist theoretical sources (among them Althusser, Gramsci and Laclau) to accord greater significance to the role of politics, culture and ideas in determining the constitution of the social order. This approach inculcated a new alertness to the political importance of media and journalism practices, and their entanglement in



forms of ideological and discursive work that were not reducible to the project of legitimizing capitalism.

Hall (1988) argued that the rigid theoretical assumptions of orthodox Marxism could not account for Thatcherism's success in generating a level of popular support that disrupted the notion of the working class as the potential agents of a radical, anti-capitalist political consciousness. His intervention revived interest in the status of the concept of ideology in Marxist theory. Hall interrogated a Marxist reflex that equated ideology with a relatively superficial domain of ideas – a 'false consciousness' (1988: 49) that masked the real material conditions of capitalist society, and which had its apogee in the media's fixation on the trivial and the spectacular (Debord, 1995). This perspective missed the political significance of ideological practices, and obscured the 'rational and material core' of a Thatcherite project that 'works on the ground of already constituted social practices and lived ideologies' (1988: 56). Hall was especially attentive to the relatively autonomous role of journalists' professional ideologies in enabling Thatcherism's political success, and the place of media representations in producing an elite-driven social consensus. Rather than presupposing a unitary ideology, he stressed the ideologically heterogeneous character of Thatcherism – its weaving together of a mix of neoliberal, conservative, populist and authoritarian idioms into a hegemonic project that resonated with the common-sense assumptions of mainstream media discourses.

Cultural studies brought a new theoretical vocabulary to the study of media and popular culture, which privileged concepts like ideology, hegemony, interpellation, subjectivity, representation, discourse, text and signification (Hall, 1982). It highlighted the political importance of news media as discursive and semiotic forms, which actively construct a social world that privileges certain ideological perspectives, while simultaneously disavowing ideological commitment behind an appeal to journalistic objectivity and impartiality. Cultural studies challenged a mode of ideology critique that positioned journalists and media workers as dupes of the capitalist system or as one-dimensional symptoms of alienated labour. Media representations and practices need to be taken seriously in their own right, as constitutive elements of the social order. It also interrogated a received critical view of media audiences as largely passive. Studies emphasizing the capacity of audiences to challenge dominant media representations became something of a new theoretical orthodoxy, as part of a general emphasis on the contingency of the social order.

Cultural studies has taken different theoretical and regional trajectories since its Birmingham school iteration in the 1970s. Critical cultural studies scholars examine the role of different mediated practices in the production of neoliberal subjectivities (Gilbert, 2011). A focus on the 'politics of representation' has informed a wider body of critical research on neoliberal discourse, under the theoretical guise of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2002), critical linguistics (Block et al., 2012), and rhetoric (Aune, 2001). My own work (Phelan, 2014a) draws on a combination of Laclau's discourse theory and Bourdieu's field theory to explore the protean character of neoliberal formations, and the resonances between a 'third way neoliberalism' that disavows the notion of a market/state antagonism and a 'journalistic habitus' that is enacted as anti-ideological (see further discussion in the final section).

Nonetheless, political economy scholars have historically criticized cultural studies researchers and discourse analysts for fixating on the textual and discursive dimensions of media practices, to the detriment of a systematic analysis of their capitalist conditions of production. This critique has sometimes been articulated as a general critique of post-modernist and post-structuralist theories, for reducing 'the real' to the status of a discourse and exaggerating the capacity of media audiences to 'resist' dominant ideologies (Garnham, 1995). Writing in 2000, Philo and Miller (see also Garnham, 1995) accused 'critical' media scholars of producing research that is complicit with neoliberalism, because of a valorization of popular taste that becomes indistinguishable from an ideological celebration of market pluralism. More recently, Downey, Titley and Toyne (2014) criticized certain faddish tendencies in media studies for displacing Hall's focus on ideology critique, and the role of media in legitimating neoliberalism. For his part, Hall's (2011) later reflections on neoliberalism reinvigorated the anti-capitalist impulses of the original cultural studies project (see also Compton & Dyer-Witford, 2014), against some of his laments of how cultural studies had displaced its focus on the politics of the social totality.

