

Towards a critical theory of communication as renewal and update of Marxist humanism in the age of digital capitalism

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Abstract

This paper's task is to outline some foundations of a critical, Marxist-humanist theory of communication in the age of digital capitalism. It theorises the role of communication in society, communication and alienation, communication in social struggles, social struggles for democratic communication, the contradictions of digital capitalism, and struggles for digital socialist humanism.

Marxist humanism is a counter-narrative, counter-theory, and counter-politics to neoliberalism, new authoritarianism, and postmodernism. A critical theory of communication can should draw on this intellectual tradition. Communication and work stand in a dialectical relationship. Communication mediates, organises and is the process of the production of sociality and therefore of the reproduction of society. Society and communication are in class and capitalist societies shaped by the antagonism between instrumental and co-operative reason. Authoritarianism and humanism are two basic, antagonistic modes of organisation of society and communication. Instrumental reason creates and universalises alienation.

Digital capitalism is a dimension of contemporary society where digital technologies such as the computer,

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the Internet, the mobile phone, tablets, robots, and AI-driven (“smart”) technologies mediate the accumulation of capital, influence, and reputation. A Marxist-humanist theory of communication aims to inform struggles for a good, commons-based, public Internet in a good, commons-based society that has a vivid, democratic public sphere.

KEYWORDS

alienation, critical theory of communication, digital capitalism, digital socialism, Marxist humanism, praxis communication

1 | INTRODUCTION

This paper's task is to outline some foundations of a critical, Marxist-humanist theory of communication in the age of digital capitalism.

Since the 1980s, Marxist theory has become unfashionable. In social philosophy and theory, postmodernism and poststructuralism challenged grand narratives, universalism and decentred the focus on the economy. Postmodernism became, as David Harvey (1990) points out, a legitimating ideology of capitalism's flexible regime of accumulation. Identity politics and cultural reductionism replaced class politics and political economy. In his last interview before his death, Stuart Hall, who championed poststructuralism and identity politics in Cultural Studies, remarked on contemporary theory that “in its attempt to move away from economic reductionism, it sort of forgot that there was an economy at all” (Jhally, 2016, p. 337) and that it is a “real weakness” that there is a lack of engagement with the “Marxist tradition of critical thinking” (Jhally, 2016, p. 338). The move away from Marx and the critical analysis of class and capitalism took place at the time of the expansion of neoliberalism, which had the paradoxical effect that Marxian analysis became political ever more relevant as social inequalities increased and new forms of austerity and precarious labour emerged while the academic and intellectual mainstream denied its relevance. In their hatred of Marx and Marxism, postmodernism and neoliberalism have formed a strange ideological consensus.

In 2008, a new world economic crisis started as a result of the developing antagonisms of neoliberal capitalism (Foster & Magdoff, 2009; Harvey, 2010; Roberts, 2016; Wallerstein, Collins, Mann, Derluguian, & Calhoun, 2013). Ever since, there has been a rising interest in Marx's works (Fuchs & Monticelli, 2018). Today, it has become harder to deny that Marx can and should inform the analysis of 21st century society. In the light of this development, this articles aim is to contribute to the renewal of Marxist theory. Given the importance of information and communication technologies and communication work in contemporary society, social theory needs to ask: What is communication? What is the role of communication in society? What is the role of communication in capitalism? What is the role of communication in digital capitalism? This paper contributes to answering these questions by renewing the engagement with a particular tradition of Marxist theory, Marxist humanism.

Section 1 outlines the importance of Marxist humanism today. Section 3 analyses the role of communication in society. Section 4 deals with the connection of communication, alienation,

and capitalism. It gives special attention to communication in digital capitalism. Digital capitalism is a dimension of contemporary society where the accumulation of capital, influence, and cultural hegemony is mediated by digital technologies such as the computer, the Internet, the mobile phone, tablets, robots, AI-driven (“smart”) technologies, etc. Section 5 analyses the connection of struggles and communication with a special focus on examples from social struggles in digital capitalism. Section 6 draws some conclusions in the context of digital capitalism and struggles for digital socialist humanism.

2 | MARXIST HUMANISM TODAY

Marxist humanism emerged in 20th century social theory. Its theoretical foundations are Hegel's dialectical philosophical and Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. Its axiological and political concern has been the establishment of democratic socialism as alternative to capitalism, fascism, Stalinism, and other forms of authoritarian statism. It focuses its analyses on the human being, human essence, human practices, alienation, political praxis, class struggles, ideology critique, and the dialectics of subject/object, practices/structures, labour/capital, the economic/the non-economic, continuity/discontinuity, etc.

Representatives of Marxist humanism have, among others, included Theodor W. Adorno, Günther Anders, Kevin Anderson, Simone de Beauvoir, Ernst Bloch, Angela Davis, Raya Dunayevskaya, Zillah Eisenstein, Barbara Epstein, Frantz Fanon, Erich Fromm, Lucien Goldmann, André Gorz, David Harvey, Max Horkheimer, C.L.R. James, Karl Korsch, Karel Kosik, Henri Lefebvre, Georg Lukács, Herbert Marcuse, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, Bertell Ollmann, the Praxis Group in Yugoslavia, Sheila Rowbotham, M.N. Roy, Edward Said, Jean-Paul Sartre, Adam Schaff, Kate Soper, E.P. Thompson, Raymond Williams (see Alderson & Spencer, 2017; Fromm, 1965). Marxist humanism's decline had to do with the general decline of Marxist theory under neoliberal conditions, the postmodern turn against Marxism, structuralism's attack on the human being that fostered the rise of post-humanism, and the influence of Althusser and Foucault in social theory (Alderson & Spencer, 2017).

There are *five reasons* why we need a renewal of Marxist humanism today. The *first reason* is the emergence of authoritarian capitalism. In critical theory, the concept of authoritarianism goes back to Erich Fromm (1941/1969), who defines it as a social character who submits to those in power and enjoys dominating others. For Fromm, fascism is the most developed form of authoritarian society and authoritarian capitalism. Max Horkheimer (1939/1989, p. 78) sees authoritarian and therefore also fascist potentials immanent in capitalism itself. But not every form of capitalism fully develops its authoritarian potentials. Adorno et al.'s (1950) F-scale outlines a large number of characteristics of the authoritarian personality. The core of this approach are four features: authoritarianism combines the antidemocratic belief of the necessity of strong, top-down leaders, nationalism, the friend/enemy-scheme and ideological scapegoating, and the belief in law-and-order politics, violence, militancy, and war as the best political means (Fuchs, 2018a). Authoritarian capitalism is a society that combines capitalism with these principles. New forms of nationalism and authoritarianism have emerged in recent years. They pose dangers to democracy and can result in a new world war, genocide, fascism, etc. Marxist humanism stresses socialism and humanism as opposition to fascism.

