

## The 4th ICTs and Society Conference

*Critique, Democracy and Philosophy in 21st Century Information Society.  
Towards Critical Theories of Social Media*

Department of Informatics and Media, Uppsala University, May 2-4, 2012

Christian Fuchs

The main task of the conference *Critique, Democracy and Philosophy in 21st Century Information Society. Towards Critical Theories of Social Media* was to provide an opportunity to discuss and reflect on the role of critique, critical theory, and philosophy in the information society and in relation to the Internet and social media. In the conference opening session, I stressed the importance of being critical today and of conducting critical analyses and scholarship of media and communication in a global society that is shaped by crisis. The conference focused on discussing questions such as the following ones:

- What are the meanings and roles of critique and critical theory today?
- What are the conditions of critique today?
- What does it mean to study media and communication critically today?
- What does it mean to study digital media and the Internet critically today?
- In what society do we live today and what is the role of information in it?
- What is the role of crisis, capitalism, power, struggles, and democracy in contemporary society and how are they connected to digital media?
- What kind of theories and what philosophies do we need for understanding all of these phenomena?
- How can we bring about a just society?

The ICTs & Society Network (<http://www.icts-and-society.net>) was founded in 2008. It is an international group of scholars that focuses on fostering discussions and networking of people who conduct research about the role of ICTs and the Internet in the information society. The first conference took place in June 2008 at the University of Salzburg (Austria), the second one in June 2009 at the University of Trento (Italy), the third one in July 2009 at the Internet Interdisciplinary Institute of the Open University of Catalonia in Barcelona. In 2012, the ICTs and Society Conference was held in Sweden at Uppsala University, where the Department of Informatics and Media acted as host and main organizer. It was thus far the largest of the four conferences: There were approximately

170 attendees, 100 talks in parallel sessions, and 15 keynote talks in 7 plenary sessions. A generous funding of the event by Vetenskapsrådet – The Swedish Research Council, enabled the invitation of the keynote speakers. Besides Uppsala University and the ICTs and Society Network, also scholars from the following institutions were involved in the organisation of the conference: the European Sociological Association’s Research Network 18: Sociology of Communications and Media Research, tripleC – Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society, the Unified Theory of Information Research Group (Austria), Aarhus University’s Department of Information and Media Studies (Denmark), the Vienna University of Technology’s Institute for Design & Assessment of Technology (Austria), and Jönköping University’s School of Education and Communication (Sweden).

## **The Uppsala Conference**

The opening plenary “Marx is Back: The Importance of Being Critical in Media and Communication Studies Today” was chaired by *Janet Wasko* (University of Oregon, USA). *Vincent Mosco* (Queen’s University, Canada) focused on the critical and Marxist study of labour, media, and communication today. He pointed out the return of the interest in Marx and the importance of Marx as a) political economist, b) cultural theorist, c) journalist, and d) of Marx’s work “The Grundrisse” for critically understanding media and communication today. He showed that numerous scholars contribute to Marxist studies of media and communication today. The central question would not be what the next big technology would be, but rather if knowledge workers of the world will unite. Convergence would not only be a process at the level of technology, organizations, and the labour process, there would rather also be trade union convergence that could potentially strengthen the labour side in class struggles. Vincent Mosco showed examples for trade union convergence in communication industries in Western countries, China, and India. The crucial question would be: Will knowledge workers of the world unite democratically and for democracy?

In the second talk of the opening plenary, *Graham Murdock* (Loughborough University, UK) analysed consumption, ideology, and exploitation in the time of digital commodities. Commons would be material and imaginative spaces, common resources, relations and rights. The enclosure of the commons would involve privatization, exclusion and expulsion. It would be a historical process that today also affects digital media. In addition, the promotional complex would have enclosed everyday life. Exploitation would be a structural category defined by asymmetric exchange that today also affects web 2.0 prosumers, whose time, attention, personal data, talent/skills, education/training and materials are exploited. Given exploitation’s structural character, it would also be exploitation if people like being exploited (as e.g. in the context of “digital labour” on Facebook). Alongside the commodification and commercialization of culture, digital gift economies and revived public institutions would have emerged. There would be three forms of the media economy that are based on commodities, public good and gifts.

