**Commodity and Community in Social Networking: Marx and the Monetization of User-Generated Content**

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**Introduction**

The notion of immaterial labor or free labor originates within the current of autonomist Marxism. Hardt and Negri (2004, 108) argue, “immaterial labor as labor creates immaterial products, such as knowledge, information, communication, a relationship, or an emotional response.” They consider “immaterial labor as ‘affective labor,’ involving both body and mind, that produces or manipulates affects such as a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement or passion” (Hardt and Negri, 2004, 108-111). Since Hardt and Negri (2000) engaged with the term immaterial labor, some scholars (Arvidsson and Colleoni, 2012; Gregg, 2009; Livingstone, 2003) have argued that it has positive aspects in that it emphasizes the tastes, preferences, and cultural content constructed by voluntary users who dedicate their time to producing some sort of social good.

However, Terranova (2004) points out, free or immaterial labor can be interpreted as unpaid labor due to its nature, simultaneously voluntarily given and unwaged, enjoyed and exploited. Free labor is the moment where the knowledgeable consumption of culture is translated into excess productive activities that are pleasantly embraced and at the same time often shamelessly exploited. This happens because the voluntary activity of immaterial labor has been incorporated into the commodification process as corporations and advertising agencies systematically exploit their users.

Christian Fuchs (2010) combines the theories of free immaterial labor and Hardt and Negri’s concept of the “multitude” with audience commodity theory in an innovative Marxist analysis of the Internet. In this article we will discuss and criticize Fuch’s argument for considering social networking sites (SNSs) on the Internet as the scene of capitalist exploitation of free immaterial labor. In the course of our critique we will also engage with the rather different critique offered by Adam Arvidsson and Elanor Colleoni (2012). They argue that the labor theory of value is difficult to apply to online prosumer practices primarily due to the fact that the realization of the value accumulated by social media companies generally occurs in financial markets, rather than in direct commodity exchange. In our discussion we will develop an alternative interpretation of social networking sites on the Internet different from both of these approaches and based on the notion that the Internet creates a new public sphere. We begin with a brief summary of Fuchs’ argument.

**Fuchs’ Argument**

Marx claimed that the productive power of knowledge increases with the development of society. This development culminates today in a knowledge society. But as a collective product, knowledge is essentially social. Its private appropriation under capitalism contradicts its essence. Like the common lands divided up and expropriated at the origins of capitalism, the knowledge commons is divided up and exploited by advanced capital. “With the rise of informational capitalism, the exploitation of the commons has become a central process of capital accumulation” (Fuchs, 2010, 190).

Knowledge producers in a capitalist information society constitute an exploited class. Immaterial labor has become a major source of value not only in the production of knowledge in such institutions as universities, but throughout society. All these goods are produced in the commons through communication and sharing, but are appropriated by capital. Given the role of knowledge in advanced capitalism, the proletariat is no longer the only object of exploitation.

This is the background to Fuchs’ analysis of the Internet, in particular both user-generated content (UGC), such as pictures and videos shared on sites such as Flickr and YouTube, and SNSs on the Internet. The Internet is a major site of the knowledge commons. Individuals communicate in both the UGC and social networking sites and create knowledge. These social media on the Internet are the basis for profit-making by the companies that operate the sites, but the users receive nothing in exchange for their labor. Their exploitation is thus even more extreme than that of salaried workers. Indeed, they suffer an essentially infinite rate of exploitation.

Fuchs adopts Dallas Smythe’s audience commodity theory to explain the exploitation of free labor on the Internet. Smythe argues that audiences are products sold by commercial broadcast networks to advertisers (1977). Hence “watching time as a form of productive labor draws on Marx, for whom labor must be productive, must produce value” (Shimpach, 2005, 355). Television is the medium Smythe has in mind, but Fuchs argues that social networks such as Facebook are similar. They collect audiences and sell them to advertisers. Owners of the sites no longer provide entertainment, but rely on the audience to assemble itself through the production of attractive goods of one sort or another. Fuchs draws the radical conclusion that the activity of Internet users “does not signify a democratization of the media toward a participatory or democratic system, but the total commodification of human creativity” (2010, 192).

