

Mediating Social Media's Ambivalences in the Context of Informational Capitalism

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores the dialectics of media, by considering the socially reproductive and transformative function of social media from a political economic perspective. The authors claim that while media have consistently generated aspirations and fear of social change, their powerful capability of shaping societies depend on the historically specific social relations in which media operate. They engage such an argument by examining how the productive relations that support user generated content practices such as the ones of Facebook users affect social media in their capability to reproduce and transform existing social contexts. In the end, the authors maintain that the most prominent mediation of social media consists of the ambivalent nature of current capitalist mode of production: a contest in which exploitative/emancipatory as well as reproductive/transformative aspects are articulated by liberal ideology.

KEYWORDS

Bloch, Facebook, Fuchs and Sevignani, Ideology, Marx, Mediation, Mediatization Digital Labor, Political Economy, Social Media, Technological Utopianism, Transparency

INTRODUCTION

In this essay we explore the deep level of ambiguities that characterize the relationship between social media and capitalism, the social, political economic context in which in several regions of world they operate. We provide this reflection in a particular moment of history in which media have become at the same time the main “language” in order to decipher contemporary economics as well as the material terrain in which those economic activities develop. Yet, while social media seem to have been more and more integrated within the logic of capitalism, and capitalism, has increasingly assumed the morphology of an informational dispositive, their relationship is not straightforward but defined by a series of deep rooted tensions.

We claim in fact that those tensions illustrate a long lasting relationship between our societies and the way we understood the normative role of media technologies. For instance, Mosco (2005) claims that every new wave of media technology seems to bring with it contradictory declarations of ultimate ends, a mixture of messianic and apocalyptic predictions of future, a *telos* that simultaneously implies modernity and anti-modernity. The radio for instance could connect distant communities, thus enhancing a common understanding of the world, but could also generate phenomena of mass hysteria. In the specific case of social media platforms, they are simultaneously perceived to be rescuing the public sphere (Habermas, 1991), promoting new sociability (Boyd, 2010) while concurrently, deteriorating more genuine forms of communication such as interpersonal and dialogic

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ones, and facilitating further levels of commodification of previously un-colonized spheres of social life (Terranova, 2004).

In relation to such a debate, this paper provides a framework that tries to synthesize both utopian and dystopian, socially reproductive and reformative aspects of media by focusing on the ways in which the user generated content activity of Facebook users mediate the structural and cultural contradictions of operating in the high-tech environment such as the tension between the liberal ideology of agency and the necessities to monetize their activity. Thus, drawing on Fuchs and Sevignani's (2013) distinction between the exploitative "labor" and the emancipatory "work," the paper suggests looking at Facebook practices as representative of such a synthesis. This is a political economic perspective that focuses on how social media activities are capable of emancipating and coercing their users and how those ambivalences are mediated by liberal ideology. As a result, the contradictions between viewing technology as emancipating or coercive tend to be normatively framed as politically engaged practices, which could simultaneously be considered as the unpaid labor of producing content for Facebook.

The main theoretical contribution of the paper consists in providing a political economic critical inquiry of the capability of social media to "mediate" multiple messages, to concurrently generate social transformation and social reproduction (Bloch, 1986). In order to advance our argument, we structure this paper in three main sections: the first one concerning the link between media and utopian/dystopian societal dispositions in which we show how consistent those aspirations and fears of social change triggered by media are; the second one expounding a perspective that understands those tensions within media as an ideological process that links two aspects of user generated content, i.e. working and laboring; and the third one that uses the case of Facebook to exemplify our framework, the synthesis between the working/utopic/transformational and the laboring/dystopic/reproductive features of social media.

UTOPIA AND DYSTOPIA IN SOCIAL MEDIATION AND SOCIAL FORMATIONS

The process of social formation— i.e. how a given society comes to organize itself through time— and the process of social mediation— i.e. different elements/subjects come to interact, communicate and exchange of information among each other, are indissolubly united. That is because both processes are based on the production and reproduction of social relations. In fact, media could not exist without a preexisting social field and a sense of sociability. At the same time, a social community could not be constructed without an adequate means of communication and social coordination.

In our view this explains why there seems to be a consistent ambivalent feelings associated with mediated communication that regard media as alternatively determining a feared or a welcome social change. Furthermore, it also explains why, as we will argue later on, while media technology can significantly change throw-out time, its conceptual role of mediation may remain fairly unvaried. More specifically, we see media as channeling technological utopia and dystopia. By technological utopia we refer to the specific modern ideology assuming that progress of science and technology will eventually fulfill an ideal society in which human scarcity, sufferance and mortality will be overcome (Gendron, 1977). Its *alter*, technological dystopia, describes how technology has also been consistently associated with catastrophic changes; images of technology mediating so much to actually contaminate our humanness as well as compromising genuine social intercourse (Gendron, 1977). As a consequence, almost consistently media have been celebrated to overcome physical and temporal distance among human beings (e.g. the book, the telegraph, the radio, the email), and at the same time distancing otherwise close social relations (Jacobs, 1992). According to Peters (1999) fascination and fear for media went hand in hand with the first groundbreaking physics discoveries about magnetism and gravitational forces. In fact in both cases, people fantasized about the power of "*actio in distans*," the God-like idea of controlling an object without touching it, but also the utopic theory of labor in which production does not require physical force.

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