Further plenary sessions of the conference focused on “Towards a Global Sustainable Information Society: Information Society and Digital Media Ethics Today” (Gunilla Bradley, Wolfgang Hofkirchner, Charles Ess), “Social Media, Democracy and Politics in the Information Society” (Christian Christensen, Peter Dahlgren), “Karl.Marx@

Internet.com: Cybermarxism and the Critique of the Political Economy of the Internet and Social Media“ (Christian Fuchs, Nick Dyer-Witheford), “Feminism and the Political Economy of News and Knowledge Work in the Information Age” (Margareta Melin, Catherine McKercher), “The Internet Today: Prosumer Participation and/or the Alienation & Exploitation of Play Labour (Playbour)?“ (Tobias Olsson, Trebor Scholz), “The Internet and Critical Theory Today” (Mark Andrejevic, Andrew Feenberg).

Parallel sessions that featured a total of 96 talks were organised on the following topics.

- Tales and Theories of Commodification and Ideology: Informational Capitalism and Capitalist Media Today
- A Thousand Foucaults? A Thousand Deleuzes? Foucauldian and Deleuzian Perspectives on Social Media and Technology
- Digital Culture and the Digital Everyday: Whole Way of Life. Whole Way of Struggles?
- Facebook: Tool of Democracy? Tool of Protest? Tool of Surveillance? Diaspora: Tool of Ideology? Tool of Communism?
- The Antagonistic Lives of Knowledge Workers: Creativity, Precarity, Exploitation and Resistance
- Rise or Demise of the Public? The Public Sphere, Regulation, and Governance in the Media Age
- Surveillance 2.0? Commodification, Policification, and Discrimination in the “Surveillance Society”
- Democracy 2.0? Political Theories of the Internet
- Feminism 2.0? Gender and Family in the Age of Technoculture
- Reloading Karl Marx? Exploitation, Alienation, and Commodification in the Age of the Internet
- Philosophy and Ethics of Information: The Good and the Evil in the Information Society
- The Sociology and Political Economy of Consumption, Prosumption and Mobile Lifestyles
- Towards a Critical Theory of Social Media: The Dialectics of Empowerment and Disempowerment
- The Media – Alternatives and Commons: Towards a New Communism?
- Reason and Revolution Today: The Media in The Arab Spring, the Occupy Movement, and Beyond

Overall, the conference presentations showed a strong interest in Critical Media and Communication Studies, a profound engagement with philosophy, critical theory, and social theory, and an interest in the critical study of media, communication and digital media in the context of society, capitalism, and domination. Many conference partici-

pants pointed out the large presence of PhD students and younger scholars coming from various countries, who are conducting critical studies of media and communication and are inspired by and engaging with critical social theory and critical political economy. There was a diverse range of critical theories and critical philosophies that were employed in the presentations. A significant observation is that there was a large presence of political economy and Karl Marx's works in the presentations. The conference showed that there is a significant interest in Critical Media and Communication Studies as well as Critical Theory and Critical Political Economy of media, communication, ICTs, culture and the information society.

*Gunilla Bradley* (KTH, Sweden) focused in her plenary talk on foundations of Social Informatics and ICT ethics. She pointed out foundations of convergences that shape contemporary society: the convergence of computers, media, and telecommunications that forms ICTs, the convergence of the public, the home, and work that forms a life environment, the convergence of values, labour/markets, and technology that forms globalization, and the convergence of private roles, public roles, and professional roles that forms life roles. These structural changes form the foundations of the information society. Developments such as global war and crisis would today threaten the information society so that it is important to uphold the vision of a good information and communication society.

*Wolfgang Hofkirchner* (Vienna University of Technology, Austria) analysed potentials and risks for establishing a global sustainable information society. He distinguished three types of commons: common property in the economic-political system, common decisions in the political-cultural system, common values in the cultural system. The commons would be threatened by crises that advance particularism and fragmentation, fundamentalisms, authoritarian rule, financialization, the unequal distribution of wealth, the colonization of body and nature, the military-industrial complex, big businesses, and meaningless technologies. Social media would have ambiguous impacts on society. The greatest ambiguity would today be the one of the enclosure of the commons and movement for the reclaiming of the commons. Society would be in a great bifurcation, in which the outcome and future of society is undetermined, and that reactualizes the choice situation between barbarism and socialism.

