

# Conclusion

The accumulation of online social capital is largely economic in nature, and this results in the exacerbation of exploitation, alienation, conspicuous prosumption, online narcissism and aggression linked to capitalist circuits of the platforms of social media. The end result has been the solidifying of a spectacular society under the power and control of networks. By bringing together historical and contemporary theories, and drawing from a few salient examples on social media, it may appear that we are left with a bleak conclusion. The use of critique to explore and reflect upon phenomena represents only half its purpose; the other half is to indicate what can be done to ameliorate the situation. At this point it will be helpful to put all the components together to provide the full picture:

1. Social media sites monitor and convert our social interactions into the commodity of data, which is then sold to advertisers in the form of space. Both the social media site and the advertisers sell back the commodity to the users in the form of 'experience.' The raw data is processed or refined into curated data by a sorting algorithm where content visibility is controlled internally. The data itself has a use value, which is then converted into an exchange value when it becomes part of the marketplace for advertisers to purchase.
2. Users on social media commodify themselves while slotting their data into the convenient compartments of a social media profile, while also doing the work of the social media site through the production and consumption of content. In their social exchanges, this produces more data.
3. The rate of production and consumption by which to extract more surplus value from users is increased by increasing the incentives to participate and compete for online social capital. The integration of social buttons to share and measure online social capital, in conjunction with notification alerts, has resulted in both the increase of data collected and more

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eyeballs on adverts, which then justifies the social media site charging more for advertising opportunities. As the network continues to grow, the sum total of data can also increase or be better optimised through refinement of demographics or segmentation.

4. By dangling the promise of social validation and online display of social 'wealth,' users can get caught up in pursuing a growth for growth's sake mandate to increase their visible scores. A social marketplace emerges that aligns with the ideological values of competition and entrepreneurialism. Social interaction becomes more of an exchange value unified by the 'price' as reflected by the number of likes, followers, retweets, etc. These values have no standard basis as a unit of currency, and cannot be directly converted into other forms. In the competitive pursuit of increasing the 'score,' some may opt to purchase illicit services, or otherwise adopt strategies for optimising accumulation.
5. This accumulation for its own sake is based on predatory and primitive capitalist market logic and principles, and may require a significant amount of temporal and labour investment. Ever more surplus value is extracted by the social media site in this process whereas users pursue accumulation of a resource that is based in a simulated economy.
6. Apart from exploitation, users become subject to alienation as social interaction becomes more of a competitive game rather than having intrinsic value unto itself. Acquiring more likes takes precedence over the more traditional forms of social capital, such as skills sharing or community building. Social interaction online becomes subsumed as exchange value in this simulated economy, as social relations become ever more colonised by capitalist values. Users become commodities in these exchanges; apart from providing the data and content, users give proxy support for consumer products and services via conspicuous acts of display.
7. While users are engaged in acts of accumulation through their labour, alienation results from their spending more time working to develop and manage their online selves as opposed to collaborating with others or reflecting on the self. Self-reflection is short-circuited by the constant pressure to produce and consume social media content, while the filter bubble provides a carefully curated vision of the world that is not complete, thus contributing to alienation from the world itself. As market-based competition is rife, acts of narcissistic investment and aggression become growing symptoms in this environment.
8. Demand for online social capital outstrips supply in the attention economy. Despite growing number of users and more time spent by users, the increase in competition to accumulate more online social capital speaks more toward scarcity or to possible inflationary pressures where the value of one's measurable online social capital becomes devalued as expectations for higher scores increase.
9. As the network spectacle maintains this social capitalist enclosure, it fortifies and accelerates all aspects of alienation by controlling the discourse

of what people can see, say, or do as prescribed by the affordances of the network. Real inequalities become concealed, while more time and effort is put into ‘winning’ the social capital game through conspicuous acts of prosumption. Not only does the network spectacle aid and abet this, but the popular excitement in the prevailing discourse enables this market-based logic, with a wide range of products and services designed to increase one’s accumulation potential. This is further embroidered by the entrepreneurial narrative, where success stories are disseminated about those users who leverage their online social capital to become wealthy influencers who market products and services on social media.

10. The acceleration of the symptoms of alienation are produced by the very features of the social media platform (notification services and social buttons that include counters), in conjunction with an overarching ideology that encourages and enables online social behaviours to be indexed primarily on the act of accumulation.
11. User production and consumption is rationalised by the appeal of a standard measurement to compare the apparent value of each user in order to make judgements on social value, which is code for marketable value and potential. There is no way to win the game as the purpose is growth for its own sake, but one can easily lose by simply not playing. The enormous pressure to compete is tied up with the obligations to maintain a presence online and be perceived as relevant. Given the privilege on immediacy, novelty, stimulus and an eternal present, this labour is perpetual.
12. Capitalism prospers by these games of online social capital as it has succeeded in concealing an increase in social labour time behind the appearance of games, play, and social interaction. While within the users’ world of the social marketplace, the outer walls are that of a social factory where users continue to consume and produce more, giving freely of their time and labour while being paid in ‘experience,’ access, and the potential to win at a largely inconsequential game patterned on capitalist accumulation. The users have no ownership of their own content, and are further alienated in being offered limited choices in how they perform their labour. The end product is more data, more commodification of social life, and more advertising.
13. The user’s pursuit of online social capital is a circuit nested within the larger capitalist circuit. The use of sophisticated algorithms automates this process...