Yet, cultural scholars' commitment to ideology critique of neoliberalism has partly been transmuted into other theoretical vocabularies. In particular, Foucauldian theorizations of neoliberalism as a system of governmentality (Foucault, 2007, 2008) represent perhaps the most programmatic alternative to conventional political economy approaches. This work is sometimes framed in opposition to ideology critique, textured by Foucault's (2007) own reservations about the concept (see Dawes, 2016). Ouellette and Hay

(2008: 2) distinguish their analysis of the reality television genre of the 'makeover' programme from the notion of neoliberalism as a top-down hegemonic ideology. They argue that reality television formats are better theorized as cultural sites of a 'highly dispersed' neoliberal governmentality, which disseminate techniques and prescriptions for how individuals and populations should self-actualize themselves in a world of market competition. Their work is part of a wider literature on the neoliberal character of reality television, not all of it explicitly Foucauldian (see Couldry, 2010; Gilbert, 2011). McCarthy (2007: 17) describes reality television as 'a neoliberal theatre of suffering', because of how it dramatizes the individualized, precarious and affective working conditions of neoliberal regimes. These competitive pressures take a more generalized form in the self-branding conventions and prescriptions of social media (Hearn, 2008). A publicly performed notion of selfhood and agency is inculcated that dissolves into the 'entrepreneurial self' of neoliberal reason (Mirowski, 2013), because of its relentless desire for visibility and attention.

Dawes (2014: 704) draws on Foucault to interrogate media scholars' dependency on 'rudimentary readings' of neoliberalism as a 'free market ideology that serves powerful private interest' (see also Dawes, 2016), and shorthand binaries that pitch market against state, public versus private, and citizens versus consumers. The governmentality literature enables us to better grasp how neoliberalism involves a 'reconfiguration of the relation between state and market' (Dawes, 2014: 714), which, instead of renouncing a commitment to the values of citizenship and publicness, seeks to recast them within a market-centric framework. Liester (2013) likewise uses the concept of governmentality to explore the place of the mobile phone in the political rationality of neoliberalism. Mobile media enable a ubiquitous data surveillance regime, but also new forms of political agency and protest as possible 'counter-rationalities and counter-conducts' to neoliberal rule (2013: 59).

Beyond Hall and Foucault, critical media and communication studies scholars have drawn on a variety of other critical theoretical sources – among them Lacan, Žižek, Brown, Hardt and Negri, Laclau, Mouffe, Deleuze, Honneth (Couldry, 2010; Fenton, 2016; Jutel, 2015; Mylonas, 2014; Tiessen & Elmer, 2013) – to explore the heterogeneous manifestations of neoliberal rationality. Much of this work belies any clear distinction between political economy and cultural studies. Class (Eriksson, 2015), gender (North, 2009), race and ethnicity (Lentin & Titley, 2011), sexuality (Sender, 2006), and social movements (Fenton, 2016) all intersect

in discussions of neoliberalism and media cultures, not as discrete objects of analysis, but as constitutive elements in the universalization of neoliberal capitalism. Read in this way, neoliberalism takes the shape of a material-discursive formation, rather than something that can be adequately grasped through any simplistic opposition of discursive/idealist and materialist perspectives (Dahlberg & Phelan, 2011; Phelan, 2014a). Discussions of neoliberal discourse, neoliberal affect, neoliberal subjectivity, and neoliberal governmentality became equally pertinent to critical analyses of neoliberal political economy and ideology.

### QUESTIONING THE POLEMICAL STATUS OF 'NEOLIBERALISM'

I have thus far presented an overview of how the concept of neoliberalism has been deployed – as a *name* for the dominant social order – by different theoretical traditions in critical media and communication studies. However, the concept has also been regarded quite differently by those who question its assumed status as the default 'antagonist' of the field (see Phelan, 2014b). This discourse has a currency across the social sciences (see Barnett, 2005; Rose, O'Malley & Valverde, 2006), and is given its most derisory articulation in journalistic put-downs that see 'neoliberalism' as nothing other than a shibboleth of left-wing conspiracy theorists and activists. A qualified version of this discourse has also featured in recent critical work on neoliberalism, as part of a reflexive assessment of the limitations of shorthand definitions and narratives (see, for instance, Peck, 2010; Phelan, 2014a).

