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## **Dallas Smythe and Digital Labor**

Christian Fuchs

### **Introduction**

Dallas Smythe<sup>1</sup> established the notions of the audience commodity and audience labor in 1977 for understanding the political economy of commercial media using advertising as their capital accumulation model. His article has resulted in a foundational debate of Media and Communication Studies that involved Smythe<sup>2</sup>, Graham Murdock<sup>3</sup> (1978) and Bill Livant<sup>4</sup>. In recent years there has been a very significant rise of references to Smythe's concepts of audience labor/commodification in academic works<sup>5</sup>. This increasing interest has on the one hand to do with a return of a stronger interest in Marx's works and Marxist political economy as well as the rise of social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Weibo, Pinterest, Instagram, Blogspot, VKontakte, LinkedIn, Tumblr etc that use targeted advertising as their capital accumulation model<sup>6</sup>. Explaining how this form of capital accumulation model rises has resulted in the development of the category of digital labor<sup>7</sup>.

### **Audience Labor**

The analysis and critique of advertising played a special role in Dallas Smythe's works. He conducted studies of advertising time on commercial television and found that advertising "occupies about one of every five minutes of big city television program time and about of every four minutes of smaller-city program time"<sup>8</sup>.

Smythe criticized critical and administrative scholars for focusing narrowly on commercial media in terms of messages, information, images, meaning, entertainment, orientation, education, manipulation and ideology.<sup>9</sup>

Smythe asked the question who produces the commodity of the commercial, advertising-financed media. He said that "audiences and readerships"<sup>10</sup> are the workers of the commercial media. They create the "demand for advertised goods" and by consuming media reproduce "their own labor power"<sup>11</sup>.

Dallas Smythe's notion of audience labor challenged the idea that one can only be exploited if one earns a wage in a factory. He opened up

the notion of exploitation for the age of consumer culture. His notion also challenges the idea that the home and the private sphere are insulated against exploitation, an insight that he shares with Marxist feminism that since the 1970s has stressed the importance of considering reproductive labor as value-generating and therefore exploited by capital. Mariarosa Dalla Costa <page 52:> and Selma James challenged the orthodox Marxist assumption that reproductive work is “outside social productivity.”<sup>12</sup>

Orthodox-Marxist criticisms of Marxist feminism echo the polemical criticism that Michael Lebowitz and others marshalled against Smythe. Michael Lebowitz argues that Smythe’s approach is only a “Marxist-sounding communications theory.”<sup>13</sup> Marxism would assume that “surplus value in capitalism is generated in the direct process of production, the process where workers (having surrendered the property rights over the disposition of their labor-power) are *compelled* to work longer than is necessary to produce the equivalent of their wage. Perhaps it is for this reason that there is hesitation in accepting the conception that audiences work, are exploited, and produce surplus value – in that it is a paradigm quite different to the Marxist paradigm”<sup>14</sup>. Media capitalists would compete “for the expenditures of competing industrial capitalists,” help to “increase the commodity sales of industrial capitalists” and their profits would be “a share of the surplus value of industrial capital”<sup>15</sup>. Smythe’s audience commodity approach would advance an “entirely un-Marxian argument with un-Marxian conclusions”<sup>16</sup>. In relation to Sut Jhally and Bill Livant’s approach that is building on the one of Smythe, Richard Maxwell argues that “Jhally and Livant misapplied certain propositions in the theory of value to a realm which may be relatively autonomous from the discipline of wage-labor” and that “wage-labor” is “the necessary element of labor control and exploitation in the trans-valuation of televiewing.”<sup>17</sup> Related approaches have argued that not the audiences of commercial media are exploited, but the statisticians working for audience rating companies<sup>18</sup>.

The immediate theoretical and political consequences Lebowitz’s logic of argumentation are the following ones:

- 1) Commercial media are subsumed to industrial capital.
- 2) Slaves, house workers and other unpaid workers are not exploited.
- 3) The wage and non-wage work performed under the command of media capital is unproductive work. Media companies cannot exploit workers because they create products and services that are part of the circulation sphere of capitalism.

