

ARTICLE

# Neoliberalism Studies and Media Studies

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## Abstract

This short article provides an overview of the various theoretical and methodological approaches to analysing neoliberalism, paying particular attention to political-economic and governmental approaches (and the extent to which they can be contrasted or combined), and argues for a more theoretically- and methodologically-informed, interdisciplinary critique of neoliberalism in media studies. In emphasising the heterogeneity of approaches to studying an object such as neoliberalism, as well as the differences in how those approaches are deployed in different ‘studies’, it will thus also argue for the applicability of such concerns to research in multiple disciplines in other countries (such as France) as well.

**Keywords:** Neoliberalism; Media Studies; Theoretical / Methodological Approaches; Heterogeneity; Interdisciplinarity

A danger with reflections on the pertinence and applicability of ‘studies’ to French academic disciplines is that it can over-emphasise the Anglo-Saxon otherness of such approaches, and fall into the trap of suggesting something homogenous about what is a wide variety of domains of research, within which there are multiple methodological and theoretical debates. Indeed, the interdisciplinarity and internationalism of such approaches supposedly necessitates an ongoing dialogue between local-national and disciplinary contexts, on the one hand, and wider debates and literatures on the other.

The burgeoning field of critical neoliberalism studies, for instance, has emerged principally from the research of geographers and urban studies scholars, and has involved writing the history and genealogy of international neoliberal thought-collectives, as well as critiquing the process of neoliberalisation in various geographical areas, industrial sectors, public policies, and aspects of everyday life. Rich and nuanced debate on how to do so has not, however, been as prominent in other fields, such as critical media studies, where research has hitherto tended to employ the term ‘neoliberalism’ as little more than a term of rebuke.

This short article will provide an overview of the various theoretical and methodological approaches to analysing neoliberalism, paying particular attention to political-economic and governmental approaches (and the extent to which they can be contrasted or combined), and argue for a more theoretically- and methodologically-informed, interdisciplinary critique of neoliberalism in media studies. In emphasising the heterogeneity of approaches to studying an object such as neoliberalism, as well as the differences in how those approaches are deployed in different 'studies', it will thus also argue for the applicability of such concerns to research in multiple disciplines in other countries as well.

## Neoliberalism

References to neoliberalism in Anglophone scholarly research are commonplace, and have increased exponentially over the past couple of decades. While the first handful of citations to articles featuring the term 'neoliberalism' (or 'neo-liberalism') occurred in only 1992, there were over 200 a year by the end of the 1990s, almost a 1,000 a year by 2005, over 4,000 a year in 2010, and almost 10,000 a year in 2015 (Springer 2012). Such interest seems unlikely to subside in the foreseeable future. Prompted by the dramatic onset of the global financial crisis (2008-ongoing), which was purportedly the result of neoliberal logic, and the subsequent intensification of the familiar policies of 'regulatory restraint, privatisation, rolling tax cuts, and public-sector austerity' through an even more relentless focus on 'growth restoration, deficit reduction and budgetary restraint' (Peck 2013: 3-5), there has also recently been an abundance of public debate on the efficacy, validity and legitimacy of neoliberal policies. Even researchers at the IMF have begun to question the logic and efficacy of neoliberal policies (Ostry, Loungani and Furceri 2016). Despite (or perhaps because of) such promiscuity, however, the term itself has often been dismissed as a concept of the politically and economically illiterate (Phelan 2016), particularly by those on the right accused of being neoliberal. Within the social sciences and humanities too, it has more recently been acknowledged that the term has been prone to inflation (Peck 2013: 17), and for some it has become an 'overblown' concept (Collier 2012) that tends to be applied (in an invariably disapproving way) to pretty much anything today (Allison and Piot 2011: 5).

