

## Introduction to the Special Section “Critical Theory and Political Economy of the Internet (Nordmedia 2011)”

Christian Fuchs\* and Göran Bolin\*\*

\* *Uppsala University, Department of Informatics and Media, Uppsala, Sweden,*  
[christian.fuchs@im.uu.se](mailto:christian.fuchs@im.uu.se)

\*\* *Södertörn University, School of Culture & Communication, Stockholm, Sweden,*  
[goran.bolin@sh.se](mailto:goran.bolin@sh.se)

**Abstract:** *This paper is an introduction to tripleC’s special section “Critical Theory and Political Economy of the Internet” that presents papers from a session at the Nordmedia Conference 2011 (August 11-13, 2011, University of Akureyri, Iceland).*

**Keywords:** Internet, Critical Theory, Critical Political Economy, Critical Media and Communication Studies

**This special** section of tripleC collects edited versions of papers that were presented in the session “Critical Theory and Political Economy of the Internet” at the Nordmedia Conference 2011. Göran Bolin and Christian Fuchs organized the session, which was part of the Media, Culture and Society Division. The 20<sup>th</sup> Nordmedia conference took place at the University of Akureyri, Iceland, from August 11-13 (see: [http://english.unak.is/conferences/page/nordmedia\\_2011](http://english.unak.is/conferences/page/nordmedia_2011)).

The conference’s overall topic was “Media and Communication Studies - Doing the Right Thing?”. The question that our panel asked was related to this overall question, but we reformulated it somewhat: “Internet Studies – Doing the Critical Thing?”. The question we were interested to discuss was what it means to study the Internet critically. This certainly requires an understanding of the concept of “critical” and a conception of what Critical Media and Communication Studies is all about.

The critical analysis of the political economy of communication has during the last decades been challenged by the rise of digital and social media. Questions have been raised concerning, for example: the reification of social relations and the importance of “playbour” (play + labour) for generating economic surplus in the digital economy; file-sharing, online piracy and digital commons; corporate and state surveillance enhanced by digital technologies; the changing relations between ‘old’ media industries and ‘new’ informational industries, and the distribution of informational resources and control of informational infrastructures. These developments mean that concepts such as commodification, labour, surveillance, ideology, exploitation, alienation, class struggle, consumption, circulation, commodity, value, culture industry, capital, etc. have to be reconsidered and/or reworked for the new media situation.

The task of this session was to gather Nordic perspectives on the critical theory and political economy of digital media and to explore different frameworks, questions, approaches, concepts and problems in the use of critical political economy and critical theory for studying the Internet and social media.

The *Media, Culture and Society* division is one of the largest divisions of the Nordmedia conferences. Its focus is on the general analysis of media and society from critical and non-mediacentric perspectives, that is, on the interplay between the media and their cultural and social context. The media, including mobile and interactive media technologies, are since long well integrated into the fabric of the wider culture and society: Work, consumption, politics, family life, religion and many other social and cultural phenomena are symbiotically related to the media, and the interplay between media technologies and social and cultural factors are informing the character of social networks, political communication and governance, as well as art, culture, and commerce, all of which are themes present in the division. An overview of the program of the division can be found at [http://english.unak.is/conferences/page/media\\_culture\\_and\\_society](http://english.unak.is/conferences/page/media_culture_and_society), where many of the papers

are also possible to download. The next Nordmedia conference will be in Oslo in 2013, and welcomes new submissions to the division.

We present six papers in this section. The order of presentation is based on ascending alphabetical family names by first authors. We shortly give an overview of the covered topics (in alphabetical order of family names).

*Göran Bolin* (Södertörn University, Stockholm, Sweden) seeks to develop the field theory of Pierre Bourdieu, and sharpen its critical potential by trying to qualify the field model in relation to the various fields of power in society. He also traces some of the influences of Marx's labour theory of value on field theory, arguing that Bourdieu's adoption of Marx's political-economic terminology creates a slight conceptual confusion concerning the concepts of value and capital and that this has resulted in some unintended consequences for Bourdieu's analysis.

*Christian Fuchs* (Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden) analyses Google as an example of the capitalist political economy of Internet corporations. He uses a further development of Dallas Smythe's audience commodity concept (the notion of the Internet prosumer commodity) that he combines with Marx's model of the capital accumulation cycle. He concludes that Google should be turned into a public service organization, for which a dialectical sublation of Google is needed.