Graham Murdock<sup>19</sup> pointed out in the Blindspot Debate that the audience commodity is just one of several political economies of the media besides the sale of content and a strong public service tradition

in Europe. He also stressed that corporate media have an ideological role in capitalism. In his 2013 reflection on his debate with Dallas Smythe<sup>20</sup>, Murdock argued that the notion of the audience commodity would be of crucial relevance for understanding exploitation in the digital age. The digital media landscape would however not just be shaped by commodification, but have huge potentials for the emergence of digital commons. Graham Murdock points out the importance of re-considering the notions of the audience commodity and audience labor in the context of digital media, which points towards the necessity of the category of digital labor for understanding the political economy of advertising-financed digital media.

### **<page 53:> Digital Labor**

The digital labor debate has in its first phase focused on understanding the value creation mechanisms on corporate social media such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. Authors have for example discussed the usefulness of Karl Marx's labor theory of value<sup>21</sup>, how the notion of alienation shall be used in the context of digital labor<sup>22</sup>, or if and how Dallas Smythe's notion of audience labor can be used for understanding digital labor<sup>23</sup>. The general task has been how to best understand and conceptualize that users under real-time far-reaching conditions of commercial surveillance create a data commodity that is sold to advertising clients and who exactly creates the value that manifests itself in social media corporations' profits. Studying digital labor is now in a second stage, where it gives attention to theorizing digital labor in all its forms.

An important question that has arisen within the digital labor debate is if it suffices to focus on the social media world and to limit the notion of digital labor to paid or unpaid work in the online realm (or even narrower to limit the term to users' unpaid labor on social media). We access social media on laptops and mobile phones that tend to be assembled in China. Hon Hai Precision (also known as Foxconn) is a Taiwanese company that was the 139th largest company in the world in 2014<sup>24</sup>. According to the CNN Global 500 2012 list<sup>25</sup>, Foxconn was the fifth largest corporate employer in the world in 2012. In 2011, Foxconn had enlarged its Chinese workforce to a million, with a majority being young migrant workers who come from the countryside<sup>26</sup>. Foxconn assembles e.g. the iPad, iMac, iPhone, Kindle, various consoles (by Sony, Nintendo, Microsoft). When 17 Foxconn workers attempted to commit suicide between January and August 2010 (most of them "successfully"), the topic of bad working conditions in the ICT assemblage industry became widely known. This circumstance was followed up with a number of academic works that show that workers' everyday reality at Foxconn includes low wages, working long hours, frequent work shift changes, regular working time of over 10 hours per day, a lack of breaks, monotonous

work, physical harm caused by chemicals such as benzene or solder paste, lack of protective gear and equipment, forced use of students from vocational schools as interns (in agreement with the school boards) that conduct regular assembly work that does not help their studies, prison-like accommodations with 6-22 workers per room, yellow unions that are managed by company officials and whom the workers do not trust, harsh management methods, a lack of breaks, prohibitions that workers move, talk or stretch their bodies, workers that had to stand during production, punishments, beatings and harassments by security guards, disgusting food<sup>27</sup>. The Foxconn example shows that the existence and usage of digital media not just depends on the labor of software engineers and content producers. Digital labor covers a broad range of labor working under different conditions, including slave miners working in African conflict mines, smelters, hardware assemblers, software engineers, digital media content producers, eWaste workers, or users of commercial digital media.

Given the complex, networked and transnational reality of labor required for the existence and usage of digital media, a concept of digital labor is needed that can reflect these realities. One needs to go beyond cultural-idealist approaches that only focus on user-generated content and see how content production is grounded in industrial and agricultural labor and how the appropriation of nature in this respect interacts with culture. For adequately studying digital labor and digital media in general, **<page 54:>** a cultural-materialist approach is needed<sup>28</sup>. Given these preliminary assumptions, one can provide a definition of digital work and digital labor<sup>29</sup>:

- Digital work is all activity that creates digital media or uses them for creating use-values that satisfy human needs.
- Digital labour is alienated digital work: it is alienated from itself, from the instruments and objects of labor and from the products of labor. Alienation is alienation of the subject from itself (labor-power is put to use for and is controlled by capital), alienation from the object (the objects of labor and the instruments of labor) and the subject-object (the products of labor).

