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## *The News Media, Education, and the Subversion of the Neoliberal Social Imaginary*

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*An article in the Critical Education series The Media and the Neoliberal Privatization of Education*

### **Abstract**

*In this introductory essay, the special issue editors examine the relationship between the media and the neoliberal privatization of education in the U.S. They first take up an examination of news media journalism in late modernity and highlight how neoliberal politics under the guise of democratization of the news media have resulted in both the gutting of professional education journalism and the intensification of the representation of the interests of the economic elite. They next turn to the task of establishing a common and critical understanding of the term neoliberalism, locating it as an extension of Marx's concept of primary accumulation, an important logic that defines the relationships between individuals, communities, the state, and capital. Finally, they consider how people can disrupt the powerful processes that serve the interests of the neoliberal social imaginary. Highlighting the political actions of Raymond 'Boots' Riley to disrupt the destructive practices of neoliberalized education, they illustrate the possibilities of engaging with alternative media to reframe educational debates, while remaining critical of alternative media.*



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## Introduction

As the neoliberal agenda for public education in the United States intensifies, educational literature has increasingly turned its attention toward understanding the logics and processes of neoliberal privatization. This has been accomplished through both individual case studies of particular districts that have undergone radical reorganization (see for instance, Lipman, 2011; Saltman, 2007) and studies of the implementation of federal mandates like *No Child Left Behind* and *Race to the Top* (see for instance, Debray, 2006, Duggan, 2004; Hursh, 2008). Additionally, attention has been paid to how educators resist these processes and practices, both in the classroom and beyond. Coordinated actions to resist the increase in and reliance on standardized testing have mobilized groups like United Opt Out and Save Our Schools to bring together teachers, schools, communities, and families worried about the impact of such testing on students.

Clearly, such a neoliberal agenda is not limited to public education in the United States and worldwide, nor is neoliberalism monolithic in its implementation. It is, however, a social imaginary that impacts all aspects of public and private life as it reinforces the “need” to eliminate all things public and collective in order to privatize them at the individual level—all in service of the belief that there is no other choice. To accomplish this goal, neoliberalism presents a particular cultural, social, political, and economic logic that employs various public institutions even as it seeks to privatize those same institutions. One such institution is the news media. What role the news media plays or should play—informing the public, serving the interests of the elite, functioning as a governing institution, engaging with an informed citizenry—in relation to a given society is of much debate within and among popular and intellectual circles. Deregulation of the telecommunications industry, new technologies, shifting interests and priorities of readership have resulted in a radical shift in the work of journalism, who produce news media, and what itself is considered “news.”

It is against this backdrop that the articles in this special issue seek to deepen our understanding of the neoliberal privatization of education and the role modern news media organizations, institutions, and platforms play in this process. By extending critical examinations to mainstream media reporting on education, primitive accumulation, and challenges to normative media discourses about education, the editors and authors of the articles seek to uncover the mainstream news media’s relationship to the processes in which neoliberal educational ideologies are constructed, reflected, and reified. This issue will explicate the various ways in which the mainstream media has helped facilitate and legitimate neoliberalism as a universal logic in reforming education, both locally and globally.

Each of the editors in this series brings their expertise to the table. One (Goldstein) is a scholar and teacher educator who examines the coverage of educational issues in and across news media in the United States in an era where all aspects of the individual and society are mediatized. Another scholar (Ford) examines how educational institutions function to support primitive/primary accumulation within a globalized society with an eye towards understanding implications for the subjectivity of the individual under neoliberalism. The third (Porfilio) examines how different groups work to subvert dominant discourses about education, groups, and issues of equity and social justice in order to reclaim those discussions from elite power brokers and work for meaningful collective change. It is the assertion of these editors that a critical examination of news media coverage—including “alternative” media—of education

under neoliberalism is not only understudied; it is an endeavor that has been marginalized from wider discussions about education in the United States and globally.

The coming discussion concerning news media coverage of education under neoliberalism is organized broadly into three sections. The first section takes up an examination of news media journalism in late modernity and highlights how neoliberal politics under the guise of democratization of the news media have resulted in both the gutting of professional education journalism and the intensification of the news media representing the interests of the economic elite. In the case of public education in the United States (and education globally), news media have long employed a discourse of crisis, and have framed issues of education—the problem with failing schools, the efficacy of competition, the simultaneous imposition of an audit culture and shifting resources from public education to that which is private, and the problems with teachers and union representation—in ways that leave much of the wider issues untouched or vastly oversimplified. The second section takes up the task of establishing a common understanding of the term *neoliberalism* and applies Marx’s concept of primary accumulation as an important logic that defines the relationships between individuals, communities, the state, and capital. Arguing that the privatization of all things public—education in particular—results in a transfer of public wealth to private interests, this section highlights the ascendance of neoliberal social imaginaries in which the purpose of education is to prepare young people to be economic citizens whose very worth is defined by their ability to consume. The final section considers how people can disrupt the powerful processes that serve the interests of the neoliberal social imaginary. Highlighting the political actions of Raymond ‘Boots’ Riley to disrupt the destructive practices of neoliberalized education, we illustrate the possibilities of engaging with alternative media to reframe educational debates.

