
Following the tech bubble burst of the late 1990s and early 2000s, many predicted an inevitable decline in information industries. However, in his recent book How to Think about Information, Dan Schiller suggests this dismissal may be far too hasty. In an era where media convergence has become the norm, Schiller’s book is timely. While we watch TV on our computers, listen to radio broadcasts on our iPods and surf the Internet on our cell phones, Schiller exposes the political-economic roots and forces contributing to these media and technological trends that we often take for granted as objective innovations. Schiller examines not just the convergence of technology but also explores how information emerges as a commodity in the converging fields of culture, media, and telecommunications. By engaging the “transformative political-economic changes occurring throughout the realm of information technology and culture” (p. xiii), Schiller locates the recent acceleration of the commodification of information within a history of telecommunications development and policy to expose the emergence of a contemporary form of U.S. domestic and global informationalized capitalism.

With several prominent works to his name, Schiller’s recent piece represents twenty years of interest and work on the information age. In this work, Schiller contends that “if we wish to understand the motive, force and direction of contemporary society, it is still necessary to think about information carefully and in an extended way” (p. xiii). Schiller approaches this lofty goal by examining the roots of informationalized capitalism and explicating how informational activities have been socially transformed into profit-making commodities through a variety of political-economic trends both in the United States and globally during the past century. By grounding his arguments in a rich amount of empirical evidence, Schiller makes a convincing case for the continued relevance of information in our global digital age.

The crux of Schiller’s argument is simple: information is now a commodity—a product of waged labour and thus subject to market laws. However, when we move beyond the surface, we find more complexity as Schiller argues that information is not inherently a tradable commodity; it is subject to cultural and social forces and therefore has only become a commodity under certain capitalist conditions that have enabled an accelerated process of information commodification since the 1970s. Therefore, information has no intrinsic value; it is only assigned economic value under capitalist market conditions. By exploring the complex interdependency between information and culture industries, governmental policies and transnational telecommunications corporations, Schiller argues that information as a commodity has become the dominant perspective, usurping notions of information as a social and public good.

True to his political economy roots, Schiller’s book focuses less on post-modern theoretical and broader cultural shifts in how we think about and reconceptualise information. Instead, it exposes the intersection of historical trends leading to a marketized state of informationalized capitalism through the recent acceleration of the commodification of information. While Schiller has an occasional tendency to reify concepts such as information, culture, and capital, he is also quite thorough in moving beyond technological determinist attitudes and exposing the social actors behind capitalist and political forces that are driving the evolution of modern telecommunications systems. By looking to the past to understand the recent and arguably ongoing crisis in telecommunications, Schiller retains...
a relatively pessimistic stance on the future of transnational telecommunications while cautioning against the repetition of such trends in the burgeoning wireless industry and China’s emergent telecommunications investments.

Schiller exhibits a clear and subtle style in his writing and ensures the reader understands the foundations of his argument before building upward. He accomplishes the goals set out for this book by articulating a thorough and insightful analysis of information in the context of neoliberal market trends and global capitalism; however, he is much less critical than he is descriptive. While he raises some excellent points regarding the Digital Divide, the need for broader access to telecommunications and the denial of quality access for the general public, one can intuitively feel the oppressive yoke of capital and business with an occasional air of governmental and regulatory conspiracy. Schiller also neglects the ways in which new media open up the informational playing field by broadening the spectrum of alternative discourses, particularly concerning those emerging in cyberspace. By focusing solely on top-down manipulation of the telecommunications industry, readers are left wondering about bottom-up social forces that suggest that all information is not necessarily commodified.

Despite these shortcomings, this book’s strengths outweigh its weaknesses. Schiller really hits his stride in the later chapters by examining the Internet as the new “self-service vending machines of cultural commodities” (p. 141), exposing the integral role of advertising and sponsorship in the global flow of telecommunications. By taking a critical stance here, Schiller explains how our socially constructed desire for perpetual contact through wireless technology is predicated, not on ideas of personal freedom, but “came to us, rather, as a complex historical extension of the domination and inequality that continue to define our divided societies” (p. 173). Here we see how illusions of wireless freedom more accurately contribute to extensions of work life and new forms of surveillance and commodification, while also continuing to widen domestic and global digital divides.

*How to Think About Information* represents a significant and thorough contribution to the communications field. Schiller’s final chapter is evolutionary in that it provides an emergent example of historical trends by examining the rapid growth of China’s economy and telecommunications structures. While I would like to have seen a broader summary of debates articulated in earlier chapters, particularly concerning Schiller’s distinction between information and culture, this final focus on China leaves the reader feeling satisfied yet still intently engaged with more burning questions than answers. With the world’s gaze focused intently on China this year, we are left wondering whether their rapidly expanding telecommunications economy is heading down the road to a potentially devastating crisis. Schiller’s final chapter serves as a cautionary tale for this evolving information industry while providing us with the tools to imagine the worldwide implications of such a crisis in this era of global informationalized capitalism.

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