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NEOLIBERALISM, SURVEILLANCE AND MEDIA CONVERGENCE

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Mapping the neoliberal conjuncture

Two decades ago, long before the creation of Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, an incisive and highly seductive mediated critique of neoliberalism was produced from the Lacandón Jungle in Chiapas in southern Mexico and circulated around the globe. The indigenous peoples who lived in that region and called themselves the Zapatistas had had enough of the policies that condemned them to persistent precarity. On 1 January 1994, the day the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) came into force, they took advantage of the global media presence in Mexico to create their own alternative media spectacle and thus to forge a space through which to articulate their resistance and present their demands. Thanks in part to new media technologies, and in particular rapidly expanding internet connectivity, their ideas spread widely and found resonance not only with other indigenous groups, but also with all kinds of people in Mexico and around the world, including students, environmentalists, farmers, middle-class families, feminists, shantytown dwellers, and others whose lives were similarly characterized by social exclusion and economic insecurity. The Zapatista movement was rooted in the everyday realities of southern Mexico but drew upon and contributed to the development of global counterdiscourses challenging neoliberalism. Through the creative hybridization and rearticulation of the Latin American revolutionary tradition, Marxism–Leninism and Mayan cosmologies, the Zapatistas provided a set of discursive resources that were useful to others whose local realities differed from those of Chiapas but who were up against many of the same destructive global forces. The two decades that have passed since the emergence of the Zapatista rebellion have been a period in which new media platforms and delivery technologies have arisen, and the contestation of neoliberalism has proliferated and intensified.

This chapter develops a form of conjunctural analysis (Grossberg 2010), a method of ‘radical contextualism’ developed within cultural studies that posits ‘conjunctures’ as ‘problem-spaces’ whose illumination ‘aims to give people an understanding of the contingency of the present’. Conjuncturalism thus ‘presupposes a reconstitution of imagination in the context of its own analysis’ (ibid.: 57–8). We start by identifying two key phenomena that we propose as central to the current conjuncture. The first is what we might define as neoliberalism or neoliberalizing processes: a set of discourses, political rationalities, formations of common sense, policy prescriptions and economic practices that took off in the 1980s with heavy support from multinational
corporations, international financial institutions, and right-wing politicians, scholars and media commentators. In many ways, neoliberalism is an inadequate concept. As Stuart Hall (2011: 207) writes,

> critics say the term lumps together too many things to merit a single identity; it is reductive, sacrificing attention to internal complexities and geo-historical specificity. I sympathize with this critique. However, I think there are enough common features to warrant giving it a provisional conceptual identity, provided this is understood as a first approximation . . . I would also argue that naming neo-liberalism is politically necessary to give the resistance to its onward march content, focus and a cutting edge.

At its core, neoliberalism involves the intensification of processes of commodification, privatization, individuation and labour flexibilization, and the attempted reduction of social services and social contracts, including healthcare, education, public pensions and public safety nets. The neoliberal state has, however, continued to invest in the expansion of military capacity, intelligence gathering, surveillance activities and data mining.

Neoliberalism has had multifaceted consequences for individuals, households, and communities. On a global scale, we have witnessed a growing increase in social and economic inequality, accompanied by the closing-down of democratic spaces as the rich become richer than ever and those harmed by the system find themselves deprived of political redress. In addition, our planet is in climatic chaos as the neoliberal obsession with economic growth hinders any meaningful political action on global warming (Cupples 2012; Klein 2014). As noted, this state of affairs has met with intense modes of contestation and political activism from a variety of sectors. Neoliberalism’s detractors and losers, those harmed or outraged by the unnecessary misery it engenders, have mobilized against neoliberal policies via social media, on the streets, in their communities and workplaces, and through scholarship. At the time of writing, it is not clear whether neoliberalism may be coming to an end, as there is evidence that it is intensifying and giving rise to growing authoritarianism, but also counter-evidence that it is more fragile and contested than ever (Cupples and Glynn 2014; Peck 2012). On the one hand, in the UK, Australia and Canada, as Wilson (2014) writes, neoliberal governments have managed to discursively entrench long-term austerity measures, and, despite their failure to generate prosperity for more than a small percentage of the population, the idea that such measures are necessary has been embraced by the parliamentary opposition and by many ordinary people. In Latin America, on the other hand, we have witnessed the election of several left-wing governments, the so-called pink tide, who have campaigned on anti-neoliberal platforms, although the extent to which neoliberalism is being disrupted in pink tide economies, many of which are based on contradictory forms of neo-extractivism, is debatable (Cupples 2013). The global banking failures of 2008 and the Occupy movements of 2011 seemed to suggest that neoliberalism may be on the way out, but such a prospect seems far more uncertain only a few years later (see Wilson 2016). The recent rise of anti-austerity parties such as Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain and the Yes campaign and radical independence movement in Scotland potentially suggests, however, that the setback to anti-neoliberal forces might be temporary.

