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## Understanding Social Media Use as Alienation: a review and critique

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**ABSTRACT** The opportunities social media provide for agential expressions of subjectivity and experiential learning, relative to social media's role in reproducing digital-era capitalism, are the subject of keen debate. There is now a burgeoning academic literature which suggests that social media users are, to a greater or lesser degree, alienated by the activities of mega-corporations like Google and Facebook. Within this literature two broad perspectives are clearly identifiable. The first insists that social media platforms strongly alienate their users. To the extent that critical media scholars who advance this proposition are preoccupied with ideological hegemony, their work emblematises the idealist tendency of (old) media theorists that Dallas W. Smythe criticises. Contributors to the second perspective posit a trade-off between social media user alienation and exploitation. Not only is this idea inherently problematical, it does not go far enough towards resetting the analysis of social media back onto a materialist track. This article seeks to do just that.

Frequently, Marxists and those radical social critics who use Marxist terminology locate the significance of mass communications systems in their capacity to produce 'ideology' which is held to act as a sort of invisible glue that holds together the capitalist system ... . But for Marxists, such an explanatory notion should be unsatisfactory. The first question that historical materialists should ask about mass communications is what economic function for capital do they serve, attempting to understand their role in the reproduction of capitalist relations of production. (Dallas W. Smythe, 1977, p. 1)

### Introduction

Coined by authors of various disciplinary and political stripes, a suite of terms signals a comparatively recent technologically wrought change in capitalism. Here are just a few: technocapitalism (Suarez-Villa, 2009); semiocapitalism (Berardi, 2011); cybernetic capitalism (Peters et al, 2009); and informational capitalism (Castells, 2000). Web 2.0 is a key driver of this capitalist reconfiguration. In the neo-liberal interpretation, distanced Internet users operate within an economy of free-flowing and non-hierarchical commons-based peer production (Benkler, 2006). Yet this cooperative, reciprocity-based system is ever-more subject to corporate dictates as Internet media behemoths structure the online environment and the way people interact with, and within, the web. Sounding a note of warning, Vaidyanathan (2011) calls this process 'googlization'. Google's mantra, of course, is that its services are free. Indeed, it is arguably the triumphal 'flagbearer of Free' (Anderson, 2009, p. 120). The irony is that Google's social media platforms, notably YouTube but also Google+, draw on time and effort supplied by unpaid users. Refracting Marx through the autonomist social factory lens, and employing the notion of value-creating labour extending well beyond the wage-relation (Terranova, 2000), it is then but a short step to say that social media users are therefore alienated or even exploited (Andrejevic, 2009; Fuchs, 2010; Fisher, 2012; Rey, 2012).

The authors cited immediately above extend the critique of social media beyond the notion that 'learning to immaterial labour 2.0' through social media creates new networked forms of subjectivity which function to reproduce digital capitalism's social relations (Coté & Pybus, 2011). If these authors are correct, systematic estrangement and value extraction operate in parallel with this learning process. Yet conceptual imprecision abounds amongst this new crop of 'radical social critics' (to paraphrase Smythe) who 'use Marxist terminology' in an effort to understand the effects of social media usage. Mark Andrejevic claims that YouTube users' 'alienation' is itself 'evidence of exploitation' (Andrejevic, 2009, p. 421). By contrast, P.J. Rey argues that social media is 'an industry on the web where exploitation can occur with minimal alienation' (Rey, 2012, p. 416). Eran Fisher puts it even more starkly strategic terms: 'in order for Facebook to exploit the work of its users, it must contribute to their de-alienation' (Fisher, 2012, p. 171). This is the iceberg's tip: in the wider social media literature, alienation and exploitation are often used uncritically and interchangeably. To date, no one has systematically evaluated how critical communication scholars apply these concepts to social media. Focusing on alienation in particular, this article provides just such a review.

First I draw out the different meanings of alienation in Marx's own work, and identify his latter-day interpreters' tendency to accentuate subjective rather than objective – economic – alienation. Then I identify two distinct lines of thought within critical social media studies that feature alienation as a central theme. One is preoccupied with ideological hegemony and thus emblematises the idealist tendency of (old) media theorists that Smythe (1977) criticises. The other position sophisticatedly brackets alienation in a trade-off with exploitation; authors who write from this standpoint argue that social media users' exploitation *requires* a low level of alienation (cf. Fisher, 2012; Rey, 2012). By positing a trade-off between alienation and exploitation, they fail to consider how alienation can be used to forge an analysis of social media that meets Smythe's materialist requirements. I conclude my article by making some suggestions for developing this type of analysis.