Although occurrences of 'neoliberalism' abound in media scholarship (and further afield), authors rarely explain what is meant by the term, assuming instead a commonsensically shared understanding of the negative affect on public life it evokes. When greater specification is provided, neoliberalism's essential features are 'variously described, but always include' (Ferguson 2009: 170): consumer choice (Harvey 2007: 42); private ownership and property rights, free trade, free markets, privatisation, and state withdrawal from social provision (Harvey 2007: 2); deregulation, the restriction of state intervention, opposition to collectivism, emphasis on individual responsibility, and a belief that economic growth leads to development (Hilgers 2011: 352); valorisation of private enterprise over the state, tariff elimination, currency deregulation and enterprise models that run the state like a business (Peck 2008); a logic of 'DIP (deregulation, individualisation, privatisation)' (Bauman and Roviroso-Madrado 2010: 52); as well as an emphasis on the entrepreneurial self; and the social scientist's particular bugbear regarding Thatcher's claim that there is 'no

such thing as society' (Mirowski 2013). Emphasis is also placed on the encroachment of market relations into domains previously considered exempt, and on the opportunities such encroachment provides for particular individuals and corporations to not only extend and diversify their commercial media empires, but even to ultimately influence the political process (Harvey 2007: 34). More broadly, neoliberalism is seen as the reinvention of the classical liberal tradition, expanded to encompass the whole of human existence, whereby the market stands as the ultimate arbiter of truth, and where freedom is recoded to mean anything the market allows (Mirowski 2013). Other uses of 'neoliberalism' see it as shorthand for a new era of capitalism in more speculative times, or as an abstract and external causal force, often little more than a 'sloppy synonym' for capitalism or the world economy and its inequalities (Ferguson 2009: 171).

While its meaning, its history, and even its existence have now been debated at length in disciplines such as geography, urban studies, and sociology, the richness of the theoretical and methodological debate surrounding neoliberalism has been, until recently, conspicuously absent from the Anglophone literature on *media, cultural, and communications studies*. Despite rare acknowledgments that references to neoliberalism require greater nuance, even rarer engagements with neoliberal literature itself (O'Malley and Jones 2009), and occasional warnings that the 'intuitive' focus on a big picture narrative of global neoliberal trends risks privileging similarities in privatisation and liberalisation over 'diverging accents' in their implementation (Parthasarathi 2010), most accounts have limited themselves to the ways in which 'neoliberal ideology' (Hall 2011; Harvey 2007) is combined with other ideologies in policy and regulation. Such work has tended to avoid, however, critical engagement with the theoretical perspective it draws on, to ignore competing approaches, and to see neoliberalism not only as a unitary ideology imposed from outside or above, but often as little more than a 'bogeyman' to be denounced (Collier 2012; Gane 2012).

In contrast, recent contributions towards a burgeoning field of *neoliberalism studies* (Burgin 2012; Davies 2014; Jones 2012; Mirowski and Plehwe 2009; Peck 2010) deal not only with the contradictory ways in which these elements combine with other policies, and the contextual differences in their application from one country to another, but with the history of liberal and neoliberal thought, and an engagement with the political-economic debates within liberalism and neoliberalism. This literature, engaging critically with both the Marxist approach of Stuart Hall and David Harvey, which constructs neoliberalism as an ideology, and that of Foucault (2010), which sees it instead as a form of governmentality, as well as a more discursive and processual approach (Peck 2013; Springer 2012), which aims to bridge the gap between the other approaches, suggests a longer and more detailed history than tends to be assumed, and provides a corrective to accounts of neoliberalism framed in terms of *laissez-faire* or individualisation. It also turns our attention to a more nuanced appreciation of the changing role of both the state and the market.

Although such debates have been for the most part unacknowledged in English-language media studies, I suggest that Des Freedman (2014), Terry Flew (2012; 2014; 2015) and Sean Phelan (2014) can be considered as exemplars, respectively, of political-economic, governmental, and discourse approaches within media and communications research, and this article will now turn to each of these in turn.

## Neoliberal ideology

Critiques of neoliberal trends in media policy and regulation tend to refer understandably to (geographer) David Harvey's seminal contribution (2007), and to Stuart Hall's successive (cultural studies) analyses of UK neoliberalisation from Thatcher, through Blair, to Cameron (1988, 2003, 2011). Unfortunately, such announcements demonstrate little critical engagement with Harvey's and Hall's approach, and limited awareness of the wider array of perspectives on neoliberalism. Both Hall and Harvey (see also Duménil and Lévy 2014) portray neoliberalism as an ideological and hegemonic project (Hall 2011: 728; Harvey 2007: 3) to remove capital from the constraints of Keynesian interventionism (Harvey 2007: 11), and to oversee 'the shift of power and wealth back to the already rich and powerful' (Hall 2011: 721; Harvey 2007: 42). Hall's neo-Gramscian account highlights Thatcherism's contradictory strategy of balancing ideological anti-statism with state-centrist interventions, thus providing an admirably nuanced account of hegemony that refuses to reduce Thatcherism to a simple phenomenon of ideological class interests. However, it makes the ideological impulse of Thatcherism of 'considerable importance' (Barry et al. 1996: 11), while refusing to acknowledge neoliberalism itself as anything other than an ideological project.