### **New(s) Media and Education Coverage in and for a Networked Society**

In 1993, 22.9% of US households had a computer and only 18.0% had Internet access. In 1997, almost half the homes in the United States accessed the Internet using America Online’s dial-up serve via a landline (“The fall of Facebook”). Google was founded in 1998. Facebook was founded in 2004, YouTube in 2005. Twitter in 2010. America Online was bought up and through various iterations has become what Robert McChesney calls an “oligopoly”: one of the many mass media conglomerations that buys, sells, produces, supports, and creates much of the content available across all media (1995, *Rich Media, Poor Democracy*). Most millennials have no frame of reference for the role that American Online (now AOL) played in the mediatization of people’s lives locally and globally. But they probably recognize *The Huffington Post*, one of its subsidiaries and the popular news website/aggregator, and interface with any number of AOL’s products and services with little or no awareness as they connect to people and groups in their lives.

What was once separated by thousands of miles is now accessible to any person who has access to an Internet capable device and a place to “hook in.” One can read about the Arab Spring in *Al Jazeera*, *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, and from any host of micro-bloggers who live-tweeted the events as they happened. A teacher in the United States can partner with a teacher anywhere in the world and the two classes could learn about each other, their cultures, and languages. One might visit a hospital for an x-ray and notice on the report that the film was

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read by a radiologist in India. Most Americans now live in a network society, one in which many aspects of life are driven and shaped by access to technology (Castells, 1996; 2005).

This is not to say that everyone in the global economic society has this same access, or that all people in the United States have a computer or use the Internet at home. In fact, in 2011, 75.6% of households had a computer in the home and 71.2% had Internet access, with clear racial disparities in terms of home access and use of the Internet and/or a computer (File, 2013, Computer and Internet Use, census.gov). The fact that a quarter of US households did not have a home computer or Internet in the home should be telling about a persisting digital divide. A global look paints an equally complex amalgam of disparities by race, economics, culture, and geography. Maps and global statistics from the World Bank reveal that Internet and cell usage are much spottier outside highly urbanized areas (Engle, 9/14/2014, This world map shows every device connected to the internet; The World Bank, Internet Users (per 100 people)). 4.5 billion people around the world have no access to the Internet; two countries that have been argued to be the United States biggest global competitors—India (84.9%) and China (54.2%) have large percentages without access (Ferdman, 10/2/2014). However, that global picture is changing, and for some, it raises concerns about nations' and individuals' ability to compete in this new society.

To Thomas Friedman, the concept of the “flat world” encompasses the wide potential and power of the Internet and the network society in the globalized world described above, and it is one for which Friedman believes the United States is not well prepared (1999; 2005; Friedman & Mandelbraum, 2012). Friedman, an American journalist, has a regular column in *The New York Times* and is not the only mainstream media news journalist to draw a connection between serious issues like poverty, the economy, inequality, and public education in the United States. Others, like Paul Tough, have written on the need to foster grit in children from struggling communities and the need for educational leaders who will go the distance to see that children from those same communities get what they need (1009; 2012). National Public Radio and PBS New Hour education journalist John Merrow has reported on the state of education in the United States and envisions an education that prepares young people to live and participate in a “vibrant democracy” (2001; 2010; 2011). Dana Goldstein (2014) and Steven Brill (2011) have each tackled and written their own conclusions about the role of teachers and teachers' unions in exacerbating (or not) the problems in US public education.

The journalists listed above are examples of many who report the news across multiple platforms: radio and television, blogging and tweeting, posting talks and presentations on YouTube, Facebook, and other social media. By the nature of reporting the news, these journalists shape how stories are presented to whomever picks up their books, reads their columns or long form pieces, or views their visual segments. Their work is consumed, mediated, and remediated in other news reports, on people's Facebook pages, and through Tweets. The work they do has become mediatized, reflecting cultural and social processes in which media shapes much of daily interaction, including education, daily communication with friends, family, and colleagues, what one does at work and how one “works,” how people use their free time, etc. (de Castells, 2005; Hjarvard, 2008; Shulz, 2004). Unless people consciously choose to disconnect, we are all—to some extent—engaged in a process of mediatization.

To be connected is to be part of the new constellations of social groupings evolving on the Internet. More important, to be connected is to engage economically through clicks, blogs, tweets, posting pictures, and above all, consuming and sharing. Those data can then be

disaggregated and run through a series of complex algorithms to reveal information useful in the service of the market (Van Dijck, 2013). As we illustrate later, primitive accumulation under neoliberalism is not simply the privatization of all things public and common. Primitive accumulation functions to *quantify* individuals and groups through the collection of metadata. Interest in data is not limited to marketing and advertising, and can be seen elsewhere, particularly in regard to education. Current debates over an ever-ending crisis in education—as evidenced by low test scores, not enough students graduating college on-time with the right degrees and too few people prepared for the world of work—reflect one of the many ways in which neoliberal perspectives shape the parameters of the discussion (Hursh, 2007; 2008). This crisis is not limited to the United States; rather, the message conveyed is one of global crisis that has precipitated the need to fundamentally rethink what young people should learn, how they should learn, and how they should be assessed (McDonald, 2013; Takayama, 2007).

Well into the second decade of the twenty-first century, researchers, policy makers, businesses, educators, the public, think tanks and futurists continue to struggle with the implications of a mediatized and globalized society (Hjarvard, 2008; Livingstone, 1999). How the news media reports on issues related to living in a mediatized and globalized world will have an impact on what the public knows and understands (Schudson, 2003). While there are those like Henry Jenkins (2006) who are heartened by the democratizing possibilities, others are less sanguine about living in a mediatized society. There are those who point out that the conditions of neoliberalism—lack of access, poverty, and economic predation—have resulted in a wealthy elite and a massive underclass deadened by and to the more violent, coercive, and above all anesthetizing elements within the mediatized environment. A few thrive, others *subsist* (Giroux, 2010).

