Raymond Williams' Communicative Materialism

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Raymond Williams is one of the most important and influential cultural theorists. Although he wrote on communication(s), the main reception of his works is today predominantly focused on his works on literature and culture. This article therefore presents an overview of his notion of communication and asks: How does Raymond Williams conceive of communication? How can we use his communicative materialism today for understanding digital communication? Williams advanced a materialist understanding of communication. His elements of a materialist communication theory help us to illuminate communication in the context of the base/superstructure problem, and ideology as a peculiar form of instrumental communication. He provides concepts that we need for a materialist understanding of digital media. The article concludes that we need the approach of communicative materialism for grounding a Marxist theory of communication that is relevant to the analysis of digital media.

Introduction

Raymond Williams (1921–1988) is today primarily remembered as a cultural and literary theorist and as a novelist. But to what extent was he also a communication theorist and to what extent can we use his approach for understanding digital communication? This article tries to answer these questions. Digital media analysis, in general, lacks theoretical foundations. Williams' approach can be used for mitigating this circumstance and for renewing cultural studies' engagement with Marxian theory.

Jim McGuigan (2014: xv) reminds us that 'Williams's project was much broader than that of a literary scholar', and that Williams was an influential social theorist. In his often-overlooked book *Communications*, Williams (1976: 9) asks, 'What do we mean by communication?' He then draws a distinction between communications as systems and means of information communication and communication as human social process.[1] Given that Williams asks what we mean by communication, it is worthwhile asking if there are elements of a theory of communication in his works.

This essay discusses the materiality of communication, the base/superstructure problem and the notion of ideology in Williams' work. It shows that these dimensions are important for his materialist understanding of communication, and that each of them helps us to critically understand digital media.

The materialist theory of communication

Culture and communication are closely connected. Williams (2005: 243) argues that his approach of cultural materialism stresses 'the centrality of language and communication as formative social forces'. It is well known that Raymond Williams understood culture as a whole way of life. Culture includes lived culture, recorded culture and traditional culture (Williams, 1961 [2011]: 70). All three require 'characteristic forms through which members of the society communicate' (p. 62). The creation of culture requires 'communication and the making of institutions' (p. 126). For Williams (1981a: 13), culture is a signifying system, consisting of practices through which 'a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored' (Williams, 1981a: 13). This means that wherever there is culture, there is communication. When we communicate, we constitute culture. We need a theory of communication in order to have some idea of how communication relates to community, how it relates to society, what kind of communication systems we now have, what they tell us about our society, and what we can see as reasonable directors for the future. And we can only do this by theory. (Williams, 1989b: 20)

Rejecting both purely subjectivist and objectivist approaches, Williams (1976) distinguishes between communication and communications. Communication is the 'passing of ideas, information, and attitudes from person to person', and communications are 'the institutions and forms in which ideas, information, and attitudes are transmitted and received' (Williams, 1976: 9). Whereas communication is a human social process and a practice (Williams, 2014: 175), communications are systems, institutions and forms. There is a dialectic of communication and communications: Humans communicate by means of communication, whereas communications are created and re-created by human co-production and communication.

Williams (1976: 130–137) in his book *Communications* distinguishes between authoritarian, paternal, commercial and democratic organisational forms of the media (see Sparks, 1993). The first three communications systems are political, cultural and commercial expressions of instrumental reason. Authoritarian communications involve state control, manipulation and censorship of the media. The 'purpose of communication is to protect, maintain, or advance a social order based on minority power' (p. 131). Paternal communications are authoritarian communications 'with a conscience: that is to say, with values and purposes beyond the maintenance of its own power' (p. 131). In such communication systems, there is ideological control that aims to impose certain moral values on audiences. The controllers of paternal communication systems assume that specific morals are good for citizens, and that the latter are too silly to understand the world. In commercial communications, there is commercial control: 'Anything can be said, provided that you can afford to say it and that you can say it profitably' (p. 133). All three forms have an instrumental character: Authoritarian, paternal and commercial communications instrumentalise communication and turn it into a tool for control and domination.

In contrast, democratic communications are for Williams based on cooperative rationality. Such media systems are based on the freedom to speak and the free

choice of what to receive. Such communications are 'means of participation and of common discussion' (p. 134). Williams (1976, 1983b) argues for a 'cultural democracy' that combines public-service media, cultural co-operatives and local media (see also pp. 65–72). Such a democracy establishes 'new kinds of communal, cooperative and collective institutions' (Williams, 1983b: 123). The core of Williams' proposal is

that public ownership of the basic means of production [the means of communication and cultural production] should be combined with leasing their use to self-managing groups, to secure maximum variety of style and political opinion and to ensure against any bureaucratic control. (Williams, 1979: 370) The idea of public service must be detached from the idea of public monopoly, yet remain public service in the true sense. (Williams, 1976: 134)

Instrumental and co-operative media are contradictory forces. Practically speaking, one can assess the instrumental and co-operative character of a medium by asking to which degree it is based on collective control and advances critique and reflection. Only cultural forms of class struggle can drive back the capitalist colonisation of communications. Democratic communications are the dominant form of communication in a socialist society, in which 'the basic cultural skills are made widely available, and the channels of communication widened and cleared, as much as possible' (Williams, 1958 [1983]: 283).

