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The Political Economy of Communication: Power and Resistance, An Interview with Vincent Mosco

Begoña Ballesteros, Luis Luján, and Joan Pedro

Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain.

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Abstract

In this interview professor Vincent Mosco discusses major structural features of the social system, which constrain the possibilities of using technology, media and communication in a genuinely democratic way. At the same time, he also emphasizes the importance of dialectics in social processes and analyzes the agency and resistance of different social actors -such as communication workers- in the processes of media production and democratic struggle. He then refers to the challenges that new communication technologies pose to capitalism. Finally, he reflects on the theory and the state of the field of political economy of communication.

Introduction

Canadian professor Vincent Mosco (1948) is one of the most notable figures in critical communication research, especially in the field of the political economy of communication. His academic work has focused on the economic, political, technological and cultural implications of the transformations that the communication sector has experienced since the end of the 20th century.

Some of his best known books are *Broadcasting in the United States: Innovative challenge and organization control* (1979), which was based on his doctoral thesis in sociology at

Harvard University; *The Political Economy of Information* (1988), edited with Janet Wasko; and *Continental Order?: Integrating North America for Cybercapitalism* (2001), edited with Dan Schiller. In 2005, Mosco received the *Olson Book Award* for his book *The Digital Sublime: Myth, Power and Cyberspace* (2004) in which he demystified the idea of technological development as a universal panacea. The previous year, his research on communication, technology, and society was recognized with the Dallas Smythe Award.

Under his Canada Research Chair in Communication and Society at Queen's University, Kingston, Mosco's recent research has dealt with the way in which communication and information workers are responding to the current context of neoliberalism, information society, and technological change. As a result of this research he has co-edited with Catherine McKercher *Knowledge Workers in the Information Society* (2007) and written with Professor McKercher *The Laboring of Communication: Will Knowledge Workers of the World Unite* (2008).

Unquestionably, his most influential work is *The Political Economy of Communication: Rethinking and Renewal*, published in 1996 and revised and updated in 2009. Almost 15 years after its original publication, this book is considered a classic by communication scholars and an indispensable tool for those who wish to understand communication from a critical perspective.

In this interview, Professor Mosco summarizes some of the main concepts, ideas and processes that he has studied throughout the years. He shares his insights on the tradition of the political economy of communication and some of its main entry points, discusses technological and social change, and reflects on communication and media at the current crossroads. Indeed, the capitalist system is facing serious contradictions today and new opportunities for civil society and democratic development have emerged. Mosco talks about these changes focusing on the dialectical relationship between structure and agency and between power and resistance, paying special attention to the new media.

Ballesteros, Luján & Pedro: A revised and updated edition of your 1996 landmark book *The Political Economy of Communication* was published in 2009. The core concepts you develop in the book are commodification, spatialization, and structuration. How do

these concepts still help understand the most important features and relations of the communication phenomena today?

Mosco: It seems to me that these concepts are more important than ever. First, *commodification* refers to taking goods or services valued for their use and turning them into commodities that are valued for what they can bring in exchange. Commodification is my entry point to understand communication and it seems to me that it is more central today to understanding mass media, new media and information technology than ever before. I've been studying for years the process whereby advances in technology make it possible to measure and monitor, and to package and repackage communication and information products. The new media we have today make it easier to commodify stories, news and other forms of information and entertainment, and to distribute them widely. We also have more and more transnational businesses that are using new technologies as inputs to produce more commercial products. Therefore, in essence, commodification is central because it is more and more apparent that the mass media are commercial products.

When I was writing the first edition to the book it seemed to me that commodification does not completely explain social relations, and should not be the only tool in the political economy of communication (PEC). I made this point on philosophical grounds, whose underlying view is that we should not reduce all phenomena to one essential cause. That is why I developed additional entry points including, first, *spatialization*, which looks at the ways in which we overcome spatial constraints with communication and information. I use spatialization, a term that has been used by geographers for many years, as opposed to the more popular term globalization. I do that, in part, because I consider globalization more of a euphemism, which is used to support the extension of business and other institutions worldwide. Spatialization is a more objective term, which refers to the ways in which communication and information technologies are being used to extend communication and media across spatial boundaries.

Finally, I use the term *structuration* derived, in part, from a line in Marx's 18th Brumaire, which, to paraphrase, is that people make history but not under conditions of their own making. This means that agency is constrained by structures and structures are built with agency. *Structuration* thereby studies the process by which agency and structure interact and create

different kinds of social relations, including those based on class, gender, race and other social relational formations.