The *second reason* are the limits of postmodernism in contemporary capitalism. Althusser and Foucault have had major influence on the emergence and development of postmodernism and poststructuralism that have attacked Marxist theory, class politics, the notions of the

human being, truth, alienation, commonalities, universalism, etc. While there are postmodern theorists who made productive use of Marx, certain versions of postmodernism have contributed to the decline of Marxist theory in an age when class contradictions have been exploding. Marxist humanism foregrounds praxis as class struggle and Marxist theory. It is a critique of postmodernism. Postmodernism has advanced a relativism and anti-universalism where there is no truth. In an age of fake news, post-truth, new nationalisms/fascism, we need a political concept of truth. Marxist humanism enables us to think critically about what is true and false. Postmodernism has fostered identity politics without class politics and as a consequence liberal reformism. Humanist Marxism advances democratic socialist politics. Postmodernism has advanced the hatred of Marx. In a time of major capitalist crisis, Marx is urgently needed. Post-colonial theory and thought has advanced forms of reverse orientalism (Chibber, 2013; Warren, 2017) where everything non-European and non-Western has been automatically considered as being progressive, which partly legitimates authoritarianism. Marxist humanism stresses universalism and human beings' commonality.

The *third reason* is the need for dialectical analysis. Posthumanism, the concept of the Anthropocene, Actor Network Theory, New Materialism, etc. are attacks on the human being that collapse the dialectic of unity and differences into structures that eliminate or reduce the importance of humans. Post-humanism collapses the dialectic of human/non-humans and of human/technology (robots) into the post-human cyborg. Bruno Latour's Actor Network Theory declares that things and instruments such as machines are just like humans social actors and together with the latter form actor networks. As a consequence, Latour collapses the differentiation between the human as the social being and the non-human into the actant as the social (see also Fuchs, 2020a, pp. 20–21). Deep Ecology and animal liberation theory collapse the dialectic of nature/society into an undifferentiated whole. Postmodernism collapses the dialectic of class/non-class into identity and the dialectic of culture/economy into culture. The concept of the Anthropocene blames the human being and not capitalism for the environmental crisis. The result of these developments has been the proliferation of undialectical, reductionist thought. While postmodernism and its various currents have continuously claimed that Marxism is reductionist and economic, they have themselves advanced new forms of reductionism. In contrast, Marxist humanism is dialectical. It foregrounds the importance of humans in society and the dialectical relations that the human being is part of.

The problems of structuralism constitute *the fourth reason*. (Post-)Structuralism reduces humans to bearers of structures that resemble puppets on a string. It underestimates the importance of human practices, human thought, communication, production, and social struggles in society. In contrast, Marxist humanism stresses practices, praxis and the dialectic of practices/structures in society. For example, Althusser sees humans not as active agents but as bearers and “the ‘supports’ (Träger) of [...] functions” (Althusser & Balibar, 2009, p. 199) defined by society's articulated structures and the mode of production. In Lacanian theory, humans “interact like puppets” and are “tools in the hands of the big Other” (Žižek, 2007, p. 8). Lucien Goldmann in a debate with Foucault and Lacan argued that a famous slogan in the May 1968 Paris protests read that “structures do not take to the streets”, which means that “it is never structures that make history, but men, although action of these always have a structured and significant character” (in: Foucault, 1969, p. 816). Lacan commented that “if there is anything that the May events demonstrate, it is precisely the descent of structures into the street” (in: Foucault, 1969, p. 820). Structuralist accounts of society fetishize structures that are interpreted as autonomous actors acting on and independently from humans. They disregard Marx's

dialectical insight that humans “make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past” (Marx, 1852, p. 103).

The fetishism of difference is *the fifth reason*. Postmodernism's focus on difference has parallels to the ideology of the new right that demands the separation of cultures. The new forms of nationalism that have proliferated in the past ten years fetishize difference by ascertaining pride in the nation and the hatred of immigrants, refugees, people of colour, etc. Marxist humanism stresses the universality of humanity, humans' common features, and the indivisibility of humanity.

Marxist humanism is a counter-narrative, counter-theory, and counter-politics to these developments. A critical, dialectical theory of communication can draw on and start from this intellectual tradition. The methodological approach that the present author takes in this context is to make visible, engage with, draw on, start from, use, interpret, and further develop elements from often unknown, hidden, ignored, neglected, and forgotten Marxist-humanist works (see Fuchs, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c, 2017a, 2017b, 2017d, 2018b, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2020a, 2020c).

The very basic questions from which the resulting approach starts is: What is communication? What is the role of communication in society? Section 3 deals with these questions.

3 | COMMUNICATION IN SOCIETY

This section first analyses the relationship of work and communication (subsection 3.1) and then broadens out the discussion to the analysis of communication's role in society in general (subsection 3.2).

3.1 | Work and communication

When thinking about a critical theory of communication, most scholars will immediately think of Habermas' theory of communicative action, which is the most prominent and most widely read and cited critical approach to the analysis of communication in society.

The epistemological and methodological approach the present author takes is very different from the one that Habermas chose in the creation of his theory of communicative action. The German philosopher engaged primarily with non-Marxist mainstream theorists of language and communication, especially George Herbert Mead, Jean Piaget, and John Searle. Habermas implicitly has sustained the old, but incorrect prejudice that Marxism has nothing important to say on communication and culture. The approach that the present author has developed in contrast tries to invalidate this claim by showing that there is a rich, but ignored tradition of thinking critically about language and communication in Marxist theory.

Starting from Hegel's Jena philosophy, Habermas in the 1968 essay “Work and Interaction” developed thoughts about work and interaction that in the 1980s formed one of the theoretical foundations of his opus magnum *Theory of Communicative Action* (Habermas, 1985a, 1985b). In the Jena lectures, Hegel (1803/1804, 1805/1806) argues that work and interaction are two manifestations of the spirit. In his interpretation of Hegel's Jena philosophy of the spirit, Habermas (1968) argues that work and interaction are two aspects of society that are based on two different rationalities, namely strategic action (work) and understanding (interaction). In *Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas formalises and further develops this

distinction as the antagonism between system/lifeworld, steering media (money, power)/language, work/interaction, system integration/social integration, and instrumental action/communicative action. In a key formulation, Habermas (1985b, p. 281) characterises his own theory as “media dualism” that is based on “two contrary types of communication media”. The German philosopher builds his theory on the assumption that work and communication form two independent substances of society that are radically different. “On the human level, the reproduction of life is determined culturally by work and interaction” (Habermas, 1971, p. 196). In his latest book *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie (This Too a History of Philosophy)* published in 2019 in German, Habermas reproduces the dualistic assumption that society consists of two substances. He writes that “society’s structures not only contribute to *social integration* by values, normatively binding expectations and communicative understanding, but also contribute to society’s *system integration* by functional mechanisms such as relations of power and exchange” (Habermas, 2019, p. 137, translation from German).

