

Interview

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Exploring the Intersection of Communication and Labor: A Dialogue with Dan Schiller

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Abstract: This paper came out of a research seminar at Tsinghua University. On November 16, 2023, Yuezhi Zhao, a communication scholar who studies the political economy of communication from a transcultural context, invited Dan Schiller, a critical political economy scholar and historian of information and communications to her doctoral course entitled *A Global History of Journalism and Communication Theory* at Tsinghua University, for an open dialogue. In this lively scholarly exchange, professors and student participants explored a wide range of issues at the nexus of communication, labor, and geopolitical dynamics from both historical and contemporary perspectives. In part 1 and 2, Yuezhi Zhao invited Dan Schiller to reflect on the intersections of communication and labor in the digital age; In Part 3, Dan Schiller responded to a list of questions submitted anonymously by the class ahead of time and identified by students on the spot.

Keywords: communication theories; labor; digital technologies; geopolitics of information

1 Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Communication and Labor

Yuezhi Zhao: Thank you, Dan, for this privilege to have you. As I said in our email exchanges, the course is about the history of communication theories. And we used

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your *Theorizing Communication: A History* as a key textbook. We learned tremendously from it. Even though to use labor as an entry point may look unconventional these days, it's essential. In fact, during the first half of this course, everybody did a survey of the research questions and theoretical frameworks of key Chinese communication journals, and we discovered that the issue of digital labor features prominently. The odd thing is, however, we discover that the topic of labor was not put under the theme of Marxist Theory of Journalism and Communication. We have Marxist Theory of Journalism and Communication, then we have labor. What does this say about the state of the field in China? I think what you tried to do in this book was to bring labor under a unified conceptual framework, in a more holistic way. So, as they say, the floor is yours and we would like to hear your thoughts. Specifically, if you are going to update the book, what will you do? Perhaps you can start with that? We sent you questions and everybody is preoccupied with geopolitics. But as I said in the email, maybe after we sort out the theoretical issues, these geopolitical questions will become less significant.

Dan Schiller: I basically want to begin by saying that I'm happy to be with you. I'm grateful to you for making the time to be together; I have missed interacting with my friends in China. Given what's going on in San Francisco, perhaps it's an auspicious day to hold this meeting. I have only some scattered thoughts, nothing fully prepared. But I want to begin by telling you about the great historian, Natalie Zemon Davis, you may not have heard of her. She was a historian of early modern France, and she died just a few weeks ago in her 90s, she had a good, long life. She declared that she tried to be, and I'm quoting here, "not only a truth teller about the past, but also a historian of hope (Barber, 2023)."

I would like to think that I too have tried to be a historian of hope. I've undertaken two kinds of historical research. First, studying communications as an aspect of U.S. history. I'm basically a U.S. historian – of communications – showing how different communication systems have interacted with the major trends, conflicts, and power relations that have shaped a more encompassing U.S. history. But this is part of a still wider global history, for U.S. history can't be taken alone. The global history of communications remains too-little known and very often uninvestigated. Popular movements to critique, and to transform or rebuild communication systems and cultural practices, in particular go back at least as far as the early years of printing in Europe. I could give you some examples of that, but I won't, because time is short. These movements of transformation extend worldwide across the centuries. During the first years of the Soviet Union, there were efforts to transform the received culture. One expression of this was called Proletkult, which encompassed literature, theater and art. I'm only citing this for you, because it's an example of a wider process: movements to critique and to transform or rebuild communications structures and practices.