### **Alienation in Marx and Beyond**

The concept of alienation sits uneasily within the corpus of Marx's work. Alienation features strongly within his writings at a time when he was still working out the key tenets of his materialist conception of history and his value theory-based analysis of capitalism more specifically. His discussion of 'estranged labour' in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, for example, is replete with references to alienation. For anyone who has even a passing familiarity with Structural Marxism, alienation has weighty Althusserian baggage. Borrowing one of Gaston Bachelard's terms, Louis Althusser (1982, p. 34) identified an 'epistemological break' between the *Manuscripts* and what Marx subsequently wrote, the lynchpin being his 1845 *Theses on Feuerbach*. Before that, Marx's work supposedly neither had 'theoretical maturity' nor was it truly 'scientific' (Althusser, 1982, p. 34).[1]

There is no doubt that the *Theses* are a watershed in Marx's thinking. By bridging the subject-object dualism through the notion of material praxis, Marx unshackles himself from mechanistic materialism and abstract idealism alike (Marx, 1978 [1845]). But it is an overcall to assert, as Althusser does, that there is a textual rupture between the *Manuscripts* and the *Theses*. Bertell Ollman bends the stick too far in the opposite direction. In his pathbreaking *Alienation* (originally published in 1971), he rejects all attempts to periodise Marx's work along Althusserian lines, whereby 'each period [is] taken as a radical departure from what came before' (Ollman, 1976, p. xv). Far from being a pre-scientific conceptual remnant, alienation – Ollman argues – is the master-key to Marx's entire thinking.

Ernest Mandel takes a more even-handed approach. Shortly after Althusser's *For Marx* was originally published in French (as *Pour Marx* in 1965), Mandel came up with a scintillating – though nowadays often neglected – little book on the genesis of Marx's economic thinking (Mandel, 1971).[2] After addressing the place of the *Manuscripts* within the Marxian oeuvre and politically contextualising the different interpretations of alienation's status within Marx's work, Mandel arrives at the following conclusion:

The evolution of Marx's concept of alienated labour is thus clear: from an [ahistorical] anthropological conception (Feuerbach-Hegelian) before the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, he advances towards a historical conception (starting with the *German Ideology*). The *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* constitute a transition from the first to the second[.] (Mandel, 1971, p. 163)

Central to this transition, he maintains, was Marx's 'abandoning [of] the concept of the generic man, the "species being"', which resulted in him finding 'the precise historical roots of the exploitation of man by man' (Mandel, 1971, p. 162).

In his *Manuscripts*, Marx (1982 [1844], pp. 66-69) adumbrates four elements of alienation. The first three are estrangement of workers from (1) each other, (2) their humanity (or 'species-being'), and (3) their subjectivity-realising activity in the labour process ('self-estrangement'). The fourth form of alienation is the 'estrangement of the *thing*' – namely, 'the product of labour' which confronts the worker 'as an alien object' (Marx, 1982 [1844], pp. 66-67, original emphasis). The philosophical notion of species-being was central to just one aspect of alienation that Marx identified. Focusing on the other aspects, Mandel directs attention towards what he calls Marx's subsequent treatment of specifically 'economic alienation' (in the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*) due to the 'social division of labor' that splits capitalist societies into social classes (Mandel, 1971, p. 181, emphasis omitted). According to Mandel, economic alienation is estrangement from labour's products, from the act of production in the labour process, including the 'instruments of labor' that workers confront 'as an alien and hostile power which enslaves and stifles' them (Mandel, 1971, p. 181).[3]

Neglect of economic alienation is precisely what Musto (2010, p. 86) takes Erich Fromm to task for – namely, failing to assign 'due weight to objective alienation (that of the worker in the labour process and in relation to the labour product)'. Musto connects the dots between the French existentialists, psychoanalysts like Fromm, and philosophers such as Herbert Marcuse, arguing that they divorce alienation from history and specifically capitalist relations of production. He describes as a 'glaring error' the existentialist preoccupation with 'the concept of self-alienation' or 'the alienation of the worker from the human species and from others like himself – at the expense of objective (economic) alienation (Musto, 2010, pp. 87-88). Across the Atlantic the situation was even worse. The conservative intellectual tide let alienation drift in the scholarly literature much farther away from Marx's original meaning of the term (Horowitz, 1996). Cold war-era North American sociologists 'generally saw alienation as a problem linked to the system of industrial production, whether capitalist or socialist, and mainly affecting human consciousness' (Musto, 2010, p. 94). Establishment-type organisational sociologists such as Robert Blauner took the spotlight off economic alienation within capitalism per se, claiming instead to illuminate alienation as the social-psychological symptom of a Durkheimian-generic industrial society's failings (Blauner, 1964).[4] Ultimately sociologists allowed alienation conceptually to dwindle down to mere 'individual maladjustment to social norms' (Musto, 2010, p. 94).