For some, media, more specifically the news media, have helped to exacerbate the sense of crisis through the production of spectacle, fear, and manufactured crisis (Altheide, 2002; Anderson, 2007; Berliner & Biddle, 1995; DeBord, 1967; Kellner, 2003). Others point to the ways in which the news media are able to set the agenda and function as gatekeepers in terms of what is reported, how, in what format, etc. (McCombs, 2004; Shaw, 1979). The news media have been analyzed in terms of their ability to function as a propaganda arm of the government and the ruling class to support their political, economic, and hegemonic interests (Hermann and Chomsky, 1988). While differently theorizing the effects of the news media, they all strive to understand

the day-to-day work of the press in informing its audiences of the opportunities and warning them of the dangers, real or imagined, in their environment and in the rest of the world. The media, by describing and detailing what is out there, present people with a list of what to think about and talk about. (Shaw, 1976, p. 97)

Much of the more recent literature examining news coverage of education examines many of the issues that critics of neoliberalism have identified as part of the plan to privatize education: research on teachers, their identities, and their effectiveness (Alhamdan, Al-Saadi, Baroutsis, Du Plessis, Hamid, & Honan (2014; Cohen, 2010; Goldstein, 2010; Reyes & Rios, 2003; test scores and global competitiveness (Stack, 2006; Warmington & Murphy, 2004; 2007), charter schools (Rotherman, 2008), parental choice (Rotherham, 2008), media representations regarding political positions (Gerstl-Pepin, 2002), reliance on advocacy-oriented research and think tanks (Haas, 2007; Malin & Lubienski, 2015; Yettick, 2009), among others. Others have

examined media-government relations (Levin, 2004; Ungerleider, 2004). Some of the most compelling research examines the role that the news media takes in the education policy-making process (Franklin, 2004; Lingard & Rawolle, 2004; Rawolle & Lingard, 2010; Wallace, 1993; 1997). Taken together, these scholars illustrate the importance of examining how the new media talks about issues related to education, particularly as globalization and mediatization are framed within neoliberalism and packaged for consumption.

Within this wider context, this special series seeks to contribute to the small but growing body of research examining how news media cover education under the conditions of neoliberalism. There are those, like educational journalist Fred M. Hechinger, who are concerned with educational journalists having an adequate foundation upon which to base their reporting. Others are concerned with the radical shifts in news journalism, particularly given the small share of education reporting, with only 1.4 % of news coverage in 2009 addressing education (West, Whitehurst, & Dionne, 2009). Professional groups like the Education Writers Association and university-affiliated groups like the Hechinger Institute offer programs for those interested in reporting on education. The American Educational Research Association has partnered with The Hechinger Institute, the EWA, the Columbia School of Journalism, the Spencer Foundation, and the Knight Foundation to address concerns about education reporting, particularly in regard to reporting on major research reports released to the public. Among their projects was the 2010 publication *Guide to Educational Research for Journalists* (Hechinger, 2010), a series of workshops, and summer and annual internships for journalists. Cynthia Gerstl-Pepin (2007) and others have called for the development of extensive and longitudinal research projects that examine media coverage of education. These actions are an important response given the downsizing of newsrooms, the rise of news media reporting, and the rising influence of think tanks. They are not, however, sufficient responses given how neoliberalism is shaping discussions about teachers, students, schools, education, and the human condition. New critical constellations need to evolve to challenge the current discourses of crisis, and refocus them on the crisis of neoliberalism, particularly as it continues to shape the news media and education.

### **Neoliberalism, Primary Accumulation, and Education: Redefining the Purposes of Education**

What does it mean when present political, economic, and social constellations in the advanced capitalist countries is signified with the term *neoliberalism*? What precisely does this term signify, and to what does it stand in contrast? The need to continually forefront these questions when using the term is highlighted by a recent study on the use of the term in academic journals in education. In their examination of the deployment of *neoliberalism* in peer-reviewed education journals, Julie Rowlands and Shaun Rawolle (2013) commented that the term was rarely clearly or effectively defined within the literature, and that there was little consensus on just what neoliberalism is. Such lack of agreement is problematic because “by using ‘neoliberalism’ in a non-specific way... we are at risk of perpetuating the dominant discourse of neoliberalism rather than disrupting or challenging it” (269). To avoid this danger, and for the more general sake of clarity, we want to take a moment to explain the way that we, in sculpting this special series, conceive of neoliberalism and the neoliberal turn within the current historical era.

