

SOCIAL MEDIA, BIG DATA, AND CRITICAL MARKETING

Christian Fuchs

Introduction

Social media and big data have become ubiquitous keywords in everyday life. The term ‘social media’ is commonly used for social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, Weibo), blogs (e.g., WordPress, Tumblr), micro-blogs (e.g., X/Twitter), short form video platforms (e.g. TikTok, Snapchat), user-generated content-sharing sites (e.g., YouTube, Flickr, Instagram), or wikis (e.g., Wikipedia) (Fuchs, 2017b, 2024, chapter 2). Big data refers to the collection and analysis of data in such vast quantities that humans are incapable of processing them – only algorithms can (Fuchs, 2017b, 2024, chapter 2). There are diverse sources of big data, one example being credit and debit card transactions. So, the term ‘big data’ is not limited to social media. At the same time, given that Meta platforms and apps (Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp) have about 3.4 billion daily active users¹ and Google processes more than 1.2 trillion searches per year on average,² these two US Internet companies are probably the largest data processors in the world. This tells of an inherent link between big data and social media. While social media characterize the techno-social systems enabling human interaction on the Internet, big data are the digital results of human activities. Google, Facebook, and other online platforms tend to store all data and meta-data for long periods of time and therefore require huge server farms consisting of numerous supercomputers.

Google and Facebook are two of the world’s largest companies. In the 2025 Forbes ranking of the world’s 2,000 largest transnational corporations, Google (the holding company Alphabet Inc. is now the parent company of Google) occupied rank 9 with its annual profits of US\$111 billion. Facebook/Meta was ranked 20 with annual profits of US\$62.4 billion. One should not be mistaken: Google and Facebook are not communication companies. They do not sell the ability to communicate. Rather, they are the world’s largest advertising agencies. Their profits almost exclusively derive from targeted advertising. Understanding social media and big data therefore requires that we contextualize these phenomena through the critical study of marketing and advertising.

Critical marketing studies are based on the insight that “marketing has devoted too much attention to refining itself as an instrumental science, with the corollary emphasis on the production of knowledge for the ‘marketing organization’, not for wider stakeholders” (Tadajewski,

2010, p. 776). Further, it is a “systematic critique of marketing theory and practice” that uses “some form of critical social theory ... whether this is drawn from the neo-Marxist critical theory tradition, some variant of humanism, feminism” or other approaches (Tadajewski, 2010, p. 774). As a consequence, critical marketing does not mean conducting marketing critically or studying how to make marketing critical. Rather, critique and marketing are polar, dialectical opposites, just like socialism and capitalism. Critical marketing is a critique of marketing that aims at creating knowledge that helps us overcome both capitalism and marketing. Critical marketing studies as a discipline understands itself as being part of an emancipatory social science (Tadajewski & Brownlie, 2008). Taking a critical marketing perspective on social media means applying critical social theory for understanding social media’s power structures.

The task of this chapter is to critically understand social media and big data’s political economy. It outlines key classical texts (second section), contemporary texts (third section), and future research directions (fourth section) that can help us achieve this goal.

Key Theoretical Approaches

There are many critical approaches that matter for critically understanding the Internet and social media. In a text like this chapter, one is necessarily limited to the number of key texts and thinkers one can introduce. I will here focus on four classical thinkers and one text by each of them: Dallas Smythe, Karl Marx, Raymond Williams, and Sut Jhally.

Dallas Smythe: ‘Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism’

Dallas Smythe’s (1977) article *Communications: ‘Blindspot of Western Marxism’* has become a key text in the political economy of communication and when it comes to understanding advertising’s political economy. Smythe’s starting point is a critique of many Marxists’ understanding of communications as transmitters of ideology, and of advertising as belonging to an unproductive sphere of capital circulation. “The mass media of communications and related institutions concerned with advertising, market research, public relations and product and package design represent a blindspot in Marxist theory in the European and Atlantic basin cultures” (Smythe, 1977, p. 1). Smythe criticizes that a lot of critical and administration scholars analyze commercial media in terms of messages, information, images, meaning, entertainment, orientation, education, manipulation, and ideology. He argues for a perspective that gives a stronger role to the category of labor in the critical study of communication and culture.

Smythe bases his analysis on Karl Marx’s (1867) insight that the commodity is capitalism’s elementary form and that abstract labor produces the commodity’s value. He asks in the *Blindspot* essay: What is the advertising-based commercial media’s commodity? Who produces the commercial media’s commodity? Given that advertising-based media tend to provide their content gratis as a gift, the information cannot be a commodity.

Smythe gave the following answer:

I submit that the materialist answer to the question – What is the commodity form of mass-produced, advertiser-supported communications under monopoly capitalism? – is audiences and readerships (hereafter referred to for simplicity as audiences). ... Of the off-the-job work time, the largest single block is time of the audiences which is sold to advertisers.

Smythe, 1977, p. 3

Audiences would work to create the demand for monopoly capital's commodities (Smythe, 1977, p. 6).