The second key dimension of the current conjuncture that we identify involves media convergence. Just as conjunctures are conceptualized as problem-spaces structured around core contradictions, media convergence is a contradictory phenomenon that entails both a consolidation of dominating forces and the development, expansion and mobilization of grassroots counterforces. Convergence names a key set of processes that are core to the emergence of a highly elaborated and complex contemporary media environment marked by rapid technological development,
digitalization, and new forms of interactivity, connectivity, participation and mobilization. Media convergence is a highly multidimensional phenomenon that scholars have theorized in a range of different ways. Two of the most prominent themes associated with media convergence in scholarly analyses are, on the one hand, ongoing processes of conglomeration that have led to ever greater concentrations of capital and power within the media industries and, on the other, ongoing collisions of ‘old’ and ‘new’, digitalized media that shift power relations between producers and consumers and enable media content and discourses to cross technological platforms in highly unpredictable ways. As Henry Jenkins (2008: 18) writes, media convergence,

is both a top-down corporate-driven process and a bottom-up consumer-driven process. Corporate convergence coexists with grassroots convergence. Media companies are learning how to accelerate the flow of media content across delivery channels to expand revenue opportunities, broaden markets, and reinforce viewer commitments. Consumers are learning how to use these different media technologies to bring the flow of media more fully under their control and to interact with other consumers.

Media convergence is therefore a phenomenon with complex cultural, political, economic and technological dimensions that make the contemporary media environment quite distinctive. Radio, television and newspapers persist and in many places are thriving, and are likely to do so for the foreseeable future. But the ways in which their content is created, delivered, consumed and contested are changing. As Daniel Dayan (2009) observes, rarely have representations of situations and events ‘simultaneously involved so many conflicting versions and so many competing media’ as in the contemporary environment, where ‘the activity of displaying has become a globally sensitive battlefield’ to the extent that ‘what is today at stake is the authority invested in the act of showing’ (ibid.: 20). Once the attacks of 9/11, for example, were instantaneously shown by ‘the media of the center’ to the bulk of the world’s population and thereby ‘established as the foundation of a new historical reality’, images of these very same attacks were almost as instantaneously rearticulated and mobilized across a myriad of media platforms as a means of challenging the official narratives of 9/11 (ibid.: 27; also see Glynn 2015).