Flew (2009) interrogates how the concept operates in the political economy literature; he is more amenable to the account of neoliberalism formulated by Foucault. He questions critical media scholars' reliance on neoliberalism as an 'omnibus' term, which reduces the analysis of different national contexts to a 'single organizing prism' (Flew, 2008: 128). His argument (see also Flew & Cunningham, 2010) folds into a general commentary on the status of critique in media and cultural analysis. He captures tensions between analytical approaches that pragmatically respond to the assumptions and contradictions of neoliberal political economy, and an externalist critical stance that asserts strong opposition to a unitary neoliberalism.

Grossberg (2010) voices a similar critique of the term's taken for grantedness, but with sharper focus on the cultural studies literature. Ritualistic appeals to neoliberalism can 'le[t] us off the



hook', he argues, and cultural studies 'would be better off without [the term] unless its meaning is always specified and contextually located' (2010: 141). Grossberg articulates a set of objections that go beyond any specific theorization of neoliberalism; Marxist and governmentality accounts can be equally 'lazy' (2010: 2). The term can produce a totalizing form of analysis, which fails to grasp the dynamics of the particular social context.

Garland and Harper (2012: 413) question the value of the concept from a Marxist perspective, suggesting the 'discursive substitution of "neoliberalism" for "capitalism"' has obscured the role of the state in serving the material and propaganda interests of capitalists. Contrary to the assumption that the dominant account of neoliberalism has been Marxist, they interrogate the woolly-headed liberal assumptions that underpin critiques of neoliberalism, which find expression in a largely unproblematic defence of public service broadcasting as a democratic alternative to neoliberal media. A 'neoliberalism-versus-democracy framework' (2012: 413) is inadequate, they argue, because of the co-opted condition of democratic cultures and state infrastructures under neoliberalism (see also Dean, 2009; Roberts, 2014).

### NEOLIBERALISM AS AN ANALYTICAL CATEGORY

Taken together, these critiques point to the analytical limitations of conceptualizing neoliberalism as a monolithic concept or structure, which 'causes' and 'acts' on different social and media practices. The concept needs to amount to more than a polemical device for denouncing media regimes that we wish were otherwise (Dawes, 2014; Phelan, 2014a).

Debates about the conceptual status of neoliberalism embody tensions between universal and particularistic modes of analysis (Glynos & Howarth, 2007; Phelan, 2014a). Invoking a unitary 'neoliberalism' performs a necessary universalizing and totalizing function. It enables critical media scholars to name and identify – whatever our preferred theoretical vocabulary – ideological, hegemonic, economic, governmental, and discursive continuities between different social contexts and practices. At the same time, the notion of a universal neoliberal structure, logic or subject can obscure how neoliberalism is differently articulated in different social contexts. These methodological problems do not disappear if 'capitalism' is reinstated as our primary antagonist. Tensions persist between asserting the coherence of the

universal concept and negotiating the existence of different neoliberalisms or different capitalisms (Hay & Payne, 2015; Soederberg, Menz & Cerny, 2005).

These analytical conundrums are also political. For critical scholars, the concept of neoliberalism names the Other that gives discursive coherence to our own political-intellectual (Grossberg, 2010) identities. It signals the always-already political character of scholarship, in contrast to a scientific habitus that disavows political commitment. Nonetheless, Barnett (2005) and Clarke (2008) argue that ritualistic denunciations of a monolithic neoliberalism can generate a kind of political fatalism, where we simply confirm the story of neoliberal dominance, rather than disarticulating its constitutive logics and mechanisms. The critique of neoliberalism potentially inhibits our capacity to conceptualize a way beyond 'it', and explore how the material-discursive legacies of neoliberal regimes might be politically reconstituted and 'disfigured' (Phelan, 2014a).

