Critical theory, digital media and the future of democracy

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The analysis of communication and media industries has traditionally involved an understanding of structure (media industries, political and regulatory frameworks), text (media and digital products), and audiences (reception and prosumption). Dallas Smythe (1983) distinguished between administrative communication research which focused on improving communication systems and functions (such as public relations) and critical media research. Critical media theorists foreground media analysis as the "study of social relations, particularly the power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources" (Mosco 2009: 10). Central here is to understand how media products are commodified, how the spatial dynamics related to ownership and control of digital industries shape production and consumption, and how these structural aspects constrain or permit agency and active citizenry through media as a fourth estate.

Fuchs (2020: 182) makes the point that while contemporary society may be "an information society according to the state of its forces of production [...] it is capitalist in its relations of production." It is therefore important to examine the political and economic factors constituting digital production, distribution

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https://doi.org/10.38140/aa.v57i2.10205

ISSN: 0587-2405 • e-ISSN: 2415-0479

Acta Academica • 2025 57(2): 1-14

and consumption, especially since current digital productive forces are considered to be automated artificial intelligence based on algorithmic pattern recognition and are promoted as neutral. Fuchs (2018) expressed concern about the intersection of the political with these technologies, particularly in terms of the compression of public interest journalism, the rise of algorithms and clickbait influencing democratic backsliding. He theorizes "Industry 4.0" (IoT, AI, Big data, social media and cloud computing) as a digital German Ideology, cautioning for necessary skepticism of any ideology which proclaims a revolution before it has actually taken place (Fuchs 2018: 281). Critical Theory allows for analysis of resource flows linked to digital production and media ownership, and brings questions of control into sharper focus, thereby enabling discussion around extractivist tendencies of data and other core digital industry inputs, declining public trust and the erosion of democracy in the contemporary technological milieu.

Concerns for intersections between political spheres and media industries are not new. Theorists critical of administrative communicative approaches found them suspect for professing value neutrality even as they actively perpetuated existing structures of dominant social and economic relations. Fuchs indicates that language also comes under the logic of reification, and quotes Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno:

> The monologue of power replaces the dialectic so that talk is mere appearance, but in reality everything is silent. Communication [in capitalism] makes people conform by isolating them. Propaganda turns language into an instrument, a lever, a machine (quoted in Fuchs 2020: 131).

In 1934 Hollywood moved from a pre-code era to a morally restrained cinematic conservatism. Will Hay (Ward 2024: 4) was charged with enforcing the "motion picture production code" which espoused values of submission to political authority and traditional/religious morality. This was aggressively promoted by the National Legion of Decency, a group whose main aim was to make sure that art was correctly and conservatively handled to offer audiences an idealised, non-controversial cinema reinforcing the status quo.

Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno arrived in America around the mid-1930s and, observing its ideological cinema, coined the phrase 'culture industries', theoretically linking cultural products to industrial production. They observed that the industrial production of cultural goods brought (mass)

culture under capitalist logic, which implied the rationalisation of production, distribution and consumption. Cultural products subject to commodification became fetishized so that exchange value predominated use value, but this was not only about monetary efficiency. It was also about stabilizing class relations which were reified so as to present a naturalness to the social order cultural products depicted.

In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1948), Adorno and Horkheimer indicated that "all reification is a forgetting." The cinematic world *code Hollywood* presented gave audiences an escape from their own lives and obscured conditions of its creation, in so doing obstructing the capacity for individual autonomy in decision making and agency.

During this era, a figure seen as the father of public relations rose in prominence. Edward Bernays advocated the engineering of mass behaviour through psychological appeals strategically situated in cultural and media products. His astonishing campaign in the 1950s for the US company, United Fruit, included a short movie, *Why the Kremlin hates bananas* (Myers 1995: 255). It was commissioned by United Fruit to sway opinion in favor of US intervention in Guatemalan politics by portraying Guatemala as communist and hence worthy of an externally engineered coup. Bernays in the opening chapter of his book, *Propaganda* (1928), stated that in order to organize chaos, "the conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organization habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country" (1928: 9).

Public relations of large media industries, often very well resourced, work strategically to obscure the real conditions of digital production, which makes it harder for the citizenry to understand the cost of engagement in the digital realm. This compounds the possibility for authentic and autonomous decision making in a digital world.

Adorno and Horkheimer's student, Jürgen Habermas, departing from their critique of communication in capitalism, theorised the autonomy and decision making of the masses with the notion of the public sphere, where he argued for an extension of the 18th century English bourgeois public sphere. He indicated that consensus emerging out of public debate was an important way in which a public with common goals could achieve self-determination.