Habermas is influenced by Kant’s dualism of subject and object and Weber’s (2019) dualism of purposive action on the one hand and value-rational, affectual, and traditional action on the other hand. Habermas reproduces Weber’s dualism of economy and society as the dualism of system and lifeworld. His theory of communication is a Kantian and Weberian humanism that lacks the Hegelian and Marxian dialectical logic that conceives of two moments as being simultaneously identical and different. Marxist humanism therefore promises to be a good foundation for a dialectical critical theory of communication.

Work and communication are not two separate human processes. They are identical and different. In his early philosophical works such as *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (Marx, 1844c) and *German Ideology* (Marx & Engels, 1845/46), Marx asked himself what the human being is and how capitalism cripples the human being. He built his critical theory of capitalism on these foundations. A basic insight of these works is that the human being is a societal being. “The individual *is the social being*” (Marx, 1844c, p. 299). Humans shape and are shaped by the social relations they enter in everyday life: “Not only is the material of my activity given to me as a social product (as is even the language in which the thinker is active): my *own existence is social activity*, and therefore that which I make of myself, I make of myself for society and with the consciousness of myself as a social being” (Marx, 1844c, p. 298). Marx adds the insight that the social relations humans enter are relations of production. The “production of material life itself [...] in order to sustain human life” is “a fundamental condition of all history” (Marx & Engels, 1845/46, p. 42).

The human being is a producing, social, societal being. By producing their conditions of life, humans socially produce and reproduce society. Social production, production in social relations, and the production of the social and society, are the key features of the human being. Materiality of society means that humans produce sociality and socially produce. Production for the satisfaction of human needs is the key feature of society. This means that work is the key process constituting society. It is an economic process but extends from the economy into political and cultural life. Humans also produce political relations, where they take collective decisions, and cultural relations, where they make meaning of the world. Therefore, production not just creates “eating and drinking, housing, clothing” but also “various other things” (Marx & Engels, 1845/46, p. 42), including social, societal, economic, political, and cultural relations. Marx’s key sociological insight is that everything that exists in society is a social relation and is produced as social relation. Communication, i.e. “the production of ideas” and “the mental intercourse” of humans, is not immaterial but part of “material activity” (Marx &

Engels, 1845/46, p. 36). Communication is “the language of real life” (p. 36). Humans are “producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc.” (p. 36).

Marx and Engels argue that communication is a production process. There is a dialectic of work and communication: humans *communicate productively* and *produce communicatively*. Communication aims at the production of a specific social use-value, namely that humans understand the world and understand each other. Therefore, *communication is productive*. The production of use-values that satisfy human needs cannot be achieved individually, but only in social relations. Communication is the process that organises social relations. Therefore, *humans produce communicatively*.

Already classical bourgeois economics assumed that the human being is by nature an entrepreneur of the self and a homo oeconomicus, a rational economic being that is egoistic, self-interested, competitive, and profit-maximising. Adam Smith argued that “the propensity to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another” is “a certain propensity in human nature” and “the necessary consequence of the faculties of reason and speech” (Smith, 1776, p. 18). Authors such as Brown (2015, chapter III) argue that with the rise of neoliberalism, the concept of the homo oeconomicus has further proliferated. (Neo-)liberalism essentialises and fetishises the capitalist. The critique of neoliberalism is prone to deny that human beings are economic beings by claiming that they are primarily political or cultural animals. Such assumptions just replace one reductionism by another one. For Marx, humans are simultaneously economic and non-economic beings. As social production the economic operates inside of the political and the cultural. But the political and the cultural have their own emergent dynamics and go beyond production. Power and meanings are produced and reproduced and at the same time constitute structures, organisations, and institutions that have particular logics.

In his *Politics*, Aristotle (2013, §1253a) characterises the human being as *zōon logon echon* (ζῷον λόγος ἔχων). Hannah Arendt (1958, p. 27) and Charles Taylor (2016, p. 338) point out that the translation of this term as “rational animal” is imprecise. Logos is Greek for both rationality and speech. The Greek language here points us towards the fact that rationality and language are intertwined and not two separate human substances. In contrast, the Cartesian dualism of mind and body separates two aspects of the human being that belong together. According to Alfred Sohn-Rethel (1978), this separation goes back to the invention of the division of labour in class societies that invented the division between mental and manual labour. It is a basic human propensity that there is a dialectic of the human as rational, producing animal and the human as languaging, communicating animal. Language and communication are rational and human and society's rationality is organised through communication. Marx (1867b, p. 346, translation from German) summarises this dialectic by writing that the human being is “by nature [...] a societal animal” („gesellschaftliches Tier”), which includes that communication is production and communication organises production.

Aristotle (2009, §1139b) points out that human action is teleological: “everyone who makes makes for an end”. Aristotle's teleology influenced Marx's assumption that human work is purposeful activity. Humans produce with means of production in order to achieve the goal of satisfying needs. For Marx (1867a, p. 284), the human being “also realizes [*verwirklicht*] his own purpose“in work. In his widely ignored book *Ontologie des gesellschaftlichen Seins* (*Ontology of Societal Being*), Georg Lukács (1986a, 1986b) argues that work as teleological positing is the model of human activity.

Teleological positing implies that humans are working beings. They set themselves goals that they want to achieve by utilising certain means. The teleological positing of work means the “intervention into concrete causal relations in order to bring about the realization of the

goal” (Lukács, 1978, p. 67), “the positing of a goal and its means” (p. 22), that the human being as worker and producer is a “conscious creator” (p. 5). Communication means that humans are “answering beings” (Lukács, 1986b, p. 339, translation from German). Language makes possible the “distancing of the object from the subject” (Lukács, 1978, p. 100). By communicating, humans can repeat production processes in a variety of spaces at a variety of times. Production becomes routinised and regularised so that society can re-produce itself. Society’s reproduction is the repetition of social production.

Language is a “complex inside of the complex” of society (Lukács, 1986b, 181, translation from German). It “mediates [...] both the metabolism of society with nature and the interactions between humans that takes place purely inside of society” (p. 181, translation from German). As particular form of teleological positing, communication has a work-character and is a peculiar form of work that enables the mediation of humans’ social relations.