Heavily influenced by the ideological critique of media regulation (in the works of Garnham 1990 and Murdock 1993) and neoliberalism (Harvey 2007), Des Freedman, for example, has emphasised that media policy and regulation need to be understood in terms of political acts and ideological influences (Freedman 2008: 13), rather than as a disinterested process that is impartially applied in the public interest (Freedman 2008: 2), focusing our attention on the informal and relatively invisible influence of corporate lobbying as much as official policymaking processes (Freedman 2008: 12). Although such an approach sees neoliberalism as aversion to state intervention in markets (Freedman 2008: 11), it sees debate less in terms of a regulated market versus a free market, and more in terms of a distinction between regulation that is either in the public interest or for private interests (Freedman 2008: 17). Freedman's engagement with those alternative approaches that have emphasised the contradictory, historically-specific and ongoing nature of neoliberalisation ultimately concludes that, despite such contradictions and theoretical nuance, neoliberalism remains fundamentally connected to a limited set of core ideas; namely, free markets, individual rights, personal choice, small government, and minimal regulation (Freedman 2008: 25, 36). He warns, however, that in providing long lists of its negative aspects, or in treating it as shorthand for marketisation, neoliberalism is 'flattened and homogenised', to the extent that it comes to be little more than an 'umbrella term for all that is wrong with a more commercialised society', simultaneously dehistoricising the process (by suggesting that market obsession is only a recent phenomenon) and marginalising the tensions and competing interests at the heart of neoliberal projects (Freedman 2008: 37-38).

Nevertheless, Freedman maintains that a singular conception of neoliberalism that foregrounds its links with increasing social inequality remains both useful and necessary (Freedman 2008: 46), and recommends understanding neoliberalism instead (Freedman 2008: 41) as a range of discourses that legitimate the market and delegitimize the social (Couldry 2006), with the aim of transforming the balance of forces so as to facilitate capital accumulation (Harvey 2007). He maintains that while appreciating

varieties of neoliberalisation and acknowledging the nuances of neoliberal thought is a useful area of research, it remains limited compared to research that develops a sense of what links such variation and nuance together, approaching neoliberalism instead as a purposeful political project with an overarching commitment to private over public institutions and interests (Freedman 2008: 223-224).

Freedman's emphasis on 'critique' echoes similar calls to counter a perceived tendency in contemporary cultural studies and media studies to read Stuart Hall's work on identity and representation selectively, at the expense of his emphasis on ideology critique (Downey et al. 2014). Such calls distance a 'critical' version of cultural/media studies from an alternative relativist approach that has also tended to draw more on (an equally selective reading of) Foucault, leading to an insular case of 'Foucault-phobia' (Dawes 2016) amongst critical scholars that makes them reluctant to embrace Foucauldian critiques of neoliberalism that have developed in other disciplines.

At the same time, the 'critical' tendency to use 'neoliberalism' a little too loosely and freely, seeing it as a Leviathan (Collier 2012) that immerses itself everywhere, and denouncing it wholesale without really engaging it as an object of study in its own right, has been located within a broader weakness of the Left to reduce politics to negation and resistance, to the extent that it is often 'anti-everything' but rarely 'pro-something' (Ferguson 2009: 167). There are theoretical and methodological weaknesses to a structural and moralistic approach that ignores debates and developments beyond broadcasting studies; a self-defeating consequence of which may be to also undermine the political efficacy of such critique (Dawes 2017). In contrast, others have warned against fetishising neoliberalism as an ideology, representing it as a caricature of liberalism (Mirowski and Plehwe 2009: 433), or reducing it to (neoclassical) economics (Mirowski and Plehwe 2009: 421), when it should instead be seen as a multidisciplinary concern with theories and practices of the state (Mirowski and Plehwe 2009: 427) and market.