Audiences produce attention that is sold as audience commodity to advertisers. Therefore, according to Smythe, audiences conduct unpaid audience labor that produces the audience commodity and are exploited by advertisers. Smythe stressed that, in capitalism, also, unpaid labor is exploited and produces value. This focus was in line with developments in Autonomous Marxism and Marxist Feminism in the 1970s: Autonomous Marxists such as Antonio Negri (1988) stress that there is a collective social worker who creates value inside and outside the factory and the office. They argue that society in capitalism is a social factory. Marxist Feminists stress that housework (re) produces labor-power as a commodity and is therefore exploited by capital (e.g., Dalla Costa & James, 1973). Smythe's work, Autonomous Marxism, and Marxist Feminism have in common that they emphasize the importance of the exploitation of unpaid labor for capitalism's existence (see also Cova & Paraque, this volume, and Arvidsson & Giordano, this volume).

In the age of digital media, there has been a resurgence of interest in Smythe's works. My contribution in this respect has been the linking of the notions of audience labor and the audience commodity to targeted online advertising (Fuchs, 2012; Fuchs, 2014; Fuchs, 2015). How does Smythe's work matter for understanding social media? On social media, we are partly audiences watching, reading, and listening and partly producing consumers (prosumers) creating content ourselves. So, for example, on YouTube, most of us tend to predominantly watch videos. Many of these videos have in-video advertisements. So, we not only consume the free content but also pay attention to advertisements. And Google sells this attention to advertisers as a commodity. One difference from television is that on YouTube, users can produce and publish videos. So, some users upload their own videos from time to time. And a smaller group of professional YouTubers tries to earn a living from creating YouTube content. By browsing videos on YouTube, searching on Google, and visiting websites, we produce a lot of meta-data that reveals a lot about our personal interests and tastes.

Google stores all of this data on its servers and identifies it with the IP address with which we access the Internet. Google also gains access to various other online data sources and thereby builds personal profiles of interests. Therefore, we do not simply find an audience commodity on social media but also an online attention commodity that is enabled through big data – a vast amount of personal data gathered about all aspects of users' online and offline lives and activities. In order to find out more about consumers' tastes and interests, advertisers and media organizations no longer need to conduct consumer surveys. The constant real-time surveillance of online behavior and long-time storage of personal data allow for targeting advertisements based on individual profiles. The online audience and attention commodity allows an advertiser to, for example, target an ad for a soft drink to all users in London in the age group 16–30 who have, at some point in time, googled the soft drink's name. The creation of big data commodity is a sophisticated form of surveillance and exploitation of user labor.

Karl Marx: 'The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret'

'The Fetishism of the Commodity and its Secret' forms the fourth section of the first chapter in Karl Marx's main work *Capital Volume I* (Marx, 1867, pp. 163–177). In *Capital Volume I's* first chapter, Marx shows that in capitalism both economic and ideological dimensions play an important role: A commodity has an economic dimension because it is produced by labor

within class relations. The section on commodity fetishism adds to the analysis that a commodity also has an ideological and aesthetic dimension that tries to deceive and manipulate humans. Marx here returns to the analysis of ideology that he advanced in an earlier work, *The German Ideology*, where he defined ideology as a *camera obscura* that makes humans and their social relations “appear upside-down” (Marx & Engels, 1845, p. 42).

The social relations between workers’ labor appear not “as direct social relations between persons in their work, but rather as material relations between persons and social relations between things” (Marx, 1867, p. 166). Marx calls this phenomenon “the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labor as soon as they are produced as commodities” (p. 165). He summarizes the causes of the commodity’s fetish character in the following words:

Objects of utility become commodities only because they are the products of the labor of private individuals who work independently of each other ... Since the producers do not come into social contact until they exchange the products of their labor, the specific social characteristics of their private labors appear only within this exchange.

p. 165

The notion of commodity fetishism points out that phenomena such as commodities and money are ubiquitous in our everyday lives in a capitalist society. Given their thing-like status, we cannot directly see where they are coming from and how they have been produced. Therefore, capitalism, commodity exchange, and money appear to be natural forms of the organization of society, to which no alternatives exist. Fetishism de-historicizes society. Fetishism is, on the one hand, a particular aesthetic of the commodity. On the other hand, all ideology is fetishistic in character as it attempts to legitimate, naturalize, and justify specific forms of domination and exploitation.

The most influential theoretical take-up of Marx’s notion of commodity fetishism can be found in Georg Lukács’ 1923 book *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein* (in English: *History and Class Consciousness*). Commodity logic conceals “every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people” so that “a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a ‘phantom objectivity’” (Lukács, 1971, p. 83). Lukács coined the notion of reification. Generally speaking, reification (another term for it is alienation) means conditions under which humans are not able to control and determine the structures that shape their lives. Reification therefore can exist in all realms of life (Fuchs, 2016, chapter 5). Lukács was particularly interested in economic and cultural reification. “Reification requires that a society should learn to satisfy all its needs in terms of commodity exchange” (Lukács, 1971, p. 91), which includes “the separation of the producer from his means of production” (Lukács, 1971, p. 91). Lukács bases the notion of reification on Marx’s concept of alienation. Alienation means that humans do not control structures that influence their lives so that these structures are “*something alien, ... a power independent of the producer ..., an alien object ..., a power on its own*” (Marx, 1844, p. 272). Lukács added another important dimension to the theory of commodity fetishism: His notion of reified consciousness stresses the subjective dimension of ideology and fetishism. Ideology and fetishism are not just objective structures and strategies; they are also experienced and lived. Ideology aims at influencing human consciousness. Lukács’ works have had a major influence on Marxist ideology critique, including the approach of the Frankfurt School.

