

BIOGRAFISCHES LEXIKON DER KOMMUNIKATIONSWISSENSCHAFT

I Really Do Have a Lot of Questions

Janet Wasko talks about her academic career, the political economy of communication approach, the situation of critical scholars in the US field, and the past and future of IAMCR. Thomas Wiedemann led the interview on October 23, 2015 in Madrid.



Janet Wasko (source: private)

Career Stages

Studied radio, television, and film at San Diego State University and at California State University, Northridge. 1973 BA, 1974 MS. 1980 PhD at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Positions at Temple University, Temple University/London, and University of California, Santa Barbara. 1986 Professor and Knight Chair in Communication Research at the School of Journalism and Communication, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon, USA. 2012 President, International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR). Member of the Editorial Board of *Media Industries*, *Javnost*, *Media Culture & Society*, and *European Journal of Communication*.

Where did you grow up and can you tell me something about your parents?

I grew up in Southern California, in San Diego. My parents were quite interesting. My mother came from Tennessee, from a farm. My father was from a city environment in Duquesne, Pennsylvania, overlooking steel mills. His parents were immigrants from Czechoslovakia. Both of my parents definitely were working class and did not finish high school. They moved to San Diego and my father did a lot of different things, as he had a kind of entrepreneurial spirit. My mother was a seamstress and eventually started her own business, alterations and sewing. It was just a small business, but for her to do something like that was fantastic. My parents were very supportive of me. I had one brother, and I was the first one in my immediate family to go to college.

Were there any connections to political parties?

Yes. I am not quite sure why, but neither of my parents talked too much about their political party affiliations. It was almost like it was a secret. They voted a certain way, but did not talk about it. They probably voted Republican, but they were not so active politically. My father became more and more conservative as he got older. My mother became less conservative. San Diego is a very conservative city with a lot of military, so I definitely grew up in a conservative context. However, when you go to university, you become open to different things.

What was your major when you started studying at the University of San Diego?

At San Diego State University, I immediately started studying radio, television, and film. As many of our students, I wanted to work in that area.

Has this been your professional dream since ever?

Well, perhaps at one time, it was. I can tell you that story if you want.

Sure.

In high school, I won a speech contest for a trip to the United Nations. I went on a one-month trip on a bus across the country to New York with a group of 30 or 40 other students. All of us were from different cities in California and Arizona. This experience had a big impact on me. I thought that the UN, first of all, was a very noble, wonderful, and vital institution, but we also visited other places. On that trip, I met someone who worked at a television station in Arizona. He worked on a live children's television show. So when I visited him in Phoenix, I became fascinated with the whole process of television. That is how I got interested, and when I went to San Diego State University, I took a class in broadcasting. So it was not really a goal for me forever, but was rather circumstantial. But I then immediately was interested and I wanted to work in the industry.

You worked for a number of media companies in Los Angeles.

Yes, I was so anxious to work in the industry that I did not finish my degree, but moved to Los Angeles. Also, of course, at that age, you want to get away from home, although San Diego was not very far from Los Angeles. So I stopped studying, got a job at ABC television network and then worked at several different places: ABC television, a commercial production house, a local television station, and the Disney Studios in Burbank. But this was also a period when exciting things were happening in American society: civil rights, the anti-war movement, the feminist movement. I became increasingly more political and, of course, more and more to the Left. I also became increasingly disillusioned working in the media. The Disney experience was what prompted me to go back to the university – it was though they were operating without any sense of what was going on in the world. Also, often what I was doing in the media industry was related to advertising and commercials. I kept thinking, what a waste. All these very talented people, and what are they doing? Worrying about how to sell soap, literally. I thought there is so much more that could be done with media, which idealistically prompted me to go back to finish my bachelor's degree at California State University, Northridge. I thought it would be good to get involved with educational television. Then I found that, at least around that time, educational television was really a bit boring. Lots of talking heads, not very exciting or innovative. But I did okay with my studies and when I finished my bachelor's degree, one of my professors encouraged me to continue to graduate school.

Was this the time when you decided to become a communication scholar?