*Charles Ess* (Aarhus University, Denmark) discussed digital media ethics and philosophy in 21st century information society. He pointed out that in the West there are developments away from privacy as individual entity towards group privacy, a movement from private property to collective property (e.g. open source, FLOSS, Pirate Bay), and from the individual self towards the relational self. In the East, there would be opposite tendencies. Digital media would enhance the emergence of hybridization that also affects the self so that an emotional-relational self would have emerged. Commodification would threaten privacy, autonomy, dissent, and freedom. In this situation, critical thinking and digital media ethics would be of high relevance.

*Christian Christensen* (Uppsala University, Sweden) analysed the role of WikiLeaks in contemporary society, especially the role of transparency and its relation to the mainstream media. He argued that WikiLeaks was facing the choice between spreading its leaks via alternative media and thereby facing the problem of elite access and via mainstream media, which pose a censorship risk. WikiLeaks would be about making power transparent and would have mainstreamed transparency. Slavoj Žižek

would have overestimated the power of WikiLeaks and underestimate the power of cooptation.

*Peter Dahlgren* (Lund University, Sweden) discussed social media and the civic sphere in the context of crisis, critique and the future of democracy. He argued that there are both optimistic and pessimistic views on the role of the Internet and society. Excessive pessimism should be avoided. Besides Marx's concept of critique, there would also be the one of Kant that focuses on epistemological critique and questions like: What do we know? How do we know? What can we know? Such a form of epistemological criticism would highlight discrepancies. Dahlgren argued that critique would have lost its punch today due to the decline of the left and the rise of neoliberalism. There would be a return of critique today without a central focus on class. The battles between culturalists and political economists in the 1990s would have been unproductive. One should avoid excessive inner-academic battles and focus on the complementarities of left scholarship. One would need less critique and more creative ways to engender hope, including the creation of sites of political participation.

*Nick Dyer-Witford* (Western University, Canada) analysed Cybermarxism and cycles and circuits of struggle in 21st century capitalism. He argued that we are witnessing the emergence of a global *Gesamtarbeiter* (collective worker) – *Weltgesamtarbeiter*. There would today be a transnational commodity chain with precarious, feminized and migratory labour at its core. ICTs would tie together the global worker and the global commodity chain. Digital media would have been a condition of possibility of the current global crisis. The four wheels of struggle would be North American and European struggles against austerity measures, the Arab spring, struggles of Chinese migrant workers and peasant struggles in Latin America. Today's activism would involve people, who make use of digital media in their everyday lives. Social media would be a commodification apparatus, but also enable free association and digital activism. Chaos tendencies would today include high relative immiseration, geo-political conflicts and the ecological crisis. The question of our age would be if these crises could be overcome by establishing a new society. Students would play an important role in contemporary struggles. The task for critical academics would be to defend and deepen spaces for the critical analysis of the media and society.

*Christian Fuchs*' (Uppsala University, Sweden) topic was the critique of the political economy of social media and informational capitalism. He pointed out complementarities between Frankfurt School Critical Theory and Critique of the Political Economy of the Media. It would be a prejudice that both approaches are pessimistic and neglect agency and subjectivity. Contemporary society would be among other things an information society on the level of the productive forces and capitalistic on the level of the relations of production. Both Manuel Castells' and Henry Jenkins' approaches would lack the capacity to analyse the Internet and the information society critically. Digital labour would involve three elements: ideological user coercion, alienation of ownership and control, expropriation of value. Unpaid digital labour would be a manifestation of the emergence of a social factory and factory planet. The play labour of Internet prosumers would be based on the super-exploitation and enslavement of workers in developing countries. The notion of the participatory web would be an ideology. Revolutions would not be made on Twitter or Facebook, these would rather be tools for rebellions that emerge from and question actual power relations

and materialize themselves in spaces like Tahrir Square, Syntagma Square, Puerta del Sol, Plaça Catalunya, or Zuccotti Park. Needed would be an alternative Internet that can only be established by struggles for the strengthening of the commons.