A different and more limited instance pertains to Zanzibar. You've heard of Zanzibar? It's currently part of Tanzania, but 60 years ago it was known as Zanzibar. The U.S. was trying to put up, and did put up a satellite ground station there in the late 50s and early 60s, for military purposes. Many people in Zanzibar, however, didn't want this. The communication scholar Lisa Parks has written an article which documents how Zanzibaris protested against this earth station (Parks, 2020). This was before Zanzibar became independent, it was still a British colony. People actually demonstrated against this earth station, and in 1964 when Zanzibar won independence from the British, one of the first acts of its new president was to order its closure. The Organization of African Unity even protested U.S. satellite communications as an attempt to militarize the continent. This is again just an example, taken almost at random to illustrate the history of attempts to restructure communications. There are innumerable examples; but my point is that we don't possess even a barebones history – let alone the comprehensive global history that we will need to fully understand it. Not just to enrich academic scholarship, but also to clarify how popular mobilization and popular will have actually influenced the development of communications.

Now to be sure, many of these efforts were not successful. Many actions were suppressed; but that doesn't mean they didn't matter. It means only that they were undercut or disabled. They have a life, that continues, that endures and that people carry forward. I want to bring your attention to this. I've made contributions to clarifying episodes of popular restructuring in three of my books. I know that my book *Theorizing Communication* is a very demanding book. I reread some of it in preparing some remarks for tonight. And I was rereading the first chapter and I thought, this is really hard. *Theorizing Communication* offers some brief sketches of different movements for reform of U.S. communications. My first book, *Objectivity and the News*, provides a more in-depth examination of a process of communications restructuring. But the third book that I have written in this general area, another in-depth study which I just published earlier this year, is called *Crossed Wires*. It's really my life's work – about the history of U.S. telecommunications. It's an effort at recovering the role of telecommunication workers, other reformers, and radicals in trying to build a different telecommunications system – and in influencing the telecommunications system that the U.S. actually developed.

Again, my major point is that there is a history here – a global history – about which we know far too little. And I hope that maybe some of you or your colleagues could try to re-search this. Because I'm certain that there is meaningful research to be done, in the Chinese context as well.

2 Digital Technology, Labor, and Geopolitical Dynamics

Dan Schiller: Another aspect of my own research has been to investigate the intellectual history of communications study itself. Which I did in *Theorizing Communication*, and in a number of articles, including an article on the anti-fascist origins of the political economy of communication study. And this research reveals a recurrent tendency to reification in theories of communication, in the United States. Is that a word that you're familiar with, "reification"? Meaning "the petrification of living processes into dead things," in the words of Martin Jay (Schiller 1996, 120). Thus, you come to believe that a category, or a term, or a conceptual framework is real, when actually it's a name – a name that we come to believe possesses living substance. This tendency to reification has been strong in U.S. communications study, which in turn has exercised a strong influence worldwide. It's been repeated over and over again. Generations of scholars have been convinced that they have understood what communication is, by employing one reified conception after another. In my book I uncover a pattern of reification that helps us explain how communication studies has actually evolved.

And yet, as I show, there have also been moments when scholars and activists have broken through the reification, at least for a moment, at least in part, and seen communication as part of a larger social process – as reunited with a social totality which grants greater or lesser importance to labor. Indeed, in some of these moments scholars have been able to sense that communication and labor are not remote from one another but connected. So that when we speak, or when we communicate using elaborate technical systems, we are actually performing labor.

Marx, and some other philosophers held that labor – defined as intelligent action – is constitutive of human-ness. It is the essence of human species-being, that's the term Marx used "species-being." Labor is thus an encompassing, social category.

Yet this comprehensive, indeed all-inclusive category "labor" has been all but impossible to assimilate. In its stead we have seen endless reifications. You might remember from *Theorizing Communication*, Baptist Hubert who, in the 1880s, protested how intellectuals disparaged industrial workers. Baptist Hubert said "the great mistake of intellectual people is that they believe mechanics are working without brains. It's not so. Every person has brains, perhaps not highly cultivated, but so far as the brains go, this person uses them in work. This is true, not only of intellectual labor, as it's called, but of all kinds of labor. Even the most humble worker uses the brains, the street sweeper, although occupied in a very humble, and to some a very disgusting work, cannot afford to do without the brains. If this person does not use the brains to direct, you will find the place where this person sweeps to

be poorly swept. Neither again, can an individual leave the body behind? The body must move with the brain (Schiller 1996, 20).” It’s a simple – and profound – formulation: the brain and the body go together. This is the essence of all labor and, again, of human social being. But we get, instead of following this insight to the conclusion that communication involves labor, always, we get reification in one form after another – all issuing from the notion that “intellectual labor” stands apart from “labor” *per se*.