3.2 | Society as sphere of communicatively organised production

Communication is the process of the production of humans’ sociality, social relations, groups, organisations, social systems, structures, institutions. It is therefore also the process that organises and mediates the production and reproduction of society in a dynamic manner. Figure 1 visualises this role of communication in society. Communication is the production process of human sociality and humans’ social relations.

Society is the totality – a complex of complexes, as Lukács (1986a, 1986b) says –, in which humans produce and reproduce social relations that condition, enable, and constrain their practices. It is a dialectical process where human social practices and social relations condition each other mutually. Society consists of the three realms of the economy, politics, and culture. These realms are neither separate nor fully reduceable to one system nor equally foundational for society. They are all economic because all social systems are systems of production (Table 1). At

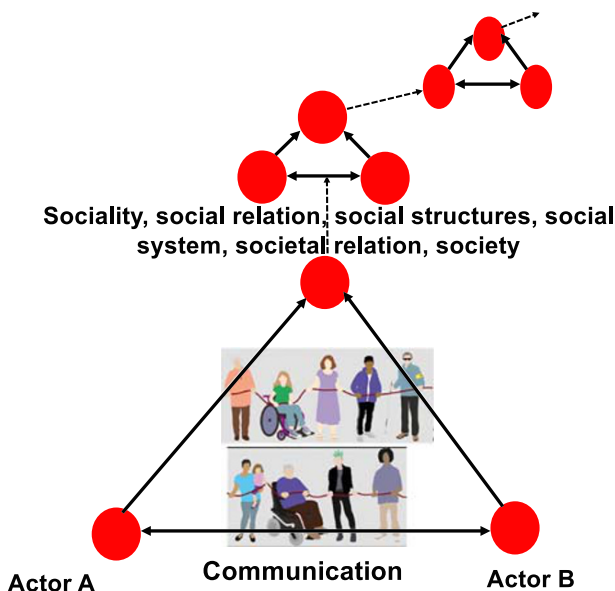


FIGURE 1 Communication as the mediation and production of human sociality and social relations in society [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

TABLE 1 Society's three realms of production

Realm of society	Teleological positing
Economy	Production of use-values
Politics	Production of collective decisions
Culture	Production of meanings

the same time, all types of social systems have their particular, emergent qualities and features whereby their sum is more than the total of the production of their parts.

Raymond Williams (1977) outlines that the relationship of the economic and the non-economic (the “base” and the “superstructure”) has in Marxist theory been characterised as one of determination, reflection, mediation, typification (representation, illustration), homology, and correspondence. Williams criticises that all of these approaches leave the economic and the non-economic separate and are therefore not “materialist enough” (pp. 92, 97). Williams argues that culture is material. The same is true of politics. This means that the economy in the form of teleological positing operates inside culture and politics. Ideas, policies, laws, meanings, ideologies, etc. are just like cars and computers produced by humans in social relations. Williams (1980, p. 50) writes that “communication and its material means are intrinsic to all distinctively human forms of labour and social organization”. Communication is intrinsic to and operates inside of social systems and organises the production of sociality. Because of the work character of communication, also work is intrinsic to communication. All social realms and systems are at the same time economic and non-economic.

Orthodox approaches have reduced society to an economic base. For example, Louis Althusser (1969, pp. 135–136) argues that the advantage of “the spatial metaphor of the edifice (base and superstructure) is simultaneously that it reveals that questions of determination (or of index of effectivity) are crucial; that it reveals that it is the base which in the last instance determines the whole edifice”. E. P. Thompson criticises Althusser’s approach as “mechanical materialism” (Thompson, 1978, p. 247) that disregards that society’s instances and levels “are in fact human activities, institutions, and ideas” that humans experience (p. 97).

The river is a much better metaphor for society than a house or a clockwork. Society is a dynamic and productive flow of human activities. Georg Lukács metaphorically describes society as “the river of everyday life” (Lukács, 1963, p. 13, translation from German; see the visualisation in Figure 2). The river as society’s dialectic foregrounds the role of networks, processes, and streams of social production. Rivers have various branches that dynamically flow in and out of the main current. The metaphor of the river envisions society as dialectical, creative, and



FIGURE 2 Society as dialectical river
 [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

contradictory flow of human production. The political and the cultural are productive currents that flow out of and back into the economy. Communication is the societal rivers' water that mediates and enables life inside and reproduction of the stream.

In capitalist society, rivers are often not as blue and clean as the title of Johann Strauss's waltz "On the Beautiful Blue Danube" implies. Capitalist reality more looks like the polluted river shown in Figure 3. The polluted river is a metaphor for how structures of class and domination damage life, humans, society, and nature. A critical theory of communication needs to also look at communication's role in alienated society, i.e. class societies and capitalist society. The section of this paper that follows discusses communication in capitalism.

4 | COMMUNICATION, ALIENATION, & DIGITAL CAPITALISM

This section first discusses what alienation is about (subsection 4.1) and then analyses the connection of alienation and communication in capitalist society (subsection 4.2) with a special focus on examples from digital capitalism.

4.1 | What is alienation?

Humans are the "ensemble of the social relations" (Marx, 1845, p. 4) in which they interact with other humans in everyday life. We are and are becoming in the course of our lives through the social relations we produce, reproduce, enter, and where we meet others as part of society. Social relations, organisations, institutions, and society can be organised in different manners. In co-operative social relations, humans act in manners that benefit all or at least the many. In competitive, instrumental social relations, humans try to take advantage of each other so that one or some benefit at the expense of others. There is a difference between co-operative and instrumental reason. Instrumental reason guides human action in manners so that some instrumentalise others, whereas co-operative reason shapes actions in ways that create advantages and a better life for all. Instrumental and co-operative actions are two forms of purposive action. Whereas the first is interested in creating benefits for the few, the second wants to create benefits for the many.



FIGURE 3 The polluted river as metaphor for alienation in class and capitalist societies, source: Wikimedia commons, Jan Jörg [public domain] [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Alienation is the term that Marx uses for characterising dominative and unequal social relations where humans do not control the conditions under which they live. In alienated relations, humans do not control the relations, means, and results of social production. Marx characterises alienation as “*loss of self*” (Marx, 1844a, p. 228), “*powerlessness*” (p. 228), “*the loss of the object*” (Marx, 1844c, p. 273), “*the loss of his [the human’s] reality*” (p. 279), “*the product as a loss*” (p. 279). Alienation means a power gap and the loss and lack of control. On the one hand, Marx sees alienation as economic alienation, i.e. as class relations, relations where the worker’s activity “*belongs to another; it is the loss of his self*” (Marx, 1844c, p. 274). But on the other hand, he characterises religious ideology and the bourgeois state as alienation (Fuchs, 2018c), which shows that besides and together with economic alienation there are also political and cultural forms of alienation. David Harvey (2018) therefore argues that alienation is a universal process that extends beyond economic production into the realisation of value, the consumption and distribution of commodities, politics, culture, and social life. He speaks of universal alienation. Harvey (2003, 2005) defines the new imperialism and neoliberalism as the commodification of (almost) everything and accumulation by dispossession. Commodification and exploitation and therefore the attempt to universalise alienation are immanent features of capitalism. Neoliberalism has managed to break down welfare state barriers to the universalisation of economic alienation so that commodification was able to intensify and extend itself.