Well, not exactly. I went on mostly because I had a lot of questions (and I still do!). This is what is valuable about education: opening your eyes and asking questions. So I went on to get my master's degree, which really started me becoming much more critical. And since I still had too many questions, I began thinking about being part of academia rather than going back in the industry. I was looking around for universities and found the doctoral program at the University of Illinois where one professor was doing a course on socialism and communication. That was one of the attractions. Well, I went there and he never taught that course again, but at least I started studying with him. The professor was Thomas Guback, who specialized in the political economy of communication. I was very fortunate to go to Illinois because it was a very good program at that time. So, it was not that I dreamed of being in the media industry or to be a professor from the time I was a kid. Both were somewhat circumstantial.

You have already referred to the political climate of this time, in particular the protest movements. How would you compare the student Janet Wasko with your students today? Are there many differences?

When I started teaching, while I was finishing my PhD, a lot of things were going on at campuses. There were radical movements and student organizations were much more radical, too. Today in the United States, you do not find that same level of political activity, but I think students still have the potential to be radical, to question and to not follow the status quo. However, they are told, you have to have a degree to get a job. That is what they want when they come to university. So yes, I think there are differences. The students now are less explicitly political. I say that in a qualified way because certainly, there are a lot of issues that students feel strongly about, environmental issues, for instance. There is the potential again for young people to be more radical. But we also understand that students today are paying a lot of money for their education in the US, which also affects their perspectives. So, yes, there are differences.

Your PhD was on banks and the film industry (cf. Wasko 1982). Did you choose this topic?

I was interested in film because I thought there was much more potential to really make a contribution, to really utilize the media in innovative and important ways. And it did not include advertising, although there are other constraints. I had some ideas about a dissertation and one of them I was very excited about was the role of film festivals in the film industry. So I went to talk to Tom Guback, who was doing work on the economics of film (cf. Guback 1969) and told him about this topic. Another one I was interested in was labor in film, but we agreed that the real history of labor and unions in Hollywood would be a little tricky and intense because of alleged Mafia connections and other reasons. But Tom had a list of topics that he thought would be interesting and important (I think all professors do). Guback then mentioned the idea of banks and the film industry. So I started reading some material and there were these references to the US film industry being very influenced by banks in the 1930s. In fact, there were claims that they controlled the Hollywood industry at that time. That was intriguing and so I began to think about that basic relationship between movies and money.

Your subject area.

Yes. The more I explored the topic, the more I really was intrigued. The question then was how to find primary sources. We agreed that I would throw a wide net to see what I could find. I started looking for any kind of documentation and found myself first doing historical research and going to a lot of different archives. Eventually, I realized that I needed to do the whole history of the relationship between banks and the film industry because it changed over time. First, I found documents at the Museum of Modern Art in New York about D.W. Griffith and his banking relationships. I located 1930s bankruptcy files from several companies. Then, I found that Bank of America in San Francisco has archives with many documents from the 1950s. They all represented a kind of interesting history in the way that different periods represented slightly different relations. I then started interviewing industry people and bankers. It was a real challenge to get access to them, but I was able to arrange interviews with several bankers who were involved at that time, and with film company treasurers. A couple of them assumed I was probably interested in finding out how to raise money to make a film. I suppose they thought, why would you be doing all of this research unless you wanted to make a film and make a lot of money?

Can you tell me more about your academic teachers at the University of Illinois?

Yes, but it was mainly Tom Guback, who offered classes in the political economy of communications. At that time in Illinois, there were other professors and students developing a kind of cultural approach. For instance, James Carey who was the guru of culturalism, but also Lawrence Grossberg who was connected to the Birmingham School. The rest of the country was not talking about this at the time. Carey's version of cultural studies, or culturalism (cf. Carey 1989) was somewhat different than cultural studies in Great Britain, for instance, which had a more radical, political agenda, while culturalism drew from pragmatism, and the Chicago School of sociology. Though culturalism was strong at the time at Illinois, there was also a strong tradition of political economy, represented by Guback, at the time, but going back to Dallas Smythe and Herbert Schiller. Smythe probably taught the first course in political economy in the United States (cf. Smythe 1960) and Guback was his student. Although Guback was somewhat isolated at that time, a number of other graduate students started working with him and a critical movement was started to grow. There was a group of us at Illinois, plus people at Stanford and on the East coast. We started connecting people and started a newsletter (*Communication Perspectives*) at Illinois that gathered information about critical orientations to studying communication and media.

Who else was responsible for the newsletter?