Williams was a thorough reader and interpreter of Marx. He found particular interest in Marx's quest for an alternative to capitalism. Marx is a constant point of reference throughout Williams' oeuvre. Frequently being asked, 'You're a Marxist, Aren't You?' (Williams, 1989b: 65–76), Williams rejected the derogatory implications the question often had and criticised the lack of engagement that it brought along. He writes about how orthodox Marxists often declared that a specific position 'has nothing in common with Marxism' and how every socialist theorist was flatly 'referred to as a Communist whether or not one actually carried the party card of membership in the Communist Party' (Williams, 1989b: 65). Williams rejected both Stalinist orthodoxy and anti-Marxism, but made clear that for him Marx 'was the greatest thinker in the socialist tradition' (p. 66). He argued that his approach of Marxism was one that stressed 'the connections between a political and economic formation, a cultural and educational formation, and, […] the formations of feeling and relationship which are our immediate resources in any struggle' (p. 76). Contemporary Marxism that focuses on 'the real meanings of totality', the questioning of capitalism and domination as totalities, would be 'a movement to which I find myself belonging and to which I am glad to belong' (p. 76). Given that such an understanding guided Williams' works, it is no surprise that he, as we will see next, also related the concept of communication to Marx's theory.

Williams (2005) argues that the political transformation of society has to include communications, and that socialism entails, as Marx says, '"the production of the very form of communication", in which, with the ending of the division of labour within the mode of production itself, individuals would speak "*as* individuals," as integral human beings' (p. 57). Williams, here, refers to Marx's Feuerbach chapter in the *German Ideology*, where Marx writes in a note that conditions of human self-activity mean 'Production der Verkehrsform selbst' (Marx and Engels, 1845a: 72) – 'Production of the form of intercourse itself' (p. 91). In the *German Ideology*, Marx uses the term *Verkehrsform* for what he later termed the relations of production (*Produktionsverhältnisse*). He later spoke of Verkehr as 'Kommunikations- und Transportmittel' (Marx, 1867a, 1867b: 405) ['means of communication and transport',

(p. 506) and continued to use the term 'Produktions- und Verkehrsverhältnisse' (Marx and Engels 1845b, 91). ['relations of production and forms of intercourse', (p. 90). So Marx used the term 'forms of intercourse' and not, as Williams translates the term, the 'very form of communication'.

Marx situates the notion of *Transportmittel* at the level of the productive forces and the concept of *Verkehrsverhältnisse* at the level of the relations of production. *Transport* means the shifting of an object in space from position A to position B. *Verkehr* is more general and has three meanings: (a) transport, (b) contact/relation and (c) sexual intercourse. Marx speaks of the means of communication as part of the productive forces but uses the term *Verkehr* in a general sense as social relations in the sense of (b). So when Williams says that, for Marx, socialism means that humans produce and control the form of communication, the imprecise translation also contains two truths:

1. Socialism is a fundamental change of the productive forces, which includes changes of the means of communication;
2. Socialism changes the relations of production, that is, the social relations that are established and maintained in and through communication.

Williams' quest for an alternative society and alternative communications remains of key importance in the age of digital media: In the digital media world, what Williams in *Communications* terms commercial communications is dominant. This becomes evident when one, for example, thinks of monopoly capitalist firms such as Google (search engines), Facebook (social networks), Microsoft (operating systems) and Amazon (online shopping). Also, authoritarian communications is present on the Internet, which becomes evident when we think of Edward Snowden's revelations about online surveillance, the Chinese Internet and the way right-wing authoritarians such as Donald Trump use social media (Fuchs, 2017b, 2017a). The alternative type of communications that Williams described as having democratic potential exists on the Internet but is relatively marginal. Two well-known examples are Wikipedia and non-profit, radical open access journals and books.

The instrumental logic of society and the Internet that manifests itself as the exploitation of digital labour, domination online, and ideologies of and on the Internet is never perfect, but always prone to attack by social struggles. Such struggles are not an automatic reaction to domination, but are always a possibility. Raymond Williams' stress on alternative communications reminds us that the dominant, instrumental Internet is not an inevitable end point: that a commons-based Internet and a public-service Internet are feasible alternatives that are possible but are at the moment marginal. Williams also understood that political action is needed. He, for example, argued for 'selective and variable levels of taxation' (Williams, 1976: 164) and for taxing advertising. Today, online giants such as Google make use of tax avoidance strategies in order to maximise their profits and defend their monopolies. An online advertising tax could be a strategy aimed at forcing the online giants to pay taxes. Taxing large corporations' profits could fund a participatory media fee: In this model, the state collects corporate taxes and re-distributes a part of it to citizens via participatory budgeting to citizens, who receive annual media cheques that they are obliged to donate to non-profit Internet and media projects. Public-service media could create and operate an alternative, advertising-free YouTube that makes their programme archives available for remixing and re-use.

Williams (1977) advanced the approach of cultural materialism, especially in the book *Marxism and Literature* (Williams, 1977). Cultural materialism has an 'emphasis on production' (Williams, 1981b: 12) and is the 'analysis of all forms of signification

[…] within the actual means and conditions of their production' (Williams, 1983a: 210). Williams (1983b) argues that communication is not secondary to the forces and relations of production because 'relations between people in the society are often seen most easily by looking at the institutions of communication' (p. 22) and because 'it is through communication systems that the reality of ourselves, the reality of our society, forms and is interpreted' (p. 23). Seeing communication as material allows us to stress that the production of social relations through communication is a key feature of society.

