

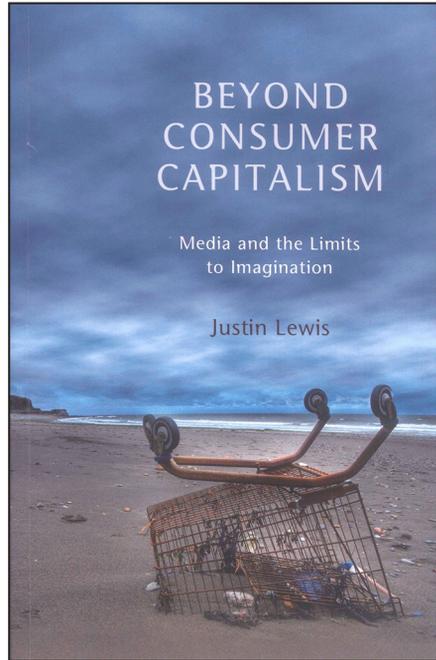
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Capitalism's obsessions lead society awry

Beyond Consumer Capitalism: Media and the Limits to Imagination.
by Justin Lewis. Cambridge: Polity Press,
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WHEN critics take aim at a society gone awry through an obsession with consumption, wealth and individualism, their arguments are usually about political interests and structural forces. Justin Lewis's book is a breath of fresh air, not only because it's beautifully written and argued, but because he asks us to think about these pressing problems on an imaginative level. Imagine, he asks, if advertisements were banned? Or imagine if advertising creatives were told to produce any story rather than one aimed at selling?

The book has two strengths. It makes a case, firstly, that consumer capitalism's greatest problem is that 'it is a system that cannot envisage a moment when we have enough things'



(p. 3). Or, as Lewis puts it slightly differently at the end of the book, it is a system that cannot think beyond its current narrow limits.

Secondly, the book places media and communication at the heart of the problem, seeing advertising, news journalism and the explosion of digital media as responsible for the failure of imagination and the neglect of the good life in favour of acquisition. It calls on those of us involved in media practice or scholarship to take responsibility for connecting the links between the unsustainable economy, the imbalance of wealth in society, the lack of collective long-term thinking and an obsession

with new technologies and gadgets.

The book begins by arguing that consumer capitalism has reached the limits of its ability to enhance people's quality of life. It then engages in a detailed critique of the environmental, economic and social constraints of a system that promises happiness and fulfilment, before moving on to attacking the dominance of advertising in our media, which, it argues, leads to conservatism, to the promotion of buying things as a route to fulfilment and to constraints on media forms and content by the demands of advertising.

Lewis then focuses on news journalism. Journalism is constrained by the advertising-led business model it has grown up with, not so much through the censorship of advertisers, but by the structuring of news around the breathless pursuit of the new (at the expense of structuring it around new ideas for a better world).

Lewis is particularly scathing of business journalism, showing how it fails to understand the economy in terms of workers or social good or long-term sustainability – indeed in any terms except those of growth. Later chapters critique the waste that the media and communication system produces – more energy, for example, is consumed than by air travel, when you add up the energy used by vast

computer servers, the costs of the production of gadgets that are thrown away every few years and the running of all these gadgets.

The book isn't able to push much beyond the imaginative limits of consumer capitalism. Lewis calls for slower journalism, greater public funding of public good media and greater regulation of advertising and other aspects of the media. I didn't find any of these solutions particularly new, but that was not really the book's point. Its concern was more on pulling economic, political, environmental and cultural concerns together into a coherent critique.

Above all, I was convinced by the emphasis on the affective and imaginative role the media play. Lewis quotes the radical economist Tim Jackson as saying that the problem with finding an economic model not based on ever-greater consumption in a finite world is that 'we simply haven't set our minds to exploring such a possibility' (p. 43)—particularly through our media.

Where I did find the book weak was on understanding the emerging mediascape, with its ever-shifting convergence and divergence of multiple media forms and the flows of media across social media networks. There have been attempts to think outside consumer capitalism in some

of these areas, among them Benkler's (2006) emphasis on sharing as an increasingly important modality of society alongside the money economy.

Analysis of how these ideas have collided with, or been subsumed within, consumerism seems to me one of the tasks of a media scholarship that wants to push thinking beyond the bounds that Lewis describes so well.

This eloquent book calls on us to focus on the need for a more imaginative media and public. As Lewis puts it so nicely, we do need some different stories.

Reference

Benkler, Y. (2006). *The wealth of networks: How social production transforms markets and freedom*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.



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