Neoliberalism can be approached first as an intensification of the private and its dominance over the public; as an ideological and political force that seeks to generalize the rule

of the market throughout society, as a project aspiring to subject every domain and aspect of life to the rule of market exchange and capitalist production. Yet this definition of neoliberalism is, in many ways, not so distinct from capitalism in general. To begin to broach the specificity of neoliberalism, then, some historical context is necessary, and for the purposes of this introduction we will confine ourselves to the history of neoliberalism in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

The neoliberal era is generally demarcated from and stands in contrast to the social democratic era, which occurred roughly between the end of the Great Depression (late 1930s) and the end of the 1970s. This period was marked by Keynesian economic policies and a capital-labor “compromise” in which “workers abandoned their calls for socialist reconstruction and their demands for structural change, and accepted government policies and the bargaining and welfare mechanisms the state set about to provide for them” (Olssen, Codd, & O’Neil, 2004, p. 127). Keynesian economic policies, including wealth sharing through progressive taxation, expanding social welfare programs, increasing regulation of business and labor, abandoning the gold standard, state responsibility for national economic health, and higher wages were seen as the answer to the crisis of overproduction and capital realization that defined the Great Depression (Bowles & Gintis, 1986; Hursh, 2008; Jaffee, 1998). Industrial production expanded in the U.S., especially when industry in Europe and Japan was destroyed during World War II. As a result of labor organizing efforts, increased productivity, rising profits, and the overall increasing dominance of labor and socialist-oriented governments in the world, organized labor (dominantly representing white workers) was able to wrest a larger portion of the values produced from the capitalist class. Outside of the workplace, workers were able to win victories in the political arena. Both of these trends represented the growing power of labor *within* the capitalist order. As such, they were economic, political, and social threats to capitalist class rule and, potentially, to the capitalist order.

Neoliberalism can be seen as the capitalist class’ response to this threat. The power of organized labor in unions, workplaces, society, and the state was attacked (framed discursively as an attack on “big government”). The public institutions that were products of this power, such as education, were seen as ripe for expropriation through privatization and deregulation. American economists like Milton Friedman engaged in long-term criticism of Keynesianism, and blamed its policies and practices for economic contraction in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Friedman advocated for limited government, less state oversight of the economy, and a reliance on the free market for services and goods, including those traditionally offered by the federal government (Friedman, 1962). For all of the rhetoric against the state, however, the neoliberal order rests quite heavily upon state intervention to achieve and maintain its ascendance as the defining economic logic of late capitalism. As David Harvey (2005) writes, the state has to “set up those military, defense, police, and legal structures and functions required to secure private property rights and to guarantee... the proper functioning of markets” (p. 2). The state also plays a crucial role in instituting and maintaining markets where they did not formerly exist, or where they formally existed in a limited role. Consider, as just one example, the tremendous role that the state is playing in opening the market for privately run and owned charter schools. First presented as a panacea to “failing” urban schools under President George W. Bush’s *No Child Left Behind*, the institutionalization of charter schools as common sense school reform under President Obama’s *Race to the Top* initiative tied federal education funding to increasing caps on

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<sup>1</sup> There is ample literature documenting this history that can be consulted. See, for example, Harvey (2005), Lazzarato (2012), and Peters (2007).

charter schools, such that federal policies and regulations were deployed to privatize what was previously considered a public resource (Carr and Porfilio, 2011; Fabricant & Fine, 2012; McGuinn, 2012).

In her review of the pro-charter documentary *Waiting for Superman*, Diane Ravitch describes the logic behind this school reform effort:

American public education is a failed enterprise. The problem is not money. Public schools already spend too much. Test scores are low because there are so many bad teachers, whose jobs are protected by powerful unions. Students drop out because the schools fail them, but they could accomplish practically anything if they were saved from bad teachers. They would get higher test scores if schools could fire more bad teachers and pay more to good ones. The only hope for the future of our society, especially for black and Hispanic children, is escape from public schools, especially to charter schools, which are mostly funded by the government but controlled by private organizations, many of them operating to make a profit. (2010, para. 3)

Students of color and students who are poor are, in theory, both the beneficiaries and the victims of the neoliberal logic applied to education. On one hand, public schools are supposed to help children rise above circumstances and when these schools fail to do so, they are to be replaced by schools like charters, which are presented as more committed to and capable of meeting the needs of these students. The more students—particularly Black and Hispanic, poor and urban—moved to charter schools, the better the chances of their success because market forces will bring to bear the benefits of competition. Unfortunately, the ideal of charter school education differs greatly from the reality because they not only fail to deliver on their promise of a high achieving education using only public funds, they also fail to achieve an equitable education for all students because they are exempt from accepting students with disabilities and students who are English Language Learners. Charter experiments in New Orleans, LA, Philadelphia, PA, and other large urban centers have resulted in school closures, the implementation of prison pedagogy, greater social and economic segregation, less oversight of the (charter) schools in terms of their ability to meet the needs of students, and more inequality and less social justice—all sanctioned by state and federal governments (Fabricant & Fine, 2012; Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, & Wang, 2010). The power of the state, in other words, is wielded against the poor and working classes. In this sense, we affirm David Harvey's (2005) thesis that neoliberalism, particularly as it pertains to education, is a class strategy *within* capitalism that is oriented toward the restoration of capitalist class power. Thus, it is crucial not to cast neoliberalism as a totalizing global order or a framework that can account for all changes in the global political economy since the 1970s. While Harvey acknowledges that neoliberalism isn't homogenous, he does tend to present it as totalizing, particularly in his portrayal of China (see Malott and Ford, in press).

Related to this thesis is the idea that neoliberalism is more oriented toward accumulation than production (and, especially, realization). In particular, the role of so-called primary—or primitive—accumulation in the maintenance of capitalism has taken center stage. The origins of this concept lie in the last part of the first volume of Marx's *Capital* where Marx refutes the bourgeois origin story of capitalism, which holds that there were once two groups of people, one that was frugal and hard working and another that was wasteful and lazy. Three interrelated presuppositions formed the foundation upon which capitalist production rests: first, a mass of people (workers) are separated from the means of subsistence (e.g., agricultural producers are



expropriated from the land); second, there is a need for commodities (i.e., the creation of the market); third, there is a concentration of resources, raw and ancillary materials, and primary means of production in the hands of one class. These three components are each part of the establishment of the capital-labor class relation/antagonism. Much as neoliberal critics highlight today, Marx (1967) demonstrated that it was “conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, briefly force” (p. 668) that comprised the mechanisms through which the conditions that presuppose capitalism were acquired.