We can learn from Chapter 1 of Marx’s *Capital* that when analyzing capitalist phenomena such as advertising and targeted advertising on social media, there is always an economic and

a cultural dimension, as well as aspects of labor and ideology. Dallas Smythe's notions of audience labor stress advertising's labor dimension. Given that, as Marx shows, any commodity also has a fetishistic and ideological dimension, one also needs to look at the ideological dimension of the audience commodity. The works of Sut Jhally and Raymond Williams can help us better understand commodity fetishism in the context of advertising.

***Sut Jhally's 'Advertising as Religion' and Raymond Williams's
'Advertising: The Magic System'***

Sut Jhally's (2006) essay 'Advertising as Religion: The Dialectic of Technology and Magic' analyzes advertising's fetishistic and ideological structure. Jhally points out that in capitalism, the division of labor ensures that people only work on one part of a product. Because of the division between mental and physical labor and the fact that goods come to us through markets, we do not understand their origins. "The social relations of production embedded in goods are systematically hidden from our eyes. The real meaning of goods, in fact, is *emptied* out in capitalist production and consumption" (Jhally, 2006, p. 88). Advertising taps into this void: Commodity fetishism empties commodities of human meaning. We cannot understand the meanings of life and experiences of commodity producers, as these are all removed from the equation. In an artificial way, advertising creates ideological meanings that it bestows on commodities.

Into the void left by the transition from traditional to industrial society comes advertising ... The function of advertising is to refill the emptied commodity with meaning ... Production empties. Advertising fills. The real is hidden by the imaginary.

(Jhally, 2006, pp. 88–89)

He adds that the "most important functions that advertising performs is to provide meaning for the world of goods in a context in which true meaning has been stolen" (Jhally, 2006, p. 93).

Advertising is tremendously powerful because it tells stories and provides meanings about goods and the economy that are not presented in other forms. It uses various strategies for doing so, for example, the strategy of black magic (Jhally, 2006, p. 91): Humans suddenly transform in supernatural ways through commodity use. Advertising is a secular form of religion. Advertising is a system of commodity fetishism: It promises satisfaction and happiness through the consumption of things (Jhally, 2006, p. 102). For Jhally, advertising is propaganda that promotes the ideology of human happiness through the consumption of commodities. By analyzing advertising as ideological commodity propaganda and commodity consumption ideology, Jhally defies positivist definitions of advertising that describe it as useful information for consumers that helps them navigate commercial options in complex markets. A typical example of such an uncritical definition of advertising defines it as "a channel of information from manufacturers to Consumers" that merely "tells where to find what you want" (Kaptan, 2002, p. 28).

In his essay 'Advertising: The Magic System' (2000), Raymond Williams analyzes the history of advertising. He shows that in the early stages of capitalism, advertising was seen as harmful and was therefore limited by an advertising tax. The emergence of advertising, as we know it today, can – in the main – be traced back to the emergence of monopoly capitalism in the late 19th century (see Harbor, 2017).

Advertising was developed to sell goods, in a particular kind of economy. Publicity has been developed to sell persons, in a particular kind of culture. The methods are often basically similar: the arranged incident, the “mention”, the advice on branding, packaging and a good “selling line.”

Williams, 2000, p. 183

Comparable to Jhally, who sees advertising as capitalism’s secular religion, Williams analyzes advertising as capitalism’s commodity magic: Advertising is capitalism’s system of “organized magic” (Williams, 2000, p. 186) and “organized fantasy” (p. 193).

You do not only buy an object: you buy social respect, admiration, health, beauty, success, power to control your environment. The magic obscures the real sources of general satisfaction because their discovery would involve radical change in the whole common way of life.

p. 189

Jhally’s and Williams’s analyses of advertising as capitalism’s religion and magic system correspond to Marx’s analysis of commodity fetishism in general. Marx (1867) argued that a commodity is a peculiar thing; it is “strange” (p. 163), “metaphysical” (p. 163), “mystical” (p. 164), and “mysterious” (p. 164). As a consequence, the commodity “stands on its head,” and “grotesque ideas” (p. 163) about the commodity’s nature emerge.

Marx’s notion of commodity fetishism and Jhally and Williams’s applications of this concept to the critical analysis of advertising also matter in respect to social media; first, in the context of social media advertisement’s general structure, and second in respect to social media’s inverse commodity fetishism. McDonald’s is one of the biggest advertisers on Facebook. One example posting shows a “Mexican burger” and says: “Get in the mood for Mexico with spicy Habanero chilli mayo in this week’s #GreatTastesoftheWorld: the Mexican Stack!”

The ad presents a particular image of a burger as being tasty, multicultural, international, spicy, etc. McDonald’s presents itself as fostering an international lifestyle and eating culture by adopting culinary influences from all over the world. This image is, however, fetishistic, illusionary, magic, and religious. It is a belief system that might not correspond to the actual reality of the production of the burger that is advertised. The consumer does not know where the meat and ingredients come from and under what conditions they are produced. The advertisement distracts attention from common criticisms of McDonald’s relating to working conditions, possible health and environmental impacts, the McDonaldization of the world, etc. The advert is fetishistic because it tries to create a brand image that only presents the burger and the company in a positive light and disregards the actual social conditions of production. What is specific to commodity fetishism on social media? Advertising’s commodity fetishism in print publications and broadcast media (radio, television) is standardized and unified; every consumer of these media receives the same advertising messages. In contrast, we find personalized and targeted commodity fetishism on social media. Advertisers such as McDonald’s can target their ads at users who, based on their previous online activity, for example, appear to be fond of fast food.