In this spirit, I want to identify five ways that media and communication scholars might mitigate the field's over-reliance on a broad-stroke understanding of neoliberalism, and enrich the analytical purchase of the concept. Some of these tendencies are already evident in the literature, but relatively under-developed compared to the authority of a 'big picture' (Peck, 2010: xii) neoliberal story. Contrary to those who wonder if the term should be discarded, we might say that the problem is not with the concept as such, but rather with how it is analytically deployed and articulated.

First, instead of treating neoliberalism as a 'static type' (Clarke, 2010: 980) definition or concept, media scholars should take their cue from the geography literature and focus on *processes* of neoliberalization (Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Peck, 2010). We cannot, and should not, avoid sometimes speaking of a unitary neoliberalism. Nonetheless, this simple change in perspective focuses attention on how neoliberal 'logics' (Phelan, 2014a) are acting *on* and *in* social practices, in contrast to a one-dimensional mode of critique that simply names social practices as 'neoliberal'. It compels us to explore how neoliberal processes are articulated with other political, social, economic, cultural, and media processes, in ways that can cannibalize the latter, but also generate paradoxes, contradictions and political resistance. It differentiates between the neoliberalization of a practice and the practice as such (for example, the notion of press freedom) even when our capacity to make such a distinction is challenged by the subsumptive power of neoliberal reason. We should be able to speak coherently about the neoliberalization of media practices

and cultures, without reducing the latter to nothing other than neoliberal symptoms. We need to be attentive to other things happening in mediated regimes that cannot be accounted for within a neoliberal framework. However underdeveloped or latent, they represent potential composite elements of counter-hegemonic media practices that challenge neoliberal(ized) reflexes and dispositions.

Second, media scholars need to check our default representation of neoliberalism as a 'free market' ideology and philosophy that is perfunctorily opposed to the state. The shorthand has a certain conceptual coherence, not least because of the thematics of neoliberal rhetoric itself. Nonetheless, it can reproduce a problematic opposition between economic and political rationality, where neoliberalism is primarily aligned with the former. And it can downplay the state-enabled character of neoliberalism (see Foucault, 2008; Wacquant, 2012), by dichotomizing the relationship between market and state. To be fair, no one would deny the existence of something called the 'neoliberal state' (Briziarelli, 2014; Roberts, 2014), be it in the form of an aggressive championing of market rule, a 'third way' formation that privileges the trope of a state/market 'partnership' (Phelan, 2014a), or state-enabled audit regimes that internalize market rationality (Crouch, 2011; Power, 1997). Yet, even when critically and ironically inflected, Wacquant (2012) and Crouch (2011) wonder if critiques of the 'free market' can amplify the truth effects of discourses that *dichotomize* market and state. In addition, the anthropomorphic, totalizing figure of 'the market' risks attributing agency to a 'thing' that is always a proxy for a particular regime of state-enabled corporate power (Jones, 2013). Simple state/market binaries also obscure the heterogeneous potential of both entities and the possibility of different configurations of state, market and civil society in the political and institutional design of media and communication systems (see, for example, Baker, 2001). Privileging the figure of a unitary state either working for or against neoliberalism brackets out the tensions between the 'right hand' and 'left hand' of the state (Bourdieu, 1998a), where the narrow economic reason of the former is challenged by the social impulses of the latter. And critical discussions of the market can easily dissolve into general denunciations of neoliberalism, as if markets are, by definition, *neoliberal* institutions, rather than mechanisms potentially open to different political articulations (see, for example, Holland, 2011). Blanket critiques of this kind impair recognition of how even radical democratic visions of an alternative media system might incorporate market-based elements (Curran, 2002). And they sidestep, or simply dismiss, the political question of how capitalism

might be differently organized (see, for instance, Hay & Payne, 2015), in ways that would reject the myth of a 'free' market.