Williams rejects the orthodox Marxist assumption that language is a reflection of material reality that lies outside of it and was created after human labour came into existence. In *Marxism and Literature*, Williams (1977) stresses that it is important to see that language is an activity (p. 20). It is material because in it, the 'physical body' produces 'agitated layers of air, sounds' (p. 29). It is a social relationship (p. 30). 'Language is in fact a special kind of material practice: that of human sociality' (p. 165). For Williams, spoken words are material because they make use of immediate human resources, whereas written words would be material because they make use of non-human resources (p. 169). Language and communication are part of that material reality, not external to it. He stresses the important influence of Valentin Vološinov's (1986 [1929]) *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* on the development of a materialist theory of language. Vološinov against reflection theory recovered 'the full emphasis on language as activity, as practical consciousness' (p. 35). 'Signification, the social creation of meanings through the use of formal signs, is then a practical material activity; it is indeed, literally, a means of production' (p. 38).

Given that all communication offers meanings of the world to others, we can also say that all social relations inherently involve communication. Communication is the process in which humans produce meaning and thereby constitute culture. Whereas communication is the social production of meanings, culture is the system in which communication takes place. Culture is the totality of social meanings and meaning-making practices that shapes, conditions, enables and constrains our everyday communication that reproduces the cultural system and its structures. Economic, political and other social systems all have their 'own signifying system – for they are always relations between conscious and communicating human beings' (Williams, 1981a: 207). And they are 'necessarily elements of a wider and more general signifying system' (p. 207). This means that culture is 'a system in itself' (p. 208). It operates intrinsic to all social systems. Culture and social systems are 'mutually constitutive' (p. 217).

In his 1978 essay *Means of Communication as Means of Production*, Williams (2005: 50–63) stresses that culture and communication are not simply ideas but also material because they require means of communication:

[M]eans of communication, from the simplest physical forms of language to the most advanced forms of communications technology, are themselves always socially and materially produced, and of course reproduced. Yet they are not only forms but means of production, since communication and its material means are intrinsic to all distinctively human forms of labour and social organization, thus constituting indispensable elements both of the productive forces and the social relations of production. (p. 50)

The means of communication are 'intrinsic, related and determined parts of the whole historical social and material process' (p. 52). Orthodox Marxist approaches exclude communications from the means of production. They associate the means of production with 'mechanical formulations of base and superstructure', in which

communication is seen as 'a second-order or second-stage process, entered into only *after* the decisive productive and social-material relationships have been established' (p. 53). One of the reasons why such a position is untenable is that communications have become important industries and play an important general role in the economy (p. 53). Means of communication have a history that is part of, but not reducible to, the history of the general means of production, to which it stands in a variable relation (Table 1).

Table 1.
William's typology of the means of communication (based on Williams, 2005: 53–63; 1981a, chapter 4).

Communication based on immediate human physical resources	Verbal communication	Spoken language, written language: poetry, songs,
	Non-verbal communication	Body language: dance, postures, gestures, facial expressions,
Communications based on non-human materials socially produces by human labour	Amplificatory communications	Megaphone, television, radio, cable and satellite television
	Durative communications (storage)	Seals, coins, medals, paintings, sculptures, carvings, woodcuts, written texts, printed texts, sound recordings, film, video, cassettes, discs
	Alternative communications	Alternative speaking, listening, seeing, recording featuring democratic communal use, self-management, autonomy, collective cultural production: e.g. community radio

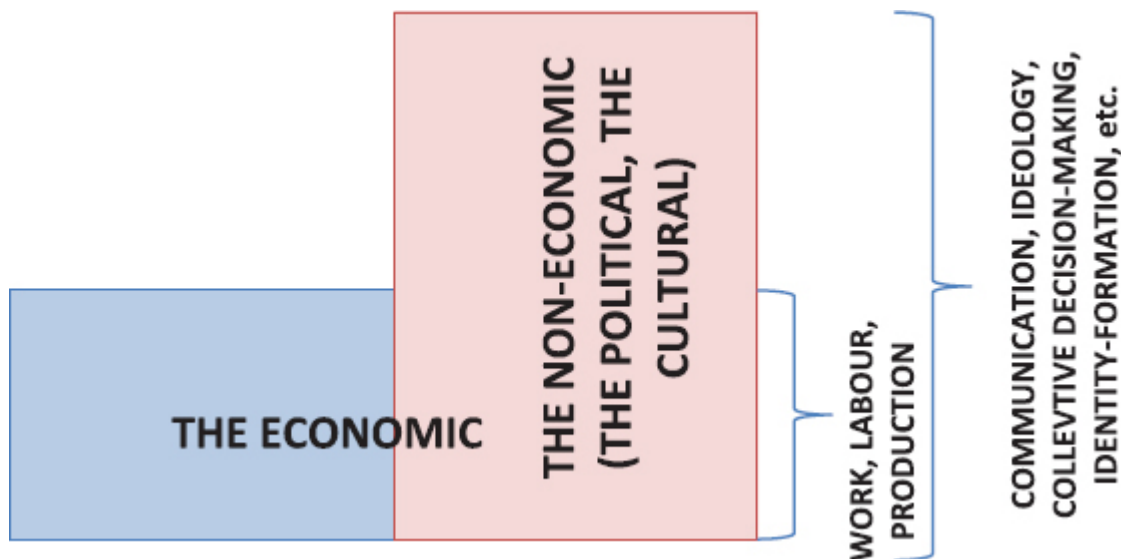Williams established a typology of the means of communication (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. The relation of the economic and the non-economic in society.

Digital media result in a convergence of these types of means of communication: The Internet is a convergent information, communication and co-operation technology, on which the various types of means of communication that Williams identifies converge. In the online realm, we can find verbal communication in the form of written text (e.g. chat rooms) or spoken text (e.g. Skype), non-verbal communication (images, memes, digital music, etc.), the amplification of reception (e.g. BBC iPlayer and file sharing), storage (e.g. Dropbox and iCloud) and alternative (non-profit and non-instrumental) communications (e.g. Wikipedia and Democracy Now!).