Interestingly, this normative (culturalist) emphasis has its counterpart in late-1960s – protest-era – work by French social theorists who were most interested, not in homogenising notions of industrialism or defending American values, but rather in understanding and critiquing capitalism's new forms. Musto (2010, pp. 90-92) identifies Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* (which came out in 1967) and Jean Baudrillard's *Consumer Society* (published in 1970) as key texts that hooked alienation into the worker's envelopment by the spectacular flashiness of a symbol-laden consumerist social order. For Debord and Baudrillard alike, the capitalist economy is culturalised; culture is 'the star commodity of the spectacular society' (Debord, 1983, p. 193). The worker qua spectator is alienated by the insinuation of capitalism's spectacular imagery into his/her consciousness:

The alienation of the spectator to the profit of the contemplated object ... is expressed in the following way: the more he contemplates the less he lives; the more he accepts recognizing himself in the dominant images of need, the less he understands his own existence and his own desires. The externality of the spectacle in relation to the active man appears in the fact that his own gestures are no longer his but those of another who represents them to him. (Debord, 1983, p. 30)

Alienation is at the heart of Debord's analysis. Baudrillard refers to alienation just a handful of times in his *Consumer Society*. As eagle-eyed Musto (2010, p. 91) points out, however, Baudrillard concludes that the consumer society's emergence has ushered in 'the age of radical alienation' (Baudrillard, 1999, p. 191). Even more striking is the emphasis Baudrillard places on inculcation of cultural norms:

Consumption is an active, collective behaviour: it is something enforced, a morality, an institution. It is a whole system of values, with all that expression implies in terms of group integration and social control functions ... . The consumer society is also the society of learning to consume, of social training in consumption. That is to say, there is a new and specific mode of *socialization* related to the emergence of new productive forces and the monopoly restructuring of a high-productivity economic system. (Baudrillard, 1999, p. 81, original emphasis)

What one finds, then, in Debord and this early work by Baudrillard is the intertwining of the concept of alienation with a strikingly culturalist account of the consumer society's reproduction, which accents the ideational realm.

There are, however, glimmers of praxis-based materialism in Baudrillard's writing. For one, from the standpoint of reproducing the existing capitalist institutional order, he argues that mass communications function not to inculcate normative values in individuals. Rather, his view of their socially reproductive effect seems to echo Henri Lefebvre's (1976) point that, with respect to reproduction of the capitalist system, people's practical experiences of mystified and fetishised social relations are more important than ideologically infused socialisation processes. For Baudrillard (1999, p. 123), television 'conveys by its technical organization ... the idea (the ideology) of a world endlessly visualizable, endlessly segmentable and readable in images'. Likewise, the 'mass communication function' of advertising rests not in advertisement content, but rather in 'its very logic as an autonomized medium ... referring not to real objects, not to a real world or a referential dimension, but from one sign to the other, from one object to the other, from one consumer to the other' (Baudrillard, 1999, p. 125). Fast-forwarding to his 1983 text *Simulations*, one finds Baudrillard has pushed these ideas until the pips squeak, writing of 'the dissolution of TV into life, the dissolution of life into TV' (Baudrillard, 1983, p. 55). The medium 'is now intangible, diffuse and defracted in the real, and it can no longer even be said that the latter is distorted by it' (Baudrillard, 1983, p. 54). The upshot is this: there has been a 'fantastic telescoping' of reality and signification (p. 57), such that any and all distinction between reality and image blur, thereby ushering in 'absolute manipulation' (p. 57) based on the 'non-distinction of active and passive' (p. 58, emphasis omitted). If so, then individuals are even more completely enveloped by spectacular capitalism than they were through the socialisation process he wrote about in *The Consumer Society*.

Far from Baudrillard's proto-materialism providing a link back to objective (economic) alienation, it detracts from this issue. The enduring image is of the individual immersed in a consumer society that erases the distinction between image and object, as the image is objectified and the object is spectacularised. It is an era of 'absolute manipulation', but one without any apparent connection back to the social division of labour and to capital accumulation, as production 'becomes somehow abstract' and exchanges its sign with art (Baudrillard, 1983, p. 151).

To summarise: accenting alienation's subjective side (human essence, species being, existential angst and the like), especially in combination with conceptions of society as a consumerist social order (through the lens of circulation, that is), leads right away from the materialist analysis of media that Smythe advocated. Indeed, in the following section I show that this focus, carried over to the present day, characterises one whole cluster of critical communications scholars who identify social media use as alienating. Though their reference point is not Baudrillard but Gramsci, by pressing into service the latter's notion of hegemony they depict the cultural envelopment of the social media user in terms that rival Baudrillard's treatment of the individual's plight within the consumer society.