Many domains of practice have been carved out as exceptions exactly here: art, science, law, literature, religion, and a panoply of other “intellectual” pursuits (Schiller, 1996, 191). Practitioners of these fields tended historically to experience their activity as set apart – remote from the concerns and experience of “workers.” Theorists echoed them, in detecting analytical chasms separating these different domains.

In the years since writing this book, there have been two major relevant changes. First, there are clear signs that practitioners of “intellectual labor” are recognizing themselves as sharing common interests with industrial workers. The growth of union organizing on university campuses, museums, and other cultural institutions is one expression of this change. Not coincidentally, this change in self-understanding is occurring as market forces are insinuated into areas of practice from which they had previously been absent or secondary.

Second, there has arisen a major new form of reification in communication study. Can you guess what it is? What category do we see around us today? Everybody writes about it. I should not say everybody, but it’s in all of the academic journals, it’s a hot category. Maybe some of you are working with it. I will not try to offend you if you do, but it’s digital labor. It’s a reified category, based on technology rather than social relations. Digital labor needs to be reframed in social terms. If you’re talking about people who use computers to do work, that’s fine. They use computers to do work or they use social media or they use any other kind of digital mediation. That’s fine.

But to elevate that feature and say it’s somehow distinctive and special, it’s got attributes that are different and that make our society different, because the society now revolves around such uses of technology? I’m sorry: No. That’s reification. We exist in a society that revolves around many different kinds of labor. We have domestic labor. We have wage labor. We have (though it has declined very sharply across the world throughout the past seventy-five years) peasant labor. We have casual labor. We have more specialized labor systems, such as piecework. Indeed, to be a bit provocative we may go even further. We have playful activity, right? Some of the time we don’t do paid or unpaid labor, we play. I think that’s labor, because it’s human self-activity. Just because it’s not disagreeable doesn’t mean it’s not labor. Labor could be fun in a socialist society, even if it’s something that we need to do –

because we could design it differently. But we don't tend to think that could even be conceivable, because we have become so deeply accustomed to alienated labor. Right?

And, across this great span, we have now billions of workers who use computers, smartphones, networks, etc. Their work with digital technologies needs to be set within the social relations – the labor systems – within which they work.

So, this is what I had prepared about my book and the overall situation today as regards labor.

3 Interactive Q&A Session

Yuezhi Zhao: As Dan just said, this is a very, very special opportunity, and of all the doctoral students in China taking a class like this, we are special to have this ongoing dialogue, especially with regard to the key issue of labor that Dan just talked about. Oh, Dan, did I tell you that I ruined your book's circulation in China?

Dan Schiller: How is that?

Yuezhi Zhao: By insisting on putting "returning to labor" in the subtitle of the Chinese version, which is not true to your original book.

Dan Schiller: No, you have not told me that, but I think maybe it's truer to my original book.

Yuezhi Zhao: I felt it's truer and I also felt it would resonate with all the Chinese scholars who after all have all studied Marx, and know labor as a species-being, self-directing, intelligent activity. But it turned out that by the time the book's Chinese version was out, most Chinese scholars have felt that labor is such a niche topic that if they are focused on communication theory, they feel they don't need to consider it. In fact, this includes a friend scholar, who said to me: "I thought the book is about labor, isn't it? Then I'm not going to read it." So, I totally misread the Chinese intellectual scene, which shows how out of touch I was.

Dan Schiller: All I can add to that is that I've never been very good at marketing. And now you've told me you're not either.