Both contestation and fragmentation are central to contemporary mediascapes. The economy of media attention is fragmented as audiences are increasingly dispersed across a growing assortment of proliferating platforms that include both commercial and bottom-up, alternative and activist media, including many that originate from the global South and from indigenous nations and communities. As Jesús Martín-Barbero (2011: 42, emphasis original) observes, new media forms and technologies ‘are increasingly being appropriated by groups from lowly sectors, making socio-cultural revenge or a form of socio-cultural return match possible for them, that is, the construction of a counter-hegemony all over the world’. Such forms and technologies include indigenous TV and video production, community as well as internet radio and television stations, YouTube and Vimeo channels, and volunteered geographic information. The dynamics of this complex media landscape pose significant challenges for the study of media convergence, which disrupts boundaries between consumption and production to an unprecedented degree. Citizens, activists and conventionally marginalized populations are forging new media literacies and participatory practices and devising new modes of connectivity and expression for engaging with and challenging neoliberal strategies and agendas. For example, media ‘prosumers’ use Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, blogs, internet forums and crowd-sourced and volunteered geographic information to respond to political events, government policies, corporate initiatives and mainstream media texts. In many cases, government agencies, corporations and commercial media are forced to respond in one way or another to such grassroots practices.
The lived experiences of vast populations today are thus incessantly ‘framed by, mitigated through, and made immediate by pervasive and ubiquitous media’ (Deuze 2009: 18), so that contemporary ‘prosumers’ move across multiple platforms and engage with a diverse array of content types. Contemporary citizenship has therefore become ‘monitorial’ (Schudson 1999), insofar as it involves ‘scanning all kinds of news and information sources – newspapers, magazines, TV shows, blogs, online and offline social networks, and so on’ (Deuze 2009: 18). The same person that may use Twitter to announce an anti-austerity march or be an avid viewer of Democracy Now might also regularly watch Hollywood movies, reality TV shows, soap operas and CNN.

At a time of the proliferating saturation of our cultural lives by media texts, our principal focus as analysts must be ‘the whole textual environment – how it operates and how readers negotiate it’ (Couldry 2000: 67, 76; also see Cupples 2015). In the present media environment, ‘in terms of media production processes, we continue to witness a mix of “one-size-fits-all” content made for largely invisible mass audiences next to (and infused by) rich forms of transmedia storytelling including elements of user control and “prosumer”-type agency’ (Deuze 2009: 25–6).

Some left-wing academics are dismissive of many forms of contemporary media activity, such as voting in reality TV shows or spending time on Facebook (see, for example, Harvey 2014: 278). But, as Jenkins (2008) recognizes, even in spaces of popular fandom and gaming, media users develop skills of digital participation and collaboration (such as the cultivation of collective intelligence) that can, potentially at least, be put to more overtly politicized and democratizing uses. Not only is it generally easier today for many people to make their own media, but many more are able to share, remix, edit and comment on the media made by commercial producers (Jenkins et al. 2013). Hence, while ordinary people increasingly make their own media in ways that challenge top-down control over such processes, many more are remixing and sharing the media produced by corporations with diverse and unpredictable consequences. Consequently, Jenkins et al. (2013) have urged us to disrupt the scholarly and industry focus on virality and to look as well at what they call spreadability, which facilitates the formation of new collectivities and spaces of public engagement.

While the dynamics of media convergence provide citizens with a powerful set of new tools, there are nevertheless, of course, serious barriers to bringing about meaningful social and political change. In this regard, it is important to recognize the complex spatial and temporal convergences and complicities between the ‘corporate-driven’ or ‘top-down’ and the ‘user-driven’ or ‘bottom-up’. Within what Mark Andrejevic (2013) calls the ‘digital enclosure’, our participatory media activities are being appropriated by states and corporations in the form of ‘big data’ that can be harnessed towards the advancement of neoliberal agendas. While corporations strive to ever more precisely chart consumer profiles and preferences by exhaustively mining social media sites, the NSA and other agencies subject citizen activists to extensive surveillance and criminalization. Thus, although the internet enables us to access once unimaginable volumes of information and forms of connectivity, it simultaneously renders us vulnerable to algorithmic control exerted by the forces of predictive analytics, commodification and securitization. As Christian Fuchs (2011: 304) writes, web 2.0 users are ‘producers of information (produsers, prosumers), but this creative communicative activity enables the controllers of disciplinary power to closely gain insights into the lives, secrets, and consumption preferences of the users’. Indeed, the participatory practices of media users sometimes mimic disciplinary and securitizing control in the mode of what Andrejevic (2005) calls ‘peer-to-peer’ or ‘lateral’ surveillance.