Habermas outlined communicative action and determined the conditions for building authentic consensus. Here communicative action geared towards understanding was privileged over purposive or instrumental action. Key to developing consensus via communicative action was access to reasoning: understanding which occurs when "a hearer has access to the reason for a speaker's utterances" (Habermas 1985). Habermas was concerned that the media industries bypassed consensus building communication for strategic influence over the decision-making capacities of audiences by using spectacle and publicity to mask authentic communication wherein the process of reasoning is visible.

The questions of self-determination, autonomy and individual agency persist in the digital age, especially during the advancement of generative artificial intelligence, where it is not as easy to discern the reasoning processes behind the 'conclusions' generated by chatbots. Vincent Mosco (2005), dealing with myths around media, observed the emergence of the digital sublime, an idea which mythologised the digital sphere as a transcendent force. The digital sphere, especially web 2.0 – web 3.0 with newly featured interactivity and connectivity, was expected to democratise politics, culture and even economies, evidenced by the rise of citizen journalism, the Arab springs and the explosion of user generated content. However, Mosco also analysed spatial relations and found an increase in the concentration of ownership and control of media and digital industries which may increase rationalisation of media and media products, one area of concern being digital surveillance. At that time Mosco (2009: 15) pointed out that "[c]ommunications systems in the United States are now shaped by a handful of companies, including US-based firms General Electric (NBC), Viacom (CBS), the Walt Disney Company (ABC), Time Warner (CNN), Microsoft, and Google." He concedes that enabling resources are available to users within media industries; rephrasing Marx, he contends that "we can [...] 'make history' but only under the terms that social structures enable" (2009: 16).

Emma Hay (2024: 96) explored social relations from an ecological-complexity perspective extending Felix Guatarri's "three ecologies" to review the type of economic reification gross domestic profit (GDP) represents as the sole economic driver of a country. Hay expands growthmanship as the notion that "bigger, faster, more is better." It presents economic growth as the only means to securing economic stability and acts as separate determinant for all

other social relations, however, what is hidden is its complex and dysfunctional effects. Hay cites the Oxfam report as showing that

> during the 2020-2022 period, while global debt escalated and the impacts were felt amongst the world's poorest, the world's ten richest individuals saw their wealth increase by over $540 billion. According to the report, should these ten men lose 99.999 percent of their wealth tomorrow, they would nonetheless still control more wealth than 99 percent of all the people on the planet (Hay 2024: 104).

Similar to the logic of Hay's growthmanship, generative artificial intelligence (GAI) is presented as progressive, inevitable and better than and for humans, leaving us to ponder existential issues. Less visible from this discourse is the effect on the commons such as electricity, water[2], education, art and the fourth estate, journalism.

Despite the chilling title, 'Automating democracy'', Amy Ross Arguedas and Felix M. Simon (2023) discuss the effect of GAI on journalism indicating that the key is for regulators to act on important technical, ethical and legal challenges on individual and national sovereignty. They argue that in the developing world, regulators need to pay particular attention to counter balancing bias, infringements of personal data and other products, the reduction of democratic dialogue to echo chambers and a general erosion of public trust in newsrooms.

The argument for stronger regulation to offset digital automation is well made; however, Mosco's observation of a handful of companies shaping US communications has since shifted to a handful of companies shaping communication systems around the world. Michael Hartnett (quoted by Welsh 2024) observed the impact and dominance of seven companies and coined the name 'the magnificent seven', representing an oligopolistic digital infrastructure. The magnificent seven are Apple, Amazon, Alphabet (Googles parent company), Meta, Microsoft, Nvidia and Tesla. Regulating against the magnificent seven may prove tricky when their revenue ranges from one and a half trillion to five trillion (exceeding most developing countries); as such, these companies can influence consumer behaviour and economic trends (Welsh 2024).

2 See Lo for a deeper understanding of how to calculate the water cost in relation to one's personal generative AI footprint (2025).

Rare earth elements, central to smart phones, electric vehicles and servers for GAI, are increasingly in demand by communication and technology companies. China holds the majority stake in rare earth production, and other countries like Vietnam, Brazil, US, Russia and India hold smaller reserves, while South African and Tanzania together hold 2% of global rare earth reserves (Boafo, Spencer and Dotsey 2025). Other metals which are significant to GAI and communication infrastructures are cobalt, nickel, copper and lithium. "Almost three-quarters of the global cobalt output is produced in the Democratic Republic of Congo" (Boafo, Spencer and Dotsey 2025).