The digital labor debate has been accompanied a resurgent interest in Dallas Smythe's concept of audience labor and audience commodification for explaining the role of targeted advertising on social media<sup>30</sup>. In this context notions such as prosumer labor<sup>31</sup> have been used.

Prosumer labor on social media differs in a number of respects from audience labor in broadcasting:

- Creativity and social relations: Broadcasting audiences produce meanings of programs, whereas social media prosumers not just produce meanings, but also content, communications with other users and social relations.
- Surveillance: Broadcasting requires audience measurements, which are approximations, in order to sell audiences as commodities. Social media corporations monitor, store and assess all online activities of users on their platforms and also on other platforms. They have very detailed profiles of users' activities, interests, communications and social relations. Constant real-time surveillance of users is an inherent feature of prosumers labor on capitalist social media. Personal data is sold as a commodity. Measuring audiences has in broadcasting and print traditionally been based on studies with small samples of audience members. Measuring and monitoring user behavior on social media is constant, total and algorithmic<sup>32</sup>.
- Targeted and personalised advertising: Advertising on capitalist social media can therefore more easily target user interests and personalise ads, whereas this is more difficult in commercial broadcasting.
- Algorithmic auctions: Algorithms organise the pricing of the user data commodity in the form of auctions for online advertising spaces on the screens of a specific number of users. The ad prices on social media vary depending on the number of auctioneers, whereas the ad prices in newspapers and on radio and TV are set in a relatively fixed manner and are publicly advertised. User measurement uses predictive algorithms (if you like A, you may also like B because 100,000 people who like A also like B)

### **Digital Labor and Productive Labor**

The digital labor debate has been accompanied by the question how feasible Karl Marx's labor theory of value is for understanding digital labor. And often-overlooked aspect is that this theory is a theory of time in capitalism and that digital labor needs therefore to be situated in the temporalities of capitalism<sup>33</sup>. One criticism brought forward against those who argue that users of corporate social media platforms that use targeted advertising are exploited has been that advertising as part of the sphere of circulation that only realizes, <page 55:> but does not create value, and that users' activities are one or several of the following<sup>34</sup>: unproductive, no labor at all, less productive, a consumption of value generated by paid employees in sectors and companies that advertise on social media, or an expression of a system where what appears as profits are rents derived from the profits of advertisers. These opinions are not new, but just a reformulation of Lebowitz's criticism of Smythe.

The crucial category used in such discussions is Marx's notion of

productive labor. There are passages, where Marx argues that only wagedworkers who produce surplus-value and capital that is accumulated is productive labor. For example:

“Every productive worker is a wage-laborer, but not every wage-laborer is a productive worker. Whenever labor is purchased to be consumed as a use-value, as a service and not to replace the value of variable capital with its own vitality and be incorporated into the capitalist process of production - whenever that happens, labor is not productive and the wage-labourer is no productive worker”<sup>35</sup>.

Or:

“Productive labour, therefore, can be so described when it is directly exchanged for money as capital, or, which is only a more concise way of putting it, is exchanged directly for capital, that is, for money which in its essence is capital, which is destined to function as capital, or confronts labour-power as capital. The phrase: labour which is directly exchanged for capital, implies that labour is exchanged for money as capital and actually transforms it into capital”<sup>36</sup>.

Marx’s thoughts on this topic are however inconsistent, so there cannot be one “true” interpretation of what productive and unproductive labor is. The interpretation of productive labor that I follow is one that stresses the notion of the *Gesamtarbeiter* (collective worker).

