

# Marx is Back, but Will Knowledge Workers of the World Unite? On the Critical Study of Labour, Media, and Communication Today

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# Thanks!

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# “Shameless Plug”

## CANADIAN JOURNAL of COMMUNICATION

The Labouring of Communication VOLUME 31 · NUMBER 3 · 2006

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VINCENT MOSCO

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Day of Mourning

CAROLE CONDÉ

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## CANADIAN JOURNAL of COMMUNICATION

SPECIAL ISSUE

**The Labouring of Communication**

Guest Editors: Catherine McKercher & Vincent Mosco

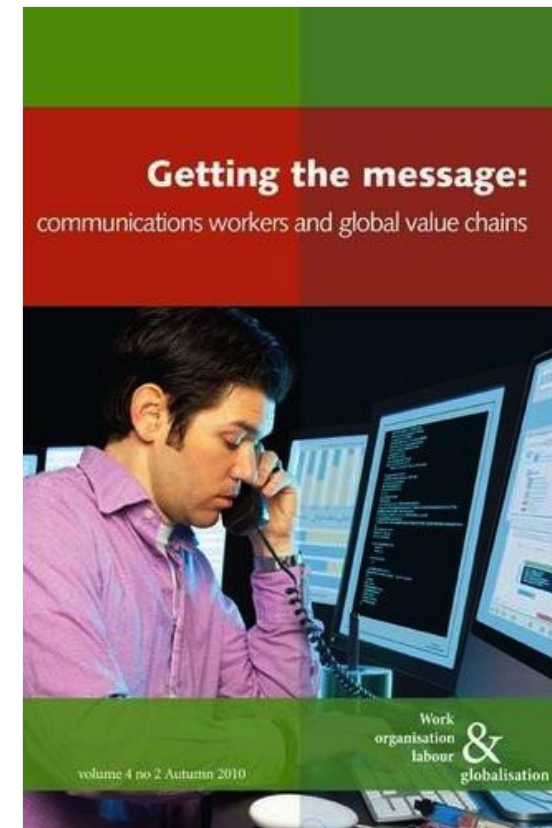
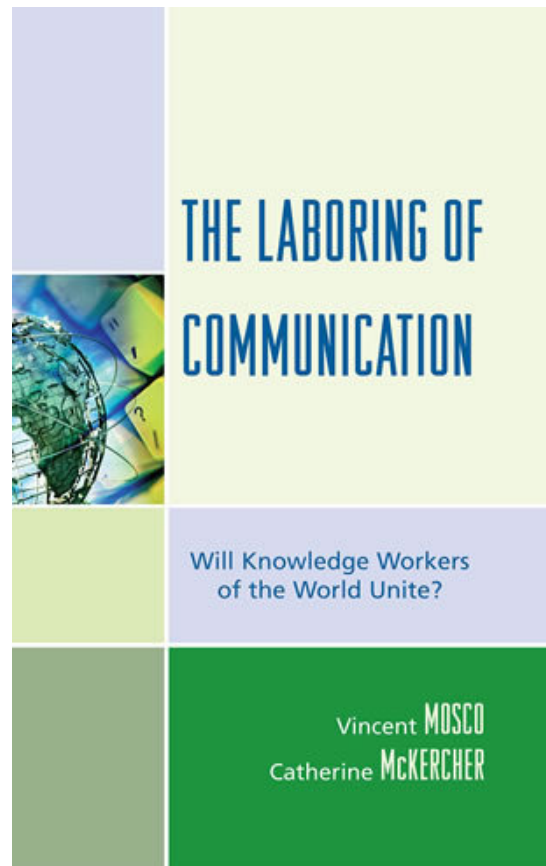
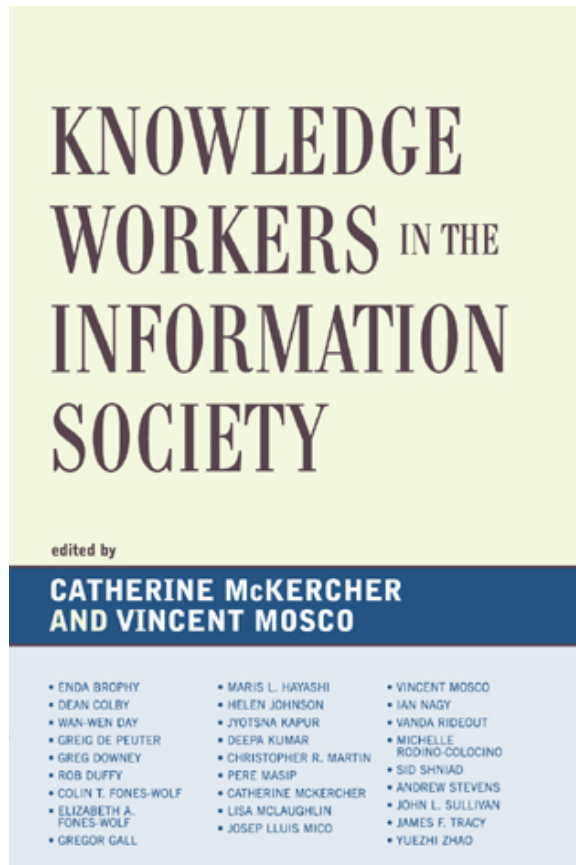
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# A few more