### Neoliberal governmentality

For Terry Flew, for instance, the term's use has become 'sloppy'. It is 'routinely invoked to explain everything from the rise of Bollywood themed weddings to competitive cooking shows to university departmental restructurings' and the propensity to 'lapse into a kind of conspiracy theory is readily apparent' (Dawes and Flew 2016). He has criticised the tendency of many scholars to use the term as a conceptual trash-can, '...into which anything and everything can be dumped, as long as it is done with suitable moral vehemence', and written about the need to 'rescue' the concept from the most vocal moral critics of markets and economic discourse, whom he accuses of producing functionalist and instrumentalist accounts of the state.

In recent years (2012; 2014; 2015), he has been focusing on Foucault's lectures on neoliberalism, and engaging with the theoretical debates on how best to understand neoliberalism. Foucault's lectures at the Collège de France in 1978-79, published in English in 2008 as *The Birth of Biopolitics*, were very important in giving the concept of neoliberalism some analytical rigour. Rather than just being used as an abuse term – something critical humanities scholars came to adopt to denounce any relation with economics and markets –, neoliberalism was now being seen as part of

an important historical moment, where economists associated with the 'Austrian School' (led by Hayek, and inspired by von Mises and Schumpeter) and the 'Chicago School' (Milton Friedman, George Stigler etc.), as well as the 'Virginia School' of James Buchanan and the 'public choice' theorists, were turning their critique of Keynesian economics and government intervention into markets into a wider set of ideas about the relationship between political economy and social order. For Flew, this shows that talk about neoliberalism has been moving beyond being essentially a rhetorical flourish to appearing as a sound analytical concept grounded in empirical evidence. He argues however, that this kind of approach cannot be combined with the ideological approach. For Flew (Dawes and Flew 2016), Foucault pursued a critique of Marxism from the perspective of someone who understood the theory well, and this makes it difficult to transpose Foucault's work into neo-Marxist theories of hegemony.

Motivated by dissatisfaction with the broadly Marxist reduction of capitalism to economic relations, of ideology to false ideas that serve ruling class interests, and of power to a falsifier and suppressor of 'true' human essence (Miller and Rose, 2008 2-4), a contrasting sociology of neoliberalism developed throughout the 1990s and 2000s under the banner of 'governmentality studies'. The work of the 'Anglo-Foucauldians' (Barry et al. 1996; Rose 1999; Miller and Rose 2008) on the Thatcherite and Reaganite neoliberal assaults on the welfare state focused instead on the governmental rationalities that emerged during the period.

Predominantly an 'Anglo School of Governmentality' building on the work of Nikolas Rose and colleagues, it was based in large part on what were at the time only the scattered availability (occasional interviews and partial notes from his then unpublished lectures of the late-1970s) of Foucault's elaborations on the subject of governmentality (Barry et al. 1996: 7). Of particular importance was Foucault's lecture on 'governmentality' (1<sup>st</sup> February 1978), subsequently published in English in *The Foucault Effect* (Burchell, Gordon and Miller 1991) and eventually in its proper context as the fourth lecture in *Security, Territory, Population* (2009). In this lecture, Foucault traced back to the 16<sup>th</sup> Century the emergence of the idea of 'government as a general problem', the associated problematisations of concepts such as state, economy, and society, and an increasing concern with statistics and calculation as a means of governing the 'conduct of conduct' (Foucault 1991; Rose 2000: 315). Arguing that the 'state' is a relatively abstract and unimportant concept, he shifted attention instead to the ways in which 'government', as both internal *and* external to the 'state', makes possible the redefinition of what is within and outside of the competence of the state; in other words, what is public and what is private (Foucault 1991: 103). Seeking to understand, without recourse to ideology (Miller and Rose 2008: 4), intervention into the lives of individuals in 'liberal' societies, which otherwise proclaimed the limits of the state and the privacy of the individual (Miller and Rose 2008: 1), the Anglo School found in Foucault's approach a more adequate way of capturing the productive, individualising aspects of power that actually make possible a series of positive and tactical interventions, as well as those negative aspects captured by the ideological approach.