Marx stresses that work is not an individual process. The more co-operative and networked work becomes, which is the consequence of the technification of capitalism and the rise of knowledge in production, the more relevant becomes Marx’s third understanding of productive labor: productive labor as labor of the collective worker. The notion of the collective worker becomes ever more important with the development of fixed constant capital and productivity<sup>37</sup>. Marx has set out this concept both in *Capital, Volume 1*, and the *Results of the Immediate Production Process*. He argues that all work is productive that is “an organ of the collective labourer, and to perform any one of its subordinate functions”<sup>38</sup> and that with the development of co-operation an “ever increasing number of types of labour are included in the immediate concept of productive labour” so that “the aggregate worker” creates “an aggregate product which is at the same time a quantity of goods”<sup>39</sup>.

Figure 5.1 visualizes the economic relationships of Facebook (and other corporate social media platforms using targeted advertising)

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A commodity has a use-value, value and symbolic value. A company's production workers create the basic use-value that satisfies human needs. These activities take an average combined number of labor hours. Labor is the substance of value, labor time its measure and magnitude. In order to sell its commodity, a company tries to give positive meanings to it and to communicate these meanings to the public's members whom it tries to convince that this goods or service can enhance their lives and that they should therefore buy this commodity and not a comparable one offered by another company. Most commodities have independent from their physical or informational nature a cultural component that is created by cultural labor. The cultural dimension of a commodity is necessary ideological: it appeals to consumers' imagination and wants to make them connote positive images and feelings with the idea of consuming this commodity.



The creation of a commodity's symbolic ideology is a value-creating activity, but not a use-value generating activity. The use-value of a commodity can be physical and/or informational: we have cars for satisfying the need of driving from A to B, we listen to music for satisfying our aesthetic desires, etc. The exchange-value of a commodity is the relationship in which it is exchanged with another commodity, normally money:  $x \text{ commodity A} = y \text{ commodity B (money)}$ . Symbolic value establishes a link and mediates between use-value and exchange-value, it helps accomplishing the exchange, in which consumers obtain use-values and capitalists money. Wolfgang Fritz Haug<sup>40</sup> speaks in this context of the commodity's use-value promise: The sales and advertising ideology associated with a commodity promises specific positive life enhancement functions that the commodity brings with it and thereby conceals the commodity's exchange-value behind promises. The symbolic commodity ideology promises a use-value beyond actual consumption, an imaginary surplus and surplus enjoyment. These promises are detached from the actual use-value and are therefore a fictitious form of value.

Saying that the cultural labor of branding, public relations and creating commodity advertisements creates symbolic value is not detached from the notion of economic value. Rather value here precisely means that for the creation of this symbolic dimension of the commodity labor time is invested. It is therefore no wonder that almost all larger companies have their own public relations departments or outsource public <page 57:> relations and advertising to other companies. Paying the circulation workers employed in such departments or companies needs to be planned and calculated into the price of commodities.

Consumers give specific meanings to the commodities they buy and consume. They thereby construct consumption meaning and in doing so can react to use-value promises in different ways:

- 1) They can share these ideologies and buy the commodities because they hope the promise is an actual use value;
- 2) they can deconstruct the use-value promise as ideology and refuse buying the commodity;
- 3) they can deconstruct the use-value, but nonetheless buy the commodity for other reasons.

For communicating commodity ideologies to consumers, companies need to buy advertisement spaces in commercial media. Commercial media link commodity ideologies to consumers, they "transport" ideologies to consumers, although it is unclear and not determined how the latter react and if the confrontation with commodity ideologies results in actual purchases. Facebook and other corporate social media are advertising companies that sell advertising space and

user data as commodities to clients who want to present commodity ideologies to users and hope that the latter buy their commodities. Facebook has paid employees that organise the development, maintenance and provision of its software platform. On December 31, 2012, Facebook had 4619 paid employees.<sup>41</sup> But Facebook cannot sell advertising space without its users. Without them, it would be a dead platform that would immediately cease to exist. Between March and June 2013, more than a billion people, roughly 43 percent of all internet users, had accessed Facebook.<sup>42 43</sup>