At that time, it was mostly Eileen Meehan, Fred Fejes, Jennifer Slack, and me. We started bringing people together, getting to know each other, and that led to the formation of the Union for Democratic Communication (UDC) in the early 1980s in Philadelphia. It was an attempt to connect critical researchers with activists and alternative film people. Tom Guback was involved, plus Vincent Mosco coming out of critical sociology, Oscar Gandy, Dan Schiller, Herb Schiller, Dallas Smythe, and many others. It was a moment when the discussion of critical versus administrative or mainstream approaches really started. UDC was quite active and is still alive. It still exists and struggles on.

The nucleus of a new circle that made political economy of communication more visible in the field (cf. Mosco 1996: 82-103).

Yes, this approach had been present in the past, but not so prevalent. Herb Schiller was very active in San Diego, doing a lot of work and influencing students and the public on critical approaches to media. He not only wrote influential books (cf. Schiller 1969), but was active in other ways. Then, there was Tom Guback at Illinois, as I already mentioned. Some of us ended up at one time at Temple University, including Vinny Mosco, Dan Schiller, and Dallas Smythe, for a while. That was an amazing moment, totally unplanned. The political economy of communication had really started becoming much more visible. Although it was still marginalized in a lot of ways, many more people were acknowledging critical approaches, which led to the ferment in the field in the 1980s.

What happened between 1980 when you finished your PhD and 1986 when you were appointed to a professorship at the University of Oregon?

I worked at Temple University in Philadelphia for about five years, including one year in London at the Temple London program. I then went back to the West coast, to a couple of places in Southern California. Finally, I got the job at Oregon. This is similar to many of us, I think, who have wandered around a little bit, before settling somewhere.

In his collective biography of ICA fellows, Michael Meyen (2012) described the US scientific community largely shaped by the so-called Michigan State habitus. What facilitated the critical Janet Wasko's academic career in this environment? How about the factors that proved useful for you to become a professor?

I was fortunate to choose to do my doctoral studies at Illinois, where there was a real diversity of approaches. At other places, they did not include critical approaches in general or political economy in particular. At Illinois, the critique of the Michigan State approach (or habitus) was happening in different ways. By the time I went to Oregon, critical approaches had grown, even though there was (and still is) a dominant paradigm. At Oregon, I joined a small faculty that was more or less critical oriented, and it felt very comfortable. The program was Telecommunications and Film and was a part of a speech department. But in the early 1990s, rather soon after I arrived, there was a major change. The department was disbanded and our program was taken over by the journalism school. We had a PhD and they did not. However, they had a strong foundation in journalism, including advertising, public relation. The reorganization (actually, hostile take-over) was very difficult, and the film people actually went to the English department. Others retired rather quickly. I have stayed even though I find some of what goes on in the school quite problematic. For instance, many would agree that advertising and public relations should be in the business school. On the other hand, I think we have developed a good graduate program and I am able to work with doctoral students, continue teaching the courses I want to teach, and even have an endowed chair. So, I guess I have made it work.

Have you never considered applying for a position outside Oregon?

Every time we have a faculty meeting, I consider it (laughing). Seriously, only a couple of times. It is a nice part of the country to live and now, increasingly, I have really good colleagues. The school has been growing and adding younger scholars who are very critical oriented, and we have a base of really good people in media studies.

However, you probably agree with Hanno Hardt who complained in an [interview](#) that he was

marginalized at Iowa because of his Marxist orientation (Meyen/Löblich 2007: 116). Have you ever felt being an outsider of the academic field, too?

When you are at a university, academic freedom should protect you. And it does, in some ways. But in the United States, there is still such an amazing ignorance and stigma about Marxism, about socialism, about communism and all that. So yes, of course, we are at the margins still. But I do not want to dramatize the situation. Some people have really suffered more than others, such as not getting tenure, for instance, and things like that. It depends in a way where you are, how you negotiate your role. But it can be difficult being a real Leftist. Sometimes it seems even just saying the word capitalism is thought of as radical (laughing). But in some settings, it is less difficult than in others. At the University of Oregon, I found a strong sociology department where there are Marxists such as John Bellamy Foster, whose job is to teach Marxism. He is very proud of that. With that tradition, you find a lot of Leftists there. But we do not have power. I do not know if that answers the question, but Hanno Hardt was right, although I think he worked as much in Europe as in the US.