Yuezhi Zhao: Not good at all! If we literally translated the book's title, people may buy it. But, whether they can read beyond page three, that's another question! It may boost sales because the title is so general. *Theorizing Communication: A History*, who will not want to read it? But by adding labor in the title, I made a disaster.

Dan Schiller: I'll tell you a story. I taught telecommunications history for 40 years in different universities, and if I was going to do it again, I would probably change the title of the course. Because what happened was, in the United States – I don't know if this is true in China, but in the United States – communications is a major that is about 60–65 % women. It's mostly women and not too many men.

Yuezhi Zhao: It's the same here. Definitely, in our school at Tsinghua, 9 out of my 12 graduate students are women.

Dan Schiller: In the telecommunications history course, the students are almost all men. So I wondered why is this happening? And the reason seemed to be that women Communications students didn't want to take classes on "telecommunications", because they thought it would be heavy on engineering – which was not true. This was very ironic, because women were very important historically as workers in the telecommunications industry, and women receive substantial attention in my course. So yes, I suppose I should have changed the title.

Yuezhi Zhao: I heard that our friend Bob McChesney, who once taught a course in Political Economy, changed the course title into Money, Power and Media, right? And that worked.

Dan Schiller: That worked. He had 800 students.

Yuezhi Zhao: Anybody want to just have a question in response to what Dan was speaking about?

3.1 Impact and Social Implications of Digital Technology in Traditional Labor

Sze Lai Chan: I have a question regarding your perspective on communication as a form of labor, reflecting the essence of human activity. Your view on the concept of digital labor as a distinct category is thought-provoking. Could you elaborate on how you perceive digital technology's integration with traditional forms of labor? How does this integration affect our understanding of labor in the digital age? And also, in light of your views, how should we approach the social impact of digital labor, especially in terms of economic inequality and the digital divide? Do you see digital labor as exacerbating these issues or as a potential equalizer that could lead to a more equal society?

Dan Schiller: These are very large questions. I might need you to go back, but starting at the end. I think you need to, in a sense, adopt a method for approaching the question. And the method that I have is historical, because I'm historian. I think the United States is the best place to start to approach the question of the impact of digitization, because the United States was the original prime mover for digitization on a society-wide scale.

There was a development of digital technology here, going back to the 1950s on quite a big scale. In my studies of that process, it was very much a top-down process. Big corporations and major military agencies drove the innovation and adoption of digital technology. As we move from the 1950s, into the 1970s and 1980s, we move from big mainframe computers to networking of computers. Not yet the internet, but

networking of computers in a process of time sharing, and subsequently the networking of many smaller computers. The essence of the process, was to try to accommodate the movement of capital to low wage locations first inside the United States. So that big businesses could locate production in low wage regions of the United States, by using networks to help with the processes that networks enabled, from accounting, R&D, and also the running of equipment through net-worked processes.

Eventually, by the 1980s, to do the same thing outside U.S. borders. Once that begins to happen, the impact on the labor force becomes very sharp. The impact on wages, social structures, on communities become more and more aggravated to answer your question. We get stagnating wages and growing inequality. In the United States, it's not fair to say this is just because of digital technology. It isn't. It's also because of container shipping, air transport and other technologies. But all of them together, and in particular digitalization, it's not just technology, but it's the deregulation and liberalization that occur across the globe, that produced growing inequality in the United States. And to your question, as I see it, digitization helped to enable a very severe growth of inequality. I see no sign that is changing. In fact, with AI there's every reason to think that it will worsen. I'm sorry to be pessimistic. That's my projection on that area.

Dan Schiller: Regarding the first question, I hinted at this in my first statement, we have a variety of forms of labor. In our different societies, we have a very significant wage labor in the United States, and now very dramatically over the past 40 years in China, but also in many other parts of the world.