Arguing that Hall's ideological critique of Thatcherism, in particular, missed the ethical and technical character of neoliberalism, and the ways in which neoliberalism constructively aligns diverse interests (Barry et al. 1996: 11), the governmentality scholars shifted theoretical attention away from political philosophy, and towards governmental rationality and the close analysis of mundane techniques and technologies.

Although the ethos of public service and the public provision of social welfare no longer play a pivotal role in the neoliberal way of governing social life (Miller and Rose 2008: 82), governmental analyses suggested that neoliberalism does not necessarily preclude their continued existence in some form. Rather than a rejection of actual failures of central planning, therefore, the neoliberal critique of the welfare state is better appreciated as a critique of the ideals of knowledge and power that such rationalities embody (Miller and Rose 2008: 81).

The governmentality lecture on which much of the early literature was based was more an 'overture of where [Foucault's] researches were going... than a culmination of analyses already undertaken' (Elden 2007: 29), however, both sympathetic and critical accounts have much to learn from the fuller 'history of [liberal and neoliberal] governmentality' (Elden 2007: 30) offered by the publication of Foucault's two lecture series on liberalism (2009) and then neoliberalism (2010).

For proponents, the advantage of the governmental over the ideological approach is that it treats the public-private (state-society) dichotomy as an instrument and effect, rather than the basis and limit, of governmental practice, becoming itself an object of study (Lemke, 2001: 201). It also highlights a congruence, rather than a distinction, between individuals and collectivities as moral-responsible and rational-economic actors (Lemke 2001: 201). Rather than diagnosing a shift from state to society, the state is shown to retain its sovereign form and take on new functions. The reduction in welfare state intervention, therefore, is less a matter of the state losing its powers of regulation, than the reorganisation and restructuring of governmental techniques, and the shifting of competence onto responsible and rational individuals (Lemke 2001: 201-202).

### Neoliberalism as process and discourse

According to 'inflationist' political-economic accounts (such as those provided by Hall and Harvey), neoliberalism is an expansive and adaptable ideological project linked to financialised capitalism. The Foucauldian 'sceptics' (such as Collier and Ferguson), on the other hand, emphasise it instead as one of many strands of a complex of individualised governmentalities, and never more than a flexible assemblage of technologies, routines and conducts (Peck 2013: 3).

Despite some efforts to bridge the gap between these two approaches (Larner 2003; Peck 2004) or to rethink the terms of debate (Brenner et al. 2010; Dean 2012), constructive dialogue between them has been rare. For some (Collier 2012: 189), such attempts risk obscuring rather than illuminating neoliberalism, as there are 'unbridgeable methodological differences' between political-economic and governmental approaches. Although Collier acknowledges that the tensions between similarly non-structural approaches can be reconciled, and neoliberalism as an original movement of thought linked to policy programmes that produce hybrid government formations, he maintains that such approaches cannot be reconciled with even the nuanced structural approach of Peck and colleagues (Collier 2012: 193-194). There remain, he argues, two distinct ways of approaching analysis. Either neoliberalism is specifically linked to particular elements that are then teased out from a jumble of diverse elements, or it is expanded so that the entire ensemble is associated with neoliberalism, in which case it is presumed to have greater significance than and influence upon any other element (Collier 2012: 189). Methodologically, Collier sees a clear

distinction between the approach that insists that heterogeneity and variegation can still be called neoliberal, and that which dispenses with structural explanations that only obfuscate actual processes.

For others (Peck 2013), however, although there are significant tensions between the contrasting ontological and epistemological understandings of neoliberalism, there remains scope for dialogue between them (Peck 2013a: 18). The urban studies scholars, Jamie Peck, Nik Theodore, and Neil Brenner have made the most serious attempt to find a compromise between approaches (Collier 2012: 188), accommodating a fluid and variegated appreciation of contextual difference while maintaining a structural approach that recognises the ways in which local differences and contextually embedded forms are shaped by the 'context of context' (Brenner et al. 2010). Both approaches have, they argue, questioned 'template' models of neoliberalism that tend to reduce it to a list of explanatory attributes, such as 'privatisation, deregulation and the limited state', though neither alarmist presumptions of a singular and global monolith, nor ambivalent or agnostic accounts of diverse techniques that share no more than a 'family resemblance', offer a satisfactory account of neoliberalism (Peck 2013a: 15). Rather, 'theoretically informed, and informing, empirical work' is required for the refinement of understandings of neoliberalisation (Peck 2013a: 19).