In the unrelenting velocity of GAI, a less explored issue is that of sustainable, fair and peaceful mining of rare earth elements and significant metals, particularly in the developing world context which is sometimes unsettled by protracted conflict and instability. Mining these elements and metals can become extractive and reinforce existing power imbalances. Boafo, Spencer and Dotsey (2025) state that "Africa holds about 30% of the world's critical mineral deposits [...] [this] underscores the urgency of governance reforms and regional cooperation to transform mineral wealth into sustainable prosperity, avoiding another 'resource curse'." The US has recently brokered a "minerals for peace" deal between the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Rwanda. Hanri Mostert and Tracy-Lynn Field (2025) indicate that "despite its immense mineral wealth, the DRC is among the five poorest countries in the world." The peace deal which exchanges Washington's military oversight in the area for the DRCs mineral supply to the US may bring stability to the region but Mostert and Field (2025) argue that based on past research, this is unlikely.

Mosco's analysis of communication industries showed that structure mutually constitutes constraints and agency in enabling resources. Two recent examples are relevant in the context of preserving artistic works and news as digital commons. Author Zakes Mda was one of the writers who won the "landmark $1.5bn settlement reached between artificial intelligence company Anthropic (Claude) and a group of authors whose books were allegedly used without permission to train AI systems [by] downloading copyrighted books from online pirate sites [...] to train its large language models" (Mashamaite 2025).

The second example refers to Competition Commission's report on Google's monopoly position and South African news organisations. The Commission reported that:

> there has not been an equitable share of value between Google and news publishers in South Africa both historically and currently [...] the Google algorithm distorts competition between news media organizations insofar as it: a) over-represents global news media in SA for search and Top stories, b) under-represents vernacular and community media, and c) over-represents subscription publishers" (MDPMI 2025: 3).

As a result of the Commission's findings Google and YouTube agreed to pay R688 million to South African news media (Ryan 2025).

The two examples indicate the possibility of agency against dominant and constraining structures – however, both involve the mobilization of legal, regulatory avenues. The amount was negotiated as a voluntary settlement rather than a fine and the revenue will not go directly to the news organisations who created the content that was scraped by Google but government organisations dealing with media development and diversity (Ryan 2025).

This special edition on 'Critical theory, digital media and the future of democracy' focuses on the complex tensions and opportunities that can emerge with the intersections of digital culture, power relations, and the material reality. These analyses are categorised within three interrelated themes:

- Media industries and digital culture
- Media, conflict and democracy
- Media, the built environment and nature/ natural world

Media industries and digital cultures

This section of the special edition brings together the contributions of Mylonas, Shaer, Swer, Moodley, and Timmer, each addressing a different dimension of either popular media or digital culture. Their analyses converge on a central insight: contemporary media environments do not merely circulate cultural content; they actively configure the perceptual, affective, and interpretive structures through which individuals experience the social world. Opportunities for expression and participation now unfold within systems characterised by commodification, algorithmic governance, and an intensified shaping of subjectivity. Collectively, these articles illuminate how contemporary media and digitality reframe cultural life, offering moments of critique while simultaneously constraining its transformative potential. Across these articles, a

coherent picture emerges: contemporary media reorganises cultural experience by shaping how individuals perceive, interpret, and express themselves. Rather than functioning as neutral intermediaries, these media platforms actively negotiate the formation of meaning, the rhythms of attention, and the possibilities of subjectivity. This collection underscores the need for sustained critical engagement with the technological and economic logics that increasingly define the contours – and the limits – of cultural agency in the digital age.

Building upon and Horkheimer, Benjamin, Agamben, and Mbembe, Yiannis Mylonas in 'Class context in popular drama and horror' examines how films such as *Parasite*, *Joker*, *Squid Game*, and *The Menu* translate late-capitalist crises into compelling visual and narrative forms. These works reveal class antagonism through spectacles of biopolitical regulation, precarity, and necropolitical exposure, while media industries convert these crises into globally consumable aesthetic products. In this process, popular culture becomes a site where structural violence is simultaneously exposed and neutralised; i.e. rendered visible enough to resonate, but stylistically contained so as to circulate without disrupting existing power structures.