Targeted commodity fetishism is the first feature of advertising on social media. A second feature is what I, in various publications, have termed the inverse commodity fetishism (Fuchs, 2014, chapter 11; Fuchs, 2015, chapter 5). In conventional commodity fetishism, one cannot

experience the social context of commodity production but is directly confronted with the logic of money and the commodity. On Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and other targeted-advertising-based social media platforms, the commodity fetishism is inverted: Because access to the platform is free and the sale of the big data commodity is hidden, one does not experience monetary exchange or commodity purchase on Facebook. Instead, the social dimension of communication, sharing, and community is what is foregrounded and experienced. As a result, the commodity form is hidden behind the social form so that commodity fetishism tends to take on an inverted form. For Facebook users, it is not directly experienceable that users produce a commodity for Facebook; that they actually work for Facebook; and that they are the ones generating the company's profits. The inverse commodity fetishism makes it more difficult for users to perceive themselves as workers who are creating value and are being exploited.

The ideological effects of commodity fetishism are an immanent manipulative feature of online advertising. Social media also enable an algorithmically engineered form of manipulation, namely the manipulation of emotions and attention. This became evident when researchers from Princeton University conducted a large-scale experiment on Facebook (Kramer et al., 2014): The emotional tone of postings shown on the Newsfeed of 689,003 users was manipulated.

Two parallel experiments were conducted for positive and negative emotion: One in which exposure to friends' positive emotional content in their News Feed was reduced, and one in which exposure to negative emotional content in their News Feed was reduced.

...

[The] results suggest that the emotions expressed by friends, via online social networks, influence our own moods, constituting, to our knowledge, the first experimental evidence for massive-scale emotional contagion via social networks ... and providing support for previously contested claims that emotions spread via contagion through a network.

Kramer, 2014, pp. 8788–8789

Such research has implications for advertising and marketing: If negative messages are kept from the News Feed, then users are more likely to positively engage with content, including advertisements and the company's postings. The experiment that was supported by Facebook also shows that technically it is easy to manipulate what is seen and not seen on the News Feed. It is just a small step from research about manipulating emotions to practically conducting such manipulation. The effect would be that social media platforms would become purely positivist, suppressing attention to critical content, possibly also including the critique of politics and corporations. Facebook is a targeted-advertising machine and one of the world's largest advertising corporations. Manipulation for the sake of keeping users and advertising clients happy can easily result in the filtering out of critical postings. The result is then a platform that is an instrument of capitalist interests and censors everything that does not adhere to the logic of commodities.

Engineering and manipulating emotions and sociality on social media can easily result in one-dimensional social media. The Princeton researchers and Facebook were criticized for not obtaining the users' informed consent for the online experiment they participated in.

Facebook apologized to its users.³ The Electronic Privacy Information Centre demanded that Facebook make its News Feed algorithm public because the secrecy of algorithms enables and supports possible manipulation.⁴

Current Key Areas of Research

This section focuses on two key areas of current critical research about social media: digital labor and digital alienation.

Digital Labor

The notion of digital labor emerged in the context of the 2009 conference *The Internet as Playground and Factory* organized by Trebor Scholz at The New School in New York (see <http://digitallabor.org>). Later, a collected volume of some of the presented contributions was published (Scholz, 2013). The basic idea is that user activity on commercial digital media is unpaid labor that creates value and a digital commodity. Therefore, social media companies such as Facebook and Google exploit users. My own contribution to the digital labor literature has been the combination of the digital labor concept with critical and Marxist theory (see Fuchs, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2015).

If one wants to understand a particular aspect of capitalism, then one needs to look at how commodity production is organized. Marx has provided a framework for such an analysis (see Fuchs, 2010):

$$M - C(c, v) \dots P \dots C' - M'$$

A capitalist corporation invests monetary capital M for purchasing specific commodities C as means of production. This includes labor-power (variable capital v) as well as resources and instruments (constant capital c). Labor-power is the subjective dimension of the means of production. Resources and instruments form the means of production's objective dimension. In the production process P workers transform the objects in order to create a new commodity C' , in which labor-time and a surplus-product are objectified. The new product is more than the sum of its elements. When the commodity C' is successfully sold, then an increased capital sum M' is created. A part of C' is reinvested so that a new cycle of accumulation starts, while other parts are paid out as interest, dividends, bonuses, and rent. The point of capitalism is the accumulation of capital, production with a monetary profit. The commodity C' is sold at a price that is higher than the investment costs. The commodity C' and its value are created by labor. But the workers do not own the products they create. They are only remunerated for part of their work in the form of wages. The surplus-value and surplus-product they create remain unremunerated. The key aspect of capitalism is that capital accumulation can only work by exploiting workers, which means that part of their labor is unpaid and that capitalists own the products that workers create.