Fuchs political project is similar to that of Hardt and Negri. Like them he wants to broaden the potential front of opposition to capitalism to correspond to the widening scope of exploitation. He argues that the fragmented struggles of advanced capitalism can potentially converge around resistance to the exploitation of free labor in the production of knowledge. The various exploited groups can resist capitalism as did the proletariat at an earlier stage.

Although we agree with Fuchs that Internet users are exploited in some sense, we will suggest a different explanation for how this comes about. We will focus on two problems in his article. First, Fuchs’ approach to understanding the exploitation of free labor greatly simplifies the complex economic strategies of commercial social networking sites. Second, Fuchs defines the Internet reductively in terms of its role under capitalism. He ignores the actual content of the communications SNSs mediate and underestimates the significance of the new public sphere they constitute. He does not take the political usages of the Internet seriously, a point to which we will return in our conclusion. Instead, he focuses exclusively on the fact that corporations profit from the labor of users. But we question his argument that the users are actually labouring for the companies that operate social networking sites and that the exploitation of user contributions is the defining attribute of those contributions.

**Facebook Economics**

Facebook is particularly complicated among social networking sites. It is characterized not just by the free labor model of UGC, but by a multi-commodification model that is a hybrid of different media commodification strategies in an aggressive economic synergy and technological convergence. The monolithic notion of audience labor cannot foreground enough of what is going on in sites like Facebook. We need to focus on the malleability of commodification on new media such as Facebook, which have complicated the economics of the Internet more than the early Web 2.0 technologies such as YouTube (Jin, 2013). Facebook users have been commodified—primarily based in user generated content, which is turned into information that can be monetized—not only as free labor but also as markets and advertising-medium labor. These interconnected strategies enable it to receive higher profits, as well as financial rent, which has been a major source of the financial valuation of Facebook.

Facebook is one of the most significant examples of the emergence of a whole new economic form on the Internet. It adds thousands of new user registrations globally every day. The number of total users has grown from 585 million in December 2010 to 1.23 billion in December 2013. About 757 million daily active users on average visited Facebook in December 2013 (Facebook, 2014). Facebook users also generated an average of 3.2 billion Likes and Comments per day during the first quarter of 2012 (Facebook, 2012). Facebook has benefited massively from these user activities. Its revenue has been soaring due in large part to advertising. Revenue is generated every time a user clicks on an advertisement (Facebook, 2012, F17). Major advertisers can’t miss the opportunities presented by having a presence on Facebook.

The theoretical understanding of the exploitation of user participation in Facebook is controversial due both to questions about to the nature of users as a class and the problem of the quantification of user participation. On the one hand, as Cohen (2008) points out, Facebook exploits its users in some sense since it does not pay a wage for the labor that produces content. As Marx highlighted (1867), exploitation is the fundamental aspect of class. He claims that “the driving motive and determining purpose of capitalist production is the greatest possible exploitation of labor-power by the capitalist,” who owns the means of production. Likewise, Facebook users produce informational content, but their products are appropriated by capital. We will consider in the next section whether this parallel makes sense, but first we will discuss some economic arguments for and against Fuchs’ claims.

Unlike labor, gender, or race, Facebook users are not easy to categorize because they are an aggregation with little in common beyond the link formed by the technology through which they communicate and the markets supported by that technology (Cote and Pybus, 2007, 97). Nevertheless, with the rise of user-generated content and free access to social networking platforms that yield profit from online advertising, the economics of the Web seem to resemble the accumulation strategies employed by capital on traditional media like television. To this extent its users constitute a meaningful economic entity and potentially therefore also, Fuch’s implies, a social actor. But what sort of entity and what sort of actor? There is considerable disagreement about the nature of their “labor,” or indeed whether they labor at all.

On the other hand, researchers argue about whether user participation can be measured and sold to advertisers, and if so, who conducts the quantification of user participation and how significant it is in Facebook’s overall value. For example, Smythe (1977, 4-5) pointed out that “several media research corporations and media corporations themselves as well as AC Nielsen quantified audience participation in order to assure that advertisers get what they pay for when they buy audiences.” Later, rather than seeing audiences as working for media industries, Bolin (2010, 357) suggests, “it is more fruitful to see statistical representations of audiences as raw material that is shaped into a commodity by market research agencies and departments and sold as a commodity. It is not the viewers who work, but the rather the statisticians.” Bolin (2010) is suggesting that as raw material users’ contributions cannot be considered labor. Their words and images are available for exploitation like a mountain rich in ore, but they are not implicated in the process of value creation.