In 'Participatory truth between Adorno's negativity and Gadamer's play: digital media, the culture industry, and Kantian aesthetic consciousness', in dialogue with Adorno, Gadamer, Kant, Han, and Horkheimer, William Shaer explores how digital infrastructures transform the conditions required for aesthetic experience. Algorithmic curation, accelerated consumption, and the erosion of contemplative modes of engagement undermine the interpretive openness central to both Adornian autonomy and Gadamerian play. Digital platforms privilege immediacy, novelty, and personalisation, fragmenting aesthetic experience and narrowing the horizon of critical reflection. What emerges is a cultural landscape in which interpretation is increasingly guided by automated systems, diminishing the potential for sustained, reflective encounter.

In 'Frankfurt School – The musical!: *Shock Treatment* and the Eros of online civilization', drawing upon Adorno and Horkheimer, Marcuse, Lukács, and Fromm, Gregroy Morgan Swer reinterprets the cult film, *Shock Treatment*, as an early commentary on 'prosumer culture'. The film's vision of everyday life as continuous performance anticipates contemporary platforms where self-expression becomes a form of commodified labour. Prosumerism collapses

authenticity into spectacle, positioning individuals as both producers and products within visibility-driven economies. Through this theoretical framing, Swer illustrates how digital capitalism internalises critique by reconfiguring agency into performance, binding subjectivity to the imperatives of circulation and marketability.

Utilising the insights of Adorno, Benjamin, and Horkheimer, Tamia Sadé Moodley in 'Teas, symphonies, and the culture industry: unpacking *Bridgerton*'s musical legacy' analyses Bridgerton's orchestral pop covers as emblematic of the broader algorithmic governance of musical culture. Streaming platforms refine the culture industry's mechanisms by engineering predictable affective responses and reinforcing familiar patterns of listening. Through computational curation and data-driven design, musical experience becomes increasingly structured around optimisation and retention. Moodley highlights how this environment blurs the line between aesthetic pleasure and algorithmic control, producing a listening culture shaped as much by platform logic as by artistic intention.

Informed by Adorno and Horkheimer, Marcuse, and feminist theorists such as Power, Bennett, Pierce and Sandall, in 'The problem with rebellious hyper-femininity: an analysis of social media's undermining of hyper-femininity as subversive praxis' Kayleigh Timmer examines the politics of hyper-femininity in digital culture. Although framed as a form of reclamation or resistance, hyper-femininity is quickly absorbed into cycles of trend-based consumption and algorithmic visibility. This aesthetic of subversion becomes a marketable persona, its critical potential diluted by the demands of replication and circulation. Timmer's analysis reveals how digital capitalism transforms resistant identities into consumable performances, reinforcing the structural dynamics it ostensibly challenges.

Media, conflict and democracy

The next theme relates to the contemporary media environment, and how it articulates global conflicts and societal trauma. These considerations engage directly with the concerns of Critical Theory, particularly as digital technologies and contemporary media environments, political formations, and psychosocial dynamics shape the production of meaning, engender conflict, and call into question democratic possibility in the contemporary context.

Anthony Collins and Ahmad Jamal's analysis of discursive constructions of violence in Gaza in 'Say no genocide': discursive constructions of violence and subject positions around Gaza' demonstrates how digital technologies mediate contested narratives, produce incompatible subject positions, and draw on deep historical traumas to sustain polarized interpretations of unfolding events that render the conflict intractable. They note that competing digital accounts do not merely gather together different forms of information but are rather shaped by technological systems, and the pre-existence of already established narratives, as part of deeper historical processes. Affect is imbued in these technologies through both systems of power and intergenerational trauma. Collins and Jamal's comparative discussion of the Christchurch attacks and Gaza, and the analysis of DARVO as a framing mechanism serve to explicate how these debates are structured through digital and public discourse. They engage with relevant literature across genocide studies, postcolonial critique, and discourse theory, thereby providing historical context and nuanced discussion regarding the emergence of Zionism as a hegemonic ideology amongst the Jewish people. Their suggestion is to 'say no to genocide', which implies the resistance to the current genocide in Gaza, resistance against a recurrence of the Holocaust, and endeavors to denounce the use of the term 'genocide' in relation to Palestine.