For geographer Simon Springer, the distinction made between ideological and governmental approaches is ultimately a false dichotomy, and approaching neoliberalism as discourse helps to recognise its variegated nature and transcend this impasse.

A discourse approach moves our theorizations forward through an understanding that neoliberalism is neither built from the 'top-down', as in Marxian understandings of ideological hegemony, nor from the 'bottom-up', as in post-structuralist notions of governmentality. Rather, neoliberalism is instead recognized as a mutable, inconsistent, and variegated process that circulates through the discourses it constructs, justifies, and defends (Springer 2012: 135)

Following Jamie Peck's and Simon Springer's recognition of neoliberalism as a variegated process, rejecting the false dichotomy between Marxist and Foucauldian approaches to neoliberalism, and emphasising the relational logic of the social, Sean Phelan (2014) develops his own discourse-based account of neoliberalism in the context of media studies. This approach builds on the work of Laclau (and Mouffe) on the idea of the 'political' as much as their approach to discourse theory, and mobilises Bourdieu's field theory as a sociological and theoretical supplement to Laclau. His approach is also indebted, to a lesser extent, to Glynos and Howarth's particular version of discourse theory, as well as their privileging of logics, the work of Billig on banal rhetoric, and of Couldry on media rituals.

Instead of over-relying on a reified version of neoliberalism, Phelan argues, it is more productive to see neoliberalism as a series of constitutive, discursive logics; in particular those of market determinism, commodification, individualization, competition, and self-interest. Rather than replacing, or being imposed, he contends, these neoliberal logics are dialectically internalised and contextually, didactically, and hege- monically articulated with other political, social, and fantasmatic logics. Consequently,



the task of media researchers is to identify not so much the ways in which neoliberal doctrine is reproduced in media content, but how the neoliberalisation of a journalistic habitus is primarily performative and always mediated (Phelan and Dawes 2018).

A focus on process also allows us to look at the longer-term history of the influence of neoliberal thought on media policy. In my own research, for instance, I have focused on the increasing importance of the concepts of ‘competition’ and ‘choice’ in British broadcasting policy in the decades leading up to the 1980s and the point at which scholars normally identify a neoliberal turn in policy, and connected them to dialogues that policymakers had with neoliberal think-tanks and lobbyists as part of the consultation process in developing policy (Dawes 2017), while others have analysed the internalisation of neoliberal discourse and perspectives within an ostensibly public service broadcasting working environment (Born 2005).

## Conclusion

While Freedman insists on the importance of retaining the term ‘neoliberalism’ and of a Marxist-informed critique of neoliberal ideology, Flew criticises the overblown and reductive use of the term and favours instead a Foucauldian-inspired reading of neoliberal governmentality. Despite their differences, both these authors reflect the position (exemplified by Stephen Collier, 2012) that the two paradigms cannot be reconciled. Phelan, on the other hand, follows Jamie Peck (2013) in seeking a way of bridging the gap between distinct theoretical and methodological approaches. A more reflexive and comparative form of media research (Flew et. al. 2016) and a focus on neoliberalism as a mediated as well as variegated process (Phelan 2018), as well as of media power as a *material* and *relational* property (Freedman 2014), can make not only a more effective critique of neoliberalised media; additionally, such media research into neoliberalism can, in turn, make a valuable contribution to its critique in other disciplines.

Drawing on these recent engagements in Anglophone media studies with those debates that have taken place in other disciplines, this article has argued for a rapprochement between these approaches, for a more self-reflexive engagement with neoliberalism as an object of analysis, and for a consideration of the necessity of engaging with neoliberalism as a mediated process rather than a unitary ideology. Ultimately, it represents a call for British media studies to be as interdisciplinary as it claims to be, and for the applicability of critical media and neoliberal studies to disciplines and domains of research beyond the Anglophone world.

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