But are Facebook users productive workers? They are certainly not less important for Facebook's capital accumulation than its paid employees because without users Facebook would immediately stop making profits and producing commodities. Facebook's commodity is not its platform that can be used without charges. It rather sells advertising space in combination with access to users. An algorithm selects users and allows individually targeting ads based on keywords and search criteria that Facebook's clients identify. Facebook's commodity is a portion/space of a user's screen/profile that is filled with ad clients' commodity ideologies. The commodity is presented to users and sold to ad clients either when the ad is presented (pay-per-view) or when the ad is clicked (pay-per-click). The user gives attention to his/her profile, wall and other users' profiles and walls. For specific time periods parts of his/her screen are filled with advertising ideologies that are with the help of algorithms targeted to his/her interests. The prosumer commodity is an ad space that is highly targeted to user activities and interests. The users' constant online activity is necessary for running the targeting algorithms and for generating viewing possibilities and attention for ads. The ad space can therefore only exist based on user activities that are the labor that create the social media prosumer commodity.

Facebook clients run ads based on specific targeting criteria, e.g. 25-35 year old men in the USA who are interested in literature and reading. What exactly is the commodity in this example? It is the ad space that is created on a specific 25-35 year old man's screen interested in e.g. Shakespeare while he browses Facebook **<page 58:>** book pages or other pages. The ad is potentially presented to all Facebook users who fall into this category, which amounted to 27,172,420 on June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2013. What is the value of the single ad presented to a user? It is the average labor=usage time needed for the production of the ad presentation. Let's assume these 27,172,420 million users are on average 60 minutes per day on Facebook and in these 60 minutes 60 ads are presented to them on average. All the time they spend online is used for generating targeted ads. It is labor time that generates targeted ad presentations. We can therefore say that the value of a single ad presented to a user in this example is one minute of labor/usage/prosumption time.

So Facebook usage is labor. But is it productive labor? Marx sees transportation labor that moves a commodity in space-time from location A to location B, which takes a certain labor time  $x$ , as productive labor: What

“the transport industry sells is the actual change of place itself....The productive capital invested in this industry thus adds value to the products transported, partly through the value carried over from the means of transport, partly through the value added by the work of transport”<sup>44</sup>.

The value generated by transporting a commodity from A to B is therefore  $x$  hours. The symbolic ideology of a commodity first needs to be produced by special ad and public relations employees and is in a second step communicated to potential buyers. *Advertising therefore involves production and transportation labor.* Advertising production does not create a physical commodity, but an ideological dimension of a commodity – a use-value promise that is attached to a commodity as meaning. Advertising transport workers do not transport a commodity in physical space from A to B, they rather organize a communication space that allows advertisers to communicate their use-value promises to potential customers. Facebook’s paid employees and users are therefore 21<sup>st</sup> century equivalents of what Marx considered as transport workers in classical industry. **<page 59:>** They are productive workers whose activities are necessary for “transporting” use-value promises from companies to potential customers. Marx associated transport with communication as comparable forms of work. On Facebook and other social media platforms, transportation labor is communication labor.

Dallas W. Smythe argued that it is a specific feature of audience labor that audiences “work to market [...] things to themselves”<sup>45</sup>. Facebook users constantly work and constantly market things to themselves. Their usage behavior constantly generates data that is used for targeting ads. All Facebook usage is productive labor, with the exception of those cases, where users block advertising with the help of ad block software, which probably only a minority does. Facebook usage labor adds value to the commodity that is sold by Facebook’s ad clients. Practically this means that a lot of companies want to advertise on Facebook and calculate social media advertising costs into their commodity prices. Nielsen<sup>46</sup> conducted a survey among advertisers and advertising agencies. 75 percent of the advertisers and 81 percent of the agencies that participated in the survey indicated that they buy targeted ads on social media. This shows the importance of social media for advertising today.

The production workers of Facebook’s clients produce use-value and

value. Their public relations and advertising employees (or the workers in the companies to which this labor is outsourced) produce value and a use-value promise as symbolic value. Facebook's users produce the value and the communication of this use-value to themselves. They are productive workers. That they create value means that their labor time objectifies itself in commodities: the ad clients' employees objectify their labor in the commodity that is marketed to Facebook users, whereas Facebook users objectify their labor in the prosumer commodity that is sold to Facebook's clients. User labor is thereby also objectified in the commodity that is marketed and potentially sold to users themselves.