In 'The nomadic war machine of Gabor Maté's Compassionate Inquiry', Adrian Konik's examination of Gabor Maté's "Compassionate Inquiry" articulates a nomadic, minoritarian response to trauma that challenges dominant state and market logics while highlighting how unresolved trauma constrains democratic agency. Konik's discussion of Gabor Maté is refracted as a Deleuzian nomadic war machine in relation not just to individual recovery, but also to society and to politics. Deploying both Gabor Maté's published/online works, along with Maurizio and Zaya Benazzo's documentary film *The Wisdom of Trauma* (2021), the author posits an avenue for dealing with trauma as resultant from the State Apparatus's majoritarian channeling of particular desires for profit. This analysis rhizomatically links Foucault's disciplinary/bio-power society, Gilles Deleuze's societies of control, and early minoritarian vectors of healing (through Jean-Martin Charcot and Francine Shapiro). Such considerations are crucial to ensure the effective functioning of democracy, since the persistence of trauma as resultant from the State Apparatus suppresses political agency.

And in their second contribution, 'Propaganda, the public spheres, and the new economic conditions of the digital age', Jamal and Collins trace how the economic conditions of the digital age transform the public sphere through

algorithmic sorting, fragmentation, and the circulation of propagandistic content. The impact of surveillance capital remains a major problem, particularly in terms of algorithmic insularity and antagonism, the breakdown of public discourse into echo chambers and filter bubbles, the evasion of scrutiny by algorithms that provide particularized information to individuals, engagement farming through inflammatory misinformation, increased and selective exposure to conspiracy and mythology through user funneling, and the generation of inflammatory content by bots and troll farms. These phenomena pose clear threats to civil order and democratic processes, which the authors strive to address by means of Habermas's model of the public sphere and communicative rationality.

Media, the built environment, and the natural world

This final group of papers focuses on our environment, the natural and the built. They consider questions about how digital media can be used to address injustices, such as through digital activism or fostering the recognition of the marginalised, and how the spaces in which we live can come to be oppressive. Thus, this group of papers seeks to identify sources of oppression and injustice, and to address the sources of oppression or injustice identified, providing solutions, strategies, or analytical frameworks which serve a normative function.

In the first of these papers, 'The loss of environmental knowledge: digital platforms and indigenous games in southern Africa', Elsie Bokaba explores how the voices of elderly African women, *uMakhulu*, have been marginalised and the wealth of culture and environmental knowledge they hold ignored. This, Bokaba argues, is especially the case in digital spaces. Bokaba contributes to the ongoing global discourse exploring the possibilities of utilizing digital platforms for the fostering of the inclusion and recognition of indigenous communities and knowledge, posing the novel suggestion that one way of achieving such inclusion and recognition is through integrating traditional games into digital landscapes. The digitization and therefore amplification of these games would not only involve the demarginalization of the epistemes of *uMakhulu* but also position them as holders of credible ecological knowledge. Bokaba thus considers the possibilities digital media holds for decolonial work, in particular the amplification and protection of indigenous knowledge and those who bear it and for the imparting of eco-values.

In her paper 'Considering socio-ecological digital activism through a Fuchsean lens', Inge Konik explores another facet of digital media's potential for facilitating resistance against injustice. Konik considers in particular Christian Fuchs argument that the digital commons poses a site for digital resistance against authoritarian capitalism. Konik thus demonstrates the extent to which Fuchs' theorizing on the digital commons, digital public sphere and digital resistance is applicable to the challenges faced by activists in the South, addressing its limitations by supplementing his theorizations with those of theorists such as Michael Kwet and Nanjala Nyabola. She brings these arguments into conversation with the digital activism of the environmental conservation and human rights organisation Environmental Defenders (or ED), reflecting on the constraints on and potential in the ED's digital work. Konik thus highlights the potential of digital media for socio-ecological activism, like Bokaba exploring the possibilities digital media holds for action against oppression and injustice and for working towards the preservation of the natural world.

Finally, the last paper in this special issue shifts the focus from the natural to the built environment. In 'A Benjaminian analysis of the built environment: toward a Critical Theory of architecture' Nathisvaran Govender and Cate Otto develop a Critical Theory of architecture through the work of the theorist Walter Benjamin, which allows for the analysis of oppressive architectural objects and built environments. They develop their critique through the assertion that architectural objects function both as a 'cultural sign', emanating from and reflecting the culture of their context, and a 'material presence' involving the architectural object's form and function, both overt and covert. Govender and Otto argue that it is when these characteristics of an architectural object contradict each other and come into conflict that the architectural object becomes oppressive. Govender and Otto then demonstrate the practical, normative function of their Critical Theory of architecture, applying it to the Mangaung Intermodal Transport Facility (MITF) in Bloemfontein, South Africa, an architectural object which they argue exemplifies much of South Africa's public infrastructure. Through this application of their Critical Theory of architecture, Govender and Otto thus show the practical benefits of their theory for analyzing architectural objects and identifying often ignored sources of oppression.

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