Erich Fromm draws a distinction between humanism and authoritarianism. In authoritarian social forms, “*an authority states what is good for man and lays down the laws and norms of conduct*” (Fromm, 1965, p. 6). In humanist social forms, the human being is “*both the norm giver and the subject of the norms*” (p. 6). Authoritarianism is a type of character structure, ideology, social structure, and social system where humans are treated like things and instruments. Humanism is a type of character structure, ideology, social structure, and social system where humans are treated in a humane way so that they can realise their potentials and society can realise its possibilities so that the many benefit. Georg Lukács (1971) uses the term reification for processes where humans are treated like things. Axel Honneth (2008) argues for the renewal of the concept of reification in critical theory and interprets it as processes that create and sustain disrespect. Reification (*Verdinglichung*) is closely related to alienation (*Entfremdung*). Whereas *reification* more foregrounds the *process* of reducing humans to the status of things, *alienation* has more stress on the *result* of this process, namely that humans aren’t what they could, deserve and should be, but are out of control of the conditions that shape their lives.

Class and dominative societies are built on authoritarian, alienated, reifying, and disrespectful structures that turn humans into mere objects, instruments, and things. Human subjects thereby become the objects of control, domination, and exploitation. Table 2 shows what forms instrumental reason and co-operative reason take on in society. Alienation is the colonisation of society by instrumental reason so that instrumentality dominates over co-operation. In instrumental, alienated societies, there is an antagonism between instrumental, alienating forces and forces that struggle for advancing the logic of co-operation.

TABLE 2 Alienation as the antagonism between instrumental and co-operative reason in society

	Reification practices, alienated structures	Co-operative practices, humanistic structures
Economy	Exploitation: Private property	Self-management: Commons
Politics	Domination: Dictatorship	Participation: Democracy
Culture	Disrespect: Ideology, demagoguery	Love: Friendship

There is a basic antagonism between instrumental and co-operative reason. It takes place both at the level of practices and structures that mutually shape each other. In the economy, reification and alienation take on the form of class relations where private property owners exploit workers. In a socialist economy, there is in contrast to class societies common ownership of the means of production and workers collectively govern and control the organisations they work in. There is an economic democracy. In the political system, reification and alienation mean domination of one group over others and in the extreme case dictatorship. Co-operative political reason in contrast means a participatory democracy, where humans collectively control the conditions that shape their lives (Macpherson, 1973; Pateman, 1970). In alienated, reified culture, there are ideologies that try to legitimate dominative interests by misrepresenting and dissimulating reality and structures that give respect and fame to few and disrespect and disregard the many, who lack voice and visibility. Co-operative cultural reason in contrast means that every is treated in a respectful manner, is recognised, and has a voice in the public sphere.

Erich Fromm (1947, 1965, 1976) introduces the social character as a level that mediates between individual psychology and society. The social character is a dominant, typical psychological character structure that has a higher likelihood in a certain social group than in other groups. Authoritarianism and humanism are the two basic social characters that Fromm identifies. Authoritarian individuals are destructive, exploitative, competitive, aggressive, and hateful. Humanists are creative, caring, loving, co-operative, and helpful. A human being's psyche and consciousness is shaped by the social relations they enter over the course of their life and is therefore influenced by the experiences they make and the micro-, meso- and macro-levels of society, including the family, personal relations, the economy, political life, and cultural relations.

Capitalism is a mode of economic production, where humans are forced to sell their labour-power to capitalists who own the means of production as private property and to produce commodities that are sold on the market in order to yield monetary profit that is reinvested with the goal of accumulating ever more capital. According to Marx, in the capitalist economy, the working class is "a machine for the production of surplus-value" and the capitalist class "a machine for the transformation of this surplus-value into surplus capital" (Marx, 1867a, p. 742) and an "extractor of surplus labour and an exploiter of surplus-labour" (p. 425).

In feudal societies, the feudal economy was closely integrated with the monarchical political system. The political rulers were also members of the property-owning class. Religious power formed an important ideological, political, and economic force interacting and legitimating the monarchy. With the rise of capitalism, the economy became disembedded from the political system and a new political economy emerged consisting of the class relation between capital and labour as well as the modern nation-state. The authority of the monarch, the aristocracy, and religion started to decline and in their place the authority of the capitalist class in the economy and a ruling political elite in the political system emerged. A division of labour between capitalist owners, managers, political bureaucrats, and ideologues emerged. Bourgeois economy, state, and ideology are at the same time relatively autonomous, intersecting, interpenetrating, and interacting.

Given that economic production shapes and takes on particular forms in the political and the cultural system, the capitalist system is not just an economic mode of production but a type of society, a societal formation. Capitalism is a type of society where the logic of accumulation shapes the capitalist economic mode of production, the nation-state as mode of governance and mode of political production, and ideologies such as individualism, racism, nationalism, etc. operate as mode of legitimation and mode of cultural production.

Table 3 shows the dominant structures and processes in capitalist society's three spheres. Capitalism is a general societal realm shaped by the logic of accumulation. In the economy, accumulation implies and is based on the competition between actors on the market who have to strive for controlling and accumulating capital. In capitalism's political system, there is competition between political groups who strive to accumulate influence and decision-power. In capitalism's cultural system, there is competition between individuals who strive to become celebrities that accumulate reputation, attention, and respect. Structures of accumulation imply that there are winners and losers. A tiny minority of capitalists, managers, governors, and celebrities, and influencers accumulates power whereby workers, citizens, and everyday people are disempowered.

4.2 | Communication in the context of alienation and digital capitalism

Instrumental reason and co-operative reason also shape communication (see Table 4). Alienation is the expression and manifestation of instrumental reason.