Arvidsson and Colleoni (2012, 137) contend that “people who create value for Facebook and other social media platforms do so voluntarily without any kind of compulsion whatsoever. People indeed feel more than compensated (as already noted by Smythe) by the use value and gratification they derive from these activities.” They question the economics of the audience commodity theory as applied to Facebook. Hardt and Negri (2000, 354-359) argue, furthermore, that this immaterial labor is immeasurable.

In this regard, Facebook itself claims that it creates value for advertisers and marketers by offering more than one billion monthly active users on its site. The use value of users’ labor is constantly established through specific processes of measurement that serves to quantify its corresponding exchange value (Dowling, 2007, 126). The economic significance of users’ activities are arguably altered by the active presence and active intervention of capital (Dowling, 2007). As such, what distinguishes the concept of free labor in the era of Web 2.0 is its link to ideas of quantitative and interactive commodities in both production and consumption. In this sense, watching is work rendered quantifiable by ratings points that reflect units of audience power.

Advertising is not Facebook’s only business model; it has developed direct marketing as well. Among Facebook’s annual revenues, advertising revenue accounted for 84.2% in 2012, but this was down from 98% in 2009 because revenue from non-advertising sources increased by 62.3 times between 2009 and 2012. Unlike several UGC technologies, which mainly sell users’ free time and energy to advertisers, Facebook’s users constitute a market. The users can purchase virtual goods on the Facebook platform by using various payment methods available on the website (Facebook, 2012). In other words, Facebook shows a very unique business model differentiating itself from other UGC models.

Meanwhile, Facebook has greatly increased its financial valuation, which is “related to its perceived capacity for attracting future investment, or, to use a more general term, financial rent” (Arvidsson and Colleoni, 2012, 145). Arvidsson and Colleoni consequently argue that Facebook’s business model “can be interpreted as a symptom of a transition away from a Fordist, industrial model of accumulation where the value of a company is mainly related to its ability to extract surplus value from its workers (to use Marxian terminology), to an informational finance-centered model of accumulation where the value of a company is increasingly related to its ability to maintain a brand that justifies a share, in terms of financial rent, of the global surplus that circulates on financial markets.”

In other words, according to Arvidsson and Colleoni, the brand becomes a source of value in itself, apart from any evidence about the earning capacity of the company that produces actual products under the brand. The rewards to the brand may be called a kind of rent by analogy with land, valued in itself apart from the income it may produce at the time of sale. This concept of rent explains some otherwise puzzling phenomena such as the enormous prices paid for digital companies that have an established brand but little income, or the intensity with which luxury goods producers attack counterfeits which are sometimes produced in the very same factories and with the same materials as the official products but sold at a lesser price.

Facebook indeed attracted financial investments in the stock market, which has been one of the major forms of revenue in digital capitalism. Right after its initial public offering (IPO) on May 18, 2012, the capital value of Facebook was as much as $104 billion (AP, 2012). Although the share price for a while nosedived from $38 to $22.17 on November 16, 2012, the price soared to $51.95 as of October 25, 2013. Arvidsson and Colleoni (2012) and Hardt and Negri (2000) suggest that the labor theory of value has become irrelevant to understanding SNSs because financial rent is now more significant than labor. As Ernest Mandel (1975) already pointed out, late capitalism is a form of increasingly parasitic rentier capitalism in which surplus profits are obtained by monopolizing access to resources, assets and technologies. Rather than resulting from the direct exploitation of labor at the point of production as the labor theory of value would have it, value is now appropriated through rent (Bohm et al., 2012). The idea of profit based on rent shifts the dominant logic of value production in the heartlands of the advanced capitalist economies.

While the pursuit of financial rent is one of the major business models for SNSs in the digital economy, it is imperative to understand that financial value is also based on user participation and ad revenue. Finance capital investments in Facebook are made because of the expectation of high future profits. In other words, financial capital does not itself produce profits, and it is only an entitlement to payments that are made in the future and derive from actual value-creating activities (Fuchs, 2012, 641-642). For Facebook, user activity is the source of profit, without which its financial value would be insignificant.