### **Social Media User Alienation I: ideology and hegemony**

The semblance of active participation in social media, the possibility of uploading materials or commenting on existing ones, of sharing Facebook 'likes' with others, no doubt perpetuates the

myth of consumer sovereignty. Social media users *choose* to do these things. It is this conscious participation in a process that ultimately results in commodification of personal information stripped from the user, and its reconfiguration for targeted advertising, which has led the authors I review in this section to make the link from Marx's concept of alienation to Gramscian-style hegemony.

Proulx et al (2011, p. 23) are a case in point: based in large part on a Facebook case study, they claim 'the Internet is transforming ordinary users into active, consenting participants in their own alienation by consumer society'. By alienation they mean submitting to a system that takes something from users. Using Bruns' (2008) now standard sociological parlance, and referring to social media users as 'producers', they argue that '[t]he act of creation and freedom that defines the producer – freely producing, remixing, and distributing content on the web – is also an act of subjection and submission to the economic system on which the Internet is based' (Proulx et al, 2011, p. 22). What does this system take from users? The answer they supply: users' information. They state – correctly in my view – that:

personal information left on sites by users of Web 2.0 platforms ... eventually becomes metadata that can be used for sophisticated profiling of Web clients. Profiles can then be sold or exchanged between companies, producing increasingly precise targeting of advertising campaigns and marketing strategies. (Proulx et al, 2011, p. 23)

To argue that this user-generated data, as opposed to consciously created and upload 'user-generated content' (van Dijck, 2009, p. 41), is stripped away or 'alienated' from the social media user is one thing. But it is quite another to say that users, therefore, are not just subjectively alienated by a consumer society but *consent* to their alienation.

Proulx et al (2011) go not just one, but two steps too far. This is because their argument about consent begs the following question: If social media use is subjectively alienating, why do people participate in a system that alienates them? Their explanation, along with that of the other scholars I discuss in this section, grafts the Gramscian notion of hegemony onto a strong socialisation (consumer culturalist) model of the relationship between the individual and society. Proulx et al (2011, p. 23) say that Facebook providing producers with the ability to protest about Facebook's own corporate actions enables them (the producers) to 'participate in Gramsci's counter hegemonic project'. Facebook may facilitate protest, but clearly it sees social media as hegemonic in the first instance – to the extent that it reproduces consumer capitalism. Likewise, Bernard Stiegler implicates YouTube in

a major turn in the cultural hegemony and the poisonous heteronomy imposed by the consumerist industrialization of culture ... [A]s anticipated by Antonio Gramsci, the *cultural hegemony of consumerism* consists of *imposing heteronomy*, while making believe that political decisions are no longer possible – 'there is no alternative' – because politics has been absorbed by the market and the economy. (Stiegler, 2009, p. 47, original emphasis)

Comor (2010), too, presses Gramsci into service. Because he advances one of the more well-developed arguments, it is worth looking closely at his reasoning. He maintains that social media users, amongst others whom he calls 'prosumers', are all trapped in 'a hegemonic order' (Comor, 2010, p. 323). Here is why: 'the prosumer acts in response to his state of alienation ... [but] the act of prosumption itself may deepen this state of being' (p. 321). Comor invokes the liberal sociologist Zygmunt Bauman on the 'consumerist culture' to argue that the social media user qua prosumer is 'promoting and selling himself to others as yet another commodity' (p. 320). Quite which market this sale is transacted through is unclear. Comor is persistent though, arguing that 'becoming known to others' is users' 'idealized' goal (p. 320). Indeed, in an 'alienated polity', supposedly the only way to participate is to seek 'to be included in a cultural tapestry of exchangeable commodities' (p. 320). Notably, this includes 'attracting Facebook friends' (p. 320). Culture implies inculcation of norms and values, including wrong notions 'self-empowerment' which in reality, Comor maintains, are founded on 'commodifying social relations' (p. 322), such that users 'internalize mostly commodified constructs' (p. 323). Culture, inclusion, and internalisation – clearly Comor is making a strong socialisation argument.

Analysing social media in terms of cultural hegemony leads to the worst of both worlds of social theory. Writing about factory labour, Burawoy (2012) pinpoints these twin faults; what he

says is equally applicable to digital labour. First, by making ‘claims about the deep internalization of social structure, reminiscent of the structural functionalism of the 1950s and its “oversocialized man”’, Comor and others ‘compound the forcefulness and eternalization of the present’ (Burawoy, 2012, pp. 204-205). How does anyone ever consciously rupture the capitalist cultural membrane if in everything they do, including organising a protest by communicating with Facebook friends, they are automatically and unambiguously ‘reproducing ... their own possessive individualism and alienation’ (Comor, 2010, p. 322)? This is political nihilism writ large; it forgets the first lesson about the ever-present possibility of resistance. For one, political organising skills can be learnt through web usage. Facebook itself provides a platform for organising efforts, as protesters’ online activities during the 2011 Egyptian revolution amply demonstrate (Ghonim, 2012).