## **Conclusion**

I have in this chapter revisited Smythe's notion of the audience commodity and audience labor in light of the corporate social media industry that uses targeted advertising. A prevalent criticism is that Facebook users are not paid and therefore do not create value, but only consume the value created by paid employees in companies that advertise on Facebook. I have argued against this idea that Marx has a broader notion of productive labor that is based on the notion of the *Gesamtarbeiter* (collective worker). On Facebook, the boundaries between production and consumption blur and consumption becomes the production of use-values both for the users (information and sociality) and advertisers (user data). Facebook users are ideological transport workers that transport advertising ideologies by their network usage to themselves.

Conceptualizing somebody as unproductive is not just an analytical term, it is also a slur and quite emotive. Nobody wants to be called unproductive as it carries the connotation of being useless and parasitic. Saying that Facebook users do not create value and that Facebook is a rentier that consumes the value produced by wagedworkers employed by other companies politically implies that users are unimportant in class struggles in the digital age. Wagedworkers in the non-digital economy are seen as the true locus of power. Hence recommended political measures to be taken focus on how to organize these workers in unions, parties or other organizations and struggles for higher wages and better wage labor conditions. Users and Facebook are seen as being outside the locus of class struggle or only as something that unions and parties can also use in wage labor struggles.

Facebook users are productive transport workers who communicate advertising ideologies that make use-value promises. Their activities are productive labor. Politics for the digital age need to consider users as political subjects. Unions, organizations of the Left and struggles are nothing that should be left to wagedworkers, but need to be extended to digital media users. Pirate Parties have understood this

circumstance better than the orthodox wage-labor fetishistic parts of the Left, but they have not well understood that the exploitation of digital labor is connected to the commodification of the commons that include the communication commons and that as a consequence internet politics need to be connected to the critique of the political economy of capitalism as a whole. So whereas the orthodox part of the Left tends to dismiss users as politically unimportant and to neglect internet politics, Pirate Parties see users as the only political subjects.

The only feasible political way forward is to create unions and organizations of users that are connected and part of a broader political Left. For doing so, the orthodox part of the Left needs to overcome its ignorance of and technophobic biases against the internet and users need to perceive themselves as being ripped off by internet companies. We need social media unions and a fusion of Pirate Parties and left-wing parties.

**<page 60:>** That Facebook users are productive workers means that they have the power to bring corporate social media to a standstill. If users go on strike, then Facebook immediately loses money. If Facebook's waged workers go on strike, the platform is still online and can be further operated for exploiting users. Users are economically powerful because they create economic value. Organizing a collective Facebook strike or shifting to alternative non-commercial platforms is a refusal of digital labor. Besides unionization and online strikes, also policy-oriented measures are feasible in order to strengthen the protection of users from capitalist exploitation. Ad block software is a tool that deactivates advertisements on the websites a user visits. It can either be used as add-on to web browsers or is automatically integrated into a browser. Using ad block software is digital class struggle: it disables Facebook and others' monetization of personal data by blocking targeted ads. Think of a legal requirement that makes ad block the standard option in all web browsers: users are empowered because commodification of data is not the standard, but an opt-in chosen by the users if they turn off the ad blocker. A useful complementary legal measure is to require all internet platforms to deactivate targeted and other forms of advertising and to make users opt-in if they want to enable such mechanisms.

Class struggles need to extend from factories and offices to Google, Facebook and Twitter. The theory of digital labor is an ally of users, whereas those approaches that want to reassure us that users are unproductive do not side with the interest of users and denigrate them as unimportant in class struggles. Representatives of the Old Left want to have their factory struggles back without realising that Facebook is a new factory.

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## Notes

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<sup>40</sup> Wolfgang Fritz Haug, *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986).

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<sup>42</sup> Data source: <http://www.alexa.com>

<sup>43</sup> According to <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>, the latest available world population count was 2 405 518 376 on June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2013.

<sup>44</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital. Volume II* (London: Penguin, 1885), 135, 226-27.

<sup>45</sup> Dallas W. Smythe, *Dependency Road* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1981), 4.

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