Dan Schiller, **How to Think About Information**, University of Illinois Press, 2007, 267 pp., $35 (hardback).

Reviewed by
Russell A. Newman
University of Southern California

In 2005, in the wake of regulatory approval of the mergers of telecommunications behemoths Verizon with MCI followed by SBC with AT&T, William Kovacic – then a nominee for Federal Trade Commissioner – suggested during his Senate Commerce Committee vetting that mergers be seen not in a national perspective with implications for local communities, but rather in the context of global competition. Senator Ted Stevens' response made clear the apparent needs of the present era, as he declared that in coming years, questions of whether two large firms should be allowed to merge - "particularly . . . in the communications field" – would require new frameworks for analysis. In particular, "If we look at just the United States, they will seem large. But if you look at the global market for . . . the telecommunications industry in the future, they will be small." He then exhorted that in future considerations at the FTC, the agency should "look at the field of competition and not the size of the competitors here at home" (Hearing 2005, pp. 26-27). It is this corporate-government handshake and its evolution in the development of today's global contexts which serve as the backdrop to Dan Schiller's new volume, *How To Think About Information* (2007)*.* A pervasive aspect of these contexts today is the declaration from industry and public interest advocates alike that we must adapt our institutions, if not our own souls, to the new broadband reality. We hear that one of the most pressing missions our country faces is that of providing all a broadband Internet connection, catalyzed by perennial announcements that the United States, once a leader, is falling behind the rest of the world in this regard. One cannot help but sense that there is something oddly ugly underlying an argument to 'wire the nation' to primarily remain 'globally competitive.' With many thanks and high praise, Dan Schiller has come forward to pounce on this critical juncture with an effective: *it's all a red herring.*

Seizing upon present debates, eschewing common arguments, and, for all the calls we hear today of the need for a "broadband vision" for the United States, he becomes the first, to my mind, to provide the beginnings of the task in its purest form. The irony of saying so is that the arguments presented are hardly new: *How to Think About Information* is comprised of several studies spanning 20 years of research, reworked, expanded upon, and interwoven, if minimally. While his previous *Theorizing Communication: A History* (1996) laid a broad theoretical foundation upon which he continues to build, and his *Digital Capitalism* (2000) contained a similar analysis to this volume, the benefit of several years' passing since the worst of the telecom shakeout of the early 2000s has only sharpened his analysis (of course, Schiller would argue we are simply entering a new phase of this crisis). The new volume's strength, and its importance, is that it is not actually a book about public policy; rather, it is a book that interrogates both our conceptualizations of technology and the frameworks of policy debates surrounding it. Perspective and process supersede prescription, but that isn't entirely absent, either. What emerges is often counterintuitive, precisely because Schiller places telecommunications, audiovisual technologies and broadband infrastructure in their proper place for analysis; that is, he recognizes as fundamental that debates surrounding communication infrastructure *policy*, by necessity, must be examinations on the one

hand of broader social relationships facilitated by these same infrastructures, and on the other, how these relationships are intrinsically bound up in the infrastructure itself. While an old thesis, it is a point rendered anew not a moment too soon.

A return-to-basics originally published in the excellent *The Political Economy of Information* (Mosco & Wasko 1988) opens the book, attacking the technological breaks and 'computer revolutions' of the cheerleading business press, corporate lobbyists, postindustrialists, information theorists, and activists who herald a new, more democratic order emerging via an expanding online blogosphere and the likes of YouTube. Resuscitating a decades-old critique of postindustrialism (and of strains of Marxism that consider information-related industries 'unproductive') might seem anachronistic. However, one need only glance through most any national newspaper's business section, replete with fawning coverage of the merest move of Google or breathless pronouncements of "Web 3.0's" imminent rise - with, of course, little presentation of broader structural implications - to render the whole festering matter frustratingly necessary again. Rhetorical moves to declare information 'a different kind of commodity' deserving of its own, independent field of analysis, often found in debates surrounding 'intellectual property,' are dispensed with in short order as well. Such a viewpoint suffers, for Schiller, from substituting "for the historical development of social relations among persons the purportedly immanent qualities of things" (p. 7). Far more important is *the process itself* through which information has become a commodity in its particular, necessarily transient and historically situated form, "conditioned and structured by the social institutions and relations in which it is embedded . . . social relations [that] are today creating a specific form of capitalist organization across an unprecedented range" (p. 15-16).