The second point of criticism is that the socialisation-plus-hegemony approach reproduces analytic failings inherent to Gramsci who, Burawoy (2012, p. 203) argues, ‘does not recognize the mystification of exploitation upon which hegemony, that is consent to domination, rests’.[5] In other words, by appealing to Gramsci, they (Comor; Stiegler; Proulx et al) theoretically foreclose on understanding social media’s role within the capitalist circuit. Their analysis ends with the user’s incorporation into a hegemonic order. The Gramscian theorists of social media, in effect, subscribe to the Weberian notion of capitalism as a cultural system propounded by contemporary economic historians such as Appleby (2010). The corollary is that capitalist entrepreneurs – rather than workers – are the key value creators; that capitalists too are hoodwinking ‘captains of consciousness’ (Ewen, 2001). This is in fact a step backwards from the later (post-*Consumer Society*) Baudrillard. My point is this: the perpetuation of capitalist societies has more to do with the daily lived experience of a society in which appearance masks essence than it does with ideas culturally imported into people’s minds by socialising them into a set of pro-capitalist cultural values.[6]

The turn to Gramsci prevents scholars from using the idea of economic alienation to consider fully, from the standpoint of the capitalist integration, the effects of social media stripping away user-generated data. Put in the terms of this article’s opening statement, it sidetracks them from considering ‘what economic function for capital’ social media serves, and analysing its ‘role in the reproduction of capitalist relations of production’.

### **Social Media User Alienation II: the switch**

The second critical social media school of thought’s protagonists – notably, Rey (2012) and Fisher (2012) – flip the switch: engaging with social media, they insist, militates *against* alienation. Ostensibly working within a materialist framework, Fisher argues that social media users are ‘de-alienated’ under a deliberate capitalist strategy to heighten the rate of exploitation (Fisher, 2012, p. 179). Fisher does not cite Rey; their work was published contemporaneously. Nonetheless, Fisher’s work can be read as taking to its logical conclusion Rey’s insistence that ‘social media is characterized by exploitation in the (relative) absence of alienation’ (Rey, 2012, p. 416). The implication is clear: there is neither a necessary nor a logical connection between alienation and exploitation, as one can be low and the other high.[7] Rey suggests there is a trade-off between alienation and exploitation to the benefit of capitalism as a whole, to wit ‘the structural conditions of the digital economy link profitability to a reduction in the intensity of alienation’ (Rey, 2012, p. 399). Fisher goes one step further and posits a ‘dialectical link between exploitation and alienation’ (Fisher, 2012, p. 179).[8] What each author is saying, in essence, is that by reducing people’s alienation, social media is functional for capitalism to the extent that it lifts the rate of exploitation. Fisher expresses this idea in terms of a quid pro quo:

the relations of production entailed by social media are based on an implicit social contract which allows media companies to commodify the communication produced by users (i.e. exploiting them) in return for giving them control over the process of producing communication, and expanding their opportunity for de-alienation. (Fisher, 2012, p. 180)

This rupturing of the direct Marxian connection between alienation and exploitation, transmuting each into a dimension that can move oppositely, has little to do with assessing alienation’s applicability to social media. Rather, Rey and Fisher’s primary reason for conceptually hiving off alienation from exploitation is so they can reconcile voluntary participation in social media with their assertion that users are unrelentingly exploited. According to Rey (2012, p. 416), ‘the social

media user is exploited nonstop'. Fisher (2012, p. 179) talks of 'the extension and intensification of exploitation in social media compared with mass media'. Any Marxist worth their salt would straightaway ask: why do social media users tolerate this heightened exploitation, especially when it is uncompensated for by living standards increases (i.e. increased real wages)? The answer is that '[s]uch exploitation ... is conditioned by a promise for de-alienation' (Fisher, 2012, 179). Mining the same vein, Rey (2012, p. 416) suggests that 'social media provides evidence that people are rather tolerant of exploitation so long as whatever activity they are involved in is not particularly alienating'.

Arguing that increasing exploitation is based on the prospect of reducing alienation has a certain intuitive appeal, but ultimately I think it is spurious. The main problem stems from insisting that social media users are exploited in the first place, and then positing a trade-off between exploitation and alienation in order to 'prove' this point. Rey and Fisher derive their proposition about social media user exploitation by fusing an updated version of Smythe's (1977) audience exploitation idea with autonomist notions of immaterial labour, and of exploitation occurring throughout every level of society (Hardt & Negri, 2009). Building on this idea, Fuchs (2010) even asserts that Internet users are infinitely exploited. Rey does not accept that exploitation is infinite, but both he and Fisher draw on a form of audience exploitation reasoning as the basis for saying that social media users are exploited in the first place. There are subtle differences between their arguments, so I will look at each in turn.