But we also have many other kinds of labor, both in the United States and in China and everywhere else around the world, we have domestic labor. Which are people who work in the home, providing tasks of reproduction, cooking, child care, washing, and other tasks that are essential for the reproduction of both daily life and the ability to perform wage labor.

Often those tasks are performed disproportionately by women. It's been diminishing dramatically since the Second World War. But there is still peasant labor, farm labor, and these kinds of labor. For me, digital technology is integrated into these other forms of labor. So, if I'm doing domestic labor and I'm on my smartphone, that's integrating into it. Maybe I'm watching, some kind of TV show, or doing a chat of some sort. I'm integrating that digital activity into my domestic labor. Or maybe I am integrating my tablet activity into my deliveries that I'm making as a driver, because somebody is coordinating my labor as a driver through a tablet.

But as a driver, basic labor is task-oriented labor. I'm a casual laborer as a driver. I'm a precarious laborer as a driver, that happens to be coordinated through a tablet. You see where I'm going. It's not the digital form that's principal, it's the social

relationship that's primary, and the digital activity is integrated into it. I'm trying to decenter the digital, in order to accentuate the social relationship. We should not elevate digital labor in its place.

I'm a social historian, so there's no reason to put technology in the center, putting the technology in the center sounds like technological determinism to me. It sounds like the people who do that, wants to say that technology is the driving force, but it isn't the driving force. It's never been the driving force. The people who say it's the driving force are usually the people who are trying to sell it to us. That's my view.

Yuezhi Zhao: The people who sees technology as the driving force, are the one who are the driving force.

Dan Schiller: Unless an opposing social actor tells them no, you're not the driving force. We tell them that we are going to take their place.

3.2 TikTok and US-China Tech War

Yin Liu: I asked you questions about TikTok, in the context of the U.S. and China Tech War. Specifically, my questions are: TikTok is currently facing increased pressure from the U.S. government, which is threatening to ban it unless it divests its Chinese co-owners' shares. Some argue that the core of the US-China conflict is control over TikTok's algorithm. In the context of the US-China tech war, what are your thoughts on TikTok's involvement in this battle?

Dan Schiller: Thank you. So just a few things, I want to say that control over communications and information has always been a very sensitive issue. Particularly between rival powers, rival global powers, it's always been a very sensitive issue.

In World War I, although they were on the same side of the conflict, two rival powers were the upcoming United States and the dominant Great Britain. At that time, I'm going to be very brief, as it's more complicated than this – the United States expropriated, they took the British owned radiotelegraph company that operated in the United States, and took it over. The United States just took over ownership of this British company. The United States also took over the patents held by German radio interests in World War I. This is an example from 100 years ago, of something that has a resemblance to the current situation with Tik-Tok. It's not entirely the same, but it gives us a historical benchmark to perhaps think that the situation with TikTok is not unique to the United States and China.

It's something that has a historical basis. Now, having said that, I think it will be difficult for the United States to expropriate TikTok, or to ban it unless it divests its Chinese co-owners' shares. Because it's wildly popular, which is very different from the telegraph company in World War I, which was a very elite service and didn't have great popularity. I think it will be difficult because it's so widely popular, including

among voters who might support the president, Joe Biden. I think it will raise difficulties, for that reason. It's not to say it couldn't happen. The level of hostility is strong. I'm not saying it couldn't happen, but I think it will be a little more difficult than the situation that I expressed in World War I – at least in the election year of 2024. Those are my thoughts. I hope that's somewhat helpful.

3.3 Future of US-China Dynamics in Global Digital Infrastructure

Sze Lai Chan: Given the current dynamics in US-China relationship, particularly in the field of information technology, how do you foresee this rivalry shaping the future of global digital infrastructure? Additionally, in your view, how might this tension impact the political and economic landscapes within both the United States and China?