Primary accumulation, however, continues to accompany capitalism. In Rosa Luxemburg’s (2003) economic treatise, *The Accumulation of Capital*, she demonstrates that capitalism is a unity of capitalist *production* and primary *accumulation*. Because capitalism is by definition the expansion of value, it continually spreads itself across the globe, subjecting an increasing number of people, land, and resources to its logic. While Marx was writing, this process was happening *absolutely*, but by the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century capital had (unevenly) covered the globe. Thus, Lenin (1987) wrote that, by 1916, “For the first time the world is completely shared out, so that in the future *only re-division* is possible” (p. 227). From this point on, capital expands *relatively*, by reorganizing the globe. Neoliberalism should be seen as precisely part of this process of reorganization.

The privatization of education in the neoliberal era constitutes a form of primary accumulation because it is an attempt to make private that which was previously public. Thus, privatizing education divorces students from the means of education and, in the process, institutes a dependency of students upon capital. Further, privatizing education allows for the capitalist class to accumulate a host of economic values, from those trapped in school buildings and buses to those circulating in curricula and textbooks (Ford, 2014).

Such is the economic-political aspect of neoliberalism; it is the marketization of everything. It also introduces another crucial interrelated and interdependent aspect of neoliberalism that concerns the social-subjective. Michel Foucault’s work on governmentality is useful to understand the new subject under neoliberalism because it outlines an

...ensemble formed by institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, calculations, and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific, albeit very complex, power that has the population as its target, political economy as its major form of knowledge, and apparatuses of security as its essential technical instrument” (Foucault, 2007, 108).

The word “governmentality” denotes a connection between governance and mentality or conduct. Neoliberalism, that is, entails shifts in the production of subjectivity. Perhaps one of the most obvious ways in which this transformation has taken place is in the reframing of democratic citizens from that of social and political citizen to that of economic consumer. Regarding education, Michael Peters and Tim McDonough (2007) comment, “citizens are now ‘customers’ and public servants are ‘providers’... the teaching/learning relation has been reduced to an implicit contract between buyer and seller” (159). Whereas the citizen-subject has an implicit expectation for *public* goods and services like education as part of the social contract between individuals, communities, and the state, the consumer-subject functions as a sovereign economic entity who avails oneself of private goods and services provided by a competitive market.

In this manner, neoliberalism employs the discourses of classical liberal thought found in modern democracies to achieve its goals. This link between classical liberalism and

neoliberalism expands on the former's "faith in the individual as rational chooser within markets... the individual is no longer merely a rational optimizer but conceived as an autonomous entrepreneur responsible for his or her own self, progress, or position" (Lipman and Hursh, 2007, 163). "Within neoliberalism, what the institution judges, appraises, and measures is, in the end, the style of life of individuals, who must be made to conform to the conception of the 'good life' of the economy" (Lazzarato, 2012, 132). With these two lines of transformation in mind, we can grasp more concretely the relationship between education and neoliberalism. In line with the political-economic transformation, education represents a tempting and massive potential source of profits that can be expropriated through marketizing educational sites, practices, and processes. And in line with the social-subjective transformation, education (and more specifically, schools) becomes a primary site for the production of the consumer-entrepreneurial-subject. Thus, neoliberalism affects school buildings and busing as much as it affects curricula and pedagogy, and teachers, students, and communities.

Before we move to examine the potential inherent in disrupting news media discourses, we want to offer one final qualification to neoliberalism: namely, that neoliberalism is neither a monolithic entity nor a rupture from previous capitalist projects. For one, there are distinctions between the theory and practice of neoliberalism. The ideology and discourses of neoliberalism rarely map neatly onto the lived world. Second, there are multiple, evolving, and oftentimes contradictory neoliberal strategies that vary across time and space (see Ong, 2006). As we highlighted above, supporters of charter school reform have leveraged immense public and private funding to shift the education of America's young people from being a public good to a private commodity. As the reform movement has advanced in the past two decades in particular, it has evolved from one that is firmly grounded in teacher and local control in labor-supported learning environments to one that frames an educational crisis as a function of the *public* in public education in the United States. Indeed, charter school discourses are part and parcel of the discourses of neoliberalism so that even talking about issues of equity and social justice as collective action is reduced to producing a subject of the neoliberal market who functions solely at the level of the individual.

### **Subverting the Social Imaginary of Neoliberalism: Deploying New Media to Challenge Corporate Hegemony**

As previously discussed, political and corporate leaders have successfully maintained control over production across numerous mass media outlets, including newscasts, news articles, talk shows, and advertisements, for the purpose of gaining support from citizens to corporatize educational practices, processes, and arrangements. Although controlling knowledge production in mass media outlets gives the ruling elite "unfair material advantages" in influencing "public opinion" on whether commercial formations ought to structure relationships in schools (Fuchs, 2010, 175), there are thousands of educators, artists, activists and other citizens who have increasingly turned to non-institutional "modes of engaging in politics" via alternative and news media to oppose corporate forces dominating day-to-day dynamics in schools across the U.S. (Askinius, 2012, p.12).