*Peter Jakobsson and Fredrik Stiernstedt* (Södertörn University, Stockholm, Sweden) discuss the relevance of the notion of the digital commons for changes in new media policies. They analyse how the new media industries has adopted the language of commons, openness, and participation for its own neoliberal ideology and practices that no longer absolutely defend intellectual property, but try to establish a new capital accumulation model (the authors speak of a platform model) that creates new profit possibilities for online content distribution services like Google, YouTube, Spotify, Facebook, Voddler,

*Christina Neumayer* (IT University, Copenhagen, Denmark) analyses online discussions about anti-fascist protests that took place in Dresden in February 2011. The case involves a YouTube video that shows how German right-wing extremists that attack a house, in which people, who live an alternative lifestyle, reside, with bricks. Christina conducted a discourse analysis of the discussions that took place in the comment section of this video and stresses aspects of ideology and propaganda.

*Johan Söderberg and Adel Daoud* (University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden) provide a political economic critique of the information exceptionalism hypothesis that says that information is a special good that therefore needs to be treated in specific ways. They argue that this assumption results in a limitation of the critique of private property to the informational realm and neglects the critique of private property relations in the physical realm. They discuss the Rep-rap project for underpinning their argument and call for expanding the critique of the intellectual property rights.

*Bjarki Valtýsson* (IT University, Copenhagen, Denmark) analyzes if Facebook constitutes a public sphere. He discusses Habermas' public sphere concept and applies it to the realm of social networking sites. The analysis focuses on identifying and discussing aspects and potentials of colonization of the lifeworld and emancipation from colonization on Facebook. There is a particular focus on the analysis of user consciousness that the author derives at with the help of interviews with Danish Facebook users aged 20-25 years.

*Göran Bolins' overall assessment of the session and the papers:*

If Walter Benjamin at the turn of the century 1900 could observe a shift in the status of art and cultural objects due to the introduction of technologies of technological reproduction, we can well say that we today live in an age of digital reproduction. This shift, argued Benjamin, resulted in some dramatic changes in the ways in which cultural objects were perceived, and also had consequences for their relation to capitalist production. The same can be said about the present, where we today are facing new business models connected to the fact that increasing parts of our lives are acted out in digital environments on social networking sites, through mobile phones and other personal media such as Wi-Fi-connected laptops and tablet computers. The consequences of these changes are manifold, and concern questions of labour, ownership, creativity, capital accumulation, geo-location, expropriation, exploitation, the relations between our public and private lives, between systems and lifeworld. Some of these questions are dealt with in the papers for this special section, and they each in their own way bear witness to the increased need to understand critically the economic, organizational, legal and social dynamics of contemporary communication technologies in times of rapid restructurings of the media and culture industries.

*Christian Fuchs' overall assessment of the session and the papers:*

We live in times of global crisis. The neoliberal logic has attempted to commodify everything all over the world, including the media landscape and the Internet. It wants to create capitalist societies that privatize and exploit the commons of nature, education, welfare, knowledge, technology, communication, infrastructure, etc. The question is of course how rapidly these developments have been proceeding in different countries and how successful they have been, but the crucial circumstance is that we have experienced the attempt of neoliberal commodification almost everywhere in the past decades. The Nordic countries are no exception from this development. Neoliberalism is in a crisis today; it has created its own negation and the result has been a crisis of capitalism at large. Practical and intellectual critique is crucial in this political situation for creating a better and more humane world, another world. The papers presented in this special section show that when thinking about the Internet today, we should think critically about issues like the value of digital media, commodification and exploitation of the online communication commons, intellectual property rights, the digital public sphere, alternative online media and social movement online media, or the regulation of digital media. The papers show particularly that the critical analysis of the Internet needs critical theorizations and critical theories. There is an important tradition of critical social theory in Europe that has been inspired by political philosophy. I am convinced that it is of crucial importance that critical theories are used for thinking about the media and the Internet today. The authors in this special issue contribute to this task by engaging with critical thinkers like Pierre Bourdieu, David Harvey, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Ernesto Laclau, Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Marx, Chantalle Mouffe, Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, or Dallas Smythe. They show that another world is imaginable and that another Internet is possible.

### **About the Authors**

*Göran Bolin*

is professor in Media and Communication Studies at Södertörn University in Stockholm.

*Christian Fuchs*

is professor in Media and Communication Studies at Uppsala University's Department of Informatics and Media.