

“Political economic research continues to explore the concentration of media ownership and the consequences of commercialized media for a consumer society”: Interview with Janet Wasko

Por Denis Gerson Simões¹

Eptic: How do you observe the context of the research focus of the Political Economy of Communication within the U.S. academic community in the XXI century? In what direction are the main researches in the U.S. currently heading?

Janet Wasko: The study of the political economy of communications in the US continues to provide an important and essential analysis for media studies. While mostly ignored by mainstream media economists and rejected by many cultural theorists, the tradition is continuing to grow, especially among new communication scholars. Political economic research continues to explore the concentration of media ownership and the consequences of commercialized media for a consumer society. US and Canadian scholars also are developing an even more sophisticated theoretical foundation, as evidenced by a number of new books relating to theories of political economy and media. An interesting development is the tendency for younger scholars to integrate political economic analysis with cultural theories, thus providing an even more compelling explanation of role in contemporary society.

Eptic: How do you see the impact of the recent crisis of capitalism upon the media in the U.S. and in Latin America in general? How did the film and television industries react to the crisis?

Janet Wasko: US-based entertainment conglomerates are experiencing a range of problems because of the current economic crisis. Just today Viacom and Sony have reported losses, while other companies have made adjustments in their operations, mostly, by eliminating workers, but also cutting back on their business investments. Some television and film companies have combined operations or split apart their business in various ways. Other adjustments are being made to digital distribution offered by the Internet and other digital technologies, however, most of this activity involves trying to determine how to make additional profits by recycling products.

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Eptic: Is the crisis changing the consumption habits of the American people? Does the same apply to the products of cultural industries?

Janet Wasko: We hear everyday about how Americans are reevaluating their consumption habits, in light of the present economic crisis. However, we also experience the same push to consume, which is said to be the way out of the crisis. And while some cultural industries remain healthy (motion pictures, for instance, are claimed to be profiting), others are experiencing difficult times. Some of this situation, however, can be blamed on the appeal of new forms of media such as the Internet and other digital media, which are attracting a good deal of attention even though they currently may not be contributing to new profit sources.

Eptic: How does the U.S. market see Latin American audiovisual production?

Janet Wasko: One tendency is to takeover successful media companies that produce and distribute Latin American audiovisual products in the US. Telemundo is a Spanish-language television network in the US that is owned by NBC/Universal, and reaches most of the Hispanic audience in the US through television stations or cable affiliations. More recently, another Spanish-language media company, Univision, was purchased by a consortium of US investors including Saban Entertainment, although it was rumored that some of the larger US-based transnational entertainment conglomerates were interested in the company. As the Hispanic population grows in the US, it is possible more moves of this type may occur. Meanwhile, the major companies continue to produce media products for the Latin American market, and own outlets in the Latin American market (for instance, Fox Sports En Espanol). Generally, then it is not difficult to argue that US media companies see the Latin America and the Hispanic market in the US as desirable markets.