According to Rey (2012, p. 416), social media users (like other Net users) 'produce information commodities [in] virtually every waking second'. For him, this is the key to nonstop exploitation. But his bundling of social media in with generalised arguments about exploitation on the web is problematical. For one, the most valuable information commodities for social media firms are derived from users' involuntarily and unknowingly ceded personal data – that is, from user-generated *data*, as distinct from user-generated *content* (van Dijck, 2009). Here is the crucial point: the creators and sellers of the information commodities fashioned from this user-generated data are *not* the social media users themselves, but rather the Internet firms that capture this data in the first place. These firms mine and store users' search histories in order to construct a web user profile which is then used to personalise advertising, by producing customised advertising that targets individual users' preferences. This Internet marketing technique – so-called contextual advertising – is the lifeblood of Google (YouTube's owner), whose 'real customers' are not its everyday users but rather advertisers (Vaidhyathan, 2011, p. 26). As George Ritzer and his colleagues point out:

In the main, people do not pay for Google products (e.g., Gmail, Google maps). Rather, Google's profits come from selling information on its users to advertisers[...] (Ritzer et al, 2012, p. 387)

By means of a cleverly constructed auction arrangement, having first siphoned off user-generated data, Google then sells it at a profit. Siva Vaidhyathan explains how:

[Google] collects the gigabytes of personal information ... that millions of Google users provide for free to the Web every day and sells this information to advertisers of millions of products and services. Through its major advertising program, AdWords, Google runs an instant auction among advertisers to determine which one is placed highest on the list of ads that run across the top or down the right-hand column of the search results page. (Vaidhyathan, 2011, p. 26)

Facebook's main source of revenue is also advertising.[9] Like Google, its business model is based on 'using our profiles to present us with advertisements' on subjects we have flagged an interest in (Vaidhyathan, 2011, p. 83).

To recapitulate, it is not the social media users who transform their own personal data into an information commodity; nor do they sell these data on any sort of market. Instead, they are siphoned off by Internet firms, transformed by them, and sold to advertisers. Without involving the social media users in any sort of market relation, wage relation, or indeed any market-based transaction at all – other than purchasing access to the web from an Internet service provider – it is difficult to see how exploitation in the original Marxian meaning of the term arises. This calls into question Rey's use of alienation as a conceptual stepping stone to his social-media-user-exploitation argument.

Fisher's insistence that social media users are exploited relies on resurrecting Smythe's (1977, p. 6) idea that the mass media audience is a commodity whose time 'is bought and used in the marketing of the advertiser's product'. The corollary is Smythe's notion of 'surplus value created by people working in audiences' (Smythe, 1977, p. 19). For Fisher, social media users are not merely *implicated* in the production of information commodities that are on-sold by firms like Google; rather, the users *are* the commodity: 'the audience in SNS [social network sites] is a commodity (sold to advertisers)' (Fisher 2012, p. 181). *Contra* the studies reviewed in the previous section, Fisher insists that social media provides 'the opportunity for authentic self-expression' (Fisher, 2012, p. 182). Moreover, users are supposedly remunerated by social media firms themselves: 'the [social media] platform ('wages') is exchanged for the audience work of communicating and socializing ('labour')' (Fisher, 2012, p. 181). Channelling Jhally and Livant (1986), Fisher thus makes explicit what is implicit within Smythe's audience commodity thesis – namely, that television 'programming ... is the wage of the audience' (Jhally & Livant, 1986, p. 136). This wrongheaded idea assumes that 'audiences sell watching-power to media owners' (Jhally & Livant, 1986, p. 135), and that television programmes are the reward (the wage-equivalent) they receive in return. Jhally and Livant's argument breaks down logically when they say that programmes are not just wages, they 'are messages that have to be "sold" to consumers – they are in fact consumer goods' (Jhally & Livant, 1986, p. 142, emphasis omitted). What this means is that so-called audience 'workers' are *sold their own wages*. This exercise in illogicality demonstrates the perils of argument by analogy – in this case, likening television watching to industrial production conceptualised in Marxian terms.