Dan Schiller: It's a good question. I don't foresee that we will move towards non-interoperable, separate global internets. I'm not talking about the great firewall here. I'm talking about global inter-nets. I do think that supply chains will become more distinct and separated. That's what's already happening. I think it's going to be very complicated and that they will not be fully separated, because they are so complex. There are many specific components of supply chains. For example, there are literally thousands of components in the supply chains of chips, that you cannot source domestically. Nobody can source them domestically, it's too complex. I don't really have clarity about the political economic landscapes, except to say that we are moving into a more protectionist era, where we will see greater forms of control placed over production and trade relationships.

This is a source of concern, even of alarm. Historically, protectionism has bred friction and conflict, which have not engendered favorable outcomes. The last time we had this situation was the 1930s, and the 1930s gave us a World War. I'm not saying we're going to have a World War, but I do think it's not a good recipe for harmonious international relations. So that's where I'll leave it.

3.4 Economic and Political Impacts of Data Monetization

Hanqin Li: What are the economic consequences of data monetization and surveillance capitalism by digital platforms, and how do these practices intersect with political interests?

Dan Schiller: Surveillance has been building within capitalism for many decades. It was building even before digitization, although digitization gave it a big

boost. And it's not just about platforms. You go to the supermarket and you're getting surveilled, it's not just about platforms, it's about all of the arenas of social life. You watch television, you're getting surveilled. But platforms are power centers, and because they are power centers, they extend their tentacles into both political and economic fields. As we know, most directly through the exposures of Edward Snowden. They are a nexus of political and economic power. I think that's really what we need to say, they are ubiquitous, and they have amassed unaccountable power. And they put that power at the disposal of other power centers in the society, political and economic, and the balance of power between the platforms and other power centers is in an area of active re-calibration today. Most of which is occurring behind the scenes, and we can't really see it. It's in an area where 98 % of the population is in the dark. So, the first task is to make that visible or at least more visible: to try to make the platforms more accountable. How do you do that? Well, by any means possible. It requires political mobilization.

3.5 Social Media, Polarization, and Disinformation

Hanqin Li: How do social media platforms influence political polarization, disinformation, and propaganda, and what are the economic motivations behind these phenomena?

Dan Schiller, Okay, it's a big issue. There are many areas. It's a very important issue in the United States. Just one of the major ways in which social media have intertwined with disinformation, misinformation, and polarization has to do with Covid. Social media have been incredibly important in fomenting misinformation about Covid in the United States. And this has been documented as contributing to political polarization, whereby millions of people believe that Covid is not a serious illness and that we shouldn't worry about it – or that Covid doesn't even exist. Meanwhile, Covid is still killing thousands of people a week in the US. And this has disappeared from the political landscape. The government is acting like it's not an issue, they don't even compile key public health statistics anymore. We had a public health infrastructure that was really good. They've dismantled it, it's not just a matter of letting it go. They've dismantled the public health infrastructure for Covid, and social media bears tremendous responsibility for this. Millions of people think that if you wear a mask you are part of the problem. And this is to be laid at the door of the right-wing social media. And the larger issue of misinformation and disinformation is unfortunately going to get worse in our election year of 2024.

3.6 Impact of Platform-Based Models on Traditional Media

Zhaoyi Yang: What implications do platform-based business models have for traditional media outlets, and how does this influence the diversity of voices in political and economic discourse? Because you mentioned that these digital platforms are a power center that brings forth the monologue of the Western discourse.

Dan Schiller: There's been a very big impact of platforms on traditional media. But the most significant example, is that they have all but destroyed newspapers. And this is a terrible development, particularly for local newspapers. The newspaper is becoming an extinct medium in the United States, because the search engines and the social media don't pay (or pay way too little) for using news. Hence, the newspaper model, which has historically been supported by advertising, has dried up, because the advertising is all going to search and social media. And the search and social media say, we don't want to pay you because why should we, to the newspapers. This has reached a critical phase, and something might be done. But if you have a completely capitalist media, where it's just about profit and loss, why should the newspaper survive? If they can't make money, let them go. But if they go, then we don't have news.