These are the three major entry points. Permit me to say one other thing about them. I think it is important to emphasize that these three entry points work in a dialectical fashion, i.e., commodification is not just the process of creating exchange values; it is also one that is opposed by those who defend use value as a central force in social life. Similarly, spatialization does not simply mean the extension of commercial institutions, State and other structures on a global basis; it is also opposed dialectically by those who defend, for example, local structures or public spaces against this commercial spatialization. Finally, structuration exists in a continuous process of struggle, whether that is class struggle to fight against the hegemony of the dominant class, struggles over gender, struggles over race, and other social struggles to protect, for example, as in our field, the mass media as an institution to advance social life as opposed to simply having commercial purposes.

Ballesteros, Luján & Pedro: We think it is really valuable that you put emphasis on agency, but understanding agency in the context of the structures that limit and constrain the possibilities of human action. We are thinking about your recent work with Catherine McKercher (2007, 2008), which deals with knowledge and communication workers in the so-called information society. Your empirical research documents that workers around the world are responding critically to the new challenges that arise from technological change, neo-liberalism, and the new global capitalist informational economy. We wondered if these struggles are representative of what is happening in mainstream trends, or if they are specific cases that may reflect a rather optimistic view of worker's resistance.

Mosco: I think that is a very good question. It is important to emphasize that labor is a central component of the commodification process. Communication scholars have done a very good job of describing how contents of the media and audiences are commodified, but they haven't spent much time on the commodification of labor, that is the way workers are involved in producing and distributing the media. We chose to concentrate on labor, in part, to make communication scholars more aware of the importance of labor in the process of making

media, but also to inform labor studies scholars that they need to pay attention to communication and cultural laborers, something that they have not done. You are absolutely correct. The point of emphasis in our book is to focus on the agency of workers. We do that because much of what research has been done on labor, media and technology is about how new technology and the corporations that use it exploit labor and degrade the labor process. But if you look at this dialectically we recognize that labor is an active participant in the process of creating value and some of that participation is resistance in a variety of ways; individual ways in which people try to control and make some sense of their work and more collective ones when workers get together in labor unions and other forms of workers organizations.

We noticed in our research –first in the United States, then in Europe and now, in the latest stage of our research project, globally- that there is an upsurge in the resistance of workers worldwide in the cultural, communications, telecommunications and I.T. sectors. So our job is to begin the process –along with other scholars who work on this- of describing this resistance, this active social agency of workers. We see this in traditional, such as the ways trade unions, like the Communication Workers of America, are organizing in the new media sectors. We see this happening in Canada and Europe too. We have also observed, however, new forms of workers organizations that have been especially important in the I.T. sector. For example, workers organizing at Microsoft, where the workers association WashTech has had an impact on the labor process of what is one of the largest I.T. firms in the world. We also see this outside of the core of developed societies. I have done research in India and China and find remarkable and very courageous evidence of worker agency and resistance. You are correct to point out that what we are describing are mere examples. How pervasive are they? I think this remains to be seen, but it seems to us, preliminarily, that it is pervasive enough to bring it to the attention of communication scholars who need to focus on labor organizing and labor resistance, both in traditional and in new ways.

Ballesteros, Luján & Pedro: Coming back to the core concepts of *The Political Economy of Communication*, could you comment on the origins of the processes of commodification, spatialization and structuration? What historical periods and

structural factors fostered their development?

Mosco: I think that these concepts are both universal and specific. I think it is reasonable to see them in both senses, and even necessary, certainly, in the study of the media. Commodification, or the development of exchange value and of markets, has been a process that has been a part of societies for a long time, even predating capitalism. Similarly the process of spatial expansion has been with us for a long time. Certainly, there has been, if I return to structuration, patriarchy for a much longer period of time than we have experienced capitalism. In one sense, these are general, universal concepts that are more or less applicable to different historical periods. I choose to give them emphasis by starting with commodification and moving on to the other two in this period because they are historically relevant in very specific terms to a capitalist world-system. Commodification emerges as a leading entry point in the 17th and 18th centuries in Europe as capitalism, starting with commercial agriculture and then commercial industries, emerges as a major organizing social force. I focus on these terms in the way I do today because they are historically, in my view, the most relevant to understand contemporary social relations.

Ballesteros, Luján & Pedro: In the context of a capitalist economy, what social actors are more responsible for the commodification of the communication flows? Is it the State, since it has liberalized the markets? Is it the media, for adopting the principles of commodification? Is it a certain logic within the system?