*Margareta Melin* (Malmö University, Sweden) gave attention to the re-negotiation of journalistic work and strategies of resistance against precariousness and discrimination such as e.g. the strategy of flight as fight. She stressed the existence of struggles over symbolic power, in which the white, protestant, male elite would try to defend its hegemony of the newsrooms fiercely. Men that have various strategies to defend their hegemony would dominate journalism and online journalism. Women in journalism would have developed various strategies to react to this situation: the imitation of male strategies, freelance journalism in order to better integrate the professional and private role, the creation of separate feminist journalistic spaces and projects, and the appropriation of new media for struggles. Feminist resistance could make use of new media (such as blogs) in a playful way in order to constitute the strategy of flight as fight.

*Catherine McKercher* (Carleton University, Canada) presented foundations and results of a feminist political economy of labour and communication in precarious times that feature precarious work conditions. She pointed out that although most journalism students are female, men dominate newsrooms, especially in leading positions. But what happens with the other female students of journalism? Many of them would be freelancers and precarious workers. Precarious labour in journalism would be based on piecework and piece-wages. There would be a pressure to work for free, e.g. in the form of unpaid internships that last longer than in former times. Women would conduct three quarters of all unpaid internships. News media would use social media like Twitter and user-generated content for obtaining content without payment. Examples are CNN iReporter and the Huffington Post. The notion of participatory journalism would be exposed as ideology by the exploitation of unpaid workers. Resistance would be necessary and include boycotts, protests, unionization of freelancers, or lawsuits.

*Tobias Olsson* (Jönköping University, Sweden) analysed the “architecture of participation” of social media and whom it benefits. He first pointed out that and why web 2.0 constitutes an architecture of participation and that it is unclear who benefits from it. It could either be an architecture of participation for corporations, for consumers/prosumers or for citizens. A very common claim would be that social media allow customers to participate and result in a more democratic economy. The three different positions would be hard to combine. More empirical research would be needed about participation on social media. Tobias Olsson presented research results about Swedish social media platforms and analyzed which forms of participation they employ. He concluded that corporate models are more frequent, whereas consumer- and citizen-oriented models would occur sometimes.

*Trebor Scholz* (The New School, USA) focused on the analysis of the Internet as playground and factory. He argued that digital labour does not feel like labour, but the fact that Facebook has a market value of almost 100 billion US\$ would show that it is based on the expropriation of value created by play workers. There would be various forms of digital labour: waged, unwaged, emotional, co-innovative, no collar, public-spirited, data provision, geo-spatial, gamefied, affective, mobile. Commercial-, peer- and governmental surveillance would constitute the violence of participation. Political

strategies against the expropriation of digital labour would be technical (promote data portability), legal (expand labour legislation to the Internet), social (unionization, hacking, jail breaking, decentralization), or education-based.

*Mark Andrejevic* (University of Queensland, Australia) analysed the uses of exploitation, the digital enclosure and the personal information economy. He argued that the contemporary Internet is characterized by the digital enclosure, a process in which users are separated from the ownership of their data so that a privatization takes place. Surveillance would be at the heart of the digital enclosure. The arising problems would however not simply be about privacy or targeted advertising, but exploitation. A survey among Australians showed that the more targeted ads are, the less people agree to be tracked and profiled. Exploitation would be a crucial concept for the analysis of corporate social media. The concept of exploitation would be important because a) it analyses how seemingly freely agreed upon wage labour is structured by coercion, b) it points towards forms of separation, c) it allows an ethical critique of coercion, the capture of value and alienation. The use of the exploitation concept for the analysis of social media would be linked to the engagement with Marx.

In the concluding plenary talk, *Andrew Feenberg* (Simon Fraser University, Canada) discussed how to philosophically think about the Internet as well as the role of the political strategies of the great refusal and the long march in Internet politics. He first made four observations about how Marx thought of technology:

- a. Marx was a social constructivist who saw science and technology as the outcomes of societal developments.
- b. Technology is a concrete object that is a unity of diverse elements.
- c. The appropriation of the productive forces enables the enhancement of individual capacities.
- d. Technologies (and other phenomena) have basic functions that take on certain meanings in certain cultural and economic circumstances.