Arvidsson and Colleoni (2012, 145) argue that “advertising is not the most important source of income for Facebook. And there is no linear relation between the number of users and the advertising revenue that Facebook has been able to attract and investor valuations of the company.” In fact there is a clear relation between these two values. Facebook has rapidly increased its ad revenue, from $300 million in 2008 to $4.27 billion in 2012, primarily based on its increasing number of registered users, again, from 140 million users at the end of December 2008 to more than 1 billion users in December 2012. In its filing with the Securities and Exchange Commission made on February 1, 2012, Facebook (2012, 50) indicates that “the increase in ads delivered [in 2011] was driven primarily by user growth.”

The process of commodification in Facebook is complex. Use-value is determined by a product’s ability to meet individual and social needs, while exchange-value is determined by what a product can bring to the marketplace. In the usual case use value is realized by the consumer after purchase, i.e. a payment corresponding to the exchange value of the goods. Production simply reverses the temporal order: the use value of labor is purchased by the owner of enterprise who subsequently realizes the exchange value of the product on the market. Facebook represents a new configuration.

Users voluntarily engage in activities they enjoy on Facebook, neither buying nor selling a product. However, through searching for ads and clicking the keyboard, they unintentionally commodify themselves for the market as well as for Facebook. Thus on the one hand, the use values created by users circulate among themselves in an “economy” that resembles gift giving or barter rather than commodity exchange, while on the other hand, exchange value is extracted from these use values simultaneously by the three procedures outlined above: advertising, direct marketing, and the sale of stock. Of course, these three areas commonly rely on data collection and analysis of user generated content, because they feed the exchange value in all these activities.

**Audience Commodity or Users?**

Smythe (1977, 7-8) linked the concept of the audience commodity to the labor theory of value in his initial formulation through connecting audience work and the production and reproduction of labor power. People are brought into this commodity relation by working for the networks (unconsciously, un-coerced, and unpaid) during supposedly non-work time. As consumers, they enable the transformation of their leisure activity into a commodity. While the concept of the audience commodity offers suggestive ideas for understanding what is happening on the mass media, it gains a new look in the context of Web 2.0. Television audiences and SNS users are different in respect to their roles in the commodification process.

According to Smythe the work of the broadcast audience comes after content is produced. The television program, for example, is produced and then broadcast, during which time the audience’s work begins (Cohen, 2008). As unpaid laborers, television audiences spend their off-work time passively, attending to advertising messages and buying advertised products; however, SNS users are counted, packaged, and sold to advertisers and industrial capitalists while actively engaged in pleasurable activities, among which various forms of self-presentation play a key role. This means that UGC users, and in particular Facebook users, are different from Smythe’s television audiences in that they unwittingly participate in transforming their identities into exchange values for profits. In other words, unlike television audiences who passively consume pre-produced materials, UGC users are actively producing content and consuming the content they produce at the same time.

While providing opportunities for users to enjoy their activities and networks of friends and acquaintances, Facebook also creates an intricate archive of cultural preferences for savvy marketers to exploit (Gregg, 2009, 210). Television and radio broadcasting platforms are only able to produce very broad audience commodities whose profiles and characteristics can then be sold to advertisers, but Facebook targets specific user groups much more effectively. This is done through powerful computing algorithms that filter user data according to a range of different advertising oriented criteria (Bohm et al, 2012). Information gathering is facilitated by the current climate of self-disclosure supported by interactive technology, including blogging and social networking, that generates a trove of information for data miners, whether for advertising or policing purposes (Andrejevic, 2007, 178). Facebook allows advertisers to select relevant and appropriate audiences for their ads, ranging from millions of users in the case of global brands to hundreds of users in the case of smaller, local businesses (Facebook, 2012).

Some argue on the basis of these distinctions that the concept of audience commodity as Smythe defined it cannot be used to understand the interactive nature of consumption and production in Web 2.0 technologies. We agree that it is necessary to replace the term “audience” with another more appropriate term. Sonia Livingstone advocates substituting the more explicitly (inter)active term “user.” She (2003, 355) focuses on the action of being a user in the Internet age, literally emphasizing the verbs involved, such as “playing computer games, surfing the Web, searching databases, writing and responding to email, visiting a chat room, shopping online, and so on.” The term “user” is functional and reflects the fact that users click on hypertext links in order to create a sequential flow of images on the Web, type messages that co-construct the chat room, and produce their own websites and blogs.