Third, media scholars need to develop more theoretically differentiated analyses of neoliberalism, partly through closer engagement with work in other fields. Discussions of media and neoliberalism are inherently interdisciplinary. Yet the level of cross-disciplinary engagement is sometimes slight. Garland and Harper (2012) suggest that media scholars miss some of the nuances in David Harvey's account of the neoliberal state, despite the widespread citation of his book on neoliberalism. Dawes likewise reads the privileged status of Harvey's work, and the largely uncritical engagement with it, as indicative of the field's 'limited awareness of the wider array of perspectives on neoliberalism' (Dawes, 2014: 712). Media scholars' engagement with other fields therefore needs to be more rigorous. Yet we also need to do more than cite theoretical authorities elsewhere, as if theories of neoliberalism are imported into media and communication studies, rather than something potentially immanent to our own analysis. And instead of seeing it as a weakness, perhaps our field's comparatively pragmatic approach to theory (see Dahlgren, 2011) might be construed as a strength in illuminating the heterogeneous trajectories of neoliberal reason (see further discussion below).

Fourth, critical media scholars need to acknowledge the political implications of our different analyses, in ways that go beyond the obvious fact that we don't like neoliberalism, or which eternalize the terms of the political economy/cultural studies debate. Neoliberalism is the antagonist that brings us together. Yet the question of what might constitute a substantive alternative to neoliberalism, or a genuine 'post-neoliberalism', will inevitably be contested, and not satisfactorily grasped by abstract declarations of scholars' preferred normative visions. One important focal point concerns the relationship between neoliberalism and the equally fraught concept of liberalism. Should media researchers renounce our historical identification with liberal and pluralist motifs because of an effective colonization of liberal democracy, and the language of progressive politics, by neoliberal reason (Dean, 2009; Fenton & Titley, 2015; Jutel, 2015)? Or might aspects of a progressive liberal inheritance be disarticulated from their neoliberal iteration (Phelan, 2014a), and reclaimed and radicalized as part of a coherent anti-neoliberal politics? These questions invite an additional series of questions, which were rehearsed in the post-mortems about the relative success or failure of the Occupy movement. Can a significant political alternative to neoliberalism emerge through the representational architecture of liberal democratic

regimes, and their enduring attachment to a media and political imaginary that remains centred on the nation-state? Or should our political energy be directed towards creating alternative participatory infrastructures that transcend the politics of ‘representation’? (Robinson & Tormey, 2007). Answering these, in one sense, old questions does not mean limiting ourselves to either/or propositions. Yet how we prefigure our answers will inevitably inflect our analysis, and our normative assumptions about what might constitute a significant alternative to a neoliberal order.

Finally, we need more comparative studies of how neoliberal logics structure media cultures in different national and regional contexts (Awad, 2014; Hallin & Mancini, 2004), as a counter-tendency to studies that universalize a liberal democratic transition from Keynesianism to neoliberalism. Discussions of the corrosive effects of neoliberalism already go well beyond the Anglo-American- and Euro-centrism of the media literature (see, for example, Awad, 2014; Cupples & Glynn, 2014; Thussu, 2007). Nonetheless, the relationship between different neoliberal(ized) contexts has been relatively underexplored. This limits our understanding of the variegated character of neoliberalism’s political articulations and the specific place of mediated dynamics in the neoliberalization of different national contexts. At the same time, comparative researchers should be wary of producing little more than a collection of stylized ‘ideal types’ (Hay & Payne, 2015) that simply formalize what we already know about the existence of different neoliberalisms. We need to grasp the transnational mediated dynamics of ‘neoliberal nationalism’ (Harmes, 2012), not just reify our analysis of ‘the national’ and ‘the local’. This point is especially important given the embeddedness of media corporations in transnational finance structures (Compton & Dyer-Witthof, 2014; Hope, 2012), which can operate behind the back of national public spheres and mock the political agency of the nation-state (Crouch, 2011; Titley, 2013). Equally, it underlines the importance of a global political front against neoliberalism, and inculcating forms of mediated subjectivity and practice (Berglez, 2013) that enable the possibility of a transnational polity.

