

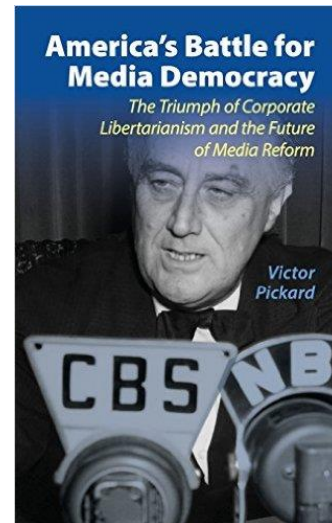
Victor Pickard, **America's Battle for Media Democracy: The Triumph of Corporate Libertarianism and the Future of Media Reform**, New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2015, 262 pp, \$29.95 (paperback).

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Victor Pickard's book on the formative years directly after the Communications Act is a major contribution to media history research, and should be read by policy historians and media advocacy researchers. In ***America's Battle for Media Democracy***, pulling from rigorous archive work, Pickard examines the subsequent players and organizational framework of the FCC in the 1940s. Intriguingly, he has found that contrary to our received narrative, the 1940s saw liberally invested commissioners who authorized studies to increase access to public airwaves. Roosevelt's New Deal technocrats were hired to implement a policy that favored privatization. But the work they actually conducted, Pickard argues, paved the way for alternative media practices to develop, from educational broadcasts to journalism ethics.

And according to Pickard, this first U.S. debate, essentially regarding the federal deliberations over if public or private institutions were best prepared to steward the U.S. airwaves, still animates contemporary media studies debates. Is democracy better served by public or commercial broadcasting? What does a successful media advocacy look like in practice, and what impediments do progressive investments face when working to change policy? Pickard's book shows that activism in the 1940s provides a case study of how progressive goals to encourage public service media materialized into specific administrative legacies. The posterity of these advocacies resulted in a failure to fully instigate a progressive framework for media policy, yet at the same time a tradition that can still be reclaimed by progressive advocates. Both outcomes were the result of this period of strategic interpretation after the Communications Act, and to understand these legacies, a dedicated and close study of these methods is necessary.

Pickard has conducted impressive primary document research, providing an exemplar of why critical political economy work remains relevant. *America's Battle for Media Democracy* provides a series of pragmatic examples for why the critical tradition in communications research continues to resonate. "Many of the tensions negotiated then are still challenging us today: concerns about media concentration, excessive commercialism, misrepresentation of minority groups and viewpoints, lack of independent journalism, and loss of local media" (p. 13). According to Pickard, a reader will note just how closely the 1940s correlates to and continues to inform contemporary production and distribution models. If one approaches the historical question of media ownership from a public service model, the private emphasis of the system requires praise for its innovations and self-sustainability, but deserves deep interrogation for its largely uncontested claim that the system, as is, provides the best opportunity for social recognition. And Pickard shows through original letters and editorials that the period's advocates articulated these concerns from the start. Corporate interests, one 1946 think piece argued, simply could



not be expected to do the work of community organizing, or educating immigrant groups. National advertisers, the author wrote, would likely shirk their public interest responsibilities because their primary concern was sales. The article was right. Yet by 1946 the audience had already become so acclimated to broadcast "flows" that a Paul Lazarsfeld survey found that audiences had trouble imagining what listening would be without advertising. Only 7% of survey respondents thought advertising should be banned, and roughly 90% of respondents fell into a spectrum of acceptance, to a sizable group in favor of advertising content. Just 12 years after the Communications Act, which had initially decimated access to frequencies for educational, labor, and even governmental broadcasters, the pervasiveness of the commercial broadcasting model had become the standard approach to mass communication in spite of healthy alternatives found in Canada, Europe, and South America.

Indeed, the best argument for the continued primacy political economy is that it seeks to identify the relationship between policies, institutional decisions, and audience interpretation by identifying the consequence of crucial social and political precedents. The method's approach usually works something in the order of matching a general principle of democracy to how a communicative message or agency succeeds or fails at promoting equal representation and access. The researcher then attempts to identify the reason why a policy or agency might not be promoting democratic participation and looks to the way in which subsequent actions unfold due to the identified precedent contradiction. It has been a remarkable model for historical and political theory, which clarifies how specific macro and regulatory decisions animate cultural communication decisions. And it has had a long and influential history in communication studies, the origins of which Pickard details in the book and hopes to revive in the discipline.

