There was a time when democracy was directly linked to one’s possibility of influencing political decision making. One person was equal to one vote or one voice. Although the spirit of this initial understanding still lingers, democracy is now regarded as a more complex concept, and represents a variety of elements such as a system, a state, a mechanism of control, as well as a series of principles and practices, as is made evident through any modern dictionary’s definition of the word. Oxford Dictionaries, for example, defines democracy as “a system of government by the whole population or all the eligible members of a state, typically through elected representatives,” “a state governed under a system of democracy,” or the “control of an organization or group by the majority of its members,” or “the practice or principles of social equality” (www.oxforddictionaries.com).

Given that democracy now encompasses a diversity of elements and perspectives, should it not be conceivable that research on the topic also be reflective of this diversity? I believe it should. However, in communication studies, it would seem that some scholars are still intent on carving out their own methodology and theoretical framework, forgetting along the way that it is “the whole that is greater than the sum of its parts” (Aristotle).
Both Robert Babe, in a chapter entitled “Harold Innis and the Paradox of Press Freedom” (Comor, 2011), and Trappel, Nieminen, and Nord (2011), in discussing their monitoring methodology, are quick to critique Robert McChesney’s œuvre as lacking the theoretical and methodological perspectives they are trying to advance in their own work, rather than embracing his work and building on it. Although critiques are part of improving and developing ideas, it would still seem from these perspectives that McChesney’s work stands on its own rather than merely offering a counterpoint or a pillar on which to expand knowledge.

The following paragraphs will serve to demonstrate the link between these works as a unit; an attempt to prove that they are better off as a body of knowledge, rather than individual cast-off books in a plethora of offerings all meant to define and explain media and democracy. The first section discusses the relationship between capitalism and democracy, the second has to do with the methodology used to examine democracy at work, and the third reflects on the importance of the past in assessing the future.

Quoting Robin Mansell, McChesney (2013) explains that since the arrival of the Internet, there have been “celebrants” and “skeptics” who have provided their take on the democratic possibilities of the new medium. He addresses some of their arguments throughout his book, as well as laying the groundwork for the importance of the use of political economy to study the Internet; however, the most poignant argument made has to be the discussion of capitalism and democracy. According to McChesney (2013, Chapter 2), for far too long the American view of capitalism has always been synonymous with democracy. However, as he explains,

> capitalism tends to promote inequality, monopoly, hypercommercialism, and stagnation, all of which are corrosive to political democracy. The first three factors contribute to depoliticization. (p. 24)

It is with this notion that he takes us on a journey of the Internet’s development, using both skeptic and celebrant views on the possibilities the Internet brings for democracy. His story is not just about the participant uses of the medium, but also its structure, and, more importantly, that of the organizations that make it up, as well as their power in relation to what the Internet can and cannot allow us to do. In other words, capitalism is no longer—and perhaps never was—the key to democracy and by letting the Internet fall into the hands of a few corporate giants, there is little hope that it will ever become the democratic powerhouse of the celebrants.

Some of McChesney’s ideas are echoed in *Media, Structures, and Power: The Robert E. Babe Collection* (Comor, 2011), which provides several arguments that aspire to free “information” from being understood and priced as a commodity. Babe also alludes to Innis’s work quite frequently in making a case for “scholars like [Robert] McChesney, [Noam] Chomsky, and [Edward] Herman” to include “a nuanced historical interleaving of technological/media change, shifts in political economic power, changes in culture, media messages, and monopolies of knowledge” (Comor, 2011, p. 227) to their critiques of the press. This comment was made in more recent Babe work, which focuses on Canadian communication thought. It would seem, however, that because McChesney may not have used Innis’ vocabulary, particularly the expression “monopolies of knowl-
edge,” that he has omitted these ideas. Whether or not he formally acknowledges Innis’ terminology (he does cite him, by the way), his new book, *Digital Disconnect: How Capitalism is Turning the Internet Against Democracy* (2013), is definitely an attempt at consciously or unconsciously reconciling many of these issues. For example, he discusses how various important centres such as the military and corporate entities as well as political pressures have made the Internet what it is today. As part of McChesney’s argument, he also makes reference to the importance of free and independent journalism as a factor for ensuring democratic practices. He even suggests that “true free-market capitalism would even benefit from a strong press system” (p. 215). In this respect he makes reference to several journalism and democracy indexes, such as the “Reporters Without Borders Annual World Press Freedom Index” and the “Freedom House Democracy Index,” which also recognizes the presence of an independent press.