The Internet would have antagonistic technical codes. One of it would be the Internet as consumption model that is based on non-hierarchical markets, broadcasting for delivery, data storage for data mining and online community as data source. Another one would be the Internet as community model, which is based on non-hierarchical communication, anonymity, broadcasting for mobilization, data storage for history and online communities. These two models would contradict each other. Andrew Feenberg asked Herbert Marcuse's question about political strategy: Should there be a great refusal or the long march through the institutions in order to defend and enhance the Internet community model?

## **Administrative and Critical Research**

In an article published in the *Nordicom Review Jubilee Issue*, Ulla Carlsson (2007) describes the development that media and communication research today "tends to be more administrative, and short-term perspectives prevail at the expense of the long-term accumulation of knowledge. Too little time is devoted to academic debate and critique; there is no 'career value' in such undertakings. The leeway for independence and the freedom to utter unpleasant truths have diminished – perhaps not formally, but

de facto“ (Carlsson 2007, 224). Also Kaarle Nordenstreng (2007) sees a tendency for “administrative instead of critical research“ (Nordenstreng 2007, 212). Ulla Carlsson stresses in this context the importance of critical research: “We should not lose sight of the fact that, *power, identity* and *inequality* are still concepts of vital relevance in media and communication research“ (Carlsson 2007, 228). We should not “by default leave science-based media philosophy and media criticism to others“ (Carlsson 2007, 228). Peter Golding (2005) has argued in this context for the need to rediscover the critical analysis of power and inequality: “First, it is vital we rediscover the relevance of the concepts of power, identity and inequality at the heart of our analyses. [...] Second, media research must reassert its connection to questions of values“ (Golding 2005, 541).

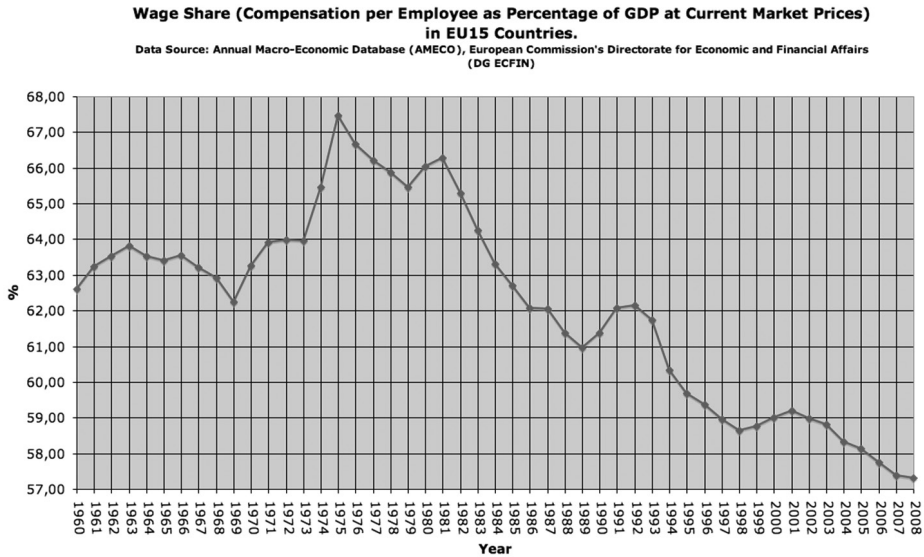
These voices remind us of the importance of being critical and conducting critical research within Media and Communication Studies. From a praxeological perspective on science, we can define Critical Media and Communication Studies as studies that focus ontologically on the analysis of media, communication, information, and culture in the context of domination, asymmetrical power relations, exploitation, oppression, and control by employing epistemologically all theoretical and/or empirical means necessary for doing so in order to contribute at the praxeological level to the establishment of a participatory democracy (Fuchs 2011).