As a form of analysis that emerged as a way to explicate New Deal cultural initiatives in the 1930s and 1940s, political economy of media became situated as the chosen policy analysis approach during the growth of mass communication departments in the 1950s. For at least the first several decades of the discipline, political economy served as the gauge of democratic "effects" of communication during the Cold War. Its origins could be found in the "dissident intellectuals," who "provided further coherence by extending this critique into trenchant policies embraced by social movement groups" (p. 33). By the 1940s, a coalition of intellectuals, FCC commissioners, and remnants of the Popular Front joined religious, educational, and civil right groups to attempt to overturn media monopolies. The result was that a uniquely moralistic voice emerged to conduct sociological humanistic analysis of media's role in the American system. Political economy was the first cultural approach to media studies, and communication departments historically employed at least one political economist to teach critical methods for interpreting the regulatory and institutional structures. Between the 1950s and 1980s, they occupied a special if token role as the resident qualitative leftist among a spectrum of quantitative practitioners of diverse political investments. What happened to the tradition?

In the early 1980s, the study of communication expanded its influence at universities. The streamlining of public policy, health communication, and public relations research consolidated a stable stream of majors for communication departments, and the introduction of Birmingham School-fashioned ideological analysis and popular culture semiotics diversified the sometimes-overlapping-with-communications discipline of film studies. In the 1990s, the introduction of cultural and representational analysis led to a new generation that deemphasized institutional and political precedent, and accentuated

super-structural reciprocity. Cultural studies was more concerned with the relationship between content and choice during discursive adjustment, while classical political economists of media held steadfast to a sociological analysis of information production by media institutions. Cultural studies newly focused on the qualitative experience of audiences, and perhaps more alluringly (and overstatedly), the notion that audience agency had identifiable social effects on production processes, and possibly even social perspective. By the 2000s, cultural studies had clearly defined the landscape, in part due to its insistence on an expanded and dynamic account of the moving parts from production to reception, which included representational analysis. Cultural studies further appeared at a moment when interdisciplinary engagement among the humanities became preferred, and the approach shared adherents in English, History, and other humanities disciplines.

As communication departments continued to streamline social science methods, “media studies”—a hybrid of communication and film studies—emerged as a sometimes de-politicized derivation of cultural studies. And two institutional changes ultimately usurped the interest of potential political-economic communication scholars. The first major change was the disciplinary shift from a Deweyan impulse of measuring media industries against the noble gauge of their ability to serve as “intentional agencies” to a “mapping” of how identity groups position themselves in relation to—and are being positioned by—media depictions. A second disciplinary change, which Pickard’s book is innovative in reconciling through his historical work, might be thought about as how the transmission model became replaced by a Gramscian assessment of how “wars of position” might be advanced in the political arena.

More recently, political economy has become entrenched as a generalized methodology for mass communications; we have seen a substantial decrease in self-modeled political economists, accompanied by a substantial increase in the moniker as one qualitative method listed among others. Several strongholds remain, notably the legendary Institution for Communications Research at the University of Illinois-Urbana/Champaign, which could well be argued founded the first fully formed communication department in the world in 1948 (though New York University’s department might have started up two years earlier). Pickard’s book is, in a way, a revival of UIUC’s qualitative regulatory and institutional analysis at a time in which progressive advocacies have failed to make sustainable policy impact. He has done this by reconciling two traditions in a hybrid approach—he is a Gramscian political economist interested in how wars of position have succeeded or failed in the construction and maintenance of intentional agencies. And the field of communication itself is one of the institutional spaces that he is addressing. Pickard articulates a compelling middle ground that speaks to cultural advocacy trends while maintaining fidelity to the nuts and bolts of policy making. But, ultimately, his book is a call to examine the logistics that underlie representational analysis and return to a waning model of progressive political advocacy that was practiced by broadcasters, researchers, journalists, and even policy makers at the onset of the discipline.

