Chapter 43

Utopia, Labor, and Informational Capitalism:
Lights and Shadows of Social Media

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ABSTRACT

Through the lens of a political economic approach, I consider the question whether or not social media can promote social change. I claim that whereas media have consistently channeled technological utopia/dystopia, thus be constantly linked to aspirations and fear of social change, the answer to that question does not depend on their specific nature but on historically specific social relations in which media operate. In the case here considered, it requires examining the social relations re-producing and produced by informational capitalism. More specifically, I examine how the productive relations that support user generated content practices of Facebook users affect social media in their capability to reproduce and transform existing social contexts. Drawing on Fuchs and Sevignani's (2013) distinction between "work" and "labor" I claim that social media reflect the ambivalent nature of current capitalist mode of production: a contest in which exploitative/emancipatory as well as reproductive/transformative aspects are articulated by liberal ideology.

INTRODUCTION

Mosco (2005) claims that every new wave of media technology seems to bring with it contradictory declarations of ultimate ends, a mixture of messianic and apocalyptic predictions of future, a *Telos* that simultaneously implies modernity and anti-modernity. The radio for instance could connect distant communities, thus enhancing a common understanding of the world, but could also generate phenomena of mass hysteria. In the specific case of social media platforms, they are simultaneously perceived to be rescuing the public sphere (Habermas, 1991), promoting new sociability (boyd, 2010) and, concurrently, to be deteriorating more genuine forms of communication such as interpersonal and dialogic ones, and facilitating further levels of commodification of previously un-colonized spheres of social life (Terranova,2004).

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

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

THE AMBIVALENT FEELING OF MEDIATION

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

For Peters, the stupefying experience of receiving a message from wireless devices, or transposing bodily existences of a person into images were interpreted as the power of human intentions overcoming natural barriers but also as the bizarre and horrific way to create a fake double of a living person, i.e. a "doppelgänger," ghostly appearances and monstrosities. In more recent times, the cultural circumstances in which media operate have significantly changed but are also still consistent with the ideology of a

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