

Chapter 13

Critical Political Economy and Content Analysis: A Fraught but Crucial Relationship

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ABSTRACT

The analysis of media content is not an integral part of the critical political economy of communication. The reasons can be understood in their historical contexts. Nonetheless, there is a case to be made that there exists an urgent need to remedy this state of affairs. Given existential threats to the planet, especially global warming and the possibility of nuclear war, it is more urgent than ever that critical political economists engage in one of the main characteristics of their subfield, praxis, and find ways to connect to citizens and stimulate them to become active in the public arena. This chapter argues that one way to do so is to produce content analyses of media coverage of current important political issues. By showing citizens evidence of the many problems with mainstream, often commercial media, citizens will be more likely to become involved in movements that aim at radical reform of media and politics.

INTRODUCTION

Informed activist-observers frequently warn against existential threats to our planet, notably nuclear war and global warming (Ellsberg, 2017; Klein, 2015). Political instability, fermented in part by the rise of populist politics, has rocked liberal-capitalist powerhouses, including the United States and Great Britain. A major cause of popular discontent in these two countries, and throughout the western world, has been economic stagnation, as capitalism has departed for low-wage countries, China foremost among them. In addition to these problems, the 21st century has already seen destructive wars waged in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria, among other places, initiated and continued based on state and corporate lies, and as of yet without accountability for the responsible elites (Blumenthal, 2019). The ways these frightening challenges to human wellbeing and even survival are investigated, reported, framed and commented on in the mainstream media constitute a crucial part of addressing them. Peoples need to be informed so

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solutions can be identified and implemented that prove constructive and preserve the sustainability of the planet we all inhabit.

We face many additional challenges, including the rise of the internet, especially social media, and in particular the use of propaganda to harness these digital channels to serving the interests of the powers that still be. Not to mention the crisis in commercial journalism, which was always flawed but because of threats to its business model has seen its centers of highest quality decline in the face of corporate cutbacks, and its professionalism, including positive features such as fact-checking and original reporting on centers of power, compromised. The nature and severity of the issues that face humanity are not in doubt; yet the ways the mainstream media report on these are dubious at best. Therefore, researching and publicizing the political economy of the media might well be more imperative than ever (Wasko, 2014).

The main bottleneck on the way to solving the threats to humanity's existence consists of mobilizing publics across the world to such an extent that they demand change and reparation for the crimes and dangers hoisted upon their world by corporate and state elites. The overriding problem of these times, then, is one of publicity and organization in the face of established threats. Standing in the way of solutions are corporate and state-controlled media that do the bidding of their owners. For they are conveyors of journalism and commentary dominated by elite sources and perspectives. Still crucially propped up by advertising revenue, the media let elites set the news agenda and thus frame the major happenings of the world in ways that justify their rule. Broad public awareness about how the media exclude viable alternative interpretations and solutions that support the public interest forms a crucial step towards a heightened political consciousness that, in turn, is a necessary attribute of a broad people's movement to change the course of human history towards sustainable economics and politics.

Critical political economists of the media are therefore saddled with a major responsibility that can only feel, at times if not often, as a burden. For a central tenet of the field is praxis or engagement with society with an eye to changing it (Mosco, 2008). In other words, critical political economists have tasked themselves with putting meat on the bones of Karl Marx's famous saying that the point of philosophy is not just to understand the world, but to change it.

This chapter argues that a major way to connect to publics, and therefore of exploding the media bottleneck, is through researching news content, proving its flaws and ideological limitations, and explicitly connecting it to the political economy of the commercial and state media. People know the media through their content, first and foremost. The content forms the media's closest point of connection to people's life world. To help people understand their predicament and to identify ways forward, it is therefore imperative for critical political economists to make detailed, well-supported statements about commercial and state media content that discusses important issues. Moreover, perhaps controversially, this chapter argues that the most suitable content analysis methods are those that include coding rules, intercoder reliability measures and numerical findings in order to "examine patterns in communication in a replicable and systematic manner" (Lilleker & Surowiec, 2019, p. 3).

Based on a critical literature review and interviews with scholars, this chapter proceeds with discussing the fraught historical relationship between Critical Political Economy and the analysis of media content, using the United States and the Netherlands as case studies. Subsequently this chapter turns to examining cultural approaches and their fraught relationship to content analysis. It then assesses the limitations and strengths of work in Critical Political Economy that integrates content analysis, after which it delineates the future research directions for the field. Finally, this chapter recaps why Critical Political Economy should do more replicable, numerical content analysis.

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