The complexities of the contemporary moment are captured by Nick Couldry (2014), who attempts to deconstruct what he calls the ‘myth of us’: an emergent ‘myth of natural collectivity’ (ibid.: 885) online that underwrites the idea that ‘this is where we now come together’ (ibid.: 882, emphasis original). Against this myth, Couldry argues for the importance of remembering that
this new formation of ‘us’ is itself constituted by the very platforms to which we are drawn, and which the myth asserts was already there all along. These platforms are at present actively reconstituting social relations through the profit-driven serial tracking of users ‘as they cross the media landscape’ (ibid.: 886). Couldry (ibid.: 885, emphasis original) argues that ‘we must be wary when our most important moments of “coming together” seem to be captured in what people happen to do on platforms whose economic value is based on generating just such an idea of natural collectivity’ as that which is promoted by the emergent ‘myth of us’.

The neoliberal surveillance state’s deep fearfulness and anxiety in the face of the threat posed by ‘the power of the imagination, dissent and the willingness to hold power accountable’ (Giroux 2015: 132) advance its desire to develop sophisticated statistical profiling techniques that might facilitate the pre-emptive identification of activists and others deemed to threaten the social order. Fiske (1998: 72) argues that the ‘function of surveillance is to maintain the normal by disciplining what has been abnormalized’, including especially racialized others and dissidents. The fears and anxieties of the neoliberal security state have motivated the exceptional confinement and demonization of those who challenge, disrupt or endanger the operations of the surveillance apparatus, such as Chelsea Manning, Julian Assange, Edward Snowden and Barrett Brown. While the state’s extreme responses to the actions of these dissidents might seem to suggest that we have entered a chilling new phase of neoliberal totalitarianism, it is important to remember that there are many historical and contemporary examples of state-sponsored racial terror, oppressive surveillance and the criminalization of dissent in what Franz Fanon refers to as the Zone of Non-Being (see Grosfoguel 2011) – including in Chile during the Pinochet dictatorship, Guatemala during the 1980s (when every Mayan Indian was a suspected guerrilla fighter), the USA during the civil rights struggles, and colonial and postcolonial New Zealand, where the criminalization of indigenous activists has a long history. Indeed, the Zapatistas have been subject to ongoing surveillance and harassment by the Mexican government for the past two decades, and arguably protected from total annihilation primarily by online expressions of solidarity that we might understand as an instance of global counter-surveillance directed against the security state. What is striking today is the magnitude of the extension of (racially asymmetrical) digital monitoring across the entire terrain of neoliberal society, such that it is virtually impossible for anybody to avoid pervasive surveillance regimes as governments, corporations, multilateral organizations and even universities jump on ‘big data’ and ‘smart cities’ bandwagons despite their limitations and serious implications for human rights (see Deen 2015; Kakaes 2015).

Nevertheless, an analysis of mediated citizen engagement with neoliberal processes reveals heightened discursive contestation around questions of our shared political futures. At the level of transformationally oriented social movements, recent decades have thrown up a resurgence of decentralized, networked organization and utopian visions of autonomy and grassroots counterpower’ based upon ‘emerging network forms and imaginaries [that] have been greatly facilitated by the rise of new digital technologies’ (Juris 2008: 10). More ordinarily, many corporations are forced to monitor their Twitter accounts 24/7 as their attempts to use social media to their advantage are subverted or otherwise backfire frequently. Companies such as JP Morgan, British Airways, Ryanair, British Gas, Tesco, Waitrose, Starbucks, McDonalds, Burger King and Coca-Cola have all seen their brands and reputations damaged (at least temporarily) by ‘hashtag hijackings’ via Twitter due to poor customer service, customer deception, exploitation of employees, unreasonable price hikes, fraud, market manipulation and tax avoidance. Large online communities in both the UK and the USA have used Facebook to contest neoliberalism. Some, such as UK Uncut, organize around anti-austerity agendas, while others, such as 38 Degrees, develop progressive, issues-based campaigns. Some develop from humorous or satirical political reflections on current events. ‘Make “Ding-Dong! The Witch is Dead” number 1 the week Thatcher
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dies’ (Make… n.d.) was a Facebook-led campaign created in an attempt to elevate the *Wizard of Oz* song to the top of the charts in time for the ‘Iron Lady’s’ funeral in 2013. In 2015, it remains a thriving, 8,000-member page that describes itself as a site to ‘share information and ideas to fight against the ongoing destruction of the country by Thatcherism and greed’. Its focus is on the UK government’s current austerity agenda, which it understands as one of Thatcher’s destructive legacies. Similarly, during the 2012 US presidential debates, Republican candidate Mitt Romney used the phrase ‘binders full of women’ in his response to a question about gender-based pay inequities. His remark attracted widespread ridicule and online commentary via Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr, where sites named for Romney’s strange turn of phrase have persisted as forums for debate around the impacts of neoliberalism in the USA. In 2015, there remain several active ‘Binders Full of Women’ Facebook pages (see, for example, BFW n.d, which has more than 300,000 likes).