His best case in point comes from a deep exegesis of “progressive stalwart” FCC Commissioner Clifford Durr’s writings and personal letters. Durr was invested in the “vitality, shared ideas, and sense of being part of something bigger than oneself” (p. 65) that characterized the constructive side of the New Deal. It was Durr who appointed Charles Siepmann and his co-author Dallas Smythe to write the infamous *Blue Book*, which called for a BBC-inspired public service mission as the guiding interpretative principle of

the Communication Act's "public interest" (Siepmann & Smythe, 1946) mandate. The *Blue Book's* "suspicion of profit-driven programming" (p. 67) excoriated the Act and its commercial benefactors as having broken the promise to develop sustaining programming, since the Act made no special allocations for educational stations. This necessarily included creating content for minority audiences, public needs, and nonprofit organizations. If such a program existed, it was either a commercial broadcast mislabeled as a sustaining program, or audiences weren't tuning in. This was not due to lack of interest, the *Blue Book* contended, but because these programs were poorly rendered, while network programming had simultaneously fallen into "advertising excesses." *Blue Book* authors Siepmann and Smythe famously went on to help found the discipline of communication itself, at New York University (1946) and University of Illinois (1948) respectively, with Illinois innovating many of the areas of specialization now associated with Communication Studies. But Durr did not fare as well. Durr received some praise, such as a prestigious award from *Variety* for being "one of the few Commissioners in FCC history who, unlike lawyers and engineers, insisted that the decisive criterion of radio service is not primarily coverage pattern, the balance sheet . . . but what comes out of the loudspeaker: the program" (p., 91). But the commercial networks posted a strong lobby to contradict the report's claims, and by 1948 Durr was forced to resign from the FCC.

The battle over media democracy might differently be framed as the struggle for allocations during a period of frequency scarcity. The introduction of FM reduced the struggle for AM frequencies significantly by the late 1940s, and the introduction of television all but guaranteed that any broadcasting interest could obtain a call letter, assuming that they were able to maintain facilities and locate an audience. But preceding every niche audience or representational trope, a series of applications, hearings, renewals, and inspections must take place. Content is preceded by best practices, and logistics are continuously scrutinized through interpretation and advocacy by lobbyists, producers, and regulators. Our current system is structured as it is in part because of what Pickard calls the victory of "corporate libertarianism" in defining these rules in the late 1940s. And current discursive positions are indirectly molded by the outcome of these early debates. We are still debating the first precedents of media regulation: What role do institutions play in representational and political meaning making? Are we active receptors of processes that originate from external producers? Do we make an impact on the contours of representational construction through our affective and digital activist responses? Or should activism take the role of institutional system building and lobby over how policies are implemented? These are tough questions. On the one hand, public sphere theory has long argued that grounds for adjudication only become coherent once they are structured so that multiple voices might equally engage over social problems. In U.S. media history, "the public" had federal traction well before Habermas, with precedents for public investment during the New Deal such as public forums and the invention of radio roundtable programming in the 1930s, not to mention earlier and institutionally connected motions toward standardized curriculum for compulsory education.

Media studies has largely concluded in the tradition of cultural studies that there is always some degree of advocacy taking place on behalf of stable yet shifting discursive blocs, toward hopeful goals of recognition and hegemonic recognition. At times, this argument has framed business industries themselves as discursive groups, making the case that corporate lobbies work a lot more efficiently to affect a public historical discourse. It might be true that big entertainment is closer to political influence

than discursive groups, but the assumption fails to assess the actual goals and largely ahistorical profit trajectory that businesses take. Media studies need to pay increased attention to the logistical goals of institutional practices and the study of how the regulatory sphere's checks and balances influence representational production. Pickard argues that if one begins with the Deweyan assumption that an intentional agency such as journalism must be properly structured for public service, then this outcome must be sustained regardless of market support. "The advertising model that has subsidized this public good for the past 125 years is no longer sustainable" (p, 226). And in this way Pickard has engendered a difficult but worthy debate. Will the political-economic model make a comeback as an ethical barometer that precedes an object of study? Or will qualitative research move more closely to the "corporate libertarian" model's rhetoric and proffered positionality?

This type of tension—over emphasis and order in methodological argumentation —is often referred to but rarely debated anymore. And it turns out to have been the very argument that took immediately after the Communications Act. The consequent result of the post-Act landscape, in spite of the better efforts of progressive regulators, was that big business became synonymous with the U.S. public democratic model. As Pickard points out, there is nothing within the system, as it has been constructed, that guarantees that equal recognition will take place simply by the existence of market opportunity. Since information is filtered and facilitated through complex regulatory, development, production, and interpretive matrices, the democratic impulse must be protected by a sustainable and openly contestable medium. Critique cannot fix structural problems. Among possible alternatives, our now 80-year-old educational/public broadcasting experiment is one imperfect yet invested institutional model that has identified the goal of sustaining public discourse beyond market whims and market failure. It seems time for a rigorous Gramscian political-economic debate to emerge to help conceive of new regulatory advocacies and innovate new institutional models.

References

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