The audience commodity theory can be adapted to Facebook in this way, but the adaptation raises problems with the assimilation of this user activity to the Marxian concept of labor. Fuchs’ comparison of capitalist production and user production on the Internet is greatly simplified. Capitalist exploitation involves more than extracting profit but also creates new conditions for doing so. The labor process was reorganized around new forms of labor that could be quantified and controlled. The products changed too as their production changed. Marx called this “real subsumption.” Capitalist appropriation thus involves not only commodification but also the transformation of labor and the commodified resources. The capitalist form penetrates the actual content of production. The completion of this process can be described as “total commodification.”

The audience commodity theory of the mass media is roughly compatible with Marx’s theory of commodification since not only is audience attention sold, its “content,” the object toward which it is directed, is controlled and rationalized by capital. But with Facebook or Google only sale occurs. Corporations commodify the knowledge commons, but they do not transform its content as thoroughly as were land and labor at an earlier stage. Of course the content is shaped to some extent by the design of the interface and worked up by such procedures as data mining, but the original flow of data is not much altered in the process. There is indeed a certain degree of standardization involved in the process, but it does not go as far as in the cases Marx considered. Unlike land cleared and fenced for raising sheep, or labor stripped of skills, online communications remain essentially what they were even after they are commodified. This is an important distinction. Where Fuchs claims that users’ communications suffer “total commodification,” we argue that the commodification is quite restricted and leaves the users relatively free.

Capitalism is a parasite on an independent content that has two quite different destinies: on the one hand the untransformed content is exchanged with other users; on the other hand the content is transformed by the imposition of the commodity form through such procedures as data mining. This double character of content suggests a different analogy than labor. Social networking actually resembles the telephone more than the factory. User content is transmitted by Internet companies in the same way that telephone conversations are transmitted by telephone companies. The users’ conversations are not controlled by the telephone companies or social networking sites as is labor by factory owners. The telephone company commodifies the conversations by the simple procedure of measuring their duration. It is true that commodifying social networking content is more complicated, but like the measurement of duration, it leaves the communication itself to go forward free of interference. The analogy between factory labor and social networking “labor” is misleading. A better analogy would be a common carrier.

This has a further consequence brought out by Arvidsson and Colleoni. The capitalist transformation of the labor process has the effect of reducing labor to the expenditure of uniform effort over time. This abstract labor is measured by its duration, hence the discussion of the struggle over the length of the workday in *Capital*. The force of the idea depends on the assumption that under capitalism goods are valued at their cost of production. The cost of production of the labor power the worker sells to the capitalist is the value of the necessities of life required to reproduce it from day to day. That cost bears no relation to the amount of product the worker can produce in the course of the workday. The difference constitutes surplus value and its appropriation by the capitalist is exploitation. This does not describe how users’ communications generate profits.

Obviously, money can be made off many human activities that are not labor as Marx understood it and are not exploited in this precise sense. As noted above, telephone companies profit from conversations on their lines but though the callers are active and sometimes even creative, their conversations cannot be described as labor. Restaurants profit from the proximity of tourist venues, but the tourists do not work for the restaurant owners. Gentrification follows artists into dilapidated neighbourhoods but the artists painting in their lofts are not working for developers. It is simply wrong to qualify every activity from which capitalists draw a profit as labor and reduce it to its economic function. In a very broad usage we can call all these examples instances of exploitation but they do not do the harms nor have the political implications of the expropriation of surplus value in capitalist production.

In a Marxist context, the identification of user activity on the Web with labor has “a set of highly particular political implications,” namely, the necessary overthrow of capitalism to end exploitation. Arvidsson and Colleoni (2012: 136) are not persuaded by Fuchs’ argument and reject its implied politics. We agree that the application of Marx’s concept of labor to the UGC and SNSs on the Internet is not appropriate. The “labor” of users is not abstract but totally concrete in the sense that it depends on personality and style. It is not uniform, is not measured by the time expended on the effort, and it cannot be divided into a portion devoted to reproduction and another portion expropriated as surplus value. Its quantification, as noted earlier, is superficial and simply records a by-product of user activity. The sophistication and complexity of that process is necessary precisely because user activity has not been reduced to the simple expenditure of effort over time as in the “real subsumption” of labor in the factory.