Private companies’ capacities to exert power across networked space are thus highly contingent on the forms of discursive interactivity that develop around corporate practices and media figures, texts and events as they unfold upon the broader terrain that defines media convergence. The ensuing struggles can be understood in Gramscian terms as skirmishes within ongoing wars of position that offer no guaranteed victories on either side (Hall 1996). To illustrate the kinds of struggles currently underway, we turn now to a discussion of the articulation, disarticulation, rearticulation and contestation of and over the austerity agenda in the UK as it spills across media forms, texts and platforms that include both ‘old’ media such as tabloid newspapers and newer forms like reality TV shows and social media.

‘Poverty porn’ and neoliberal common sense

In the UK, a particularly harsh form of neoliberal austerity was implemented by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition that came to power in 2010. Inequality steadily increased, the rich got richer than ever, and UK corporations found themselves sitting on mountains of uninvested capital that was estimated to have grown to £750 billion by July 2012 (Stewart 2012; see also Burke 2013). Huge multinational corporations such as Amazon, Starbucks, Vodafone and Google faced minimal taxation on staggeringly large profits (see Connell 2014). The government looked the other way while the Swiss arm of HSBC enabled wealthy British account holders to hide money and so avoid/evade income taxes (Leigh *et al*. 2015). Yet the same government implemented brutal attacks on welfare spending, and slashed benefits for and applied punitive sanctions on the poorest and most vulnerable sectors of society. While there was widespread concern about government surveillance of all of our private communications, UK beneficiaries were subjected to humiliating forms of surveillance that undermine and threaten well-being and self-esteem. The consequences have been extreme. While the wealth of Britain’s richest families has doubled in just five years, half a million British children do not have access to minimally adequate nutrition (Cooper *et al*. 2014). In addition, suicide rates in the UK have started to increase and are disproportionately high among those sanctioned by the Department of Work and Pensions (Platt 2014; Cowburn 2015). Neoliberalization is advanced through state-led discursive strategies that seek to blame and punish the victims of neoliberal policies as if these victims were morally responsible for the misery inflicted by the policies (Slater 2012; Tyler 2013). In a 2010 speech, British Prime Minister David Cameron encouraged hard-working low-income labourers to turn against the undeserving unemployed rather than against the super-rich:

> When you work hard and still sometimes have to go without the things you want because times are tough it is maddening to know that there are some people who
could work but just don’t want to. You know the people I mean. You walk down the road on your way to work and you see the curtains drawn in their house. You know they could work and they chose not to. And just as maddening is the fact that they seem to get away with it.

(Quoted in Rose 2011)

Such discourses circulate widely through a range of media. Right-wing tabloids such as The Sun and Daily Mail, both owned by austerity-endorsing media barons, carry many articles that warn, for example, that ‘hundreds of thousands of scroungers in the UK are robbing hard-working Sun readers of their cash’, thus amplifying and further extending into ordinary common sense a vernacular translation of the government’s austerity policy agenda (Sloan 2010). As Hall (see, e.g., 1996) has long argued, the struggle for common sense within a social formation is a crucial component of processes of hegemonization and counter-hegemonization, and therefore an important object of conjunctural analysis.

