

## **Book Review: *Media Capitalism: Hegemony in the Age of Mass Deception* by Thomas Klikauer (Palgrave Macmillan 2021, 507 pages)**

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**Abstract:** This article reviews the book *Media Capitalism: Hegemony in the Age of Mass Deception* by Thomas Klikauer. In doing so, it places the book in conversation with the decades-long debate as to the nature of contemporary capitalism, specifically the question whether the digital age in which we live represents a new and novel information/network/internet society, a new form of capitalism, or simply an extension of the status quo.

**Keywords:** media capitalism, information society, information capitalism, Critical Political Economy, book review, public sphere, ideology, public relations, corporate media

### **1. Introduction**

There is a decades-long debate within the field of Critical Political Economy of Communication as to if our contemporary political economy represents a *new* and *novel* form of capitalism, if we live in an information or network society distinct from neoliberal capitalism, or if the digital age is an extension of capitalism as understood and critiqued by Marx. Dan Schiller (1999) for instance, argued in 1999 that we now live in an age of “digital capitalism”. In contrast, Manuel Castells (2010) argues in favour of the network society. Christian Fuchs took up the debate in 2013, asking if we live in an “information society” or capitalism? Said differently, does the digital age represent a discontinuous era, a stark transition to a freer information/network/internet society, or a continuation of capitalism’s status quo? After reviewing scholars in favour of one perspective and the other, Fuchs concludes we live in an information society according to the productive forces, but continuous capitalism when it comes to the relations of production. Ultimately, he suggests that today’s political economy can only be understood dialectically. A few years later, in 2020, Soshana Zuboff (2020) introduced the notion of “surveillance capitalism” as the defining modality of information capitalism and defined by modern data collection and targeted behaviour practices of social media platforms.

In his new book, *Media Capitalism: Hegemony in the Age of Mass Deception*, Thomas Klikauer, Senior Lecturer at the Sydney Graduate School of Management at the Western Sydney University in Australia, joins this conversation by introducing a new paradigm: media capitalism. Unlike Zuboff, who argues that surveillance capitalism is a product specifically of social media industries that has since extended to other walks of informational and digital life, Klikauer envisions media capitalism as all-encompassing, defined by the hegemonic articulation of capitalist ideology fuelled by corporate media and public relations. Also unlike surveillance capitalism, media capitalism is not an offshoot of information capitalism, but rather a replacement for all previous iterations including the “culture industry”, “consciousness industry”, “dependency road”, “culture inc.”, and “propaganda”, “all of which mutated into media capitalism” (p. 9). The mass media along with new forms of digital media industries and public relations firms propagate a totalising form of capitalism. These are invisible

practices, hidden from view but pervasive in action, affecting every aspect of social, economic, and political life.

Media capitalism begins and ends with ideology espoused by corporate media and public relations, which serve not only to reproduce capitalism, but entrench it everywhere. Indeed, “corporate media have become indispensable to capitalism” (p. 15). Here, Klikauer introduces readers to the seminal equation of the book:

Media (M) + Consumerism (C) = Media-Consumerism-Ideology (MCI).

## 2. Book Overview

This is an ambitious and sprawling book, coming in at 507 pages. It is not for the faint of heart or one looking for an introduction to critical theory. With equations and diagrams depicting various permutations and iterations of the Media-Consumerism-Ideology nexus, there is much to unpack in *Media Capitalism*. The opening chapter introduces the reader to the key concepts and themes, and notably MCI. Chapter two concerns the history of media capitalism, offering a historical linear progression from feudalism, to religion, liberal capitalism (19<sup>th</sup> century) to capitalism and consumerism (20<sup>th</sup> century), through to media capitalism (21<sup>st</sup> century). Here, we are privy to the totalising force of media capitalism: media capitalism has “not end[ed] consumerism, it enhanced it by creating a fully developed system of ideology that governs virtually all eventualities of life” (p. 70). The fully developed system seeks to subsume resistance, the power of labour unions, the possibilities of education, and democratic life into capitalism. As Klikauer notes, media capitalism has “converted” Marx’s notion of false consciousness “into manipulated mass deception and ideological affirmation” (p. 79).

Chapter three continues Klikauer’s historical view, shifting from the broad movements of capitalism to the specific articulation of the public sphere. Drawing from Habermas and his critics, Klikauer recalls familiar areas of scholarship on the seminal topic, while exposing media capitalism’s anti-democratic (or “non-democratic”) tendencies. Media capitalism is democratic in rhetoric only. It prefers the hegemonic rule of neoliberalism over the democratic rule of the governed (“only twenty-first century’s media capitalism enabled ideology to supersede many precious forms of social steering” (p. 139). Klikauer argues that “democracy has no functional significance for media capitalism; therefore it has been moved from something to *must have* to something *nice to have*” (p. 149).