It is this broader, ongoing process -– itself necessarily *continuous* -– that Schiller traces upon this foundation. His is a structural account that follows the growth of a transnational, networked capitalism in which government involvement was "pivotal and sustained, not only in procuring continued research and development funding but also for telecommunications industry liberalization; privatization of what had been public information; strengthening legal rights to private property in information; and shifting global trade and investment rules to favor services" (p. 40). He spurns focusing his gaze upon the progressions of the core telecommunications network behemoths themselves, a common tack that he says "has been unfortunate as well as mistaken, because it has recurrently helped to make antimonopoly principles – rather than social need – the preferred framework for policy" (p. 61). Rather, he turns the ordinary historical approach on its head by focusing instead on the *primary constituencies* of these technologies – the business sector – that were (and continue to be) so effective at molding information technology to suit their increasingly globally networked needs. Alongside the financial crises of the 1970s, he describes the renewed push to subvert long-standing (if imperfect) protections and the 'hollowing-out' of public telecommunications infrastructure, all part of the radical shift to completely liberalize communications infrastructure itself in all its forms. He explores this model's successful export to other nations, a sustained campaign that appealed to global elites utilizing the very 'global competitiveness' argument trumpeted across America to 'wire the nation' today. Following naturally from the commercialization of communications infrastructure, the sponsor system expands exponentially on- and offline in the resulting 'global cultural marketplace,' showing "that the system-development process that ensues from this radical policy shift [to liberalize infrastructure] has been made to incarnate the contradictory market logic of the

larger political economy: *more private control* for corporate users, network suppliers, and investors translates into *less societal control and reduced democratic accountability"* (p. 96, emphasis in original).

The continuing shift is significant. Disastrously, "[t]he circuits of daily life are being set at the service of the sales function so that virtually any area of cultural practice can be reorganized to suit the demands of its underwriters. Captured by proprietary interests, the culture skids and slides away from democratic development" (p. 161). A communications infrastructure whose design was driven by (and pushed ever further to suit the needs of) transnational capital only renders notions like the 'digital divide' little more than devious chimeras in their presently accepted form, if not overt weapons against the powerless. Wire the nation, but to what end? Distribute $100 laptops, but for what purpose and in whose interest – their recipients, or the expanding and deepening tentacles of today's global capitalism? Who benefits from the distribution of near-free editions of the latest Microsoft operating system (Beer 2007)? Critics would rightly argue that social movements have increasingly appropriated electronic networks to seek justice, and this must be recognized (and Schiller does, careful not to cast aside individual subjectivity by any stretch), but "in historical terms - the only terms that matter - such technologies have provided indispensable sites of capitalist accumulation" (p. 23).

