

An Analysis of the Transformation of Social Media to “Social Factory” -Based on the Perspective of Communication Political Economy

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Abstract

With the advent of the Web2.0 era, human nature's desire for communication has been activated at the technical level. While more and more users are using social media, Internet-related companies are also trying their best to satisfy people's fantasies about the form of communication by developing various new forms of social software. However, in fact, many social media are under the guises of social media, but their essence is the logic of capital. From the perspective of the political economy of communication, this paper argues that social media has become a “social factory”, and with the expansion of the “social factory”, the entire society will gradually become factory-like.

Keywords: political economy of communication, social media, factorization

1. Introduction

One of Marx's important achievements was that he revealed the inherent logic of accumulation in capitalism and pointed out the inherent inequality that this logic produced. For labor in the digital age, from the perspective of Marx's political economy of communication, it is believed that there is exploitation, and this exploitation is ubiquitous and permeated in every link. This paper attempts to interpret the “digital labor” phenomenon of social media users in the digital age from the perspective of the political economy of communication, explore the labor form of “digital labor”, and reveal the implicit exploitation behind the enjoyment of Internet resources.

2. Mass Media That Produces “Free Lunches”

To examine the entire mass communication industry from an economic point of view, the main problems to be solved are: what is the commodity form of mass communication and who are the sellers and buyers. The Canadian scholar Dallas Walker Smythe proposed in 1977 that it was the mass media agency that created a “free lunch” (well-made television program) for the audience to enjoy, and the audience in turn became its commodity. Advertisers purchase audience goods from mass communication agencies, and audiences consume industrial products, thus completing capital circulation. Information, entertainment and educational materials delivered to audiences by mass communication agencies are a temptation (gifts, bribes or ‘free lunches’) to attract potential audiences and maintain loyal attention (Graham P & Luke A., 2011). Smythe thus opened the door to the dissemination of research orientations in political economy.

3. The Social Factory That Makes Digital Labor

Based on Smythe's analysis, some scholars put forward concepts such as “digital labor” and “network labor”. In the era of Web 2.0, social media monopolized the social media of the audience by means of self-built platforms, and “digital labor” assumed the dual attributes of “free lunch” and “audience commodity” to a certain extent. “Digital labor” has become the basic force for “social factory” to take place, and “social factory” has become the staged result of the continued development of “digital labor”. According to the status quo of the exploitation of “digital labor”, the main manifestations of “social factory” are as follows:

3.1 Instant Messaging Software

This is the infrastructure formed by the “social factory”. Taking WeChat as an example, Tencent's 2020 Q1 financial report shows that the combined number of monthly active accounts of WeChat and Wechat reached 1.205 billion (Hardy J., 2014). Huge user data has become an important source of original capital accumulation

for WeChat. With the continuous update of WeChat version, the status of its communication function is showing a downward trend. Functions such as circle of friends, mini programs, and official accounts have captured the traffic of WeChat as a communication tool, and the development of each new function also means the admission of new capital rules. As one of the largest mobile reading platforms in China, WeChat Reading has 210 million users. The participation of digital technology has enriched users' reading activities and changed the characteristics of reading. Under the active and passive forces of the platform and users, problems such as reduced reading efficiency and complicated relationships between platform users reflect the trend of user labor. Paying attention to the relationship between platforms and users from the perspective of the political economy of communication is for "digital labor".

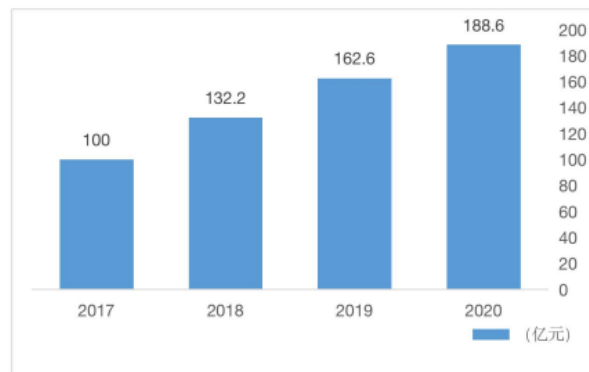


Figure 1. Mobile reading market size (billion RMB)

Notable are "micro-business" groups, which use interpersonal networks to promote goods, in the process commoditizing friendships and laboring their members (Fuchs C & Sandoval M., 2015). As the British scholar James Curran mentioned, *friendship has become the currency of circulation and the power that drives the Internet*. In the process, the "social factory" gradually took shape.

3.2 Webcaster

A complex of "being exploited" and "exploit". According to the 46th *Statistical Report on Internet Development in China* released by the China Internet Network Information Center, as of March 2020, the number of online live broadcast users in my country reached 562 million, accounting for 59.8% of the total netizens. For the purpose of capital accumulation, network anchors satisfy viewers' desire to spy or communicate through the mediated presentation of the body or life (McChesney R W & Schiller D., 2003). While the audience spends a lot of time and energy for the production and reproduction of labor for the platform, they also face the risk of being exploited by advertisers.