Following the two review chapters, chapters four through seven are thematic in nature, describing how media capitalism inculcates itself in different aspects of social life. Chapters four and five concern education. Media capitalism insinuates itself into every level of learning, thereby teaching children

“to become ideologically functioning members in the consumption and managerial spheres without understanding either [...] In short, children are conditioned into accepting joyless learning as a preparation for a joyless working life run by joyless managerial regimes. Education is made utterly boring so that children’s intuitive behaviour, inquisitiveness and spontaneity can be replaced with acceptance of the monotony of a future of working life” (p. 175).

Chapter five continues the educational theme and extends it from primary and secondary school to universities. Klikauer doubles down on the ideological conditioning of young people for a life of managerial and consumptive service – the university has become “the ideologically driven university” of which he is quite damning (p. 214).

Chapter six reflects on social life, notably commoditisation and ideologification. Media capitalism works to destabilise long-standing social groupings, from “trade unions, to political parties, churches, and social cultures” (p. 275). In its stead, it has created “atomized and de-organized individuals open to ideological manipulation” (p. 275).

Chapter seven reflects on consumptive behaviour within media capitalism. We recall here a key theme in the book: the totalising presence of media capitalism. In this chapter, Klikauer extends his thesis to employment and consumption: “Nobody is to escape from the ideological encirclement of media capitalism. The task of disseminating ideology is no longer assigned to the state but to schooling, work, consumptive relations and democracy as guided by the media” (p. 330). These themes continue into chapter 8 which focuses on managerialism and social class. Class divisions are maintained by a particularly insidious version of public relations, which “reinforces themes such as business is good, government is bad and labour is very bad” (p. 354).

By this point in the book, roughly 350 pages in, we appreciate its logical and linear unfolding: media capitalism, ideology, and consumerism have replaced previous iterations of capitalism, and seeped into every aspect of political economic life in a way that is hidden and seemingly “neutral” and “value free” (p. 360):

“Media capitalism’ ideological achievements make it possible that individuals can no longer recognize their own alienation, life’s emptiness, capitalism’s pathologies and environmental destruction with crimes of the less powerful (theft, violence, etc.) and crimes of the powerful (profit motive related to climate change) and the Anthropocene’s rises” (p. 362).

The final thematic chapter concerns democracy, which is auxiliary to media capitalism – a “mere appendix to mass media” (p. 408). Corporate media have replaced political parties as the stewards of democracy, thereby reducing “democracy to scandals, tabloid-media spectacles and leadership contests” (p. 418). “In people’s daily life”, Klikauer concludes, “it is not democracy but managerial regimes, consumption and the media’s ideological hegemony that secures media capitalism” (p. 435).

The conclusion offers us the beginning of a theory of media capitalism’s identification, description, and critique, doubling down on the argument that “capitalism needs to be conceptualised as media capitalism as it no longer functions without corporate media” (p. 467). It concludes with a vision of a post-media capitalist society, where branding (re: PR) disappears and is replaced by a focus on people and communication. By communication, Klikauer recalls the vital democratic importance of purposive conversation previously championed by scholars like Tarde (1898), Habermas (1985a, 1985b), and Katz (Kim, Wyatt & Katz 1999).

### 3. Reflections

There is no doubt that Klikauer is well read, and the book is packed with citations, a necessary and epic requirement that comes with the territory of arguing for a new modality of capitalism. The bibliography alone is worthy of publication for it offers a comprehensive database of literature at the intersection of media and capitalism. The breadth, depth, and length of this work means that it will appeal mostly to ardent students of Critical Political Economy of Communication and the history of (media) capitalism. The historical and academic terrain covered in chapters two and especially three will be familiar to these readers. Graduate students may also find it useful in their preparatory work.

*Media Capitalism* is a conceptual intervention in the field of the Political Economy of Communication not an empirical analysis. Still, while chapters four through seven offer thematic examples of media capitalism's totalising presence (education, social life, work, consumption, and democracy), the reader searches for granular examples – specific instances of the application of the theory of media capitalism. We may read this as an invitation for us as readers to engage in purposive conversation to ground Klikauer's conceptual interventions into the political economy in everyday life: How does your university perpetuate managerialism? How do your consumptive habits reflect your work environment and vice versa? What corporate media institutions fill your daily media diet? The debate continues, therefore, as to if the digital and its political economies have fundamentally altered the nature of capitalism, or simply swapped analogue productive forces for digital (Fuchs 2013).

Ultimately, however, the message at the end of the book is applicable to us all: the way to counteract the ravages of capitalism, media or otherwise, must be found and rooted in people, conversation, and everyday life, rather than those in power who promise much and deliver little.

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