In sum, while it is clear that many users of Facebook and similar sites work hard to generate content, and while it is also clear that commodification and exploitation occur on these sites, the specifically Marxist concept of labor under capitalism does not apply. That concept has a systematic significance and connotations in Marxist theory which follow it in Fuchs’ argument. But the Marxist concept is actually quite narrow and is tied to the production of commodities by deskilled labor under the control of capitalists or their managerial representatives. It implies a notion of rationalization inappropriate for SNSs. In the next section we will offer an alternative.

**The Internet as a Public Space**

There is another problem with Fuchs’ analysis of SNSs on the Internet. The audience commodity theory was designed for television. It is true that Internet “audiences” are also sold to advertisers, but SNSs are significantly different from television. A more relevant analogy than television at this point in the development of the Internet is the sidewalk. Like the sidewalk SNSs form a public space on which all sorts of interactions take place. And just as the activity on the sidewalk creates business opportunities for the owners of stores along the way, so does the Internet create opportunities for the owners of the services, such as social networking sites, on which individuals meet and converse. Advertisers on Facebook resemble store owners who rent a good location in a mall. Visitors to the mall engage in both private and public activities to the extent permitted. As in the mall the commodification that takes place on SNSs concerns access to audience attention, not ownership and sale of the conversations and their by-products such as photographs and videos. Although sidewalks and malls are not typically associated with the ideal of public discussion, it does occur there occasionally. That is a significant expression of freedom of assembly in a democratic society.

Fuchs reduces the Internet to its economic function and so dismisses its democratic implications. In so doing he ignores the human significance of online interaction as a new public sphere. The role of the social networking in social and political life is not exhausted by its economic aspect. In fact we have yet to measure the full extent of its contribution to democracy.

Arvidsson and Colleoni would seem to agree, but their notion of social networking sites as a democratic public sphere is peculiarly truncated, as Fuchs argues in his rejoinder to their critique of his own Marxist approach (Fuchs, 2012). They claim that SNSs could be employed to democratize the attribution of brand value. This would presumably make for a better financial system. The limitations of this projection are painfully clear. The actual politics of the Internet is not about improving the workings of the stock market but rather, as Fuchs points out, involves resistance to various forms of government and corporate domination.

The democratic public sphere is an essential aspect of democracy. Elections would have little meaning if citizens did not engage in widespread and continuous discussion of policies and government. The public sphere is the “space” of those discussions. It is occupied by a more or less significant portion of the population at any given time. In periods of crisis or uncertainty, it swells. When all is going well it may contract. But in any case democracy involves public participation in the creation and the criticism of ideas, policies and representatives (Habermas 1991; Salter 2003).

The Arab Spring and the Occupy Movement occurred in the early 2010s have spread awareness of the democratic potential of SNSs on the Internet. In part by using Facebook and Twitter, activists organized the unprecedented protests that gave rise to he Arab Spring and the Wall Street Occupy Movement. In December 2013, several Korean college students also opened a Facebook site (<https://www.facebook.com/cantbeokay>) in order to support the labor movement of railway workers, and this site also played a key role in organizing the massive candlelight vigil of May that demanded the resignation of the current Park Geun-hye government over the Sewol ferry disaster of April 2014. The Facebook ste spreads the citizens’ claim that the media are controlled to conceal the truth behind the failed rescue operation; therefore, this particular site has worked as an alternative to the mass media in the public sphere.