The class character of knowledge work and communication constitutes the *authoritarian and alienated economic type of information*. The property-owning class controls the means of

TABLE 3 Capitalist society

Sphere	Dominant structure	Dominant processes	Underlying antagonism
Economy	Capital/labour-class relation	Capital accumulation	Capitalists VS. workers
Politics	Nation-state	Accumulation of decision-power and influence	Bureaucrats VS. citizens
Culture	Ideologies	Accumulation of reputation, attention, respect	Ideologues/celebrities VS. everyday people

TABLE 4 Communication in the context of instrumental and co-operative reason

	Instrumental reason creating alienation	Instrumental reason and alienation in capitalism	Co-operative reason
Economic system	Knowledge and communication as private property commodities, exploitation of knowledge labour, means of communication as private property	Knowledge and communication as capital and commodities	Knowledge and communication as commons, co-ownership and co-production in self-managed knowledge-creating companies
Political system	Dictatorial control of knowledge and communication processes	State control of knowledge and communication	Participatory knowledge and democratic communication, public service media
Cultural system	Ideological knowledge and communication	Communication of individualism and nationalism	Socialist humanist knowledge and communication, citizen media

communication. In capitalist society, many communication technologies are organised as private property. There is a class relation between a dominant class and an exploited class of knowledge and communication workers who create knowledge and forms of communication that they do not own, govern, and control. In capitalism, communication and knowledge are organised in the form of cultural commodities that are sold on the market in order to accumulate capital. They are part of capitalism's cultural economy.

Let us have a look at an example of economic alienation in the context of digital capitalism: digital advertising. In *digital capitalism's economy*, we find monopoly corporations such as Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, or Microsoft that control digital services such as search engines, phones, social networks, online shopping, or operating systems. Figure 4 shows the development of global ad revenues.

The relevance of Internet advertising has continuously grown. Digital advertising today controls the largest share of global ad revenues. In 2018, Google and Facebook together accounted for 72.1 percent of the world's digital ad revenues and 31.9 percent of the total global ad revenues.¹ Google and Facebook are the world's largest advertising agencies.

A *humanistic organisation of the information economy* implies the collective ownership of the means of communication and the organisation of communication and culture as common goods and gifts. There are self-managed cultural companies (cultural co-operatives).

When *communication and knowledge* are organised in an *authoritarian and alienated manner at the political level*, there is a state monopoly of the means of communication that is used for disseminating ideological knowledge and political opposition and opponents' voices are stifled, repressed, or eliminated. For example, broadcasting and publishing in Nazi-Germany was

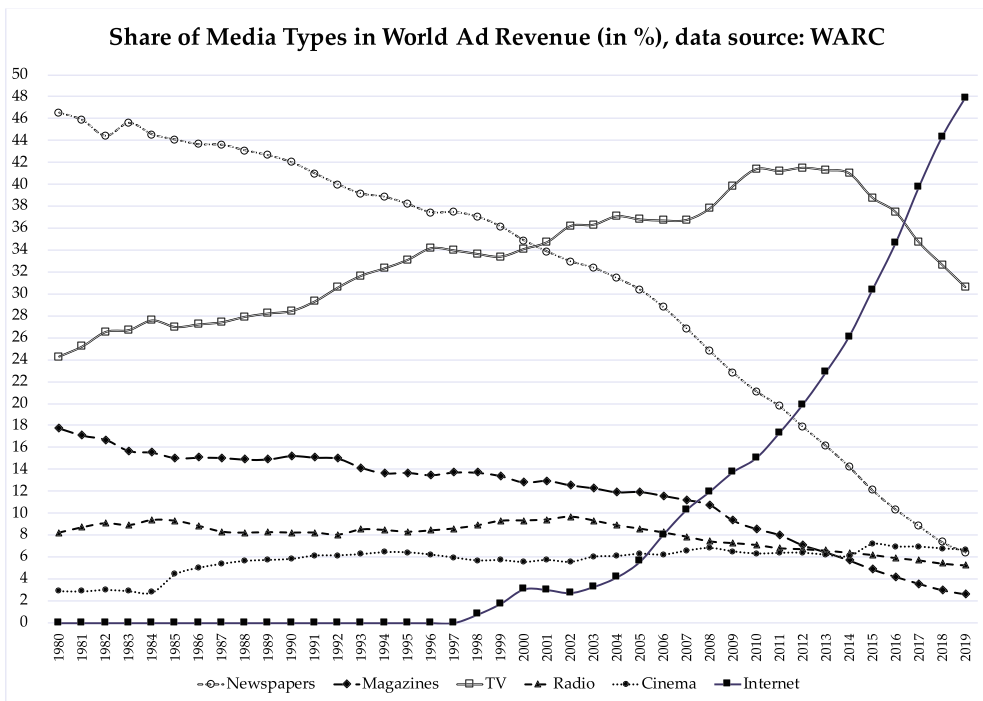


FIGURE 4 The development of various types of advertising [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

strictly controlled by the state that ensured that nothing but fascist ideology was broadcast and published. After Hitler came to power, a state-owned broadcasting company, the Reichs-Rundfunks-Gesellschaft (RRG, Reich Broadcasting Corporation), was created. It replaced regional broadcasting companies. The Reich Chamber of Broadcasting required all media workers to register so that their background and worldviews could be checked and monitored. *Gleichschaltung* meant that the Nazi-state made sure that the content broadcast and published by the media was aligned with fascist ideology, racism, anti-Semitism, etc. In the authoritarian organisation of political communication, there is mass propaganda that tries to make individuals to listen to the authoritarian leader. There are authoritarian elements not just in fascism, but in all forms of capitalism. Capitalist media want us to listen and admire the ruling class, the bureaucratic elite, celebrities, and influencers. “We listen to every voice and to everybody but not to ourselves. We are constantly exposed to the noise of opinions and ideas hammering at us from everywhere: motion pictures, newspapers, radio, idle chatter” (Fromm, 1947, p. 121). In authoritarian communication, humans are compelled and encouraged to give attention to a leader (an ideology, system, group, or individual).

Let us have a look at political alienation in the context of contemporary authoritarian digital capitalism. In the *political domain of digital capitalism*, we have seen the rise of new forms of nationalism and right-wing authoritarianism that constitute a new phase of capitalist development that can be termed authoritarian capitalism (Fuchs, 2018a). Right-wing authoritarians make use of the Internet and social media for spreading their ideology (Fuchs, 2020d). Donald Trump is the most well-known example. With 71.5 million Twitter-followers in late January 2020, he is the individual with the tenth highest number of followers. He has more followers on Twitter than Justin Timberlake and Kim Kardashian. Figure 5 shows a typical example of how Trump uses Twitter for scapegoating immigrants as criminals and blaming them for social problems in order to distract attention from how these problems are grounded in capitalism's class and power structures.