Williams argues that historically amplificatory and durative communications have come under the dominant class' control. In capitalism, this has resulted in concentrated and monopolised communications industries that in new ways make voice, visibility and access selective and a realm of asymmetric power. The basic problem is the expropriation and commodification of the means of communication (Williams, 1989b: 26; Williams, 2005: 62).

The discussion shows that Williams takes a materialist approach for understanding communication, and that there is an implicit theory of communication in Williams' works that can be re-constructed. Given that Williams foregrounds the material character of communication, we can characterise his approach not just as cultural materialism but also as communicative materialism. Speaking of communicative materialism implies that one has to re-visit the problem of base and superstructure.

Communicative materialism and the 'base'/'superstructure'-problem

In Marxist theory, culture, ideas, communication, information, knowledge, morals and ideologies are often described as belonging to an immaterial superstructure that is spatially built on a material, economic base and came temporally into existence after that base. The base/superstructure problem asks the question of how the economic and the non-economic are related to each other. The strength of Marxist theory is that it has the potential to make us aware of the fact that when we talk about politics and culture, we need to also think of the economy and the other way around.

In *Marxism and Literature*, Williams (1977) reviews solutions to the base/superstructure problem in Marxist theory. He argues that the term superstructure tends to be associated with institutions, forms of consciousness, political and cultural practices (p. 77). He challenges seeing culture as 'dependent, secondary, "superstructural": a realm of "mere" ideas, beliefs, arts, customs, determined by the basic material history' (p. 19). It is idealist to separate '"culture" from material social life' (p. 19). In such a separation, 'intellectual and cultural production […] appear to be "immaterial"' (Williams, 1989c: 205). According to Williams (1977), many Marxist approaches separate base (the mode of production) and superstructure either temporally ('first material production, then consciousness, then politics and culture') or spatially (various levels and layers all built on the layer of the economic base; p. 78). Such approaches forget that Marx in *the German Ideology* argues 'against the separation of "areas" of thought and activity (as in the separation of consciousness from material production)' (p. 78).

One has to see the 'direct material production of "politics"' and 'the material character of the production of a cultural order' (p. 93) in order to critically understand society today as much as in Williams' days:

The social and political order which maintains a capitalist market, like the social and political struggles which created it, is necessarily a material production. From castles and palaces and churches to prisons and workhouses and schools; from weapons of war to a controlled press: any ruling class, in variable ways though always materially, produces a social and political order. These are never superstructural activities. They are the necessary material production within which an apparently self-subsistent mode of production can alone be carried on. (p. 93)

The categories used in Marxist theory for describing the relationship of base and superstructure include determination, reflection, mediation, typification (representation and illustration), homology and correspondence. All these notions

leave culture and the economy separate and are not 'materialist enough' (p. 92, 97). So Williams' criticism is that Marxist theory has too often assumed a dualism of culture and the economy, as, for example, in Habermas' theory of communication (Fuchs, 2016a). Through Williams' we are able to re-consider Marx and establish a materialist and truly dialectical theory of communication.

In *Marxism and Literature*, it also becomes evident that Williams in 1977 had changed his position on how to think of the base/superstructure problem in comparison to the 1973 *Base and Superstructure* article (Williams, 2005: 31–49) and to *Culture & Society* (Williams 1958[1983]). In the two earlier works, he ascertained the differentiation between base and superstructure and basically took a position of interactive dualist mediation, in which the two realms interact, condition and exert pressure on each other, and set each other limits. In *Marxism & Literature*, he rejects the notion of mediation and the strong and soft forms of determination as dualist and idealist. He instead argues that cultural materialism holds the position that culture and communication are material, and that they are part and not part of the economy at the same time. Figure 1 visualises the relationship of the economic and the non-economic.

The non-economic includes the political (processes of collective decision-making) and the cultural (processes of collective meaning-making). Passing laws in a parliament is a form of production. It involves human work of not just politicians but also consultants, researchers, party secretaries and officials, administrators, archivists, public relations officials, security personnel and so on. A newspaper is a cultural artefact. Its production involves journalists, editors, designers, advertising experts, web editors, social media experts, printers and so on. Both the law as a political artefact and the newspaper as a cultural artefact do not just have this economic dimension of production but have effect all over society. They are produced and used, economic and non-economic phenomena. We can learn from Williams that the materialist concept of social production explodes the base/superstructure model that separates the economic and the non-economic and interprets the political and the cultural as 'immaterial'.

What is the role of communication in the model shown in Figure 1? Communication is the social process of symbolic interaction that brings together and relates different actors in the production and use of objects (artefacts and specific social structures). In the economic production of use values (including political and cultural use values), humans communicate in order to co-ordinate the production process. In the use and application of these use values in society, they also communicate and use means of communicative production in order to make meaning of society, which means making meaning of other humans and one's relation to them.

An example: When one eats a meal prepared in a restaurant, then the process of eating is a bodily activity aimed at nourishment. If eating is organised as a dinner, then it is also an opportunity for socialising through communication, for example, with friends. And what food we choose, where we eat and go out, how we dress and so on have also a symbolic dimension that communicates something about our status, habitus, cultural distinction, reputation and so on. Food is an object that is co-produced by nature and humans. Its use produces and reproduces not just the human body but also sociality, status, reputation and power. It is thereby simultaneously economic, biological, social, cultural and political. Communication is the activity that sets food in the example and other entities, in general, as an object into the relation between humans. Given that communication is the social production

of meaning in culture and culture as system is in its process-dimension communication, cultural production operates through communication in any social system. There is a dialectic of communication and culture.