Many societies have been undergoing vast structural changes in the past decades, including the rise of neoliberalism, a tendency towards the commodification of everything (including public education, knowledge, the commons, the media), the rise of postmodernism, a low presence and low intensity of social struggles, a conservative backlash, the precarization of work (including areas within knowledge work and the knowledge industries), etc.

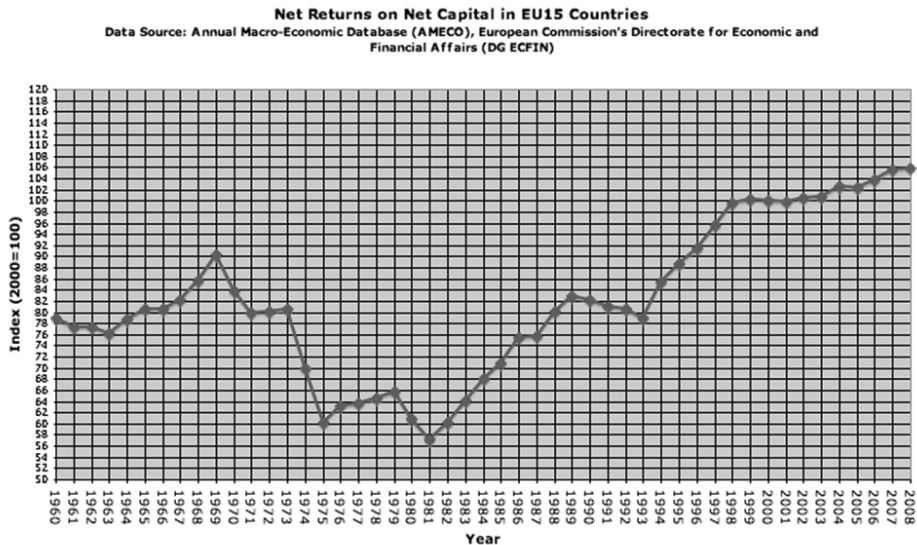
During the past four decades, a general trend can be found that economic productivity has vastly increased and that this has benefited corporate profits at the expense of wages. This development can be statistically verified by comparing the growth of productivity, the wage rate (the ratio of the national wage sum and the GDP) and total annual profits. Corporate profits have been raised by the relative decrease of wages. In the EU15 countries, productivity increased from an index value of 49.7 in 1960 to one of 104.6 in 2009 (data source: AMECO – Annual Macro-Economic Database). During the same time, total annual corporate profits increased from 100.0 billion € to 2979.8 billion € and the wage share dropped from 62.7 to 57.3 (data source: AMECO – Annual Macro-Economic Database). In the USA, productivity increased from an index value of 60.6 in 1960 to one of 105.7 in 2005 AMECO – Annual Macro-Economic Database (data source: AMECO – Annual Macro-Economic Database). During the same time, total annual corporate profits increased from 131 billion US\$ in 1960 to 3594.8 billion US\$ in 2009 and the wage share dropped from 65.3 to 60.8 (data source: AMECO – Annual Macro-Economic Database). In Japan, productivity increased from an index value of 36.4 in 1960 to one of 112.8 in 2009. During the same time total annual corporate profits increased from 6.6 billion Yen to 97.2 billion Yen and the wage share dropped from 73.2 to 58.5 (data source: AMECO – Annual Macro-Economic Database). Similar calculations can be made for other parts of the world. Figures 1 and 2 compare the decrease of the wage share to the relative increase of annual profits in the EU15 countries. This analysis again shows rising profits through a relative decrease of wages and thereby displays that the relative rise of profits was achieved by a relative decrease of wages.



**Figure 1. The development of the wage share in the EU15 countries**



**Figure 2. The development of profits in the EU15 countries**



How can these developments be theoretically interpreted? Rosa Luxemburg argued that what Marx (1867, part 8) termed primitive accumulation is a continuous process that is necessary for the existence of capitalism. She wrote: “capitalism needs non-capitalist social organisations as the setting for its development, that it proceeds by assimilating the very conditions which alone can ensure its own existence” (Luxemburg 1913/2003, 346). As a result, “capital must go all out to obtain ascendancy over [...] territories and social organizations” (Luxemburg 1913/2003, 346). David Harvey argues that various forms of continuous primitive accumulation based on colonizing spaces are needed for overcoming capitalist crises of overaccumulation. Contemporary capitalism is for Harvey based on a specific form of primitive accumulation that developed after 1970:

neo-liberal capitalism (Harvey 2005, 184, 188, 190) or “imperialism as accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey 2005, 137-182) .