The question that arises in the context of social media is how Marx's framework can be used. Access to Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Google, YouTube, Twitter, etc., is not a commodity. This also implies that these companies' paid employees do not create a commodity but rather a gift. But all of these companies are for-profit. So, there must be a different commodity and a different kind of value-generating activity. Marx's framework can be modified for social media capitalism as follows (Fuchs, 2010, 2012, 2014[chapter 11], 2015 [chapter 5]):

$M - C (c, v1) \dots P1$ (social media platform), $v2 \dots P2 \dots C' - M'$

$v1$ is the paid employees who create and maintain the social media platform. Access to the platform is a gift, a 'free lunch' for the users, who form the unpaid labor force $v2$. Their online activities create in the second production process $P2$, the online attention commodity C' that is organized via big so that such attention is in bundles sold to advertisers, which results in an increased sum of monetary capital M' can be accumulated. All labor-producing commodities for capitalists involve unpaid labor that creates surplus-value.

The difference between regular wage-labor and unpaid digital labor is that in the latter case, there is no wage, which means that all labor-time is surplus labor-time. This circumstance is a feature that social media's digital labor shares with housework (Fuchs, 2010, 2017a). Kylie Jarrett (2016) uses the notion of the digital housewife to point out parallels between unpaid online labor and houseworkers' domestic, reproductive labor.

Consumer labor is akin to domestic labor ... because it is a site of social reproduction: a site for the making and re-making of the social, affective, ideological and psychological states of being that (may) accord with appropriate capitalist subjectivities.

Jarrett, 2016, p. 71

The implication of the notion of digital labor is that Google/Alphabet, Facebook/Meta, ByteDance, X/Twitter, and other online corporations that use the targeted-advertising capital accumulation model exploit users; that usage of these platforms is labor-time; that digital workers are part of the contemporary proletariat; that value-production is not limited to factories and offices; and that activities that might feel pleasurable and personal can nonetheless be forms of economic exploitation.

The Marxist notion of digital labor results in a theoretical discussion (e.g., Fisher & Fuchs, 2015; Proffitt et al., 2015). The main criticisms can be summarized in the following ideal-type arguments:

- 1 "Marx is a 19th-century theorist. A 19th-century theory is not fit for explaining 21st-century phenomena. Marx's theory is outdated."
- 2 "Only wage workers are productive workers who are exploited by capital. Facebook users do not work and are not exploited because they do not earn a wage."
- 3 "Facebook users are not producers, but media consumers. Consumption does not create any value."
- 4 Social media is part of the advertising economy that is situated in capitalism's sphere of circulation, in which commodities are not produced, but sold. Circulation labor is not productive, but rather unproductive. Facebook therefore is a rent-seeking corporation that consumes the profits and value created by wage workers in other parts of the economy.
- 5 "The focus on the exploitation of users as unpaid trivializes much worse forms of exploitation, such as Taylorist labor and slave work."

Such arguments tend to imply that there is no problem with Facebook and Google. Their logic is: "They do not exploit us and therefore nothing needs to be done against them." Counter-arguments can be summarized as follows (see Fuchs, 2015, chapter 5; see also Fuchs, 2017a):

- 1 The 2008 crisis of capitalism and its consequences show that Marx was right and remains important. Marx was a historical and dialectical thinker. Just like capitalism remains the same by constantly changing, the categories used for analyzing capitalism undergo a dialectic of continuity and change. The transformation of the Marxian formula of capital accumulation from $M - C(c, v) \dots P \dots C' - M'$ into $M - C(c, v1) \dots P1, v2 \dots P2 \dots C' - M'$ on social media shows that the online targeted-advertising economy is based on such a dialectic of continuity and change.
- 2 If you assume that only wage workers are exploited in capitalism and that only a wage worker can be a productive worker, then the implication is that house workers, who are still predominantly female, and the world's estimated 30 million slaves are also not exploited. Your assumption is politically problematic. Marx saw productive labor as value-generating labor. One can produce value for capital without being paid.
- 3 There is in general a dialectic of production and consumption. Production involves the consumption of the means of production. Consumption produces meanings, effects, and the need for more production. Social media are different from traditional communication technologies. On social media, there is not a clear differentiation between producers and consumers of content or between production, circulation, and consumption technologies. The computer is a convergence technology. Consumption on social media is better termed 'usage'. And usage is also the production of data, meta-data, and often user-generated content. Social media users are prosumers.
- 4 The reason why a commodity produced by a brand company is much more expensive than a standard commodity has to do with the fact that branding involves advertising and marketing labor. In the contemporary economy, advertising forms an important industry in itself. It is therefore unrealistic to dismiss this part of the economy as unproductive. One can charge rent on a persistent product that was only created once but does not need constant labor input to be re-produced. But the online attention commodity is frequently updated and renewed via big data, so there is an actual labor input and a renewal of the commodity. It is therefore not feasible to argue that Facebook/Meta is a rentier. A rentier is a monopolist who controls a specific resource (usually land or real estate) and charges money to tenants, users, or leasers. Marx argued that transport labor is a form of productive circulation labor. Transport labor is the labor that is needed for transporting a commodity from the place where it is produced to the places where it is sold and consumed. Audience labor and social media users' digital labor is ideological transport labor that helps transporting advertisements that are commodity ideologies and product propaganda to users.
- 5 The logic of the argument 'A is not exploited because the exploitation of B is more violent' disregards how different forms of exploitation are united in an international division of labor, from which transnational corporations benefit. They exploit a diverse range of workers in order to accumulate capital. The production of digital media and data is based on an international division of digital labor, in which we find slave workers extracting minerals, Tayloristic assemblage workers, low-paid software engineers and call center agents, highly paid and highly stressed software engineers, precarious freelancers, user labor, etc. The notion of the international division of digital labor stresses that digital capital exploits all of these digital workers and that they therefore have a common interest to struggle against capital and to organize across national boundaries in the form of a digital labor union. The notion of digital labor is not limited to the users of targeted-advertising-based social media platforms. Marx stressed the connectedness of diverse forms of labor with the notion of the collective worker. In the international division of digital labor, there is collective digital labor.