For Williams (1977), Gramsci's concept of hegemony is important for cultural materialism. Hegemony is a whole body of practices and expectations, over the whole of living: our senses and assignments of energy, our shaping perceptions of ourselves and our world. It is a lived system of meanings and values – constitutive and constituting – which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming. (p. 110)

Hegemony is culture as 'lived dominance and subordination of particular classes' (p. 110). Art, ideas, aesthetics and ideology are 'real practices, elements of whole material social process' (p. 94). Cultural production is 'social and material' (p. 138; see also Williams, 1989b, 1989c: 206):

Cultural work and activity are not […] a superstructure: not only because of the depth and thoroughness at which any cultural hegemony is lived, but because cultural tradition and practice are seen as much more than superstructural expressions – reflections, mediations, or typifications – of a formed social and economic structure. On the contrary, they are among the basic processes of the formation itself. (p. 111)

Ideas are 'elements of a hegemony', the 'whole area of lived experience' (p. 111).

Although Williams argues that hegemony is 'continually resisted' (p. 112), for Gramsci the concept predominantly has to do with the reproduction of domination in everyday life. Gramsci (1971) argues that there are 'two major superstructural "levels"' (p. 12): civil society and the state. Civil society is the realm of hegemony that 'the dominant group exercises throughout society', and that is the

'spontaneous' consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is 'historically' caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production. (p. 12)

Hegemony for Gramsci only covers what Williams (1977: 121–127) terms dominant culture and part of what he terms residual culture and selective tradition, but not what Williams terms emergent culture, by which he understands 'new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationships' that are 'substantially alternative or oppositional' (Williams, 1977, 123; see also 2005: 37–42; 1981a: 204–205).

Another concept Williams (1977) uses is 'structures of feeling', by which he refers to 'meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt', 'structures of experience', 'affective elements of consciousness and relationships' and 'thought as felt and feeling as thought' (p. 132). In *Culture & Society*, Williams (1958 [1983]) uses the term structure (in the singular) of feeling multiple times without defining it. In *The Long Revolution*, he defines the structures of feeling as 'the meanings and values which are lived in works and relationships' (Williams, 1961 [2011]: 337). Hegemony and structures of feeling are terms that Williams employs for mediations of and between society and the individual, and also between social structures and individual agency. However, just like hegemony, a structure (of feeling) cannot describe the *process* that connects individuals and society. A specific category is missing, namely the one of communication.

Whereas cognition is always ongoing in the human brain, they are only possible through and at the same time constitute the foundation of communication. We experience the world both individually and socially. Social experience conditions individual experience and vice versa. Communication is the process that organises

the relationship of individual and social experience and relates the individual to other individuals and thereby to groups, organisations, social systems, institutions, social spaces and society. Communication connects the individual to society.

Information society theories tend to advance the ideology of the immaterial. This ideology fetishises the new that it presents as radical rupture from the old. Concepts such as the post-industrial society, network society, knowledge-based society and information society therefore often imply the end of capitalism. Along with these concepts, it is regularly assumed that with the rise of the Internet, labour and production have become weightless and immaterial. Notions such as immaterial labour, cloud computing and weightless economy imply that we live in an immaterial world of communication(s).

Raymond Williams' cultural materialism is a reminder that we need to look at the conditions of production of the Internet and digital media. In 2015, the Internet consumed 8 percent of the world's global electricity production (De Decker, 2015). Given that green energy forms only account for a small share of worldwide energy generation, operating the Internet is environmentally unsustainable.

According to estimations, around 50 million tonnes of e-waste are generated per year and predictions are that within 4 years, there will be a further growth by 33 percent (Vidal, 2013; see also Maxwell and Miller, 2012). This amount of e-waste is around 7 kg per person in the world. Up to 45 percent of the total e-waste is treated informally and illegally (Rucevska et al., 2015: 4, 7). Large volumes of e-waste end up in developing countries such as Ghana, Nigeria, Cote D'Ivoire, the Republic of the Congo, China, Hong Kong, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Vietnam, where they pollute the soil and poison e-waste workers who dismantle the technologies.

Communicative materialism means critically questioning the social production of communication(s). Digital media are produced and used based on an international division of digital labour (IDDL; Fuchs, 2014, 2015). In it, we, for example, find slave workers who extract minerals under the threat of being killed and low-paid component assemblers working under harsh conditions at Foxconn in China. There are also highly paid and highly stressed software engineers at Google and other tech companies who suffer from leisure time poverty. Furthermore, we in the IDDL find low-paid Indian programmers and users who as digital workers produce value when using targeted-advertising-based platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Weibo and Twitter. There are also precarious freelancers working in the digital media industries, online crowd workers and so on.