In recent years, those on benefits have been the focus of a number of reality television shows that some have dubbed ‘poverty porn’ (e.g., Jensen 2014), including Benefits Street, Benefits Britain: Life on the Dole, Britain on the Fiddle, We all Pay Your Benefits, Skint, The Future State of Welfare, Britain on Benefits, and On Benefits and Proud. Imogen Tyler (2013) argues for what she calls a ‘figurative method’ that traces the ‘fabrication and repetition of abject figures across several different sites – popular culture, news media, policy documents, political rhetoric, academic discourses – and within a range of social spaces including the communicative practices of everyday life’. Tyler’s ‘figurative method’ helps her to ‘ascertain the ways in which national abjects are employed to incite and legitimate “tough” economic measures and punitive governmental responses’ (ibid.: 10). Such an approach calls to our attention the reiteration and movement of the figure of the ‘lazy benefit scrounger’ across a range of discursive terrains stretching from parliament to popular media, and enables us to name the processes of abjection that make such figures into ‘ideological conductors mobilized to do the dirty work of neoliberal governmentality’. These figures of ‘poverty porn’ thus become ‘symbolic and material scapegoats’ that mediate and legitimize ‘the social decomposition effected by market deregulation and welfare retrenchment’ (ibid.: 9). The ‘poverty porn’ programmes thus extend neoliberal surveillance to the realm of the abject figure of the ‘undeserving poor’, whose visibility and abnormalization thereby function as ‘formative factors’ in the normalization of the legitimate citizen/consumer (Fiske 1998: 72).

In this way, neoliberal surveillance, in the form of reality TV shows that make up the subgenre of ‘poverty porn’, plays a constitutive role in the formation of neoliberal common sense. Such an analysis adds to the substantial body of existing scholarship that demonstrates reality television’s discursive role in the production of neoliberal subjectivities and governmentalities and the promotion of practices of entrepreneurial self-responsibilization in a period marked by the ongoing disavowal of such responsibilities by the state (see, e.g., Couldry and Littler 2011; Hill 2015; McCarthy 2007; Ouellette 2009; Ouellette and Hay 2008; Weber 2010). McCarthy (2007: 17), for example, writes that ‘the reality program – produced (unlike fiction TV) without union labour and proposing the makeover (rather than state assistance) as the key to social mobility, stability, and civic empowerment – is an important arena in which to observe the vernacular diffusion of neoliberal common sense’. And as Hall and O’Shea (2013, n.p.) argue, ‘after forty years of a concerted neoliberal ideological assault, this new version of common sense is fast becoming the dominant one’. Hall and O’Shea are also at pains to point out, however, that while ‘common sense feels coherent’, it is nevertheless ‘strangely composite’ and thus ‘fundamentally contradictory’. They assert the importance of recognizing that ‘common sense’ is itself ‘a site of...
political struggle’ rather than something that is fixed and unitary. Moreover, they note that it is crucial to acknowledge the ‘affective dimensions that are in play, and which underpin common sense’. Hall and O’Shea find, therefore, all around us both evidence of ‘individualised disaffection’ as well as ‘many signs of resistance’. In particular, they analysed online comments posted to The Sun’s blogs in response to that newspaper’s coverage of the Conservative Party’s proposal to cut benefits. Hall and O’Shea found that people are far more uncertain about these matters than some polls suggest, and that the ongoing articulation, disarticulation and rearticulation of an array of different discursive elements are generating instability and ‘an unresolved struggle over common sense within the individual as well as between individuals and groups’. As Mark Pursehouse (2008[1991]: 287) notes, understanding how the discursive currents at work in a right-wing tabloid, such as The Sun, enter into ‘real areas of lived culture’ requires the analyst to identify some of the affective and ideological investments made by actual readers. In their analysis of responses to The Sun’s report on the proposed benefit cuts, Hall and O’Shea thus found that:

while neoliberal discourse is increasingly hegemonic and setting the agendas for debate, there are other affective and sensemaking currents in play – empathy for others, a liking for co-operation rather than competition, or a sense of injustice, for example.