How liberating, then, to be reminded that this progression has been predictable and banal: "At a basic level, this endeavor has been thoroughly, even necessarily, uncreative," Schiller reminds us. "Leading features of today's Internet have been recast to act merely as extensions of long-standing corporate-commercial practice." It "embodies and further extends the tendency toward transnationalized corporate production and distribution;" it "simultaneously supports a deepened effort to market to consumers by differentiating and segmenting them into target groups;" and finally, it "sustains a trend toward more comprehensive corporate monitoring and metering of transactions" (p. 141). This required not just capitalists' commitment, but political commitment as well: global conglomerates serve to "pool transnational capital, to produce commodities within the new international division of cultural labor and propel them outward into the world market" (p. 134) while states act, with a handshake and a wink (and, as necessary, bombs) to create a stable environment for capital. However, for each step taken to increase stability, more instability erupts: the fiber glut, the natural result – no anomaly this – of the liberalization project, resulted in the strengthening of competing global centers, as excess capacity allowed foreign firms to buy cheaply into the system. Senator Stevens' concern of the growth of foreign telecommunications companies overtaking our own shortsightedly misses the very role that he and his colleagues played in creating this scenario, although that is far removed from Schiller's own concern. What *is* Schiller's concern is that "in complex and varied ways . . . accelerated commodification reorients the institutional infrastructure through which audiovisual trade flows . . . These efforts do not necessarily generate global uniformities in programming or in the specifics of national regulatory policies, but they work toward overarching congruence, in that systems of provision are reshaped by an increasingly omnipresent capital logic" (p. 121). The lesson is that the "digital divide" becomes a viable concept once again *only if it is conceived as less an issue of access than an issue of control:* "[It] is, most profoundly, about the distribution of social power to make policy for the production and distribution of information resources. Unless that power is broadly shared, democracy itself is threatened" (p. 57).

A strategy to restore democratic aims to our communications infrastructures requires that taken-for-granted concepts and metrics must be turned on their head. Exploding demand for mobile telephony worldwide is less an expression of free will to communicate than "an attempt to rationalize the irrational by attempting to wrest a measure of personal control in a social world that continues to spin out of control" (p. 172). Policies promoting "competition" are more often code for rendering communities voiceless, for giving conduit providers new mettle to selectively speed along or slow down Internet-based communications, and for essentially *eliminating* any vestige of real competition where it matters. Technological "convergence" must be re-recognized as the agenda it was before it became a phenomenon. The ascendancy of desired legislative "level playing fields" (or "regulatory parity" between broadband platforms) represent the victory of forces long seeking to replace goals of providing for social need (even if imperfectly implemented) with Pareto optimality instead. "The dominant approach treats with contempt the idea that networks should be shaped, overseen, and used with regard for any substantial public interest. The contempt has been concealed, however, by a veneer of theory that, by equating the public interest to marketplace efficiency, purports to vitiate the former" (p. 111).

Schiller is certainly not alone in his concerns, nor are they particularly new. Where Schiller sets himself apart, however, is in his broader, historically and sensitively attuned cultural-theoretic approach to today's debates: remaining decidedly anti-essentialist and technologically non-determinist in his analyses, he recognizes that any effort aimed toward reform via governmental agency - national or international - is rear-guard, as necessary as it is. Long-term, however, the instillation of democratic aims within communications infrastructure is bound wholesale to the degree of which it is instilled in broader culture itself. Schiller is sensitive to the subjectivities of those who struggle against the pressures brought to bear on the least powerful, and acknowledges that in many ways, the opportunities to create critical content have seldom been more available. What is crucial, however, is to view these developments in their proper context, and to never forget the general trajectory of the coattails upon which these opportunities ride. Communications media today in all their forms were built, modified and are operated with a narrow focus and a very particular constituency in mind: business. While some may view his conclusions as pessimistic and his forecasts gloomy, one can argue instead that those who look deeper will find new frameworks, if obscured, for envisioning "foundations of the public-service principle[s]" that must be "reimagined and thence reapplied" (p. 111), necessarily built from the ground up: myself, I find this tremendously exhilarating indeed.

References

Beer, S. (2007). Microsoft aims to double user base with $3 Windows and Office.   Retrieved 19 June, 2007, from http://www.itwire.com.au/content/view/11466/53/.

Hearing regarding the nomainations of J. Thomas Rosch and William E. Kovacic to be Commissioners of the Federal Trade Commission: Hearing before the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, United States Senate, 109th Congress, 1st Sess. (2005).

Mosco, V., & J. Wasko. (1988). *The Political Economy of Information*. Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press.

Schiller, D. (1996). *Theorizing Communication: A History*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Schiller, D. (2000). *Digital Capitalism: Networking the Global Market System*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Schiller, D. (2007). *How to think about information*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.