The IDDL involves both manual and mental labour. Williams (1983a) argues that definitions of the working class as either blue-collar wage earners or broader definitions that include also white-collar wage workers exclude 'the whole diverse body of people who are not, in such terms [of earning a wage], "economically active"' (p. 159). Feminist Marxism stresses, in this context, the importance of houseworkers in the reproduction of capitalism. Today, an entire shadow economy of 'housewifised' workers, who are unpaid or precarious, has emerged. The use of targeted-advertising-based social media platforms is just one of the numerous examples of shadow labour (Lambert, 2015) and digital labour (Fuchs, 2014, 2015, 2017b)

Donald Trump's success in becoming the 45th US President displays the materiality of communication that Raymond Williams writes about. Trump shows the interwovenness of communication, politics, the economy and ideology. Trump cannot simply be explained as an economic, political or ideological phenomenon. His economy, politics and ideology are staged and communicated as a public spectacle that gives his supporters psychological opportunities for identification, which is an

expression of anger and anxiety (Fuchs, 2017a). Trump shows that communication is indeed, as Raymond Williams argued, a basic foundational and material aspect of contemporary society. Trump is also a communicative phenomenon, a phenomenon of capitalist, authoritarian, ideological, neoliberal and nationalist communication. He is 'a one-man megabrand' (Klein, 2017: 10), an economic and entertainment spectacle that has turned into a political spectacle.

For a critical theory of communication, ideology is an important category. The next section draws attention to the notion of ideology in Williams' works.

Ideology

Williams (2005: 245, 242) is sceptical of general theories of ideology because they ignore lived experience in class society. He criticises structuralism and structuralist theories of language and ideology for downplaying 'the practical encounters of people in society' (Williams, 1989a: 157) and saw Althusser's concepts of ideology and ideological state apparatuses as theoretical decline and abstractions (p. 174).

Williams did, however, dedicate *Marxism and Literature*'s fourth chapter to the concept of ideology (Williams, 1977, 55–71). He argues that there are three understandings of ideology in Marxist theory: (a) meanings and ideas; (b) a specific class or group's system of beliefs; and (c) a system of false, illusory beliefs and false consciousness (p. 55). He shows that Marx and Engels gave a polemical meaning to the term, using it for thought that neglects or ignores 'the material social process of which "consciousness" was always a part' (p. 58). The danger would be to think of ideologies as separate from and reflexes of material reality (p. 59). Marx would have stressed that ideas are themselves material products (p. 60). Thinking and imagining will always be social processes associated with physical ways 'in voices, in sounds made by instruments, in penned or printed writing, in arranged pigments on canvas or plaster, in worked marble or stone' (p. 62). Labour and social relations necessarily require imagination and language (p. 61–62).

The concept of ideology as false consciousness aims as in Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* at identifying 'truth with the idea of the proletariat' (Williams, 1977: 68). Williams does not go into any details, but says he finds Lukács' approach unconvincing (p. 68). If ideology were merely some abstract, imposed set of notions, if our social and political and cultural ideas and assumptions and habits were merely the result of specific manipulation, of a kind of overt training which might be simply ended or withdrawn, then society would be very much easier to move and to change than it in practice has ever been or is. (Williams, 2005: 37)

Ideology is lived in educational institutions, the family and so on, where the dominant culture is learned and incorporated, but there is always the potential it can also be challenged by alternative and oppositional forms that constitute an emergent culture (Williams, 2005: 39–42).

Williams (1977) points out the different uses of the term ideology in Marxism but does not give his own definition. Marxist understandings of ideology hover 'between "a system of beliefs characteristic of a certain class" and "a system of illusory beliefs – false ideas or false consciousness" – which can be contrasted with true or scientific knowledge' (p. 66). Williams (2005) is critical of two positions that characterise two opposite poles of Marxist concepts of ideology. He, on one hand, questioned left populism that considers ways of how 'the people see it' (p. 241) as automatically good, progressive and authentic. On the other hand, he disagrees with positions that show 'contempt of people' (p. 241) which assumes that 'the people' are 'simply being

betrayed or manipulated', which ignores 'the changes that were being lived into the fibres' (p. 242).

Williams did not, however, completely reject the notion of manipulation and ideology as false consciousness. Let us next look at a series of examples of how he applies the ideology concept in different contexts. He describes strategies of the *Sun, Mail* and *Express* as powerful 'manipulative methods' (Williams, 2003b: 217) supported by press concentration. We can also find other instances, where he is closer to the positions of Lukács and the Frankfurt School than he admitted.

For example, Williams (1983c: 239–256) gave a lecture about Robert Tressell's 1914 novel *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists*. Tressell's book is about the difficulties the worker Frank Owen encounters when trying to convince his fellow workers of socialism. They believe in the ideology of their masters. Williams comments that Owen thinks 'the real enemy […] are the people who soak in the daily evidence of their condition and yet remain content; who displace their dissatisfaction onto other people' (p. 252). They are 'inside the condition of the class, outside its consciousness' (p. 252), 'vulnerable not only to propaganda and the self-justifications of others who have an interest in perpetuating ignorance, but an ignorance that gets built in, inside people themselves; an ignorance that becomes their common sense' (p. 256). The strength of Tressell's book, however, is in the attitude it communicates: 'You are a prisoner, and you'll only get out of this prison if you'll admit it's a prison. And if you won't call it a prison, I will, and I'll go on calling it a prison, come what may' (p. 256). Williams' characterisation of internalised anti-socialism as 'soaking in', 'displacement', 'outside of working class consciousness', 'propaganda', 'ignorance' and 'prison' is not so far from the assumption that the workers in *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists* have and live an ideological, false consciousness.