Not all digital labor is unpaid and based on advertising. YouTube has introduced YouTube Red in the USA and is also rolling out the same program in other countries: Members of YouTube Red pay a subscription fee for access to ad-free premium videos (including music, series, and vloggers' content).

Our new paid membership, YouTube Red, lets members enjoy any video on YouTube without ads while still supporting creators ... New revenue from YouTube Red membership fees will be distributed to video creators based on how much members watch your content.⁵

YouTube celeb vloggers such as Lilly Singh, PewDiePie (53 million), MatPat (8 million), Toby Turner (2 million), and Joey Graceffa (7.5 million)⁶ have produced series and movies for YouTube Red. YouTube stars are a labor aristocracy, who can earn some money from their profiles because they have managed to accumulate a large number of subscribers. While there is a small number of labor-aristocratic YouTube vloggers, the vast number are proletarianized digital workers, working precariously and struggling to earn a living online. YouTube only enables this YouTube aristocracy to produce premium content that is paid for by YouTube Red subscribers. In this model, YouTube can be seen as a temporary employer of these YouTube celebs that pays them a wage for the creation of specific content. YouTube Red subscribers are consuming audiences paying for access to premium content. With the introduction of YouTube Red, Google has diversified its capital accumulation model. It continues to use targeted advertising as a main revenue source and has in addition introduced a subscription service. YouTube is therefore based on two forms of digital labor: (a) users' digital labor of watching and creating in the case of the advertising-sponsored part of the platform and (b) the YouTube labor aristocracy's paid labor that creates premium content for YouTube Red.

Digital Alienation

Alienation (*Entfremdung*) is a term that Marx used to characterize conditions that humans are not in control of and under which they live. Alienation signifies not only an objective structural condition but also a subjective feeling of dissatisfaction. In discussions about digital labor, there have been different approaches to thinking of alienation in the context of social media.

Mark Andrejevic argues that commercial social media only have an appearance of being non-alienating because they foster play and sociality. But in reality, using them means a form of digital alienation, "a form of the enclosure of the digital commons" (Andrejevic, 2012, p. 84). "Users have little choice over whether this [surveillance] data is generated and little say in how it is used" (Andrejevic, 2012, p. 85). Such "external, storable, and sortable collection of data about" users' "social lives" is "separated from us and stored in servers owned and controlled by, for example, Facebook" (Andrejevic, 2011, p. 88). "Algorithmic alienation" (Andrejevic, 2014, p. 189) determines users' lives by data mining, big data analysis, and statistical correlations.

Eran Fisher (2012) understands digital alienation in a different way. For him, it "signals an existential state of not being in control over something (the labor process, the product, etc.)" (Fisher, 2012, p. 173).

[Less] alienation refers to a greater possibility to express oneself, to control one's production process, to objectify one's essence and connect and communicate with others. Thus, for example, working on one's Facebook page can be thought of as less alienating than working watching a television program.

Fisher, 2012, p. 173

Social media

establish new relations of production that are based on a dialectical link between exploitation and alienation: in order to be de-alienated, users must communicate and socialize: they must establish social networks, share information, talk to their friends and read their posts, follow and be followed. By thus doing they also exacerbate their exploitation.

Fisher, 2012, p. 179

Fisher's conclusion is that on social media, low alienation creates high exploitation.

Andrejevic and Fisher have two different understandings of digital alienation. For Andrejevic, it is an objective condition, while for Fisher it is a subjective feeling. We do, however, not have to categorically separate subjective and objective alienation. Alienation is both an objective condition and something that is or is not felt. In the book *Critical Theory of Communication* (Fuchs, 2016), I have suggested a matrix of alienation that distinguishes three types and three dimensions of alienation. We can discern between economic, political, and cultural alienation. Each of these types is organized on the subjective level (attitudes and feelings), the intersubjective level (social agency and interaction), and the objective level (structures and products of activity). Combining these types and levels results in a matrix with nine forms of alienation (Fuchs, 2016, p. 167; Fuchs 2020, p. 200 (table 8.1)). The alienation matrix can be applied to Facebook and other commercial social media platforms (see Table 31.1).

One important aspect of the matrix of digital alienation is that it goes beyond the economic realm. It also covers forms of political control and cultural disrespect. Social media is also a realm of the accumulation of political and cultural power that produces winners and losers. Another important aspect of the matrix is that objective digital alienation does not automatically imply subjective digital alienation. Although Facebook users are objectively exploited, they do not necessarily feel exploited, seeing that there is inverse commodity fetishism on corporate social media platforms. We therefore have to distinguish between feelings of digital alienation and non-alienation. In general, there is only an opportunity for societal change when conditions and the collective structure of feelings of alienation coincide. There is, however, also no guarantee that such a change will automatically or necessarily be politically progressive in character.

Directions for Future Research

Studying social media and big data from a critical marketing perspective is interesting but also complex. It involves multiple dimensions, topics, questions, and approaches. This section identifies possible research questions that remain fairly unexplored and could be taken up by PhD students and other scholars. The list that follows is not complete; rather, it provides some examples.