Fisher experiences similar problems when he extends Jhally and Livant's (1986) argument from mass media to social media. His assertion, that when people use social media they are somehow 'working' and receiving a wage-like payment in kind, implies they are selling something. Yet it is users' personal data and not users themselves, nor their attention and communication online, which constitute the prized informational commodity social media firms sell to advertisers. Fisher's recourse to the 'implicit contract' idea does not get him out this conundrum. As parties to a 'social contract' (Fisher's term) of which they are unaware, social media users receive a wage which they do not conceive of as such, in a process of unconscious self-commodification. As Caraway (2011, p. 699) points out, the whole audience commodity idea 'robs the audience of subjectivity'.<sup>[10]</sup> Moreover, as workers qua social media users neither demand these 'wages' nor struggle to increase them, they appear merely as a gift – suggesting that capitalists are beneficent individuals. This reverses the proper Marxian polarity: capital accumulation is capitalism's *sine qua non*, so the unpaid time users spend online is best construed as 'free gifts' they unwittingly cede to capitalist firms (Smith, 2010, p. 209). This time should not be seen as the social media firm's gift to social media users.

I will now draw this part of my article to a close. Work by scholars who say that social media *reduces* users' levels of alienation starkly contrasts with the Gramscian-inflected studies I reviewed in the previous section, which argued that social media alienates users by subsuming them within a consumerist culture. There is nonetheless one point of similarity between the culturalist social media alienation studies and the proponents of the de-alienation thesis. It is this: equating social media's usefulness (use value, in Rey's terms) with reduced alienation simply to explain why users tolerate nonstop exploitation results in emphasis on subjective aspects of alienation (personal self-expression, for example) at objective alienation's expense.

In short, how Fisher (2012) and Rey (2012) construct their argument has considerable drawbacks. By being too loose in their use of 'exploitation', they constantly risk rendering this concept so diffuse that it becomes almost literally meaningless. Likewise, their reduction of alienation to its subjective elements – in the service of their exploitation thesis – obscures the insights into social media's capitalist function that a focus on economic alienation affords.

### Concluding Discussion

Applying economic alienation to social media entails focusing on alienation's objective dimensions rooted in the social division of labour – in essence, private ownership of social media firms, the dependence of those firms on advertising, the specific form of advertising used, and advertising's

role in fostering workers' consumption demand. I round out my discussion by addressing each of these points in turn, blending insights from Smythe (1977) and from Andrejevic's (2011) recent work on social media.[11]

Returning to Marx's original definition of alienation, the idea most obviously applicable to social media is 'estrangement of the *thing*', which confronts the worker 'as an alien object' (Marx, 1982 [1844], pp. 66-67, original emphasis). Along these lines, Andrejevic (2011, p. 286) argues that the generation of user-generated data, and especially its use to create contextualised (user-targeted) advertisements, 'is an activity that returns to users in an unrecognizable form as a means of fulfilling the imperatives of others'. Within the critical communications literature, this most closely resembles Marx's classical 'alien objects' idea. But Andrejevic goes off-track, adding the supplementary concept of surveillance to identify an additional oppressive process atop alienation which occurs through Internet advertising. Andrejevic's application of Marx has merit; his couplet 'exploitation-as-alienation' (Andrejevic's, 2011, p. 284), and the idea of alienation as being compounded by surveillance, do not. Certainly social media can facilitate state surveillance of users, as the case of government authorities hacking Tunisians' Facebook accounts during the political uprising graphically shows (Fenton, 2012, p. 155). But conflating exploitation with alienation, while simultaneously adding surveillance to the theoretical mix, just muddies the waters (cf. Andrejevic, 2012).

Instead of pressing surveillance (whether Foucauldian or otherwise) into service, with regard to social media, I suggest that Andrejevic's point about targeted advertising be read back through Smythe's pathbreaking Marxist analysis of advertising.[12] As Fuchs (2012, p. 52) notes, social media firms rely heavily on advertising for their revenue. Yet because the whole Smythian audience commodity idea is inherently problematical (Caraway, 2011), it cannot be straightforwardly transplanted from mass media to social media. Rather, I take two different insights from Smythe's work.

First, Smythe talks of mass media advertising exposing audience members to 'alienation from the commodities-in-general which they participate in marketing to themselves' (Smythe, 1977, p. 20). Social media users are objectively alienated in the sense that they are implicated in a system of advertising that is functional for the reproduction of capitalism. This connects directly to the second point I take from Smythe. He argued that advertising undergirds worker demand for consumer goods; thus it can function to avert a crisis of underconsumption by fulfilling a 'demand management' role (Smythe, 1977, p. 19). This can help ameliorate an inbuilt capitalist crisis propensity: keeping real wages down on the one hand helps the production of surplus value, but on the other, it inhibits the realisation of surplus value due to insufficient worker-derived consumption demand. In point of fact, as David Harvey shows, just such a thing was happening in the United States due to 'wage repression' around the time Smythe advanced his thesis about demand management through advertising (Harvey, 2010, pp. 12-16). He states that 'impoverished workers do not constitute a vibrant market' (Harvey, 2010, p. 16). This has serious implications, as 'a crisis of "underconsumption" results when there is not enough effective demand to absorb the commodities produced' (Harvey, 2010, p. 107). To the extent that it stimulates working-class consumption demand, especially when supported by workers' access to cheap finance, advertising can play a role in averting or minimising such a crisis (Harvey, 2010, pp. 106-107).[13] The global financial crisis is not yet over and further research is needed to assess the role of social media-based advertising, in particular, in shoring up working-class consumption demand. Instead of targeting the domain of consumerist ideology, or metaphorically displacing exploitation from production to circulation, materialist analysis of social media is better served by connecting online advertising with contemporary underconsumptionist theories (Desai, 2010).