Williams also sees advertising as an ideology in the negative sense of the term. There are many examples in his work, all still relevant. In his essay *Advertising: the Magic System*, Williams (2005) defines advertising as 'a major form of modern social communication' (p. 185) that is 'an institutionalized system of commercial information and persuasion' (p. 170). Advertising is a magical system, 'a highly organized and professional system of magical inducements and satisfactions, functionally very similar to magical systems in simpler societies, but rather strangely coexistent with a highly developed scientific technology' (p. 185). The alternative between capitalism and socialism includes a fundamental choice between 'man as consumer and man as user'. Advertising is 'a functional obscuring of this choice' (p. 186) and obscures 'the real sources of general satisfaction' (p. 189). It is 'organized fantasy' that presents corporations' decisions as 'your choice' (p. 193), a 'world of suggestion and magic' (Williams, 1983b: 71). Advertising 'permeates the whole communications system, […] its methods have been […] widely extended into public relations and politics' (Williams, 1976: 163–164). Advertising is a 'huge area of cultural production as commercial persuasion' (Williams, 1981b: 13). Advertising is selling 'both consumer goods and "a way of life"' (Williams, 2003a: 36). 'It is a way organizing and directing a consuming public, which is given real but only limited and marginal choices' (Williams, 1968: 44). Williams (2003a: chapter 4) shows in an empirical analysis that advertising-based television tends to privilege commercial content over public-service programming, and that the news on such stations tends to take on the style, form and language of advertisements.

For Williams, advertising tries to 'persuade', to 'induce', to 'obscure' and to create fantasies by appearing to operate as magic. Williams (1989b) uses the language of

ideology critique, but in *Advertising: The Magic System*, he does not speak of advertising as commodity and consumption ideology. In another essay, he says advertising is part of 'the false ideology of communications' (p. 29).

Although Williams in other places criticises ideology critique such as Lukács and the Frankfurt School, he uses the same vocabulary. He is certainly right that we cannot assume that ideology works automatically and is always accepted and reproduced. But, at the same time, ideology is not automatically resisted either. Where ideology works, it is not just communicated but also lived and experienced, and thereby internalised by consumers and citizens. There are many attempts to make ideologies work, but we only know in hindsight which ones do. In the case of advertising, commercial ideology works when consumers consciously or unconsciously have positive feelings and associations with specific ads that increase the likelihood that in particular situations they purchase and consume the advertised commodities. So critical studies of advertising must look at the whole cycle of the production, content, distribution and consumption of ads and commodities, including the ideological content, as well as the meanings and desires the consumers and advertisers associate with them. Scholars have acknowledged that Williams has anticipated the importance of the symbolic and lifestyle aspects of branding and advertising (Wharton, 2013). Williams (2005) argues that given that capitalism's structure of feeling, meanings and values gives no answer to 'problems of death, loneliness, frustration, the need for identity and respect' (p. 190), magical systems create meanings and work as an ersatz culture. Other approaches have used the term ideology instead of magical systems: Williams' approach is certainly compatible with thinking in the line of thought of the Frankfurt School.

Williams saw mainstream communication studies as ideological, instrumental, administrative and uncritical. The focus on Lasswell's formula 'Who says what how to whom with what effect?' leaves out the question 'with what purpose?' and excludes intention (Williams, 2005: 181). This general criticism of mainstream communication theory was a foundation for Williams' critique of technological determinism: In *Television*, Williams (2003a) criticises the technological determinism of McLuhan and others as an ideology – 'an ideological representation of technology as a cause' (p. 131) that is 'a self-acting force which creates new ways of life' (p. 6). He opposes this view by a dialectic of intentions and the social order, on one hand, and technology, on the other (pp. 132–138). Williams (1983b: 128–152) challenges technological optimism as much as technological pessimism as a form of technological determinism that defends established institutions against change.

When Williams (1983b) criticises Thatcherism and neoliberalism as ideologies in the early 1980s, he argues that 'a new politics of strategic advantage' (p. 244) that he termed 'Plan X' is a code for 'a neoliberal hegemony' (McGuigan, 2015: 27) and the 'neoliberal structure of feeling' (McGuigan, 2016: 23). The defining factor of Plan X is to protect capital and the political elite's advantage, it does not care about broader effects on society, and therefore is 'a willed and deliberate unknown' (Williams, 1983b: 245).

Although Williams does not define ideology, we can from his examples of tabloid news, anti-socialism, advertising, technological determinism and Thatcherism deduce a definition. Ideology is a particular form of instrumental communication. It is a communicative strategy that the ruling class uses in order to try to achieve a strategic advantage and convince and persuade others of a specific dominant interest by manipulation, displacement, ignorance, inducement, mystification, inducement, obscuration, the organisation of fantasies and desires.

Williams' discussions of ideology show that he was struggling with finding a definitive understanding of the term. He was critical of general concepts of ideology that make ideology synonymous with culture and of understanding ideology as manipulation and false consciousness. The solution to the problem of how to understand ideology is to assume that ideology is a communicative strategy that aims at legitimating dominative interests by specific communication strategies. Williams stresses that we in hindsight can understand which ideologies are successful because they have become actively lived by human subjects and associated experiences, feelings, desires, sentiments and subjectivities in everyday life.