Mosco: I think, first and foremost, it is capitalists who have advanced capitalism. But if we look at this more specifically, I think we need to focus on three distinct forces that promote commodification. The first are the specific media producers, that is the corporations that produce and distribute mass media, develop new technologies like social networking sites for commercial purposes, i.e., to build markets, make profit and advance the production of surplus value.

Secondly, we have the State, which contributes broadly to mobilizing institutions, laws and public support for this process. It provides the institutional framework for media producers.

The third force is the general collection of capitalists, who, for example, use the mass media

to advance their own messages, specifically through advertising, but also by working with media producers to ensure, broadly, that information and entertainment promote commodification. I've said "broadly", because this does not mean supporting capitalism in every instance. So while it is important to focus on Rupert Murdock's News Corporation or on Disney and its ABC network, as central participants, it is capitalists in general, specifically through their advertising, and the State, through law and regulation, that also advance the process of commodification.

In essence, we are talking about a triangle at the top of which are the media producers themselves and at each corner we find, on the one hand, the State, and on the other side, capitalists in general.

Ballesteros, Luján & Pedro: In this context that you are describing, what role do you think the public media and the State may play in the future? Could the State challenge the capitalist and media elite?

Mosco: Again, it is important to return to the concepts of the dialectic and of agency. All social processes contain contradictions, contestation and resistance. The State itself is what we call a contested terrain, i.e., a space of struggle. In general terms, the State is organized to advance the interests of capital, for example, by managing tensions and conflicts in private and commercial media markets through law and regulation and also by keeping down public and other forms of media that might challenge commercial interests. At the same time, however, the State needs the broad support of its public, of society, and that includes organizations that work to advance public media and oppose commercialization. It has to respond to pressure to build more public media by admitting some of it into the system. So most developed societies have a public television channel and a public radio; they have public means of communication, which is part of resistance. So we have a process by which the State promotes capital, but then tries, at the same time, to incorporate public media because it is pressured to do so and because by incorporating, it can clean it up and make it less controversial. In the course of doing that, public media have a very important role to play in revealing the limitations of capitalism and uncovering government problems. We have a long tradition of resisting through public media and we also have new forms of public media

developing at the community level.

I think that there are great opportunities for communication scholars to describe and participate to advance a more public and democratic media. In North America there is an organization that I and some colleagues helped to form in 1979, The Union for Democratic Communication, which brings together critical scholars and alternative media practitioners and, internationally, the I.A.M.C.R. (International Association for Media and Communication Research), which serves as a forum for critical scholars worldwide. So, yes, there is control by capital and the State, but resistance takes place.

Ballesteros, Luján & Pedro: With regards to the interaction between the State, the media and other social actors of the capitalist system, do you think that there is a relation between the commodification of communication and cultural flows oriented towards consumption and entertainment, instead of being oriented towards education and liberation, and a certain decline of class consciousness and the weakness of workers as an engine of social change?

Mosco: It is very difficult to draw conclusions on such a general concept of global consciousness. However, I think it is important in our responsibility as academics to draw conclusions based on our research that are helpful in understanding such important issues. First of all, it is vital to see that what television, new media and the Internet provide is a form of education; in essence, a form of educating people to be good consumers, to prepare them to become obedient workers, to advance a system that would singularly turn everything into a marketable commodity, to turn every space into a private, commercial, restricted space. It is absolutely accurate to conclude that there has been a massive and global system of education to create the global consumer. And this does make it more challenging for those of us who think that there is more to social life than simply consumption and advancing profit.

With that said, I think that there are many other individuals and organizations around the world that would support the view that there is more to life than commercialism and capitalism. We see this in all sorts of movements to resist and oppose the forces of capitalism. Sometimes this has difficulty in being expressed because people feel it individually and do not have outlets, institutions, organizations that they can turn to.