## MEDIATED NEOLIBERALISM

I want to end by briefly considering how a critical media studies perspective on neoliberalism might be useful to the wider literature. Scholars in other fields regularly note the role of mainstream media

in reproducing and legitimizing neoliberalism. Yet, these references are usually cursory and incidental; the media is cited as one of a number of social institutions infiltrated by neoliberal assumptions. If there is a theoretical intuition, it is a straightforward political economy one about corporate ownership and control of the media system. What we don’t see is close theoretical engagement with arguments by media and communication scholars about the ‘mediated’ or ‘mediatized’ character of the social.<sup>5</sup> It prompts the question of how might we understand neoliberalism as a phenomenon that is ontologically dependent on media logics and processes? Our answer will partly depend on how we define the concept of media. Cubitt (2011: 7) argues that ‘spreadsheets, databases and geographic information systems’ are ‘the dominant media of the 21st century’, and that the abstractions we call ‘economy’, ‘polity’ and ‘society’ are made through the materiality of media. His argument recalls the etymology of the words ‘media’ and ‘mediation’ – their emphasis on the in-between and relational (Williams, 1983: 203–207). It also points to the potential comparative strengths of media studies in illuminating what Peck (2010) describes as an ‘omnipresent neoliberalism’ that is materialized as a ‘complex, mediated and heterogeneous kind of omnipresence, not a state of blanket conformity’ (Peck, 2010; see also Anderson, 2015).

One way of conceptualizing mediated neoliberalism is to see it as emblematic of the shift from a scholastic understanding of neoliberalism to a world of ‘actually existing neoliberalism’ (Brenner & Theodore, 2002). Knowing neoliberalism as an abstract set of ideas and propositions is one thing. But what does ‘it’ look, feel and sound like when it intersects with other logics and practices, which can trouble sweeping arguments about *neoliberal* hegemony? The question is especially apt in a media and journalism studies context, because of the extent to which different ideological discourses and sensibilities are part of the everyday texture of media cultures (Cammaerts, 2014; Freedman, 2014; Phelan, 2014a). Against one-dimensional claims about the neoliberal media, we might even say that extreme, cartoonish proponents of a ‘free market’ identity – think, for instance, of factions of the US Republican party – are much more likely to be disparaged rather than eulogized in media coverage, at least outside the right-wing media universes in which these identities are nurtured and naturalized (Phelan, 2014a).

At the same time, ‘centering’ media (Couldry, 2003) play a crucial role in naturalizing the ‘state-phobia’ (Foucault, 2008) and anti-political tendencies (Davies, 2014) of doctrinaire neoliberalism. The ‘impractical’ nature of any nominally

socialist, or even social democratic, alternative is thematized in ways that can collapse into a generalized hatred of politics (Hay, 2007; Phelan, 2014a). Contrary to the simple maxim of 'there is no alternative', we might say that ideological and political alternatives to neoliberalism are fragmentarily articulated in both news *and* entertainment media, and that even commercially oriented media cannot ignore these utopian impulses among significant portions of their audiences. However, these alternatives are routinely represented 'as biased, as mad or nostalgic' (Cammaerts, 2014), or dismissed as the merely 'rhetorical' interventions of those who are indifferent to political 'reality' (Phelan, 2014a). The desire for political and ideological alternatives is therefore captured, but given expression through a regime of mediated visibility that caricatures the desire and ultimately affirms the 'realist' imperatives of the present (Aune, 2001; Fisher, 2009). Accordingly, neoliberal assumptions and dispositions are naturalized arguably less because of positive ideological identification with markets, but because of a general political and cultural *disidentification* with the idea of 'collectivist' (Bourdieu, 1998b) alternatives.

What is potentially obscured by the lampooning of free market extremists on the one hand, and a disparaging of political alternatives on the other, is the political significance of the discursive terrain where centering media do their most important ideological work (Hall et al., 2013) – in the pragmatic 'middle ground' that, by definition, constructs itself as non-ideological. It is a post-ideological sensibility synonymous with the paradoxes of actually existing neoliberalism, because of how it disavows the impression of ideological commitment and coherence, and can wilfully appropriate the fragments of progressive political ideologies. Within the performative rationality of mediated spaces, bland 'third way' style recognition of the importance of market and state becomes the default reflex for anyone who wants to show their immunity from the blinding effects of (neoliberal) ideology.