From an economic point of view, the audience will only be favored by the anchor if they convert their viewing behavior into capital appreciation behaviors and promote the circulation of goods through "rewarding" or "purchasing products recommended by the anchor". In the process, capitalists such as advertisers, platforms, anchors, and communication companies have successfully divided up the audience, and the anchors have become the "accomplices" of the platform to exploit the audience. Network anchors also face the situation of being "exploited". Platforms or Internet celebrity incubation companies will take a high percentage of the anchor's labor income. In order to increase labor income, the anchor even stepped on the live broadcast red line to perform. The live broadcast red line set by the platform seems to be an industry regulation, but it is actually another kind of "exploitation": the price of touching the red line is to deduct the anchor's labor income (Zhao Y., 2008). In the end, web anchors became live streaming peasant-workers, and webcasting, an advanced technological act, became one of the grotesque cultural phenomena in the social factory.

3.3 Prosumers

The self-exploitation of digital labor. The famous American futurist Alvin Toffler once put forward the concept of prosumer, foreseeing the reality of the unity of consumers and producers. In the field of online media, with the blessing of technology, individuals are "empowered", and the audience replaces the media to produce "free lunch" to a certain extent. In order to further squeeze the audience, new Internet companies use concise and

actionable content produced by others as “bait” to attract audiences for active production. Tiktok’s short videos based on magical brainwashing music and powerful technical beauty functions quickly became popular. Tiktok makes hot spots through short videos shot by “net celebrities”, and at the same time attracts traffic through imitation of other users, and uses competition mechanisms (play volume, likes or “fans”) to stimulate users’ imitation and creation. In addition, Tiktok has also gradually transformed from a short video production platform to a live viewing platform, with the result that users are further exploited in terms of time. Ordinary Internet users swim in the cyberspace built by media technology, and pay labor for the capital appreciation of the Internet industry under the condition of satisfaction; Internet anchors start with the logic of capital, and are stuck because of the logic of capital; Prosumers while enjoying the joy of free creation, it has become an important force in the “social factory” to inspire laborers to work (Murdock G & Golding P., 2016). In the end, in the era of traditional media, the “free lunch” produced by mass media in the era of Web 2.0 was attracted by “social factories” through various means to attract a large number of “digital workers” for self-creation, self-enjoyment and self-exploitation, and the media gradually retreated behind the scenes. Manipulating capital and being manipulated by capital.

4. Laborization and Internal Logic of Internet Audiences

If the industrial development of traditional media depends on the audience’s listening behavior and the sale of audience information, then in the Internet era, the Internet industry has further strengthened the dependence of netizens and formed a new model of economic development centered on netizens. The Internet industry has made great efforts in the ideological production level of the structure of communication technology and the operation of the industry, trying to incorporate the communication behavior of netizens into the operation process of the Internet industry and transform it into digital labor for the appreciation of commercial capital (Wasko J., 2014). In this way, the colonization of netizens’ time and the factoryization of social space are completed. It is in this context that the “labor” perspective of audience research begins to show its powerful explanatory power.

Labor is the core concept and analytical basis of the classical Marxist doctrine system. Marx believes that labor is the life activity of human beings consciously creating use value, and it is also the essence of human beings that distinguishes them from other creatures. In “Das Kapital”, Marx said: “Labor is first and foremost a process between man and nature, a process in which man mediates, adjusts and controls the material transformation between man and nature through his own activities.”

However, the labor process always takes place in a certain social context and historical conditions, and cannot exist independently. Under capitalism, productive labor serves the process of surplus labor production and capital appreciation, so labor appears as a coercive activity, a servile behavior of the social structure. Facing the development of capital production technology, the proliferation of information technology and the transformation of capital production relations, Maurizio Lazzarato further expanded the connotation of capitalist labor, proposing that labor in the information age not only includes material production, but also includes the “labour of producing the information and cultural content of commodities”, as well as activities not traditionally classified as “work”, such as “defining and determining cultural and artistic standards, fashion, taste, consumer indicators, and more strategic Activities of different information projects such as public opinion. (McChesney R W., 2000)” In other words, the basic characteristics of the post-industrial society include: the shrinking of traditional industrial workers, the growth of the information-based and knowledge-based new middle class, and the fact that people outside the traditional labor group are increasingly becoming the exploited. In recent years, the continuous updating of Internet technology has promoted the transformation of the form of information exchange, and a new “network society” is gradually taking shape. Behind this booming digital landscape, more and more ordinary people begin to accept the “calling” of commercial ideology and are absorbed into the virtual space constructed by the Internet. Their communication behavior is also in the process. The transformed digital labor behavior with commercial value rapidly promotes the appreciation and expansion of digital capital.