I would say that on a general level, on the one hand, yes, capitalist culture has won major victories worldwide in reducing a good deal of culture to the singularity of capitalism. At the same time, it is important to recognize that capitalism contains significant contradictions that have contributed to its own failures. On a general level we have had, certainly during the last year and a half, a massive global financial crisis in capitalism that has had a powerful effect on both old and new media. The economic crisis that we face worldwide has had that impact, and it is only the latest in a series of the so-called bubbles that have disrupted capitalism significantly. It is important to recognize that media, especially new media, play an important role because capitalism, which, in essence, reached a limit in its ability to generate surplus value production through agriculture and through industrial capacity, has turned to new media and mass media to generate profit. But this itself has fed the bubble, the crisis within capitalism. Consider the widespread view that capitalism can accomplish everything with new media -that it can end history, overcome geography, and transform politics. It is important for us not just to retain hope, but to analytically understand that these are not just presumed capacities of capitalism; they are also myths that capitalism uses to build support for its practices. Moreover, when bankers, insurance companies, and other informational capitalists act on these myths, they result in contradictions that disrupt capitalism. Capitalism is conflicted internally and we are now experiencing the consequences through massive unemployment, declining standards of living, and the failure of States to resolve the crisis without drastic measures.

At the same time, most contradictions and other forces are creating resistance at a level of consciousness. I think a part of that comes down to the fact that people's political and belief system resist what reducing everything to a singularity, that is, to one way of understanding and doing things. They seek diversity, they seek complexity and they raise questions when capitalists try to turn everything into a unitary mode of production or consciousness. They look for alternatives. While it may be the case that capitalist culture is very powerful worldwide, my research and my travels around the world, including in places where one would not expect it, for example in China and Singapore, where one finds evidence of authoritarianism, one also finds an opening up, a willingness and a desire to create a more democratic culture and way of life.

Ballesteros, Luján & Pedro: Focusing on capitalism's contradictions as the ones you mention, the autonomist theory holds that technology, such as the Internet, challenges the capitalist property and market regimes under which communication flows operate. How do you view this situation?

Mosco: Professor McKercher and I acknowledge, in our research (especially in our book *The Laboring of Communication*), the important contribution of the autonomists. We conclude that the autonomist view –of Negri and Hardt, Terranova, and Dyer-Witheford, have advanced understanding, especially of the new media, by demonstrating that we need to think about the challenges and the complexities that new media pose to capitalism. Capitalism is always challenged by new media, whether the new media was radio in the early 20th century, television or now the Internet. We recognize that autonomists make a very interesting contribution by demonstrating that technology poses challenges to capitalism. Where we have more difficulty is in accepting the view that some, but not all autonomists, conclude that new technology, especially the media, will necessarily make it impossible for capitalism to solve the value problem posed by new media, that is, to produce communication and cultural commodities that they can use to realize profit. What we are seeing today, I think, acknowledges the contribution of autonomists to show that many of the big media companies, however concentrated, transnational and powerful as never before, are nevertheless having problems figuring out how they are going to make money from the new media.

Along these lines, new technologies make it easier to democratize communication and information. This is certainly a new challenge for capitalism. But a challenge does not mean that capitalists will fail to find, as they already are, new modes of making money. What this points to is the absolute necessity for communication scholars and media activists to study the history of media. The same challenges posed by the Internet today were posed to capitalism nearly a century ago, for example, when radio came along in the 1920s. It took two decades for capitalists to figure out the best way to make money from radio. In fact, when radio arrived most thought that they would only be able to profit by selling radio receivers. It took AT&T and RCA many years to realize that they could actually sell entertainment and thereby deliver audiences to advertisers for a price. We can observe the same problem today

with new media. So, while I would agree with the autonomists that new media pose challenges to capitalism (like all systems, it is indeed imperfect); my conclusion is that without resistance and critical thinking, capitalists ultimately solve for themselves the problem of creating and sustaining surplus value in new media.

Ballesteros, Luján & Pedro: The Internet, which is probably the main technological tool in the information society, is a paradigmatic example of this double-edged condition of information technologies. On the one hand it is being used for corporate and political control. On the other hand, it enables the creation and development of non-corporate media and of progressive and radical social organization. Can these two realities coexist or is one of them going to win the battle over the other?

Mosco: Again, I come back to the dialectic. It is always the case that media are contested, so if I may return to radio, for many years, while it was used for commercial purposes -once businesses figured out how to make money with it-, labor unions that owned radio stations used those stations, as historians are documenting, to advance a more democratic public message. It is the same with the Internet. The important thing to understand -especially for those who have not looked at the history- is that this is not new. The media have always been contested. My sense is that this trend is likely to continue into the future. The point isn't so much whether one of them will win out because I don't think one force ever wins to dominate an entire medium; but rather what would be the balance? Will democracy become a more significant force in the media? Will it be able to limit the expansion of commercialization and commodification?

Ballesteros, Luján & Pedro: One of the main controversies around the Internet is the issue of Net Neutrality. Could you comment on it?