Accumulation by dispossession employs four strategies for turning assets into profitable use, that is, the commodification of everything (Harvey 2005, 165ff):

1. the privatization and commodification of public assets and institutions, social welfare, knowledge, nature, cultural forms, histories and intellectual creativity (the enclosure of the commons);
2. financialization that allows the overtaking of assets by speculation, fraud, predation, and thievery;
3. the creation, management, and manipulation of crises (for example the creation of debt crises that allow the intervention of the IMF with structural adjustment programs so that new investment opportunities, deregulations, liberalizations and privatizations emerge);
4. and state redistributions which favour capital at the expense of labour (Harvey 2005, 160-165; Harvey 2006, 44-50).

In the climate of neoliberal capitalism, it has been easier and more opportune to conduct administrative research and as a consequence critical research has suffered and has definitely been institutionally weakened. In parallel to the development that society has been increasingly colonized by the instrumental logic of commodities, academia, the social sciences and humanities have been colonized by the logic of Business Studies.

## **Conclusion**

The new global crisis has shown that global capitalism has difficulties to continue to exist in the mode that it has acquired in the past decades. Accumulation by dispossession has strongly increased inequality and the finance-based regime of accumulation has coupled with the redistribution of wealth from the working class to companies and the rich increased the crisis-proneness of capitalism and resulted in a new world-economic crisis of capitalism.

New struggles and rebellions as well as attempts to introduce an even more brutal neoliberal regime have emerged. It is unclear how the future of capitalism will look like. For the social sciences, it is also unclear how their own future will look like. There are both opportunities and great risks: the opportunity to renew the critical spirit of the social sciences that has suffered under the hegemony of neoliberalism as well as the risk that the social sciences in general and critical approaches in particular will be even more cut back, structurally discriminated, and weakened due to the potential emergence of a hyperneoliberal regime of regulation.

Much will depend on how the political situation will develop in the coming years in various countries and regions of the world. In my view, the critical spirit and the interest in critical research that has guided the Uppsala conference, are signs that there is an interest in a renewal of Critical Media and Communication Studies. It is unclear, how large this potential is, if it can constitute a counter-hegemony to the hegemony of administrative research and if new opportunities for institutionalizing critical research exist and can be fostered. All we can say is that there are indicators for a certain renewed

critical potential. What we need to do next, in my opinion, is to find creative ways and projects to realize and institutionalize these potentials. This is definitely easier said than done. If those, who are interested in fostering critical research, join forces and create collective spaces for critical research, then we are definitely on the right way. The Uppsala conference was in my opinion a successful contribution to the project of renewing Critical Media and Communication Studies in times of neoliberal capitalism, global crisis, and uncertainty. Much remains to be accomplished and to be done.

## References

- Carlsson, Ulla (2007) Media and Communication Research. Past, Present and Future. Reflections from a Nordic Horizon. *Nordicom Review Jubilee Issue*: 223-229.
- Fuchs, Christian (2011) *Foundations of Critical Media and Information Studies*. New York: Routledge.
- Golding, Peter (2005) Looking Back and Looking Forward. The Risks and Prospects of a Not-so-young Field. *Gazette: The International Journal for Communication Studies* 67 (6): 539-542.
- Harvey, David (2005) *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Harvey, David (2006) *Spaces of Global Capitalism. Towards a Theory of Uneven Geographical Development*. London: Verso.
- Luxemburg, Rosa (1913/2003) *The Accumulation of Capital*. New York: Routledge.
- Marx, Karl 1867 *Capital. Volume I*. London: Penguin.
- Nordenstreng, Kaarle (2007) Discipline or Field? Soul-searching in Communication Research. *Nordicom Review Jubilee Issue*: 211-222.