In this section, we highlight a particular instance in which an artist, organizer, and hip-hop intellectual, Raymond 'Boots' Riley, member of The Coup, has successfully employed alternative media to challenge the mainstream in order for fostering awareness of and generating resistance to neoliberal impulses dominating school life. To contextualize Riley's efforts, we first

outline a conceptualization of *alternative media* that highlights several key social forces that may limit the emancipatory potential of *alternative media*. As we discuss, powerful forces may thwart democratically produced blogs, Tweets, music, videos, and images from dismantling the structures, ideologies, and practices responsible for schools becoming mere appendages of the corporate world (Uzelman, 2011). In light of this, our analysis is designed to substantiate our position that alternative media dedicated to challenging corporate dominance over schooling should not be viewed as a silver bullet imbued with power to nudge the public to gain critical insight and desire necessary to seek alternative arrangements and values for educating students.

Alternative (or new) media are a social form of knowledge. Alternative media practices are situated in a social context that favors corporate ideologies and agendas over the ideals of social justice, equity, democracy, and freedom. This makes alternative systems of knowledge that challenge the corporate takeover of education always susceptible to being “co-opted or re-appropriated” by dominant powerbrokers who are intent on corporatizing schooling, to being deemed as irrelevant by citizens who have internalized corporate propaganda surrounding the alleged social benefits emanating from corporate educational reform, and to being trivialized or excluded from conversations in mass media outlets (Pickard, 2007, p. 12). Therefore, we must be just as critical of the alternative media we rely upon to make sense of the competing agendas, macro-level processes, and micro-level developments fueling cultural dynamics in schools as we are of mass media that serve the interests of the political and economic elite.

Echoing Pickard (2007), ‘alternative media’ is a “slippery term fraught with multiple meanings” (p.12). However, there are certain features that help distinguish alternative media from mainstream media. Alternative media counters “mainstream representations and assumptions,” “suggests democratized media production that tends towards the non-commercial, the community based, and the marginalized” and often proffers political ideologies dedicated to challenging corporate hegemony and creating a socially-just world (Pickard, 2007). Yet, even with numerous marginalized groups and critically-minded individuals collectively using social media, generating alternative magazines, blogs and films, and producing music and artistic representations in order to challenge messages and representations in mass media that serve “the interests and concerns of the elite” (McChesney, 1989), such cultural work faces competing structural forces, which may ultimately undermine their attempts to bring awareness to and eliminate the corporate agenda for education. For example, many radical groups employ social media in virtual spaces, such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, which are littered with commercial formations, including news articles and advertisements that support corporate-driven educational reforms (Askinius, 2012). Consequently, some consumers of social media may become more enthralled with the commercialized agenda for education through their use of social media, rather than gaining newfound insight on the deleterious nature of commercialized schooling or on the steps necessary for building a counter-movement to democratize schools.

Furthermore, some social groups who employ alternative media as a venue in which to share critical insights and rally against the commercial takeover of education are not self-reflexive in terms of whether the collective body of their messages and activist work are complicit in reinforcing the neoliberal status quo. In fact, they may be critical about one aspect of the neoliberal agenda—including the privatization of public education—yet in the very next article, segment, tweet, or post will reinforce another aspect of the agenda. One of the prime examples of this inconsistent criticality is Democracy Now!, an alternative media source that is often consulted by progressive educators, activists, and organizers. Democracy Now! (DN)

features relatively critical and progressive coverage of the domestic U.S. neoliberal agenda, and often challenges mainstream narratives about educational privatizations. Yet, when it comes to neoliberal imperialism, or the international U.S. neoliberal agenda, the coverage offered is often just a shade different than the mainstream, U.S. State Department-fed line. Consider, for example, their coverage of the war on Libya.

In the earliest days of the U.S.-backed insurgency against the nationalist government, DN coverage was virtually indistinguishable from the corporate media. In a February 25, 2011 story about the beginning of the insurgency, DN correspondent Anjali Kamat perfectly parroted the imperialist anti-Gaddafi rhetoric already circulating throughout the U.S., referring to Gaddafi's "authoritarian rule" and labeling the armed insurgents as "demonstrators" (Kamat, 2011). Kamat even parroted what were then completely unsubstantiated—and later verified as untrue—claims about African "mercenaries hired by the Gaddafi regime" killing innocent protesters (this claim fueled the racist lynching of dark-skinned Libyans and sub-Saharan Africans throughout Libya) (see Forte, 2012, pp. 230-235). Throughout the U.S./NATO-led war on Libya, DN coverage never challenged the U.S. State Department's narrative about "peaceful protesters" who were compelled to take up arms against an authoritarian regime. Not once did they mention the millions of Libyans (many of them women) who volunteered to take up arms to defend the government—and, by extension, the country—from the U.S./NATO-backed rebels.

Sadly, in some cases even when social groups are self-reflexive with their messages and cultural work and formulate them in ways that position potential audiences to become "capable of questioning or dissenting from oppressive orthodoxies" associated with neoliberalism, they fail to achieve their aims (Cammerota, 2011, p. 64). For some audience members, the language generated by social activists and critical scholars designed to challenge commercial forces inundating education are, like many other revolutionary ideas providing an alternative understanding of social reality, not accessible to them (Pangilian, 2009). For other audience members, the language generated may be accessible; however, it is unable to penetrate their entrenched belief that schools are apolitical spaces that students attend in order to garner credentials based upon their hard work, instead of key cultural sites where the "powerful win the consent of those who are oppressed, with the oppressed unknowingly participating in their own oppression" (McLaren, 2008, p. 67). They have internalized their role as primitive accumulators in the information marketplace. According to Fuchs (2012), the numerous citizens who fail to acknowledge that schools support the dominant interests in society--at the expense of children's social and intellectual development--occupy a manipulative consciousness. Such a mindset reflects years of consuming propaganda generated by powerbrokers (see, for instance, Chomsky and Hermann, 1988/2002; Berliner, Glass & Associates, 2014). As a result, they are not able to "question domination, but further advance, legitimize or leave untouched dominative/heteronomous structures" (Fuchs, 2012, p.180).

