

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 18th 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 19th 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 20th century. They also influenced national and international telecommunications policy from the early 20th 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

Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

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