Chapter 2
The Politics of Social Media:
Mediating Ambivalences in the Era of Political Populism

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores a fundamental tension of social media by considering their socially reproductive and (potentially) transformative function. The claim is that while media and communication technologies have historically fueled both aspiration and fear of social change, their ability to shape societies are contingent on the specific social relations in which they operate. By investigating social media’s economic practices, primarily platform capitalism, the reproductive relations that support user-generated content that influence platform’s capabilities to reproduce and transform existing social contexts are examined. To illustrate this, political discourse via social media platforms have been used to argue that social media’s current capitalist mode of production exemplifies an antagonism between exploitative/emancipatory tendencies and reproductive/transformative aspects, which are further articulated by a liberal ideology.

INTRODUCTION

In the political economic study of mass media, illustrated and exemplified through the understanding that the flow of information and communication is linear and one-way, the distribution of content stems from a small number of producers to a large number of recipients (Bechmann, 2012; Wittel, 2016). Professionally created...
content is the key element in the business model of legacy media companies and is coupled with subscriptions, advertising, and/or licensing fees (Bechmann, 2012). Hallin and Mancini (2004) suggest that legacy news organizations in the United States are examples of the North Atlantic or liberal model of media which exists as a system that emphasizes profit, professionalism, and individualized representation (Benson, Blach-Orsten, Powers, Willig, & Zambrano, 2012). Epitomized by the we write, you read model of production (Deuze, 2003), content is a mass-produced product made daily and disseminated professionally.

The current age of media is historically significant, and considerably different, primarily due to social media platforms. Fundamentally, this difference lies in social media platforms operating as a key element and a main constituent of contemporary economies (Fuchs, 2015; Briziarelli & Karikari, 2016; Fuchs & Mosco, 2016). Since the media industry is considered to be profitable due to its potential for future-oriented growth, the integration of telecommunications, the computer industry at large, and the Internet into capitalism was the prerequisite for the expansion of the movement of capital (Knoche, 2015). In the political economic, social, and capitalist context of today, one dominated by social media platforms and their owners, a new class of individuals, corporations and entities capitalize on the information they collect and own through a vast infrastructure to sense, record and analyze data (Srnicek, 2017). As such, data serves crucial capitalist functions. In short, data educate and give advantage to algorithms; enable the coordination and outsourcing of workers; allow for the optimization and flexibility of productive processes; make possible the transformation of low-margin goods into high-margin services; and the analysis of data itself becomes a generative form of data (Srnicek, 2017).

As social media endures its rapid and influential integration into the logic of capitalism, and as capitalism continues to evolve through an informational character, the relationship between the two maintains development under and through deep-rooted tensions (Fuchs, 2016; Fuchs & Mosco, 2016; Briziarelli & Karikari, 2016). Moreover, the antagonism between our understanding of the normative role of media technologies and its place in society is long-lasting and forever changing. For instance, the history of mass media indicates that each new emerging technology is inevitably accompanied by a prediction of the total collapse of the previous technologies (Mosco, 2005; Tay & Turner, 2010). However, as Joyce (2018) notes, though new technology enables more active audiences, it does not mean that media corporations abandon their practices. Instead, it is important to contextualize that actions which change the innerworkings of the media ecosystem trigger multifaceted chains of reactions that inevitably seek new forms of balance.

The arrival of new media technologies can initiate major shifts in what is technically possible while being accompanied by utopic and/or dystopic sentiments. For example, in a more utopic inclination, social media are the supposed champions...
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