This argument invites the criticism that it simply describes a 'rhetorical' phenomenon, or is symptomatic of a culture of ubiquitous public relations and media spectacle that increasingly savvy media audiences can easily see through. There is something in that retort; as we know, some of the most able proponents of third way neoliberalism were masters of political marketing and public relations. Yet, arguments about mediated neoliberalism cultivate two useful analytical impulses. First, they focus attention on the mediated dimensions of objects of analysis that are usually conceptualized independently of media dynamics in the neoliberalism literature, be it ideas, institutions,

human subjectivity, regulatory regimes, or class. These should not be reduced to the status of mediated objects. Yet neither can they be satisfactorily understood independently of their mediated articulation, and the place of 'the media' in mythically centering the social (Couldry, 2003). We need to get beyond a critical reflex that only sees the ideological distortions and inauthenticity of media representations, if we are to properly understand the ontological implications of mediated publicness.

Second, conceptualizing neoliberalism as a mediated formation brings into view the central place of media infrastructures (big and small) in publicly contesting the political authority of neoliberal reason. This point is particularly salient because of the increased visibility of the term 'neoliberalism' in media spaces as a name for the dominant ideology and social order. Arguments about 'who' or 'what' is or isn't neoliberal have become a more common feature of media and political discourse, and give sharper definition to the social antagonisms that are the legacies of neoliberal cultures and policies. Neoliberalism will not be defeated through a media politics alone. Yet, constructing media stages that interrogate its discursive authority, and which enable us to collectively imagine the possibility of a different kind of social world, is a crucial part of the politics of constructing counter-hegemonic alternatives. This work is already being done, but much more is needed before it translates into a genuine popular front. Ultimately, we need to create new public spaces, and progressive new ways of being together, that can no longer be usefully called neoliberal.

## Notes

- 1 This chapter draws on previous work, especially Chapter 1 of Phelan (2014a) and Phelan (2014b). Thanks to Simon Dawes for his comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.
- 2 Media studies, communication studies, and journalism studies are treated here as overlapping fields.
- 3 At its simplest, the political economy/cultural studies debate (see Carey, 1995; Garnham, 1995; Grossberg, 1995; Murdock, 1995) involved a disagreement about the relative place of economic structures and processes, over a contrary emphasis on the power of culture, discourse, and ideas, in shaping the constitution of social and media systems. It was in part a proxy for a bigger antagonism across the social sciences and humanities – between political economy scholars, who insisted on the primacy of a Marxist analysis of capitalism and class, and cultural studies scholars, who embraced the novel post-structuralist, post-Marxist and post-modernist theories.

- 4 This chapter does not pretend to offer a proper historical account of the emergence of British cultural studies, or explore the distinctiveness of other cultural studies traditions (see Carey, 1995). The work of Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart were important antecedents to the Birmingham school. For an overview of the history of cultural studies, and its connections and fissures with other theoretical approaches in media and communication studies, see Scannell (2007).
- 5 The concepts of mediation and mediatization are sometimes used interchangeably in media and communication research (as is the case here), as terms for denoting the increasing social power and authority of media processes. However, those whose work is most tied to the concepts insist on a terminological distinction. For example, Strömbäck (2008) describes the mediation of politics as a phenomenon that is not specific to the current historical era, because it describes a long-standing situation where media are the most important conduits and sources of information 'between the governors and the governed' (2008: 230). In contrast, mediatization describes the increasing tendency of media logics to 'colonize' the logic of contemporary politics (see Couldry, 2010; Meyer, 2002). 'Political and other social actors not only adapt to the media logic and predominant news values, but also internalize these and, more or less consciously, allow the media logic and the standards of newsworthiness to become a built-in part of the governing process' (Strömbäck, 2008: 239–240).

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