You are one of the key authors in the tradition of political economy of communication. The idea of this approach was also to develop application knowledge to policy in support of public interest (cf. Smythe 1960). How about the result? Does your academic work have any practical influence?

That is a tough question. Of course, it is important, because one aspect of the study of political economy of media and communication is change and praxis. I have various answers. One is that we cannot do everything (laughing). Another is that teaching and doing research do make a certain kind of contribution. Especially teaching can have an impact as some of our students may ultimately work in the media industries. So perhaps they have heard critical thoughts (at least once!) and maybe even developed critical thinking. Vincent Mosco has said that we are knowledge workers. Sometimes, we even have the opportunity to influence policy. This is probably the case in smaller countries, where it may be more possible to have a direct impact on the government. For instance, Mosco has been involved in policy debates, especially in Canada. And in the US, Bob McChesney has been involved with public discussions of media issues. There have been moments where I have been able to contribute in various ways, but I find it a challenge. Of course, we should make our work more accessible to the public, but they keep us very busy around universities these days. IAMCR to me is a kind of contribution to some kind of public discussion of media issues.

You just mentioned IAMCR, so let us talk about your activity in this association. The first IAMCR conference was in Leicester in 1976. I read that there you “identified” IAMCR as “the organization” you “wanted to participate in” (Prodnik/Wasko 2014: 17).

When we were students at Illinois, Tom Guback kept talking about IAMCR and some of us started going there, too. When I went to Leicester, I was studying for my exams, so it was a bit absurd to go off to this conference. But it was great and I decided immediately that I would participate in the organization. In addition to that, UDC connected with IAMCR members in various ways, especially with the newly formed section on political economy. These things fit together.

At that point, many US scholars already moved to ICA. Did you go to ICA conferences in the 1970s and 1980s as well?

Yes, US scholars were involved in other organizations, such as ICA, that were based in the US. When I first started going to IAMCR, there was a handful of critical scholars from the United States involved, such as Herb Schiller, Tom Guback and Dallas Smythe, but also some more conservative scholars. That sometimes is missed. IAMCR was not (and still is not) totally critically oriented. Instead, there was a constant attempt to balance things, and I think, **Kaarle Nordenstreng** discusses this well in his various histories of the IAMCR (cf. Nordenstreng 2008). The whole Cold War thing was going on. Yes, ICA was very American, with meetings mostly in the US, 90 percent of its members from the US, and a very dominant mainstream focus. I did go, but only when it met in places where I wanted to go (laughing). People in the United States sometimes did not see the choices, even critical authors. When we started UDC, we talked about whether or not we should become involved in ICA. We chose to start our own organization. But some people continued working in ICA and found a space. Increasingly, ICA became more international, although that is still relatively recent.

However, it is a special kind of internationalization.

Exactly. Even if there are critical scholars in ICA, it still represents a kind of mainstream or dominant paradigm. But I would actually rather focus on IAMCR and point out the reasons why we are the truly international organization. Not only do we meet all over the world, we try to support young scholars from developing countries as much as we can in various ways, as well.

Going back to the period of the Cold War. You already mentioned that IAMCR was closely linked to the geopolitical climate in the second half of the 20th century (cf. Meyen 2014). Did you notice any ideological influence from behalf of the Eastern European countries on IAMCR?

Absolutely, very much. There was a kind of balancing in terms of who was heading sections and on the International Council, and there were specifically Eastern Europeans in those positions. The conferences rotated between the first world, second world, and third world. A lot of behind the scenes balancing went on, as the Cold War played out in the organization. There also was a connection to the discussions at UNESCO on the new world information order, etc. IAMCR scholars participated quite actively in that debate. IAMCR was initiated by UNESCO (cf. Nordenstreng 2008) and has had that constant tie to UNESCO.

From an Eastern perspective, you must have been seen as a fellow from the heart of the capitalist world. Did you ever fear to be misused by socialist countries concerns?

Many of us were just excited to be able to engage with and get to know people from socialist and third world countries. The value of IAMCR was bringing people together from all of those different countries. Of course, there were the politics going on, but I never felt misused. Maybe we were in various ways, but I did not feel it. In fact, many of us made connections with people in Eastern Europe. I remember the conference in Prague in 1984 where we had an informal meeting with **Yassen Zassoursky**, who was always there representing the Soviet Union, and with some of the critical US people. In a way, just to have this discussion was one of the attractions. I do not know if this point might be of interest, but people often do not realize that the IAMCR has never met in the United States, although there have been US scholars involved, critical and mainstream. Very proud of that (laughing).