To conclude: authors who assert that social media users are culturally duped and/or exploited impede understanding of social media's role within the capitalist circuit. Using the concept of economic alienation to grasp this role has two benefits. First, it is consonant with the materialist form of analysis that Smythe (1977) advocated. Second, it allows exploitation to be terminologically restricted to the specifically capitalist form of value-transfer that originates within the labour process. It is precisely this concern to which one of the most insightful Marxist analysts of the global financial crisis, Costas Lapavistas, was responding when he coined the term 'financial expropriation' to distinguish financialisation from 'exploitation at the point of production' (Lapavistas, 2009, p. 131). By the same token, it is interesting that no lesser theorists than the

autonomists Michael Hardt and Toni Negri themselves have recently cautioned against using the *subjective* sense of 'alienation' to describe the effects of web-based interaction; they substitute the term 'mediatized' for that of the 'alienated subject' (Hardt & Negri, 2012, p. 14). This is more than merely a matter of semantics. The task is to find the appropriate conceptual vocabulary with which to understand the blend of expressive and oppressive effects of the web in general and social media in particular, while keeping in sight the dynamics of digital capitalism. Hopefully this article has gone some way towards that end.

### Notes

- [1] Tellingly, Althusser (1982, p. 239, emphasis omitted) refers to 'the pre-Marxist ideological concept of alienation'.
- [2] The book, Mandel's *Formation of the Economic Thought of Karl Marx*, was first published in French in 1967. An English edition came out in 1971. On Mandel's strident critique of Althusser's ideas, see Stutje (2009, pp. 127-129).
- [3] *Contra* Althusser, Mandel (1971, p. 177) argues: 'Not only is the concept of alienation not "pre-Marxist," it forms part of the *instrumentarium* used by Marx when he had arrived at full maturity. When reading *Capital* with attention, one comes upon it there as well, though sometimes in a slightly modified form.'
- [4] Blauner (1964, p. 3) wholeheartedly accepts the view 'that alienation is not a consequence of capitalism per se but of employment in large-scale organizations and impersonal bureaucracies that pervade all industrial societies'.
- [5] 'Gramsci believed that workers actively, deliberately and consciously collaborate in the reproduction of capitalism; they consent to a domination defined as hegemony. They understand what they are doing; they simply have difficulty appreciating that there could be anything beyond capitalism. Domination was not mystified but naturalized, eternalized' (Burawoy, 2012, p. 203).
- [6] This is shown by Steven (1983) with reference to advanced industrial capitalism in Japan.
- [7] Rey (2012, p. 416) in fact argues 'that exploitation is not a sufficient condition for alienation and alienation is not a necessary condition for exploitation'.
- [8] Fisher (2012, p. 179) also explicitly uses the trade-off metaphor.
- [9] See the *eMarketer* figures at <http://www.medianewsline.com/news/168/ARTICLE/9651/2012-09-03.html>
- [10] Furthermore, Caraway (2011, p. 697) insightfully observes that in Smythe's (1977) original discussion, '[t]he actual transaction is between the media owner and the advertiser'; the net result is that the audience commodity's owner – the audience itself – 'is not party to the transaction'. He therefore concludes that 'Smythe's transaction more closely resembles a plantation owner haggling with slave traders' (Caraway, 2011, p. 697). Indeed, Fisher's recourse to implicit contracting is reminiscent of how establishment-type economic historians use this concept to discuss slavery (e.g. see Findlay, 1975).
- [11] Earlier I criticised Andrejevic (2009). The shift in tone and substance between Andrejevic (2009) and Andrejevic (2011) shows some refinement, at least, in this author's attempt to apply Marxian concepts to social media.
- [12] Andrejevic does not draw from Foucault, instead using the term surveillance in its everyday sense. For the limitations of the panopticon as a model for Net-based control, see Vaidhyathan (2011, pp. 111-112).
- [13] Of course, as Harvey (2010) shows, a financial crisis can result from unregulated lending that artificially boosts workers' buying power.

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