Mosco: This concept means, essentially, that everyone has equal access to new media because no single provider is permitted to provide advantages to those who would use the Internet simply because they have more money. It's like saying "we are able to gain easier access to the highway and to drive faster because we pay more money to those who build and operate the highway; conversely, if you don't have money, it will take longer to get on the highway and you will be relegated to a very slow, narrow lane". Net neutrality is an effort to

fight this, by making it a principle that everyone has equal access to information highways.

The term Net Neutrality is new, but the idea is an old one. From the early days of the telegraph and the telephone, people struggled to gain equal access to the means of communication. I think this is an issue that is worth fighting for and many organizations are doing so and are wining important victories, most recently in the United States under Obama's Federal Communications Commission.

But Net Neutrality is not the only key to a more democratic new media. There has been some controversy in the U.S. because one of the largest labor unions representing communication workers has not demonstrated strong support for Net Neutrality. The union believes that if companies are not allowed to build networks in such a way that they make more money from some providers, it will make it more difficult for these companies to invest in new media. The union fears the loss of jobs and the overall decline in network services. This is a complex issue. While I think it's important to support Net Neutrality, we want to be sure that we also create the jobs that continue to build the network, so that the highway for everyone is as large and as fast as it can possibly be. We don't want Net Neutrality to restrict the size of the highway. This is a particular problem, ironically enough, in a rich country like the United States, which has rates of access to media and bandwidth speeds that are lower than one might expect by comparison to other countries in the developed world. In my view we have to do two things: We have to guarantee equality, which is Net Neutrality, and we have to invest in the construction of national and global networks which guarantee that everyone has access to the best possible networks. As a political economist I recognize that this will not result from economic policy alone; it is also a political question that involves critical thinking and activism.

Ballesteros, Luján & Pedro: The following questions have to do with the tradition of the political economy of communication (PEC). In spite of producing an in-depth analysis of communication and other social phenomena, McChesney (2000) wrote that PEC had a marginal presence in US universities at the turn of the new century. Has this situation changed? Is it the same all around the globe?

Mosco: I think it is the case that PEC has a limited presence in American Universities. That

is, partly, because American communication programs were, until recently, training programs that were set up to produce people to work in the media industry. Mainly, they taught people practical skills and a few research techniques to measure audiences and do the kind of things necessary, for example, to get into radio, television, and new media marketing. Now, research in communication programs in the U.S. has grown and I think it is important to emphasize that political economy (PE) has grown with it. Whereas several years ago there were only a handful of political economists in academic departments around the U.S., now, I would say that most departments have at least one person who is broadly identified with PE and some programs have several. I don't think that McChesney would disagree with this point. His own program at the University of Illinois has Dan Schiller and others who would see themselves as working broadly in the area of PE… So, in my view, PE has grown and, most importantly, as a field of research has become global, i.e., we now see in universities across Europe, Latin America, and more recently in Asia and Africa, the growth of a globalized PEC. In fact, I am quite optimistic. It is important to acknowledge that there are people working in PE who do not call themselves political economists, and there are departments that don't call what they teach PEC, but they may offer a course on critical media studies, on the media industry or on public media that has important components of PE. Over the 35 years or so that I've worked in the field of PE, I have observed important growth. Much work needs to be done, but I am pleased to see the expansion of the field.

Ballesteros, Luján & Pedro: In your work, you rescue analytical categories from classical political economy in which one can observe the influence of dialectical materialism epistemology. However, your will to "emphasize the diversity" of the discipline, leads you to consider both Marxist thought and other different perspectives from authors like Malthus or Schumpeter. For some scholars, this union means joining together two perspectives (Marxist analysis and economic orthodoxy) which are contradictory in nature. What would you answer to this?

Mosco: I think we need to make an important distinction here. My goal was to advance and rethink PE as a broad field and identify key characteristics of PE from, for example, the time of Adam Smith in the 18th century through Marx in the 19th and to contemporary PE. They all

share certain characteristics: A commitment to history, to the study of the social totality, to moral philosophy, i.e., to values, and to bringing about social change, to social intervention, or social praxis as I call it. Whether it was Adam Smith, trying to understand capitalism critically, or Karl Marx, who set out to comprehend what he felt was the transition to a socialist or communist society, they share characteristics. The primary distinction to be made is between PE and mainstream or neoclassical economics, which was established in the late 19th century by people who rejected the commitment to history, the social totality, values, and social intervention. So I do not maintain that Marx and neoclassical economists sleep together- because they would make very strange bedmates indeed! Rather, the point is to understand the shared characteristics of a PE understanding. The central point is to distinguish PE, broadly, from neoclassical economics, which rejected the central values of PE and I think made a serious error in doing so. Today, people everywhere suffer the consequences, especially in times of economic crisis like this one, of the limited and deeply ideological understanding that mainstream economics provides.