It is in reference to this interest in democracy and journalism that his work ties in to that of Trappel, Nieminen, and Nord (2011) who published *The Media for Democracy Monitor: A Cross National Study of Leading News Media*, a compendium of results from an empirical study of democracy in various European countries (Austria, Finland, Germany, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Portugal, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom), as well as Australia. It proposes a toolkit for monitoring advanced democracies using criteria that the authors believe are essential to the study of democratic reasoning: freedom, equality, and control. Each of these elements is then assessed by relevant indicators that are in turn “graded” for each country. According to the authors, their evaluation tool was needed given that other known monitoring initiatives were either unsustainable or volatile. As they suggest, these initiatives are run by “civil-society-based observation desks with little or no social-science background (watch blogs) or they do not cover mature democracies (IREX) or they scrutinize just one country (PEJ)” (Nieminen, Nord, & Trappel, 2011, pp. 21–22).

Although this book is quite different from Babe’s theoretical approach or McChesney’s application of a political economic framework, which states why the Internet is not democracy with a capital D, it does tie in to their work by empirically describing the extent to which media is democratic in a select number of countries, and offering a series of concrete examples of the political economic structures.

More and more studies are providing a global view of media, journalism, and the values that transcend that industry. However, when taken separately, they are flawed and limited in scope. Trappel, Nieminen, & Nord’s (2011) study is very Eurocentric, whereas McChesney and Babe offer American and Canadian perspectives. Nevertheless, as Babe advocates, ideas stemming from these works can be applicable elsewhere.

In creating *The Media for Democracy Monitor*, researchers met to discuss coding and indicators; however, each individual study appears to be coded by researchers studying their own country (as discussed on p. 29), which may have resulted in bias. It would be more interesting for a group of researchers to attribute points to all countries rather than a single one to increase inter-rater reliability for all countries. This type of coding could be added to the one already generated by national teams responsible for a given country. Another of the book’s issues is the fact that not all chapters
are completely identical with regards to format and content. Although most chapters share similarities that make the book easier to read, some had varying titles and sections. Furthermore, these types of global projects also tend to simplify reality by trying to make it “fit” within selected criteria and indicators. This might explain why so few countries were included. It would have been interesting to add Canada and the United States, as well as a few additional countries, to offer an expanded sample and to provide a broader perspective by studying issues brought up by McChesney and others, regarding the threat of concentration in relation to democracy.

Other than the need for empirical data, holistic approaches, and the political economy framework, it is important to note that studies of communication and democracy benefit from the use of past work to explain the future. As such, Comor’s collection of Babe’s work is useful to all researchers and students, as it addresses issues such as the Internet’s role in relation to democracy; it looks at the ways in which media are developing given the most recent economic crises; and, it gives new insight into classic texts by Innis and McLuhan. Babe’s earlier work on telecommunications also provides retrospective and archival information needed to better understand today’s media systems, and his research can be used to compare this industry with that of other countries at various states in time. Consequently, a collection of such a rich breath of topics is a blessing for any new or seasoned scholar.

In conclusion, although it may be possible to find links between the books related to communication, and perhaps, democracy, one does not have to read them all to identify the links. It would be productive to keep in mind the fact that academic work is done simultaneously by several researchers; that it is important to acknowledge the limitations of individual research; and that there are significant benefits of studying existing work as a corpus. Surely, Trappel, Nieminen, and Nord (2011) read McChesney, as indicated in their first chapter, but they are adding something new to his ideas. Likewise, Babe reminds us of the importance of the past when contemplating the future. Academic work is done on a continuum and although two researchers may be studying the same topic, they may only become aware of each other’s work years later—which would explain why two people may be discussing the same topic using different language. However, this does not change the fact that it is the same issue. In today’s information-intensive environment, should we not be more open and aware of these varying analyses, benefiting from past research rather than assuming everything we do is “new”?

Note
1. See, for example, the Worlds of Journalism study headed up by Thomas Hanitzsch at the University of Munich. URL: http://www.worldsofjournalism.org [06, 28, 2013].