Thus ‘White Dee’, arguably the central character on Benefits Street, is available to be read as the abject figure of the ‘dole scrounger’ whose life is subject to audience scrutiny and therefore potential appropriation in defence of neoliberal measures. Nevertheless, Allen et al. (2014) note that she is also represented as a good mother who is happy, witty, compassionate, caring, articulate and charismatic. Dee is a paradoxical figure that invites identification as well as abjection and provides resources of hope or resistance to neoliberalism as well as acceptance of neoliberal ideologies. After her appearance on Benefits Street, she received a range of offers of employment, holidays and media appearances (Aitkenhead 2014), suggesting that, for many, Dee’s problem is not her own inadequacy, but rather a lack of decent opportunities. Dee became a minor celebrity, was interviewed in newspapers and appeared on TV shows such as Newsnight and Celebrity Big Brother. She became the subject of extensive discussion and debate across a range of media. She was vilified and attacked, admired and praised. The coalition government tried to use Dee to justify its neoliberal policies, as when one Tory MP commented that she served as ‘a reminder to people of the mess the benefits system is in and how badly’ necessary are the Conservative Party’s proposed reforms (quoted in Allen et al. 2014: 1). At the same time, The Guardian editorialized that Benefits Street was ‘not as bad as the dreadful title suggested’, and was, indeed, ‘redeemed by the warmth of several residents, especially the single mother styled as White Dee. Smoking but sober, loud but loving, Deirdre Kelly was shown doing the best she could for her kids in straitened circumstances’ (The Guardian 2014: n.p.). She similarly elicits frequent positive (as well as negative) reactions on social media (see Figure 15.1). Dee produced such diverse modes of popular and official mediated engagement that her status as a figure of fecklessness and abjection could never be stabilized, and she thus served to generate significant public debate about austerity. In light of these debates, White Dee (2014) herself writes:

I’m not working at the moment, so I don’t have to pay rent or council tax. I’d say my income averages about £200 a week. Now I know quite a few working people that haven’t got £200 a week – and they’re working hard all day. That’s not right. I’ve read about teachers who have to use food banks. That’s not right. But I’m not the one who
I can see why some people are angry. But I didn’t ask for those people who keep coming to my door, offering loft insulation or a boiler for free because I’m on benefits. Why can’t people who are working, and struggling be entitled to free loft insulation as well?

The public debates over austerity that erupted around the figure of White Dee, *Benefits Street*, and other ‘poverty porn’ programmes, and the struggle for common sense within the contemporary conjuncture of which these debates were both symptomatic and constitutive, also broke out elsewhere within the convergent mediasphere. For instance, in 2014, High Street greeting card retailer Clinton Cards began selling a Christmas card that ridiculed and stigmatized Britain’s poor by offering ‘ten reasons why Santa must live on a council estate’. Twitter users who were outraged by the card shared it widely and disapprovingly, which quickly forced Clinton to
withdraw the item from their line and issue a public apology (see Figure 15.2). The story and Clinton’s apology were then recirculated through broadsheet and tabloid newspapers, and other national and local media (see, e.g., Carter and Osborne 2014; Jackson 2014; Wiles 2014). In this way, the grassroots rebellion against Clinton’s abjection of poor Britons reached new media consumers who may not be social media users. The event thus extended further the conjunctural struggle over neoliberal common sense, provoking many to vow that they would henceforth boycott Clinton Cards.