Driven by Internet technology, the capital production of information capitalism has overcome the rigidity and excess of the Fordism-Keynesian production model, and has produced a digital capital production and reproduction model based on the flexible employment system to adapt to the new economic ecology and consumption environment. Relying on the network platform, information capitalism de-organizes and de-bounds core technologies and specialized assets, seeks inter-professional and inter-organizational individual mobilization and creative absorption within a differentiated and diversified society, and integrates digital labor. Gamification, entertainment and personalization, constantly cater to netizens’ instinctive pursuit of participation, community, and game violence, so as to transform their curiosity, entertainment, relaxation, happiness, excitement, excitement, loyalty and consumption desire into Digital labor and capital for business transaction

value, thereby realizing capital appreciation. At the institutional level, although this new type of flexible employment shows a certain degree of autonomy and freedom, digital workers are overly dependent on the structure and rule design of digital capitalism, and this form of digital labor that has begun to take shape has not been affected by cultural and Acceptance and recognition at the institutional level, and therefore lack of necessary institutional protection, workers have to succumb to the capital allocation rules formulated by the website, and eventually become cheap or even unpaid digital labor.

5. The Social Factory Drives Society to a Factory-Like Shift

5.1 Socializing Is Endless

Canadian communication scientist McLuhan proposed that “the medium is the message”, and every update of technology means the introduction of new communication logic. The interaction between communication and technology changes society and human beings, and will never end. At present, social media technology has become an important means to promote the interaction between communication and society. The logic of social media is to attract as many users as possible. Under the promotion of “factory”, it has been fully “factoryized”.

5.2 There Are No Barriers to Social Interaction

Cao Jin and Zhuang Qianwei (2013) mentioned that “the enclosure movement of monopoly capital and new technologies has penetrated into families and young children”. The transformation of children into “playing workers” is only one aspect of the “factoryization” of the family, which is accompanied by the digital capitalization of rural areas that occupy a large area of China’s territory and population: “The rural space enters the social field through short videos. Domain. (McChesney R W., 2000)” Families and rural areas are either passively or actively involved in the “social factory”, and the result is that the entire society is further “factorized”.

6. Return to the Communication Itself

In the face of the erosion of digital capitalism, the Internet provides a platform for rights subjects with a tendency to “actively promote”, “actively resist” or “passively incorporate”. The author believes that under the dual suppression of technology and capital, communication should pay more attention to the production and construction of meaning and return to communication itself.

(1) Media: A public resource. The emergence of news is for human beings to have a clearer understanding of the environment in which they live. The changes in communication technology optimize the way humans understand the world. The legitimacy of news and communication technology lies in this. While political economy and other factors have an impact on the communication field, the media’s public service function should be paid attention to.

(2) Individuals: the enjoyment of the “right to be forgotten”. In the current main development context of China constructed by the combination of the technological development logic of “Science and technology is the primary productive force” and the social development logic of “centered on economic construction”, digital capitalism will continue to flood people’s lives and Alienating human beings, choosing to give up digital control should become one of the basic rights of the people. For example, the “right to be forgotten” is “a new type of right extended from the right to privacy in the Internet age” (Hope W., 2014). The reference here is more aimed at netizens’ resistance to the “social factory” instilled by capital and technological logic.

(3) Society: Be wary of the digital “culture industry.” The concept of “cultural industry” proposed by German scholars Adorno and Horkheimer pointed out that what is now called popular entertainment cannot actually be compared with art. The relationship between culture and communication is actually delicate and complex. With the development of technology, the “digital culture industry” will continue to wear the cloak of culture and art in the “factory society” to erode people’s hearts through external means, and try to rebuild the world (Dwyer P., 2015). Explain the meaning of culture. Perhaps now, we need a “Renaissance” in the Internet age even more.

7. Summary

Now, when we go to a party, we see almost everyone looking down at their mobile phones. This is not a party, but a “labor workshop”. Mobile phones are like the “shuttles” used by laborers to weave before the Industrial Revolution. Social media is the most important supervisor in this “workshop”, almost everyone is producing and consuming themselves through “digital labor” on their mobile phones. The most primitive communication and communication between people seems strange and out of place at this moment. From the perspective of the interaction between communication and labor, we find that the Internet industry has formed a new economic development model centered on the participation of netizens, relying on a digital capital production and

reproduction model based on the flexible employment system. At the same time, through rights and moral discourses characterized by participation, democracy, and sharing, the power of “calling” of netizens has been expanded, and the collective intelligence and surplus productivity of the masses has been successfully absorbed in a differentiated and diversified society, and greatly saved capital operating costs. As a result, the process of capital production began to jump out of the factory walls and continuously penetrated into the places of human daily life such as family and society, completing the colonization of netizen time and the factoryization of social space. Under the realistic background of lack of necessary institutional protection, the digital labor achievements of netizens have not been reasonably distributed and shared, but suffered labor exploitation by Internet companies. This research attempts to reveal the micro-operation process and meso-level labor exploitation mechanism in which the communication behavior of the network “audience” is labored by digital capital. This will help us to rethink and examine the current optimistic discussions on Internet technology in the industry and academia. Not only that, at the theoretical level, the conversion of audience research from the theoretical perspective of “audience commodity” to “digital labor” is beneficial to make up for the logical blind spot of the simplification and totalization of media audience research, and to explore the micro-culture from the perspective of communication political and economic criticism. The practice of production, interpretation and struggle presents a richer and more diverse landscape of information dissemination, which not only means the expansion of the field of vision of communication political economy, but also strengthens the academic mission of communication research as a social critique.

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