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Dan Schiller: How to Think about Information

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Dan Schiller asks us to reconsider the way that we have traditionally thought about information, as a resource. He observes that a resource – such as air, water, and land – is available everywhere, all of the time, to everyone. A commodity, however, is a "resource that is produced for the market by wage labor" and "contains defining linkages to capitalist production and, secondarily, to market exchange." (p.21) Thus, information, like straw baskets or silicone diodes, possesses market

value. *How to Think about Information* traces the history and pursues the implications of this premise. The picture looks bleak. "Das Bedürfnis nach einem stets ausgedehnteren Absatz für ihre Produkte" wrote Karl Marx in 1848, "jagt die Bourgeoisie über die ganze Erdkugel. Überall muß sie sich einnisten, überall anbauen, überall Verbindungen herstellen." A century and a half later, Schiller argues, the terms of engagement remain essentially the same for information as commodity.

The author uses the first three chapters to answer the question, "How, when, and why does information become economically viable?" (p.4) He describes and critiques earlier theoretical frameworks – information theory of the 1930s and '40s, postindustrial theories of the 1960s and '70s, politico-economic theory of the 1980s – before settling upon one that allows him through the subsequent six chapters to draw conclusions about information and the capitalist forces that manipulate and assign value to it. The problem, according to Schiller, is that despite the early promises of consumer choice and democratization that advances in telecommunications technology offered (and continue to offer), a handful of multinational corporations, in tandem with supine media and compliant governments, have co-opted information for their own profit. Mass advertising, diffused through the very modes – mobile phones, the Internet, iPods, iPhones, etc. – only seem to increase the ease, convenience, and breadth of communication. Instead, they dupe public end-users with the illusion of technological variety and versatility while driving the demand for ever more sophisticated products. The result, the author contends in a chapter entitled, "The Culture Industry: Convergence and Transnationalization" (which echoes Adorno, oddly without explicitly invoking him), is that "[c]ontrol over system development and programming and scheduling decisions [referring to television, but applicable as well to the other telecommunication modes discussed in the book] [...] is gravitating not to viewers but to capital, directly via the new capital logic with which it is being infused." (p.130) He concludes with the dire forecast that China, recently having reinserted itself into the transnational market system, probably will also succumb – through overproduction – to the same capitalist forces that co-opted the communications and information industries everywhere else.

But Schiller often leans toward only one side of an argument, invariably the left. This allows him to be more alarmist, even hyperbolic, than a fuller and more considered perspective would allow. For example, he criticizes mobile phone networks for faulty reliability standards compared to those of land lines (with a 99.999% connection rate), claiming that the "[cellular] industry sails on, but [...] moves atop a thin skin of ice that places users in danger of falling through." (p.168) Dropped calls and inability to connect can, of course, be an inconvenience or, in an emergency, something worse. Land lines cannot be everywhere that human beings might encounter trouble, which is perhaps why about 82 million 911 calls are placed each year from mobile phones. Schiller argues that only two-fifths of

six thousand emergency call centers – also known as public safety answering points (PSAP) – in the United States can locate the source of 911 calls. Yet, he ignores significant progress that the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), state and local officials, consumer groups, and the telecommunications industry have made since 2003 to implement wireless E911, or "enhanced 911," capabilities around the country. (The FCC is the independent U.S. government agency charged with regulating interstate and international communications via radio, television, wire, satellite, and cable. Established by the Communications Act of 1934, the FCC is directly responsible to Congress and holds jurisdiction over 50 states, the District of Columbia, and U.S. possessions. For further information, see the agency website: http://www.fcc.gov)

E911, long in place for wireline phones, also enables PSAPs to locate a wireless caller's position within a few meters. (Details of the E911 program and progress made in its implementation may be found in the publicly-available report [http://www.gao.gov] by the Government Accountability Office [GAO], *Telecommunications: States' Collection and Use of Funds for Wireless Enhance 911 Services*, GAO-06-338 [Washington, D.C.: March 2006].) The author elsewhere argues that "[r]ather than becoming an independent, open infrastructure for the exchange of textual and audio-visual information resources, the Web was rapidly colonized and transformed into a new sales instrument" (p.152), allowing the sponsors of which (again, the multinational corporations) to profoundly encroach on freedom of speech and the democratic process. Perhaps, but he does not build a convincing case for this state having obtained in the United States. The abundance of websites and blogs of all political and ideological persuasions, from mainstream to extremist, as well as the ready availability of still and moving images from the aesthetically sublime to the (even illegally) pornographic would seem to gainsay his point. Indeed, Schiller would make a more convincing case were he to devote more than a passing line in the last chapter to China's efforts (hardly driven by capitalism) to restrict and monitor Internet usage of its own citizens. (See p.195) Finally, as this review goes to press, FCC Chairman Kevin J. Martin, who will preside over the January 2008 auction of a portion of the radio frequency spectrum no longer used by television broadcasters, has proposed auction rules that, contrary to one of Schiller's theses, do not favor large telecommunications companies but rather balance the needs of the various bidders: multinational telecom carriers, startup phone companies, and public safety responders. (See, for example, Kim Hart, "How to Sell the Airwaves: FCC Must Choose Between Competing Network Visions," *The Washington Post*, 13 July 2007: D1, 3)

Schiller has written a book that should stimulate discussion among scholars and students of communication and culture theory. His conclusions are deeply researched if arrived at through a particular ideological lens. In the end, he has given us at least one way to think about information.

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