This vignette that refocuses visibility away from the stigmatized poor and onto Clinton Cards illustrates a key strategy in the struggle over neoliberalism: the reversal of the relations of surveillance that are enacted through poverty porn. As Fiske (1998) writes, ‘countersurveillance may be the most immediately available means of resistance in a surveilled society’. Its significance stems from its contestation of ‘the management of visibility’ (ibid.: 78), and thus it has potential as a way of intervening into the formation of common sense around neoliberal agendas and priorities. Reality programming that scrutinizes the excessiveness (of all sorts) of the lives of the spoiled and affluent, and that interrogates the logics and discourses of trickle-down economics, such as Made in Chelsea and The Super-Rich and Us, also moves in the direction of counter-surveillance and the construction of counterknowledges. By the same token, grassroots organizations such as UK Uncut use connective media to circulate material that monitors the costs to the British public of tax avoidance and evasion by the wealthy. As the tweet captured in Figure 15.3 shows, while benefit fraud may cost Britons £1.2 billion a year, lost public revenues from tax avoidance, evasion and noncollection amount to £120 billion per year, by one estimate. By recontextualizing and rearticulating the issue of benefit fraud, such messages suggest that the austerity government’s campaign against what it calls a ‘something for nothing culture’ (see Figure 15.4) has chosen the wrong target. This reversal of visibility aimed at the 1 per cent has helped to animate a growing strand of what Gramsci called ‘good sense’ (Hall 1996) concerning expanding economic inequality in the age of austerity. By thus making visible the practices of the 1 per cent, connective media have helped bring into view and into popular knowledge the ways in which the major effect of austerity is not the reduction of government deficits but rather
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the further concentration of wealth in the hands of the already wealthy. This in turn helped make it possible for revelations in February 2015 of HSBC bank-assisted tax evasion by wealthy Britons to generate heavy discussion and debate across the convergent mediasphere. At UK Uncut’s Facebook page, for example, the HSBC scandal is articulated to the government’s austerity programme and thus used to rearticulate the common sense underpinnings of neoliberalism (see Figure 15.5).

There is nothing inevitable about the establishment of hegemonic neoliberal common sense as a fixed and final outcome. Rather, hegemonization is a process replete with instabilities and contingencies; it is an ongoing war of position. While ‘poverty porn’ can be read as an instance of what Andrejevic calls ‘lateral surveillance’, the convergent mediasphere is both facilitating the exertion of new forms of mediatization and disciplinary digital control, and opening up new opportunities for reversals of surveillance, for the establishment of new strategic connectivities, and for the circulation of counterdiscourses and the disarticulation and rearticulation of existing discourses in ways that contribute to the formation and advancement of alternative formations of common sense. While neoliberal discourses produce and circulate the abject figure of the ‘undeserving poor’ as part of an overall strategy for the normalization of the ‘legitimate consumer’, some audiences instead affectionately embrace those targeted for neoliberal demonization such as White Dee, while others participate in the counter-scrutinization of the 1 per cent and the interrogation of its trickle-down trickery. Opponents of neoliberalism must understand the instabilities and contradictions that are active in the current conjuncture as opportunities to

Figure 15.3 Exposing tax evasion on Twitter
Press release

Benefit sanctions – ending the ‘something for nothing’ culture

From: Department for Work and Pensions
First published: 6 November 2013
Part of: Employment and Welfare reform

This news article was published under the 2010 to 2015 Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government

Latest figures show Jobseeker’s Allowance claimants who failed to do enough to find work had their benefits payments suspended 580,000 times.

Jobseeker’s Allowance (JSA) claimants who have failed to do enough to find work, turned down jobs offered to them, or not turned up to appointments have had their benefits payments suspended 580,000 times since new tougher rules were introduced in October last year, new figures published today (6 November 2013) show. In each month this is roughly 5% of the number of people claiming JSA.

The new JSA sanctions regime, which was introduced in October 2012, encourages people to engage with the support being offered by Jobcentres

Figure 15.4  Tory attack on the poor

Figure 15.5  Facebooking protest against banksters
participate in the production of social imaginaries capable of envisioning how to harness ‘the
market to the needs of its people, rather than letting it dictate how we have to live’ (Hall and
O’Shea 2013: n.p.).

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Note

1 38 Degrees is named after the critical angle at which human-triggered avalanches are most likely.

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