There is also a substantial segment of the population that never takes up the alternative messages generated by social groups because they have not been exposed to locating the social groups' alternative messages. For instance, they may not be aware of the existence of specific alternative websites, blogs, community-based newspapers, or television stations or programs. There are also segments of the population that may lack the material resources to purchase the technology necessary to learn about the social groups' alternative messages.

With a myriad of social forces challenging the emancipatory potential of alternative media for bringing awareness to and the elimination of the neoliberal assault on education,

including corporations infiltrating social media, a lack of some to understand, access and embrace alternative media, and a lack of self-reflexivity by some who feel they are challenging the neoliberal agenda for education through alternative media, it would, on the surface, be of little benefit to examine alternative media claiming to challenge the neoliberal onslaught on education. However, there are several examples of educators, activists, youth, critical scholars, and other concerned citizens who are successfully navigating entrenched forces and systemic barriers that mitigate alternative media from challenging propaganda supporting corporate control over schooling. They are making inroads into providing some citizens a newfound understanding of neoliberalism's impact on schooling and building collectivist movements dedicated to ensuring that schools are "protected from the destructive effects of neoliberalism including privatization, competition, individualism, corporatism, commercialism and commodification" (Down, Smyth, & McInerney, In Press). Below, we showcase a powerful example from activist, artist, hip-hop intellectual, and cultural worker Raymond 'Boots' Riley. He has employed alternative media as one of several educative sites predicated on exposing the constitutive forces behind schools becoming appendages of the corporate world and on building a collectivist movement that is capable of humanizing educational institutions and the wider social world.

### **Alternative Media: An Essential Site to Building a Revolutionary Agenda**

Raymond 'Boots' Riley was born into a family of radical organizers who fought for racial equity with the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) during the 1950s and CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) in the 1960s. His father connected with the Progressive Labor Party during the 1970s, where he organized workers to help obtain better material conditions inside and outside of the workplace. By the time he was fourteen, Riley followed in his family's footsteps by joining the Progressive Labor Party. At this young age, he was already cognizant that organizing labor is essential for quelling the corporate world's ability to exploit labor power from the working-class. He helped to "built an anti-racist farmworkers union (in California), an undertaking which was mainly being led by people who had been kicked out of the UFW (United Farm Workers), for being Communists, and being militant" (Maynard, 2012). Riley also was cognizant of the role that unjust schooling policies play in cementing unjust power relationships in society. Not coincidentally, at the age of 15, he led "a strike to protest budget cuts at his predominantly black public high school" (Mahler, 2012).

Gradually, however, Riley felt organized labor failed to inspire a broad range of peoples-- including workers, youth, activists and artists-- to engage in cultural work predicated on upending neoliberal capitalism, the system responsible for breeding social problems, commercializing educational institutions, and spawning environmental degradation (Raymer, 2014). Initially, Riley's antidote for invigorating a collectivist movement aimed at systemic change of schools and society came through shaping the aesthetics of his revolutionary messages. By the early-1990s, Riley began to couch his messages through the cultural mediums toward which his audiences gravitated. He began producing socially-conscious hip-hop music and videos, which were consumed by millions of globalized youth. Riley inspired other workers and youth to join together to build a new social order through "guerilla hip-hop shows," by engaging them within their own communities, and by sensitizing them to revolutionary ideas through language that they used to make sense of the world (Maynard, 2012).

Over the past decade or so, Boots Riley has found alternative media to be a germane site for building a broad social movement against corporate domination in schools and society. He recognizes that more and more citizens across the globe harness social media to learn about developments inside and outside of their social circles. In addition to releasing footage of his concerts, music, and acts of protest on YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, Riley has produced blogs, been interviewed in alternative and mainstream newspapers and magazines and television stations, and connected with socially-conscious artists, student organizers, and academics so as to organize and unite a movement capable of building a new social order. For instance, in 2006, on his former record label's (Epitaph) website, Riley revealed that U.S. political and economic leaders put in place an "obscure provision of the NCLB (No Child Left Behind) Act for the purpose of forcing "public schools to supply high school students' names and private contact information to military recruiters" ("Boots Riley," 2006). He also provided insight as to why he took part in speaking engagements across the US with Music for America (MFA). He wanted to ensure that youth would have "the cultural capital and political savvy" to "reinvent progressive politics" capable of challenging corporate and military incursions in public schools, such as the unjust incursion promulgated by the ruling elite through NCLB.