As such, SNS can bring dissenting opinion to the attention of large numbers of people quickly and cheaply, and eventually mobilize them in protest. Thus despite the dispiriting commercialism of SNSs on the Internet, and the role of corporate and government surveillance in stripping us of the last vestiges of privacy, there is another encouraging side to the story. Freedom of speech and assembly have a new venue in a society that has reduced the spatial loci of public gatherings and speech-making. The visible manifestations of politics on the Internet take shape against a background of intense discussion in web forums and on SNSs. In this context user generated content is political content. There are also several examples of SNS and UGC to support the claims of the democratic sphere being possible through online activities, including SNS activities that have been used for political campaigns. For example, political use of SNS and UGC in the last two United States’ presidential elections was common. In the 2008 US election, user-created videos uploaded to the Obama and McCain YouTube channels were viewed almost as often as official campaign videos. Due to the increasing role of SNS and UGC , there is a huge literature attempting to understand this new phenomenon, the emergence of an electronically mediated public sphere on the Internet (Dahlberg 2007; Dahlgren 2013.).

What makes this possible is the very feature of the Internet that supports social networking, namely, its ability to mediate small group activity, the so-called “many-to-many communication” that distinguishes interaction on computer networks from other forms of mediated communication such as the telephone and broadcasting (Feenberg, 2012). Groups can form in the spaces for free discussion SNS on the Internet provides, debate their ideas and plans, and then use other features of UGC to broadcast a call to action.

The impact of social networking on the public sphere goes beyond these conventional political considerations. Not only does SNS support protest movements, it has enlarged the range of concerns discussed in the public sphere. That range is continually expanding in democratic societies, from its origins in taxation and war to education and economics and, more recently, environmental and gender issues. The process continues to unfold as the public sphere embraces ever more domains of social life. But, contra Fuchs, public interest in many of these new concerns is not motivated by struggle over the distribution of surplus value as are workers’ struggles. Rather, insofar as SNS users have something in common with workers, it is not their economic claims but the technological form of their association.

Factories were the first modern institutions which assembled masses around technologies. Marx understood the importance of technology in creating the mass base of struggle and contrasted the political potential of cooperative labor on the shop floor with the passivity of isolated peasant laborers. Today technical mediation touches every aspect of society, not just the factory. The entire population of advanced capitalist societies is enrolled in many overlapping technical networks, each of which is organized by a hierarchical administration modelled on capitalist management. Not just production, but also education, medicine, leisure activities, and transportation have been transformed by technology. Impressive numbers are involved in these many new functional networks, but for the most part the participants are not assembled locally in face-to-face contact as are factory workers. This has limited the political potential of these networks and made it easy to administer them in the interests of capital. Social networking is beginning to change this situation. Latent social groups can be assembled virtually through SNSs. These online networks parallel the many forms of technical mediation that unite the individuals in functional networks of one sort or another.

The case of medicine offers an example of effective mobilization in an apparently apolitical sphere. Online patient groups bring together untold numbers. The traditional isolation of patients is overcome and their relation to the medical institution transformed. Medical paternalism, already in decline before the Internet, is now much more generally challenged. Patients show up at the doctor’s office with printouts about treatment in hand. They learned very early how to use their social networks to lobby for research funding (Feenberg, et al., 1996). This is an example of what Maria Bakardjieva calls “sub-activism,” a micro-politics of daily life capable of challenging administrative hierarchies and their policies (Bakardjieva, 2012).

So far the most significant example of mobilization around the new technologies concerns the Internet itself. The defense of free communication and privacy has engaged millions of users in social networks and has so far been fairly successful in defending public usages of both SNS and UGC on the Internet. These struggles have prevented the enclosure of the Internet commons by business and continue to maintain the openness of the technology to free communication and innovative usages.

Sub-activism is not the equivalent of the labor movement in an earlier era, but it could provide a different kind of mass base for struggles over control of economic and social life. Whether such struggles will lead to the overthrow of capitalism or its reform—the alternative represented by Fuchs and Arvidsson and Colleoni—is impossible to say at this time. But it is clear that social networking creates a new kind of democratic public sphere with considerable oppositional potential.

Fuchs’ argument depends on the reductive claim that the commodification of user communications deprives them of democratic potential. We have argued that commodification operates on the margin of the many activities that go on in SNSs. Some of those activities are political and have significant political effects even as they are data mined for commercial purposes. The two streams of use value and exchange value move in parallel. Neither reduces the other to insignificance. Fuchs’ negative evaluation may be verified in a future reconfiguration of the Internet but it still affords free communication today. A one-sided critique risks demobilizing the defense of that remarkable phenomenon.

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