# Marx is back: 2008

The Times of London: Marx is Back

The Times of India: Marx in the Time of  
Pink Slips

Das Kapital as best seller

Sarkozy, the Pope, the Archbishop of  
Canterbury

## Marx is still back

“The bearded one has rarely looked better.”

Businessweek

“It’s springtime for Marx.”

Globe and Mail, Canada

But which Marx?

No thinker in the nineteenth century has had so direct, deliberate and powerful an influence on mankind as Karl Marx.

-Isaiah Berlin

The world would not be in such a snarl, had Marx been Groucho instead of Karl.

-Irving Berlin

And which Karl?

The political economist

The cultural theorist

The journalist

The Grundrisse



# Knowledge as language and labour

Since the development of computers and the Internet, the focus has been on the language side of the definition: discourse, meaning, content and the technological means of producing, distributing and consuming information.

# The labouring of communication

There is another history of knowledge,  
communication, and information studies,  
what we might call *a labouring of  
communication*.

# The subterranean stream

St. Simon, Marx, Veblen, Fourastié, Machlup,  
Porat, Bell, Galbraith, and Braverman.

# Contemporary thinking about knowledge labour

Today, critical theorists are uncovering this history and advancing the story: Ursula Huws, Dan Schiller, Christian Fuchs, Michael Denning, Nick Dyer-Witheford, Kiran Mirchandani, Yu Hong, and Jack Linchuan Qiu.

# Conceptual and political significance

The key question is not: What will be the next new thing? Rather: Will knowledge, information, and communication workers of the world unite?

# Why knowledge workers?

- Economic significance
- Communication skills
- Praxis

# Worker agency

My focus is on what workers are doing about the challenges posed by technological change, corporate concentration, the neo-liberal state and globalization.

## The hegemonic view

This is not easy because the hegemonic view is that labour, when it is not ignored, is just a dependent variable.



## The familiar bad news

Moreover, these have not been the best of times for labour especially in North America where union membership is low and trade unions defensive; a result primarily of corporate power and deregulation.

“the decline of organized labor explains a fifth to a third of the growth in [American] inequality”  
(Western and Rosenfeld, 2011)

# Labour's response

- Trade union convergence and internationalism
- Social movement unionism

# Convergence

- Technological
- Corporate
- Labour process
- Trade union

# Trade union convergence

CWA, CEP (+CAW?), ver.di, and UNI but the Hollywood unions?

# What difference does it make?

- CWA and the CBC: Defeating a 2005 lockout
- CWA + ver.di = TU
- CEP: Environmental activism, the Humanity Fund
- UNI: Framework Agreements; Call Centre Charter
- QUFA: Resisting the cuts; defending education

# Social movement unionism

- WashTech (vs. Microsoft)
- Alliance@IBM
- Freelancers Union
- The Programmer's Guild
- Workers' Action Centre

# Importance of global connections

- UNI
- ver.di

But also local self-organizing

- Collettivo PrecariAtesia



# India

- NTUI and UNI
- IT Professionals Forum
- Young Professionals Collective
- UNITES (Union for IT-enabled Services Professionals)

# China

At Foxconn's largest plant, in Shenzhen, 420,000 Chinese earning about \$188 per month and about 70,000 "interns" assemble electronic components for megacustomers like Apple, Amazon, Hewlett-Packard and Dell.

# Fair Labor Association

[http://www.fairlabor.org/sites/default/files/documents/reports/foxconn\\_investigation\\_report.pdf](http://www.fairlabor.org/sites/default/files/documents/reports/foxconn_investigation_report.pdf)

- Survey of 35,000 Foxconn workers and visits to plants across the country
- Massive violations of Chinese law
- Seven day work week; unpaid overtime; health and safety ignored
- Widespread and pervasive alienation

# Shanghai Science and Technology Publishing House

- Deskillling
- Commercialism and Party propaganda
- Shrinking social welfare programs
- Elimination of the work-unit system
- Class and age differentiation: Management vs. workers; Old vs. young

# Resistance

(Yu Hong, Jack Qiu, Zhao Yuezhi, Cao Jin, Jinhua Yao):

- Upsurge in strikes
- ACFTU
- NAFITU (China, Hong Kong, Taiwan)
- Virtual communities of QQ clusters

## Bringing it back home

Academic labour – the aristocracy of labour?  
or a model for workers worldwide?