Table 31.1 The matrix of digital alienation

<i>Forms of alienation/ reification</i>	<i>Subjects' attitudes and feelings</i>		<i>Intersubjectivity (social agency and interaction)</i>	<i>Object (structures, products)</i>
Economic reification	Feeling of alienation: "Facebook exploits me!"	Feeling of non-alienation: "Facebook is fun and voluntary and gives me social advantages. Therefore I do not feel exploited."	Exploitation of users' digital labor; users' non-ownership of platforms	Users' lack of control over the use of personal data
Political reification	Feeling of alienation: "The surveillance-industrial complex that Facebook is part of threatens freedom."	Feeling of non-alienation: "For greater security, we have to give up some privacy. I therefore don't mind state surveillance of social media."	Political control and surveillance of citizens' communication	Citizens' lack of control over how political institutions regulate the Internet, establishment of a surveillance-industrial complex
Cultural reification	Feeling of alienation: "Facebook is mindless babble, narcissistic self-presentation and showing off."	Feeling of non-alienation: "Facebook is a great form of socializing with other people."	Asymmetric visibility of users that favors celebrities, corporations, and powerful institutions	Asymmetric influence on public meaning making, centralized online attention structures, and online visibility

Source: Fuchs (2016, p. 171)

- What are commonalities and differences between users' attitudes toward targeted advertising in Western countries and non-Western countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America?
- How do traditional trade unions use social media, and what do they think of the possibility of the creation of digital labor unions?
- What have workers' and users' experiences been in the digital sharing economy (including Airbnb, Uber, and online freelancing platforms such as Amazon Mechanical Turk and Upwork)?
- What are the experiences and political attitudes of digital workers in the international division of digital labor? What do they think of the perspective of the world's digital workers uniting in a global movement or union?

- What are fake news and deep fakes? How are specific fake news circulated on social media, how do they look like, and why do they exist?
- What is the role of algorithms on specific Internet platforms and what role do they play in digital capitalism?
- What have been the experiences of people who have tried to establish alternatives to Facebook, Google, YouTube, Twitter, etc.? What problems have they faced? What challenges, limits, and problems do platform co-operatives face? Are there ways for such limits to be overcome?
- What potentials for alternatives to capitalist social media do platform co-operatives pose? What are their advantages and challenges?
- What potentials for alternatives to capitalist social media do public service Internet platforms pose? What are their advantages and challenges?
- What kind of class are professional YouTubers? What kind of class consciousness do they have? How do they think about capitalism, entrepreneurship, neo-liberalism, freelancing, and precarious labor?
- How have marketing and advertising based on big data and social media changed the film and music industries? What do artists think about these changes? What is the role of precarious labor among artists in the social media age?
- How do right-wing/authoritarian/fascist parties and social movements (Trumpism, pro-Brexit movement, Front National, nationalists, racists, xenophobes, etc.) use targeted advertising, big data, and social media to advance their ideologies? How do they use social media as forms for political communication? What do everyday users think about such advertisements and right-wing online communication?
- How does marketing and targeted advertising change with the rise of the Internet of Things? What dangers do such forms of advertising entail? What do actual or potential users think about these dangers?
- What are the limits and problems of big data? How do users think about big data-based advertising and targeted advertising? How do they think about non-commercial, commons-based, non-profit alternatives?
- How can an alternative paradigm to big data positivism and computational social science be established? What critiques can be leveled at these largely quantitative approaches? What alternative critically oriented social media research methods do we need to develop, and how can they be applied to ideology critique?
- How are specific forms of ideologies expressed on social media?
- How does the political economy of social media influencers work? What are the roles of social media influencers in young people's lives? How do marketing, advertising, and branding change on influencer profiles in comparison to traditional marketing, advertising, and branding?
- What is influencer capitalism and how does it work?
- What is digital capitalism and how does it work?
- What is digital fascism and how does it work?
- What is the relationship of digital capital(ism) and (digital) fascism/authoritarianism?
- What is the relationship of digital democracy and the digital public sphere? How can they challenge digital capitalism and digital fascism?
- What policies are needed for advancing non-commercial, non-profit, commons-based social media?

- How can the logic of social media and online communication be decelerated and the political public sphere thereby be best advanced? What is slow media 2.0? What are the potentials of slow media 2.0?
- What are the dangers of branded online content and native online advertising? How do branded online content and native online advertising make use of big data? What do users think of branded online content?
- What problems does the labor face in the context of crowdfunding? What power asymmetries and ideologies can we find in the world of crowdfunding? What have been the experiences of actual project coordinators on crowdfunding platforms such as Kickstarter? How does crowdfunding relate to neo-liberalism and the ideology of entrepreneurship?
- What controversies develop when digital advertising gurus meet digital labor activists in focus groups to debate digital capitalism?

Conclusion

Social media and big data are relatively new phenomena. At the same time, they reflect old power structures but in new ways. This chapter focused on the analysis of social media's political economy based on various critical theory approaches. It used classical concepts such as the audience commodity, audience labor, and commodity fetishism to show that critical analysis of advertising and targeted advertising needs to look at both economic and ideological dimensions. Facebook and Google are not communications corporations but the world's largest advertising agencies. Current research in critical social media studies focuses on issues such as digital labor and digital alienation. Given that social media and big data will not disappear overnight, the critical study of these phenomena remains an important task.