Ballesteros, Luján & Pedro: In the Opening Conference of the 7th ULEPICC International congress in Madrid, Spain, you argued that there has been a shift in the political economy of communication research towards new standpoints and emphases. Could you expand on this idea?

Mosco: Yes. I think, first of all, it is important to recognize that there is great continuity within PE, i.e., we are still interested in focusing on commodification as the central entry point to study big media corporations, their power, and the process of neo-liberalism, and deregulation which links the State to capitalist media. These problems and our analysis of them are still central to what we do. It was also my intention to address new standpoints. For it to grow and maintain its relevance to understand and change the world, every approach needs to evolve and develop in new ways. My interest was to look at how PEC was taking on new characteristics, without necessarily rejecting the old ones and this includes certainly, as I mentioned earlier, the globalization of PEC. PEC was once largely a North American phenomenon and then expanded as European universities developed communication programs. It is now global: There are key scholars in Latin America, in Asia, in Africa, as I

document in the new edition, who are developing a strong PE perspective and who are giving it a strong international character. This has an impact on the kind of research that is carried out. Whereas in the past research had an important focus on the problems of the national, core, capitalist media in the US or Canada, today the focus is on global questions, i.e., the ways in which transnational businesses dominate media, but also how resistance is increasingly global.

In addition, I'll briefly refer to the other important characteristics. It is certainly the case that the history of media, which I emphasized as an important force in understanding today's media, has taken on a new dimension. Specifically, people doing research on media history, like my colleagues Robert McChesney, Elizabeth Fones-Wolf, Patricia Mazepa, Dan Schiller and a number of others, are looking at the ways in which the history of media needs to be told from below, not just from above, as a history of resistance and struggle.

We've also seen the development of new standpoints of resistance within PE. Feminism has become a very important force within PEC. There are a number of books and articles that seek to address the common ground between feminism and PE. I think labor has become a new standpoint, certainly one that professor McKercher and I have attempted to advance and so have a number of other scholars. I would also argue that PE is providing new perspectives on new media. We referred to the autonomists whose work is increasingly incorporated within PE as an important dimension of understanding the complexity of new technology, i.e., new technology does do not just advance the continuity of capitalism, but also creates disjunctions, challenges, and complexities for capitalism. There has been a new emphasis within new media and the PE of surveillance, and a political dimension in understanding how new media do not just generate surplus value and profit; they generate new forms of social control.

I think it is important to emphasize that there are new organizations that are working to expand a critical analysis and intervention to bring about a more democratic media. For example, your organization ULEPICC, which studies political economy in Latin America and Spain, is a critical new development. Other recent developments have to do with advancing a democratic information society about which the organization Free Press in the United States

has made major public policy interventions. These and other organizations fuel a rejuvenation of PE's longstanding interest in praxis or social action.

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About the Authors

Begoña Ballesteros is a doctoral candidate in the Communication and Social Change and Development Program at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain. She holds both bachelor's and master's degrees from the same university, the first in journalism and the latter in social communication with a specialty in communication theory and research. from the same university, and a Bachelor's Degree in Journalism, Universidad Complutense de Madrid. Contact information: begoballesteros@ccinf.ucm.es

Department of Sociology IV, Faculty of Journalism, Universidad Complutense de

Madrid, Ciudad Universitaria, 28040 Madrid, Spain. +34 91 3942144.

Luis Luján is a doctoral candidate in the program of Theoretical, Structural and Ethical Approaches in Mass Communication at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain, from which he also learned a bachelor's degree in journalism. Contact information: lelujan@ccinf.ucm.es

Department of Journalism III, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Ciudad Universitaria, 28040, Madrid, Spain, +34 91 3942144.

Joan Pedro is a doctoral candidate at Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain, where he also earned a master's degree in communication theory and research He holds a bachelor's degree in advertising and public relations from the Universidad de Alicante, Spain. His work has appeared in the *International Journal of Radical Mass Media Criticism*. Contact information: joan.pedro@pdi.ucm.es

Department of Sociology IV, Faculty of Information Sciences, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Ciudad Universitaria, 28040 Madrid, Spain. +34 91 3942144.