Your commitment in IACMR is impressive. What role does this institutional activity play in your understanding of academic work?

From the very beginning, I started meeting people at the conferences who I was reading. It was very exciting to go to IAMCR and to sit down with people who not only were not afraid to talk about Marx and Marxist theories, but were also applying it to media and communication. That was extremely important, kind of validating what I was being introduced to by Tom Guback and other critical people who were still so marginalized in the US. To have these discussions, and to learn from people, which I still do, that was really appealing and important.

In light of the ongoing internationalization of ICA: What is the unique selling point of IAMCR in the future?

We are a non-governmental organization and are connected to UNESCO in various ways. For instance, we participate in two global alliances on media and gender and on media and literacy that are coordinated by UNESCO. The IAMCR also has had a commitment to public involvement in issues related to media and communication. Recently, we have developed a process to develop public statements, which we are very excited about. We now have a clearinghouse that looks at issues that our members feel we should support. As an example, we recently made a statement about the future of BBC. The House of Lords asked us to file evidence along these lines and we have done that. Before, it was very difficult for me and other presidents when you get such a request. Because even if you agree, what about the organization? Now we have some policies and principles. That may be different than ICA. We also have organized a committee on improvement of academic life, to deal with issues that relate to what is going on with academics as workers around the world. Then, people do not only say that they have a very different feeling when they come to IAMCR with representatives from all over the world, but we are also truly international in the places we meet. It is very difficult for Indian scholars, for example, to find money to come to London or to Chicago. So we go there. Of course, not everyone could attend the IAMCR conference in Hyderabad in 2014, but Indian scholars were able to attend, as well as scholars from Bangladesh and other countries close to India. There is a commitment to this kind of international representation. I think those are some of the selling points and a few differences from other organizations.

Who is Janet Wasko: a scholar, a teacher, the brand mark of political economy in the academic field of communication, the US ambassador of IAMCR? What is the most important aspect of your academic life?

Everything. I mean, these days, because of the other responsibilities, there is less attention to teaching. Of course, I still teach, especially graduate students. I also still try to do research and write as a scholar (laughing), but IAMCR takes a lot of my time. A brand for political economy? Well, I hate the word brand, but someone who is identified with that perspective would be great. Before I was IACMR president, I was head of the Political Economy Section for a few years. I feel very good about building that and I think it is really strong. More and more people are realizing how important it is to study those issues.

Are there any academics you would call a role model?

I always think back to Tom Guback as a role model. An extremely solid, very careful

researcher. He was an inspiration for those of us who studied with him, and also a very good teacher. I have never seen anyone who really was able to embrace a kind of Socratic method so well. Beyond that, there are some people who I find I always agree with: some of the British scholars of political economy, such as Graham Murdock and Peter Golding, but also Vincent Mosco and, of course, Eileen Meehan, who I work with often. Those people are role models, too. Now, I am also trying to open up a little bit to other critical orientations. We are doing a series of "What is?" conferences in Oregon. "What is media?", "What is film?", "What is television?". That is really introducing me to a range of ideas, theories, and scholars who I would have previously rejected. For instance, through the "What is Media?" conference, we are trying to push beyond boundaries and really open up the idea of media. We have to become less rigid in our perspectives and I am trying to do that, as well.

Looking back on your academic career and many years in communication study. Is there anything you are especially proud of?

I would say that it is still my first book, which was based on my dissertation (cf. Wasko 1982). I feel the strongest about that work. Also, I am very proud of the doctoral students I have worked with and whatever contribution I have made to their work. I am not that proud that I have not been able to change many things in the world, but we do what we can, I suppose.

Is there anything that you would do differently today?

I do not know if I would do anything differently necessarily, although I would perhaps have left the United States and worked somewhere else.

My final question goes into the far future. What will remain when Janet Wasko is gone? What should remain if you could influence it?

I would love to create a stronger and broader program at the University of Oregon. I would love to be able to influence that and build something like that, whatever it would be called. And whatever I am doing for IAMCR. I think there are some good things happening, but it is not just because of me. The current Executive Board works as a team and I think we have accomplished quite a bit.

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