Democratic governance of the means of communication and public knowledge is a key feature of the *humanistic organisation of political communication*. Citizens and cultural workers participate in media organisations' decision-taking procedures. There is no state or other monopoly of voice. Citizens are empowered by the media to speak and listen to each other. Media reports do not simply cover and glorify the elite, but give attention to the lives of everyday people. “To be able to listen to oneself is a prerequisite for the ability to listen to others” (Fromm, 1947, p. 79). The *humanistic organisation of political communication* enables humans to listen to each other. It also enables them to listen and give attention to themselves. In such a system, humans engage with each other. There are public service media that are independent, which means that such media are independent from state and corporate power and provide

<https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1088058726794387456>



FIGURE 5 Donald Trump's use of twitter, source: <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1088058726794387456> [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

engaging information, communication, education, and entertainment services. Public service media are enabled by laws but not controlled by the state.

In a *cultural system* that is organised in *authoritarian and alienated manner*, we find the constant public communication of ideology. Ideologies are forms of knowledge that legitimate domination and class society. By producing and disseminating ideology, particular individuals and social groups aim at convincing and winning over the individuals of the public so that they create hegemony that agrees to exploitation and domination and sees these phenomena as necessary, natural, and good. Ideologues use strategies such as acceleration, brevity, dissimulation, distortion, lies, manipulation, personalisation, scandalisation, scapegoating, superficiality, etc. Ideologues produce and spread false knowledge. They want to create and reproduce false consciousness.

Let us have a look at an example of alienated culture in the context of digital capitalism: the Cambridge Analytica scandal. In the *cultural realm of digital capitalism*, we have seen the emergence of the new forms of online communication of ideology. In this context, online fake news is of particular importance. Online fake news are fabricated news stories that are spread on the Internet and social media. The goal is to reify the consciousness of citizens by right-wing propaganda that appeals to emotions such as anger, fear, hatred, and sadness. Fake news is ideology communicated online in the form of manufactured news. Examples of of alt-right websites are Breitbart, Drudge Report, InfoWars, Daily Caller, Daily Wire, and WorldNetDaily.

The combination of digital advertising, digital authoritarianism, and digital ideology has enabled the Cambridge Analytica scandal. Cambridge Analytica paid money to Global Science Research (GSR) for conducting fake online personality tests in order to obtain personal Facebook data of almost 90 million users. The data was used for targeting political ads and fake news to voters. Facebook benefited financially because big data flows are part of its capital accumulation model. It therefore allowed open interfaces that supported large-scale data gathering by external actors. The lack of political regulation of the Internet has enabled digital surveillance. Right-wing authoritarians use all means necessary, including data breaches and privacy violations, to spread their ideology. Cambridge Analytica was enabled by the combination of far-right ideology, Facebook's digital capitalist practices, and neoliberal politics.

Because of the convergence of production and consumption as presumption, we have seen how particular questions concerning consumers have become questions of work and production. The users of Facebook and Google produce commodities, namely data and attention that enable targeted ads that are sold to ad clients. They are digital workers (Fuchs, 2017c). Surveillance, privacy violations, and data breaches are not simply consumer issues but questions about digital labour that not just privacy advocates but also trade unions should deal with. The reason why Google and Facebook collect and never delete masses of personal data is that data is the digital oil that drives these giant corporations' profits. Internet use is not just a matter of consumers' rights but a matter of workers' rights. We need digital trade unions and branches of existing unions that deal with digital labour issues and campaign together with consumer protection organisations, human rights organisations, and privacy advocates. In digital capitalism, questions about privacy rights, human rights and consumer rights are questions about the rights of digital workers.

A *culture that is organised in a humanistic manner* does not require, produce, and disseminate ideology. It is unideological. It produces knowledge that encourages critical thinking, self-activity, and creativity.

Given the intensification of capitalism and alienation under neoliberalism, the question arises how alternatives and struggles for alternatives can look like and what role communication plays in this context. The section that follows focuses on this topic.

5 | COMMUNICATION AND THE STRUGGLE FOR ALTERNATIVES IN THE AGE OF DIGITAL CAPITALISM

Social and class struggles are an important feature of Marxist humanist approaches. Given that Marxist humanism stresses the human being, socialism as humanism, humanism as socialism, and praxis, the logical implication is that it foregrounds the importance of class and social struggles as part of and for attaining humanist socialism.

There is an etymological connection between communication, community, and the commons. In a true communication society, the etymological origin of communication is realised. A communication society that lives up to its promises is a society of the commons. Communication then does not mean instrumentalization, commodification, bureaucratisation, and ideologisation of knowledge sharing and making something common so that the many benefit. Commoning is a true communication society's fundamental principle. A communication society is a society where humans exert common control of the conditions that govern and shape their lives.

Communications are in such a society commons-based, i.e. communication systems whose “*primary freedom [...] lies in not being a trade*” (Marx, 1842, p. 175). The basic economic antagonism that shapes communication, culture, and technology today is the one between commodification and commonification.

A society of the commons is a society that realises the creation of the economic commons (wealth and self-fulfilment for all), the political commons (participatory democracy), and the cultural commons (voice and recognition of all).

Raymond Williams envisions a communicative and cultural democracy. In such a democracy, there is the co-operation of public service media, local community media, and cultural co-operatives. Williams envisions “new kinds of communal, cooperative and collective institutions” (Williams, 1983, p. 123). Democratic communications are using the logic and rationality of co-operation. In a democratic communication system, corporations, the state, and celebrities do not control voice and visibility. In such a system, we find true freedom of speech that enables humans to listen, speak, and engage. Democratic means of communication are “means of participation and of common discussion” (Williams, 1976, p. 134). Williams argues that the key means of production should be publicly owned and given for use to self-managed organisations, which needs to make sure that there is a diversity of political opinion and that state control of opinions is avoided (Williams, 1979, p. 370).

For Marx, human beings are practical because they transform society through practices. By praxis, Marx refers to a certain form of practice. Praxis means political practices that aim at or organise a human-centred society. Praxis is the practical struggle for the creation and sustainment of a commons-based society. The creation of a true and good communication society is in need of struggles that are informed by “the *categorical imperative to overthrow all relations* in which man is a debased, enslaved, forsaken, despicable being” (Marx, 1844b, p. 182). Praxis includes class struggles that aim at abolishing exploitation, class, and domination. Praxis wants to establish an “absolute humanism” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 417).

Social struggles need their own culture, which includes the creation and communication of stories that focus on how exploitation and domination damage humans and society and how

resistance can be self-organised. The communication of injustices and resistance is an important aspect of the self-organisation of protest.

Praxis communication is a particular form of human communication that has an ethical and political character. It is oriented on the struggle for humanism and socialism. *Praxis communication* is always *communicative practice*. But only a subset of *communicative practices* is *praxis communication*. Communication is not automatically good. It is not automatically a means that questions exploitation and domination. Communication is a practice by and in which humans reproduce and produce social relations. Progressive activists use communication technologies such as the Internet for challenging exploitation and domination.