Can knowledge workers of the world unite?  
democratically? for democracy?

- More: convergence, internationalism, social movement unionism
- Variety: lessons from Italy, Quebec, India, China

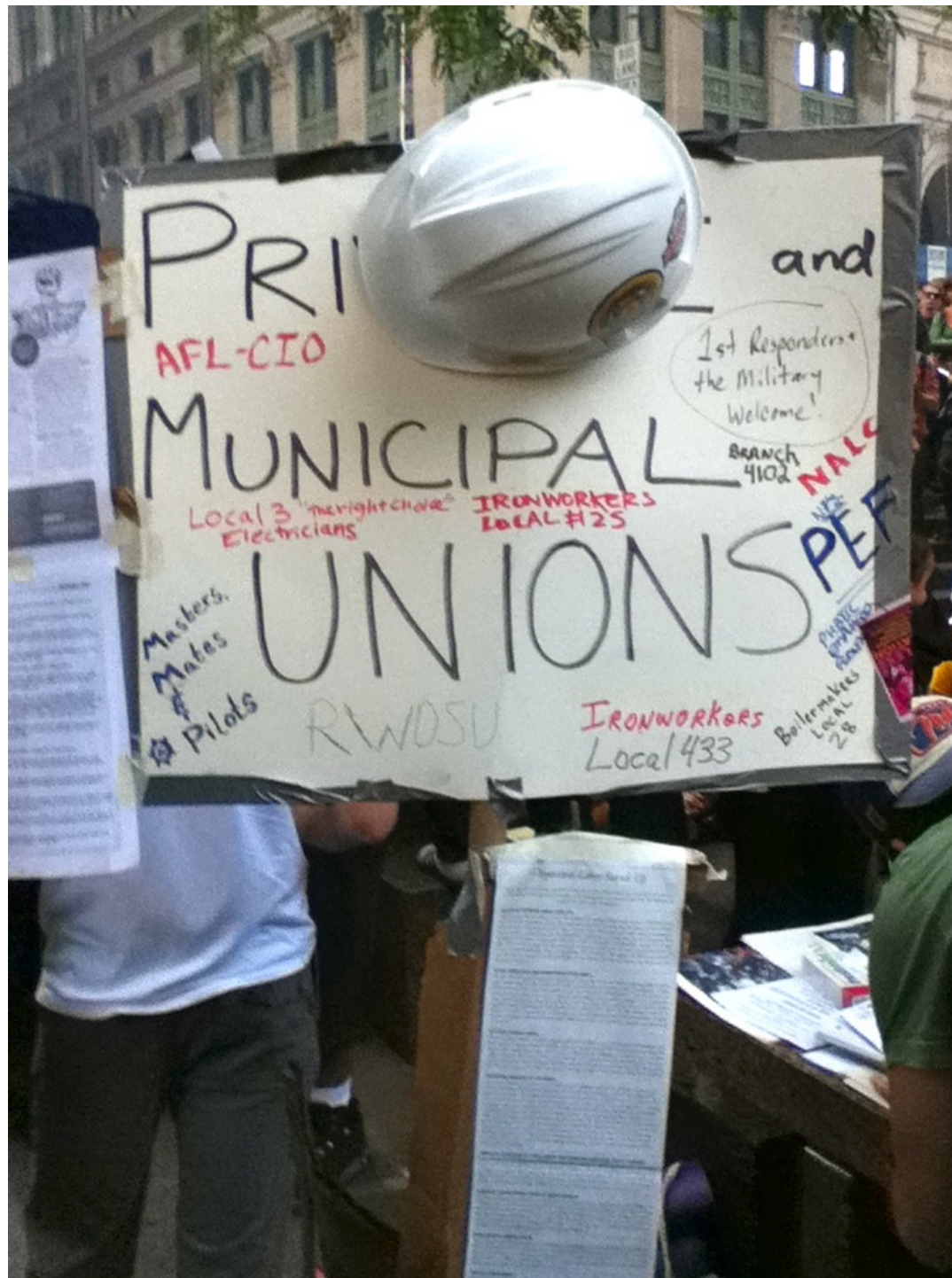
## Occupy Wall Street - Unions

<http://occupywallst-unions.org/>

“The Occupy movement has changed unions,” said Stuart Appelbaum, the president of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union. “You’re seeing a lot more unions wanting to be aggressive in their messaging and their activity. You’ll see more unions on the street, wanting to tap into the energy of Occupy Wall Street.”

*New York Times*, November 9, 2011.











# Justice for Jobs