More recently, Riley returned to his roots of labor organizing during the Occupy Wall Street Movement. However, unlike his previous cultural work with labor organizations, Riley successfully combined the use of social media with face-to-face activism to connect Occupy Wall-Street activists and labor unions. For instance, Riley engaged in interviews, released alternative messages, and generated music videos on podcasts, Twitter, Facebook, blogs, YouTube, and posters, while simultaneously engaging in face-to-face conversations with working-class citizens and activists. Both sources of Riley's cultural activities proved instrumental in providing the intellectual and emotional support needed to spur these groups to recognize why it was in their best interest to ban collectively to challenge the economic system responsible for declining material and economic conditions across the globe. Riley helped to spur workers, educators, students, artists, and activists in launching a 'general strike' of the Oakland Port on November 2, 2011. Specifically, there were "about 360 Oakland teachers... or roughly 18 percent of the district's 2,000 teachers" ("Thousands of Occupy," 2011) took part in this protest because they saw it as an "economic blow to the system and as a way to have some economic leverage" ("One of the problems," 2013) in terms of securing more resources for their classrooms and communities. Many activists also shared with Riley that the "Coup's music had some part in their political development" (Andes, 2012).

It is also salient to note that Riley has utilized additional venues and generated other techniques to bring awareness of and forge movements against the corporate takeover of schooling in the U.S. Unlike some activists and artists, he believes that there is potential in every social site to usher in new understandings and build new alliances with groups who are not yet intellectually and emotionally committed to rallying against neoliberal capitalism. For instance, he regularly gives lectures and takes part in panel presentations on college campuses for the purpose of articulating how to organize and launch strikes against corporate domination in educational institutions. Riley has successfully articulated to several audiences how the Occupy Movement was instrumental in sparking a militant Chicago Teachers' strike (Murphy, 2012). He has also performed at rallies and protests and engaged in dialogue surrounding the role large-scale corporations play in breeding the military-prison-industrial complex and gutting social entitlements for citizens. Riley also organizes people by guiding them to think about how collective actions have the ability to improve peoples lives, such as when a group of school

superintendents decide not to release “student's personal information to military recruiters” (“Boots Riley,” 2006). Instead of getting audiences bogged down with focusing on whether their actions are immediately able to build a new economic system where workers “democratically control their labor,” Riley encourages them to think about social change as a complex process that takes substantial planning, collaboration, and perseverance (“Riley on Dissent,” 2013).

## Conclusions

Despite the entrenched ideological and political power that reinforce the ruling elite's ability to sell the alleged benefits of embracing corporate educational reform initiatives in mass media outlets, some socially-consciousness artists, activists, and educators have harnessed and produced alternative media to expose the true motivation behind the elite's desire to control education. Working together, they have developed and provided alternative practices, pedagogies and insights for fostering emancipatory teaching and learning in classrooms, and to organize workers, artists, activists, and educators in collective struggles. Such actions are an explicit engagement with the goal of improving material conditions inside and outside of schools and building a democratic economic system.

Yet, as detailed above, there are several social forces that may sap the revolutionary potential of cultural work located in alternative media. Fortunately, the reflective approach Raymond ‘Boots’ Riley takes when using alternative media for fostering awareness to and generating resistance of corporate hegemony in schools and society has the potency to sidestep structural elements that may limit alternative media from functioning as a linchpin for remaking schools and humanity. Riley believes organizers must attempt to cross intellectual and social borders so as to help all constituents affected by the schooling process understand the corporate agenda for education and why it is in their best interest to struggle collectively to remake schools on the ideals of social justice, freedom and democracy. Yet, he is also aware that the task of building connections with a broad range of social actors and activating them in the struggle to humanize schools and society is daunting. That is why Riley has developed a broad array of intellectual and cultural tools, including multiple forms of alternative media, mass media, and on the ground cultural work, which may sensitize more social actors to the immediate need to join the struggle for building equalitarian schools and society. He also attempts to forge personal connections with his audiences by using multiple modalities and language systems when proffering revolutionary ideas. Finally, Riley illustrates that activism and organizing will probably not be effective in challenging asymmetrical social relations in schools unless “‘putting-your-body-out-there’ activism” is also present (Askinius, 2012, p.48).

Each of the articles in this special series of *Critical Education* expands upon our previous discussion, and seeks to illustrate how radical shifts in the knowledge society, news media, and media technologies can reproduce as well as challenge the primitive accumulation that serves as part of the foundation of neoliberal social imaginaries. On the one hand, who controls corporate media—that is, the global oligopolies—has narrowed. On the other, the potential for the Internet to disrupt the dominant discourses of the oligopolies is vast—provided that the Internet remains a public service for the public good. That an artist, organizer, and social critic is able to employ alternative media as an essential component of building an activist movement dedicated to challenging corporate domination of schooling and humanity is an important reminder to other concerned citizens, scholars, and educators.

We also encourage others who are committed to ending the corporate takeover of schools and to “redistributing wealth and power within (or against) global capitalism” to join the concomitant struggle to democratize the dominant media (Hackett, 2000, p. 61). As Hackett (2000) notes, the ability of revolutionary intellectuals to build an organic movement to democratize schools and society will continue to be challenged when the dominant, transnational media controls knowledge production on the Internet, through political spectacles, and through a myriad forms of ‘entertainment’ (p.62). With the recent surge of working-class peoples across the globe naming capitalism as the chief force tied to human suffering, to environmental destruction, and to turning schools into arenas where corporations amass wealth and position educators, administrators and students to comply with mandates that quell their ability to think critically, echoing Freire & Macedo (1987), about the word and the world, the time appears to be germane for creating campaigns where alternative media positions members of the public to “have the power to affect their material condition in their daily life” and to extinguish the source of their alienation, neoliberal capitalism (Riley, 2011).

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