Let us have a brief look at how social struggles are changing in the age of digital capitalism.

Given the changes of the working class and the importance of the social worker, the social factory, digitalisation, globalisation, the rise of prosumption and freelancers in capitalism, new concepts, new strategies and new methods of struggle are needed in the age digital capitalism. A Marxist-humanist theory of communication aims to inform struggles for a good, commons-based, public Internet in a good, commons-based society that has a vivid, democratic public sphere.

Neoliberalism's individualisation of labour, the emergence of digital labour, and the blurring of the boundaries between labour and leisure, the private and the public, production and consumption, the office/factory and the home, have created new challenges for trade unions and the organisation of the working class.

Given the globalisation, digitalisation, and informatisation of labour and the emergence of productive consumption (prosumption), we need new methods of strike. A strike of knowledge workers will not be effective if it isn't qualitatively different from traditional strikes organised in transportation or manufacturing. In general, strike as refusal of labour needs digital and global means and levels of organisation.

A study of communication in the protests of Occupy movements showed that activists use multiple media for mobilisation-oriented communication (Fuchs, 2014): classical interpersonal communication via phones, email, face-to-face and private social media profiles as well as more public forms of communication such as Facebook groups, Twitter and email lists. Posting announcements on alternative social media is much more uncommon than doing the same on Twitter and Facebook. Correlation analysis showed that a higher level of protest activity tends to result in a higher level of media use for protest mobilization. A higher level of engagement in protests has positive influences on the usage of media for political mobilisation. Mobilisation in face-to-face communication tends to positively influence other forms of mobilisation communication. Posting announcements on Facebook in order to mobilise others tends to positively impact other forms of mobilisation communication.

In digital capitalism, class and social struggles have taken on new forms. Adbusters is a Canadian campaign and culture jamming group. It was very influential in the creation of the Occupy Wall Street-movement. In September 2018, Adbusters organised #OccupySiliconValley, a one-day strike against Amazon, Apple, Facebook, and Google. Here is an excerpt from #OccupySiliconValley's call for action: "How do we take on the largest and most corrupt corporate Goliaths to ever exist? [...] 1 Google No Search Day: The ONLY thing we search is: does google do evil? We force the megabot to do some soul-searching. We see if it can tell us, the people, what's really going on behind that insidious techno-curtain". #OccupySiliconValley was not simply a consumer boycott. It was a digital labour strike. It was an example of what dimensions strikes should take into account in the age of digital capitalism.

Digital socialist humanism is the alternative to digital capitalism (Fuchs, 2020b). It is a democratic socialist society where digital technologies benefit the many and help creating wealth, participation, recognition and voice for all. Social struggles on the Internet, utilising the Internet, and against digital capital are a key element of socialist praxis communication today. But we cannot wait until after the disappearance of digital capitalism to create alternatives. The creation of alternative Internet platforms is itself part of the struggle for digital socialism. Platform co-operatives and public service Internet platforms are two types of digital alternatives. They are both non-profit models of Internet organisation. Platform co-operatives are self-managed, collectively owned and controlled Internet platforms. Users and the platform's digital workers operate, own, and govern a platform co-operatives. Public service Internet platforms are Internet platforms that are controlled and operated by public service media such as the BBC.

A public service YouTube operated by a network of public service media such as BBC, ARD, France Télévisions, etc. is an alternative to Google's commercial YouTube. A public service YouTube should encourage the creation of videos on topics that are important for democracy. This can be done by creating challenges and campaigns where users are invited to create and upload videos that accompany certain radio and TV programmes. Collective production of such videos should be encouraged in institutions such as school classes, groups of pupils and students, council houses, adult learning groups, unions, religious and philosophical groups, civil society organisations, etc. Digital creativity can be fostered by offering public service media's archive material in digital format using a Creative Commons CC-BY-NC licence that allows adoption and change of the material for non-commercial purposes. Public service media shouldn't co-operate with capitalist media but with community and citizen media, platform co-operatives, and other public cultural institutions such as museums, universities, and libraries.

The following section summarises the basic findings of this paper.

6 | CONCLUSIONS: HUMANIST SOCIALISM IN THE AGE OF DIGITAL CAPITALISM

This article has argued for the renewal of Marxist humanism and humanist socialism in 21st century digital capitalism. Marxist humanist theory stresses the importance of humans in society. It is a practice- and praxis-oriented approach that stresses the transformative capacity of class and social struggles against alienation and ideologies and for a society that combines humanism and socialism.

A Marxist-humanist theory of communication stresses that communication is a form of human practice and the process that produces understanding, sociality, social relations, social systems, social structures, and society. There is a dialectic of work and communication. In alienated societies, we are confronted by alienated forms of communication that are governed by instrumental reason. Figure 6 summarises the antagonism between instrumental and co-operative reason in the realms of society in general and communication in particular.

Praxis is the social struggle for a socialist-humanist society. The establishment of democratic means of communication is a form of praxis communication. A democratic public sphere requires democratic means of communication that are operated not-for-profit; inform, educate and entertain in unbiased manners unbiased by ideology and economic and political power; and give everyday people public voices in society.

Digital socialism is the humanist alternative to digital capitalism (for an overview, see the fifteen contributions in Fuchs, 2020b). Digital socialism is the struggle for an Internet and a

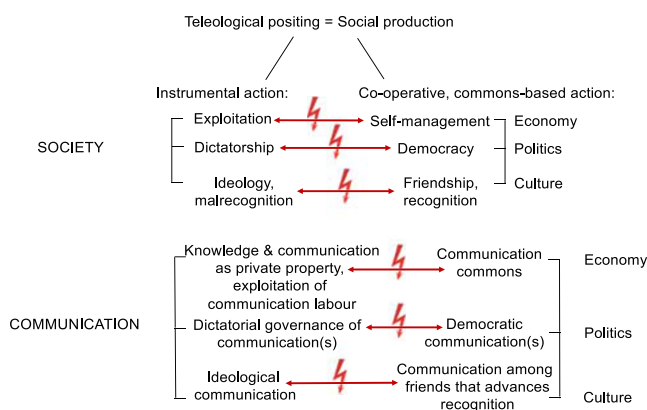


FIGURE 6 The antagonism between instrumental and co-operative in society in general and the realm of communication [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

digital media landscape, and a digital society that is not dominated by corporations but that is controlled by users, workers, citizens in the form of a participatory digital democracy.

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ENDNOTE

¹ Data sources: WARC, SEC-filings forms 10-K for Google/Alphabet and Facebook (financial year 2018).

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