This is leaving aside all of the questions which are very important questions about the quality of the news. Quality of the news in the existing newspaper system has been entirely inadequate, and that needs to be said: it loosely expresses the social class and political-ideological biases of ruling elites. But if you don't even have any newspapers, then that's even worse. I'm trying to make a distinction there. If we don't have newspapers, then we have no way of holding private or governmental power to account. We have no way of going to the government and saying to the elected officials, that they are abusing their position as a power center. And that's basically the death of democracy.

Now again, simplifying the discussion, this remains a fatal step in the decline of democracy. I think this is a primary example of the impact of platforms on the traditional media. There are many other examples in the film and television industries and so forth, but this is the one I would draw your attention to.

3.7 Cooperation in Media Economics and Political Economy of Communication Research

Hongcheng Lu: I'm a student of media economics, and when I'm doing research, I find difficulties in analyzing new problems, for example, platforms and digital labor. When I'm reading your book, and it inspires me because maybe labor is a good key

factor for us to do research in the future. Do you think there is a possibility for cooperation and communication between so-called Media Economics research and Political Economy of Communication research in the future?

Dan Schiller: Now, you've raised the issue of labor again, I was going to answer you in terms of overlap between media, economics, and political economy. There is an overlap, media, and economics, in the field of institutional economics. Institutional economics has an overlap with certain kinds of political economy. In particular, if you work empirically with for example, archival sources. If you go into statistics or business records, to study a particular corporation. Or study a particular media industry using primary sources, using the records of that industry. You can do a lot of good research that is very valuable, both for institutional economics and for political economy. It's an overlap that is meaningful and valuable.

Now, there's also a gap, to the extent that there are different versions of political economy. And I do this kind of political economy, often, that focuses on class, labor, and relations of production. Then you're not necessarily working only with business records – you might be consulting strike records, government statistics, workers' diaries, newspapers, pamphlets, and posters. However, if you're studying records that show how many people did the business employ, and what wages did they pay, and how did the labor force change over time? These are things that institutional economics might be interested in. And for political economy, these are also important, because you want to look at the relationships that are changed over time in the workforce. How did the businesses become more or less dependent on labor? For example, did they begin to automate in certain parts of the division of labor? In a particular case, you could do a case study, that could be valuable. And then you'd have to develop your own theorization. I don't really care, frankly, if you call it institutional economics or political economy, you will have to develop a theorization and find your own theory, decide for yourself. But either way, whatever you decide could be valuable for both.

Yuezhi Zhao: I just want to jump in to say that you didn't realize how significant this conversation is. Lu Hongcheng in the earlier half of this class just did a magnificent survey about the development of the entire field of media economics in China, in the journals. He came up with interesting observations in the sense that the field is still struggling. At one point, it was doing very well when advertisers were still supporting the news, but now the field, to use his words, is collapsing. It's a pivotal moment in a way, even in terms of his own intellectual identity.

Also, what you said just reminded me a historical moment at Simon Fraser University, which by the way, is in the middle of celebrating its 50th year of founding. We were there at its 40th, right? That School once both had institutional economics and political economy, with Bill Melody and Dallas Smythe personified each and worked shoulder by shoulder. I think in advocating political economy, we're not

saying that media economics has no value. The best institutional economics can be very helpful. Only that it's from a different standpoint.

Dan Schiller: Having said that, let me also remember something my father used to say, that we don't have a full team of political economists. We need a greater number of political economists. You know what I mean?

Yuezhi Zhao: Ideally, we should not only take into account media economics, they can better arm themselves with data and empirical survey. Our students in this class are very well trained in techniques of media research, especially quantitative research. Nowadays, they are armed with computer programs with all kinds of advanced statistical methods. And so, if we are talking about a whole team of political economists, we can have ones like yourself or your father, and we can have ones who are armed with statistics, but still come from a perspective that's critical, that's Marxist.