Notes

- 1 Data source: Facebook, SEC Form 10-K for the fiscal year 2024.
- 2 Data source: www.internetlivestats.com/google-search-statistics/, accessed on 18 November 2025.
- 3 www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/jul/02/facebook-apologises-psychological-experiments-on-users.
- 4 www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/jul/04/privacy-watchdog-files-complaint-over-facebook-emotion-experiment.
- 5 <https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/6306276?hl=en-GB>.
- 6 <http://uk.businessinsider.com/youtube-red-original-movies-and-shows-2015-10?r=US%26IR=T/#youtuber-joey-graceffa-will-star-in-a-new-youtube-murder-mystery-series-10>.

References

- Andrejevic, M. (2011). Social network exploitation. In Z. Papacharissi (Ed.), *A networked self* (pp. 82–102). New York: Routledge.
- Andrejevic, M. (2012). Exploitation in the data mine. In C. Fuchs, K. Boersma, A. Albrechtslund, & M. Sandoval (Eds.), *Internet and surveillance: The challenges of web 2.0 and social media* (pp. 71–88). New York: Routledge.
- Andrejevic, M. (2014). Alienation's returns. In C. Fuchs & M. Sandoval (Eds.), *Critique, social media and the information society* (pp. 179–190). New York: Routledge.
- Dalla Costa, M., & James, S. (1973). *The power of women and the subversion of the community* (2nd ed.). Bristol: Falling Wall Press.

- Fisher, E. (2012). How less alienation creates more exploitation? Audience labor on social network sites. *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique*, 10(2), 171–183.
- Fisher, E., & Fuchs, C. (Eds.) (2015). *Reconsidering value and labor in the digital age*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Fuchs, C. (2010). Labor in informational capitalism and on the internet. *The Information Society*, 26(3), 179–196.
- Fuchs, C. (2012). Dallas Smythe today – The audience commodity, the digital labor debate, Marxist political economy and critical theory: Prolegomena to a digital labor theory of value. *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique*, 10(2), 692–740.
- Fuchs, C. (2014). *Digital labor and Karl Marx*. New York: Routledge.
- Fuchs, C. (2015). *Culture and economy in the age of social media*. New York: Routledge.
- Fuchs, C. (2016). *Critical theory of communication: New readings of Lukács, Adorno, Marcuse, Honneth and Habermas in the age of the internet*. London: University of Westminster Press.
- Fuchs, C. (2017a). Capitalism, patriarchy, slavery, and racism in the age of digital capitalism and digital labor. *Critical Sociology*, 43. 10.1177/0896920517691108
- Fuchs, C. (2017b). *Social media: A critical introduction* (2nd ed.). London: Sage.
- Fuchs, C. (2020). *Communication and capitalism: A critical theory*. London: University of Westminster Press. 10.16997/book45
- Fuchs, C. (2024). *Social media: A critical introduction* (4th ed.). London: Sage.
- Harbor, K. (2017). ‘At the desire of several persons of quality and lovers of musick’: Pervasive and persuasive advertising for public commercial concerts in London 1672–1749. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 33(13–14), 1170–1203.
- Jarrett, K. (2016). *Feminism, labor and digital media: The digital housewife*. New York: Routledge.
- Jhally, S. (2006). Advertising as religion: The dialectic of technology and magic. In S. Jhally (Ed.), *The spectacle of accumulation: Essays in culture, media, & politics* (pp. 85–97). New York: Peter Lang.
- Kaplan, S. S. (2002). *Advertising: New concepts*. New Delhi: Sarup & Sons.
- Kramer, A. D. I. (2014). Experimental evidence of massive-scale emotional contagion through social networks. *Proceedings of the National Academy of the Sciences of the United States of America*, 111(24), 8788–8790. www.pnas.org/content/111/24/8788
- Lukács, G. (1971 [1923]). *History and class consciousness*. London: Merlin.
- Marx, K. (1844) Economic and philosophic manuscripts. In *Marx & Engels Collected Works (MECW)* Volume 3 (pp. 229–346). London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Marx, K. (1867). *Capital volume I*. London: Penguin.
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1845). *German ideology*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus.
- Negri, A. (1988). *Revolution retrieved: Selected writings on Marx, Keynes, capitalist crisis & new social subjects 1967–83*. London: Red Notes.
- Proffitt, J. M., Ekbria, H. R., & McDowell, S. D. (Eds.). (2015). Special forum on monetization of user-generated content: Marx revisited. *The Information Society*, 31(1), 1–67.
- Scholz, T. (Ed.) (2013). *Digital labor: The internet as playground and factory*. New York: Routledge.
- Smythe, D. W. (1977). Communications: Blindspot of western Marxism. *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, 1(3), 1–27.
- Tadajewski, M. (2010). Towards a history of critical marketing studies. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 26(9–10), 773–824.
- Tadajewski, M., & Brownlie, D. (2008). Critical marketing: A limit attitude. In M. Tadajewski & D. Brownlie (Eds.), *Critical marketing: Issues in contemporary marketing* (pp. 1–28). Chichester: John Wiley.
- Williams, R. (2000). Advertising: The magic system. In I. R. Williams (Ed.), *Culture and materialism* (pp. 170–195). London: Verso.