In the world of the Internet today, we find *ideologies of the Internet* and *ideologies on the Internet*. Ideologies of the Internet are a form of public communication that fetishises instrumental control of online communication. It is instrumental communication about instrumental communications, a meta-form of communication that justifies and defends the application of instrumental reason to the Internet. Neoliberal ideologies of the Internet, for example, present the online world as a frontier for investments that will create a better world. They leave out questions of inequality, digital labour, class and exploitation. Google describing itself in its ten core principles as showing that 'democracy on the web works' because 'Google search works because it relies on the millions of individuals posting links'. Democracy is reduced to user-generated content production online and the notion of participatory online culture. Questions relating to the secrecy of Google's search algorithm, its monopoly power in the search market, users and employees' lack of control of its means and so on are not asked. Ideologies of the Internet in the context of the state justify state surveillance, censorship and control of the Internet and leave out questions of privacy and freedom of speech. Ideologies on the Internet are the expressions of fascism, racism, right-wing extremism, nationalism, classism, sexism, anti-Semitism and so on online. Right-wing ideology flourishing in many societies is also highly present online and on social media. Ideology on the Internet tends to make use of audio-visual means generated by users (such as memes, videos, images, animations and music) and tabloidisation (simplification, few words, emotionalisation, scandalisation, polarisation, banalisation, manipulation, fabrication, etc.). User-generated ideology is the phenomenon that ideology production is no longer confined to professional ideologues but is produced and reproduced by users everyday online life (Fuchs, 2016b, 2016c)

Conclusion

Raymond Williams' work contains key foundations for and elements of a materialist theory of communication. His approach can together with other social theories be used as a foundation for a critical theory of communication (Fuchs, 2016a). Williams' communicative materialism allows us to theorise communication and aspects of the communication process, such as its role in society, its various types, the dialectic of communication and communications, ideology as peculiar form of communication, the role of communication(s) in capitalism and alternative, democratic communication(s).

Stuart Hall, in his last interview, said that contemporary cultural studies often do not expand 'a Marxist tradition of critical thinking – […] and that is a real weakness' (Jhally, 2016: 338). He argues for a 'return to what cultural studies should have been about and was during the early stages' (p. 338). Williams' materialist concept of

culture is one way that can allow media and cultural studies to renew its engagement with Marx and Marxist theory. Williams engaged closely with Marx's works and established his own humanist version of a Marxist theory of society and culture that gives attention to the production and reproduction of communication as one of the foundations of the social order. Williams argues that, for Marx, materialism means that humans produce and reproduce the social and thereby society. 'By producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their material life' (Marx, 1988: 37). Williams argues that communications are such means of human subsistence. The mode of production must not be considered simply as being the reproduction of the physical existence of the individuals. Rather it is a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite form of expressing their life, a definite *mode of life* on their part. (Marx, 1988: 37)

Williams stresses that communication is the mode of production of the social and society, and the mode of social and societal life.

Stuart Hall grounded his notion of communications in Marx's theory. At the time when Hall wrote his famous *Encoding/Decoding* article in 1973, he also worked on a new reading of Marx's (1857) *Introduction to the Grundrisse*. This interpretation of Marx was published as the first essay in the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies' *Stencilled Occassional Papers-Series* (Hall, 1973a). Hall stressed the importance of Marx's dialectic of production, circulation and consumption. The *Encoding/Decoding* essay is an application of this dialectic to communications: 'Thus – to borrow Marx's terms –circulation and reception are, indeed, "moments" of the production process in television' (Hall 1973: 119). In Hall's famous visualisation of the encoding/decoding process and its description, we cannot find human beings but rather technical infrastructures, structures of production, knowledge frameworks, meaning structures, discourses and programmes. Communications are for Hall (1973b) structures for the articulation, encoding and decoding of meanings and discourses. The encoding/decoding model later influenced the cultural circuit model (Johnson, 1986 [1987] Du Gay et al., 1997), in which communication does not feature prominently as a concept.

Whereas Hall provides a more structuralist model of communications grounded in Marx's *Introduction*, Williams – based on Marx's *German Ideology* – sees communication as human social agency, humans' production of social relations, sociality and society. For Hall (1980), Williams represents cultural studies' 'culturalist' tradition. To be more precise, one should say that Williams advanced a humanist, cultural-materialist and communicative-materialist version of Marxism, in which the communication concept played an important role. In his most detailed discussion of Williams' works, Hall (2016, 25–53) argues that 'human practice' as 'the material activity of human beings' forms the core of Williams' approach (p. 39). Williams' humanist position sees language and communication as practices, whereas in structuralism, language and communications are discursive structures (p. 72). Today, in the age of digital capitalism, it is worth re-engaging with the Marxist foundations of cultural studies, including Williams' writings, Hall's explicitly Marxist works, Marx's writings and the long and diverse traditions of Marxist theory.

In communicative materialism, communication is a process of social production, through which humans produce and reproduce meanings, culture, social relations, sociality, social structures, social systems and society. Communication is the process of the constitution of social relations. It requires means of communication as means of production. Cultural and communicative materialism allows a dialectical and materialist understanding of digital media phenomena such as digital labour,

ideologies on and of the Internet, the digital commons and so on. For Williams (1958 [1983], 319–338), working-class culture is not a particular form or a type of content but a common and collective idea of culture. This involves access to education and culture for all. 'The human fund is regarded in all respects common, and freedom of access to it as a right constituted by one's humanity; yet such access, in whatever kind, is common or it is nothing' (Williams, 1958[1983]: 326). Only a resource that is owned and used in common can benefit all. Williams' approach speaks against digital capitalism and for the digital commons.

The 'sharing society' has to 'begin by really sharing what it has, or all its talk of sharing is false or at best marginal' (Williams, 1983b: 101). Uber, Airbnb, crowdsourcing and crowdfunding are ideological forms of sharing that are not about sharing the means of communication as means of production and the benefits these means produce among all citizens and users. An alternative sharing society has to be non-capitalist in character.

Funding

Note

1. Williams does not explain why he distinguishes communication from communications. Society is based on a dialectic of structures and agency. With the rising complexity of society, systems of communication have emerged (means of communication) that enable communication over spatio-temporal distances. There is a dialectic of communication and communications.

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