Dan Schiller: Shinjoung Yeo and I put up a post on our Information Observatory blog that has Dallas's syllabus from 1958 or 1959. It's for a political economy of communication course, 2 semesters.

Yuezhi Zhao: That's still at UIUC.

3.8 Effects of Digitalization on Global Citizen Identity and Group Dynamics

Hanqin Li: As Professor Schiller just mentioned, global digitalization will eventually lead to a dissolution of ourselves. Specifically, my question reads: as we have become pure labor, we finally gain a disposed life, under the intervention and interference of capital. How do you think this orientation will affect the global citizen self-identity and group identity?

Dan Schiller: Yes, you're right, that there are invasions of our micro-world. If I want to go to the grocery store, somebody gives me an ad and says, why don't you buy this kind of cookie? I am constantly being told to do that, think about this. Here's an ad for a sweater. It's hard in that circumstance to think, or to have a coherence to your life that is like it was before. Is that what you're saying?

Hanqin Li: Yes, exactly.

Dan Schiller: Okay, let me just tell you, there was a short story written by the writer Kurt Vonnegut. He was a bestselling author in the United States. He probably died 15 years ago. And he wrote this story, published in 1961. It was titled "Harrison Bergeron," and it's an interesting story in that it appeared long before digitization the way we have it today. The story revolved around the dystopian idea that in the future citizens who were too intelligent would be made to wear earpiece radios that broadcast loud noises meant to disrupt their thoughts. Whenever anybody thought

too hard about something, a loud and disruptive noise would go off in their head. So loud that they had to stop thinking. In 1961, that seemed crazy; yet, it already captured something that everybody recognized. It was already an interesting and a scary idea. And it spoke to something that was happening in our world. What you're talking about has been noticed or present for a long time. Now we have a new version, which is definitely very manipulative. And yet the fact is that you notice it, and surely many people notice it. Do your friends ever say, damn this happening again, right?

We notice it, and in noticing it, we don't make it go away, but we kind of push against it a little bit. I would argue, for this reason, it's not a dissolution of the self, it's a re-composition of some kind. It's something that's changing, but it's not a dissolution of the self. You give them too much credit, you're stronger than them. We are all stronger. I'm a historian of hope, and I think we can hope to make that go away. What do we need to make that go away? That's a different question. That's a question that we have to answer together, that we have to find answers for, and the answers will be built, not in a day, not in a year, but maybe over the course of a number of years. And it'll take creativity, it'll take work, and it'll take, dare I say this, mass work. There are a lot of other people, but nobody promises that anything is going to be easy. But the people in the past who tried, we are their legatees. We are the people they passed their legacy down to, and we have a debt, a responsibility. My feeling is that you have a lot of power.

4 Concluding Remarks and Future Outlooks

Yuezhi Zhao: That sounds to me the most powerful, profound, concluding remarks from the historian of hope. I really sensed that, and I like the fact that this question came from somebody who was thinking about the self, and used words such the "dissolution of self", a sentiment right now is so prevalent in the world out there. Think about all the conflicts, all the wars, all the powerlessness, and also the turn to the self. That's a very neoliberal term, right? You end up thinking about your personal identity, rather than what Dan was saying about mass labor. What else is more powerful than the term mass labor? I think we really have taken this conversation to a very high level. The contrast between dissolution and hope is very clear. I think this is fantastic. We have reached a very high note.

Dan Schiller: This conversation has left me very exhilarated. Again, I am so grateful to you, Zhao and also to the students for the stimulating questions. And I hope you will go on. I know that you will develop communication research into new directions. I wish you very great success. Thank you.

Yuezhi Zhao: We are talking about the ambition to develop a Tsinghua school of communication studies. And if that is going to happen, this dialogue, this special class, will be a contributing aspect of it. And also, just like what you said about that class, I feel I still have more in the syllabus and I can't finish. I always keep the class too long, there's too much going on. Thank you for today.

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