### **A Model of Online ‘Social Capitalism’**

The clearest winners in the highly competitive games for accumulating online social capital are not the users, but the social media sites, and secondarily the advertisers who are sold the data commodity in colonising online social space. There is something shrewd about the integration of social buttons that provide

incentive for users to get caught up in increasing scores that are, by and large, of only nominal value as opposed to the very real value of capital produced by these competitive activities and accumulated by the social media site. If it were just a kind of video game, then perhaps it could be argued that the users participate for the pleasure of playing; however, there is so much more at stake when more substantial human values of social validation, relevance, or even one's employment are in play. For many users, these are not just numbers attached to their profiles and posts, but measures of their worth socially and economically.

There is something patently alienating about converting the human need to be social and reducing it to a viciously competitive game that emulates market-based logic and instrumental rationality. Furthermore, making it the basis of commodification for profit is exploitative. By enjoining users to voluntarily commodify their experiences and compete for social value through these kinds of numerical rankings not only results in alienation from self, world and others, but can exacerbate social and economic inequalities, provide incentive to narcissistic and aggressive behaviours, and have an appreciable impact on self-esteem. Some users may attempt to accumulate more of this resource through outright commodification of themselves in portraying on social media lives that are not in line with reality, focusing on moments of leisure, luxury and other forms of consumption through conspicuous display. In emulating capitalism, and valorising consumption as a form of high social value, users empower the real capitalism that exploits and alienates them in these online social venues.

Beginning with the internal capitalist circuit from within the social media site, the user's labour, which includes both production and consumption of content (as consumption does require labour to click or interact with the content which then cross-syndicates it across the network while also providing data), is surplus value. By creating incentives to for users to compete, this potentially increases time spent on the platform while also increasing data capture. This raw commodity of data is further processed into the commodity form. The user also contributes to self-commodification through the conversion of experience into content, which is then caught up in the cycle of online social capital accumulation. While in that cycle, it is part of a broader social marketplace where the content vies for attention and the accumulation of 'likes.' These likes or other forms of numerical markers of accumulation may then be leveraged for the accumulation of more of the same, or for potentially for other purposes linked to social standing or employment. The social reproduction of labour occurs in this circuit as more social interactions are multiplied in the production and consumption of content, which is further data mined by the social media site, but also leveraged by the users for more online social capital. As more labour *time* is consumed in this process, the more production of content leads to the production of data.

The larger enclosing capitalist circuit involves the conversion of user data into a processed commodity that is sold as *space* to advertisers, and thus becomes the main revenue point for the social media site. The social media site then acts

as a broker between the advertisers and the social media users in selling back the product of the commodity as experience.

In this relation between the circuits, the user is a commodity point, as is the content the user generates. Online social capital becomes real capital in this dual process of commodification. The user's labour time functions to serve the interests of the site's advertising space under the pretext of further 'experience.' So, the user pays in time and labour, and is paid in 'experience' while being given the incentive to participate in the competition to increase the in-platform 'currency' of online social capital.

## Remedies

Although it is beyond the scope of a single book to provide a remedy, we can gesture to a few possibilities for resistance, but it is important firstly to rule out those solutions that are overly simplistic or untenable.

Perhaps the most simplistic solution of all is to simply unplug from social media, to abstain from its use. Inasmuch as this may appeal to a kind of common sense view, it fails to acknowledge a position of privilege from which such a view derives. Those who are established academics, celebrities or hold significant positions of institutional power can afford to abstain from the use of social media entirely if they so choose. Many others who are not in such positions do not have the luxury to simply unplug, and particularly those who are attempting to establish themselves in a given field, or for those whose opportunities and employment depend on making use of social media. Moreover, those who lack in social opportunities due to distance, ability, or degree of marginalisation can ill-afford to simply dismiss social media. The position of privilege that has the choice to unplug is akin to the same kind of class divisions we see in offline life, such as in the ability to choose not to endure long hours at the work place, an arduous daily commute, or having to shop at a discount grocery store out of financial necessity. Being able to unplug from social media is more the privilege of those who belong to what Veblen would call the leisure class, but also for those who occupy positions of institutional power.

It can be tempting for some who embrace the unplugged view to consider social media entirely frivolous, and certainly they may draw some inferences in this book to confirm their own views given the largely negative social and economic effects covered in this book. Such a view seems to cultivate a kind of naive romanticism of a 'better time' before the rise of social media. This nostalgia neglects the fact that there is no empirical evidence to suggest that societies are more narcissistic, aggressive or frivolous – the only difference is that there is more opportunity to express such behaviours to a larger audience, and that we now have a digital archive that records what once went little recorded. To assume otherwise is to make a causal argument that social media has a strongly deterministic impact on human behaviour, and would qualify as a fallacy. We

can say that social media has had an appreciable effect on behaviours, as any new medium does in reshaping social and cultural contexts, but having an effect is quite different from declaring an absolute determinism. Although we have covered mostly the negative social consequences of social media in this book, social media has also provided a number of benefits *despite and sometimes in resistance to* capitalist control of major social media. As a tool, it has united otherwise disparate groups and been effective in mobilising for social justice. Social media has been instrumental in raising awareness of an emergency situation, such as in times of a natural disaster or in locating abducted children. Its real-time affordances have also been useful for users to detect and intervene when another user is expressing suicidal ideation. Social media has been a tool for organising progressive resistance, such as the massively attended Women's March in response to the inauguration of Donald Trump.

Resistance is not futile, but simply unplugging is not a satisfactory answer. If we take the Institute of Network Cultures, founded by Geert Lovink, and their release of the *Unlike Us Reader*, they do not advocate for simply walking away from social media, but in creating alternatives that are not corporately controlled. Their solution is to bring together artists, theorists and other practitioners to engage in the critique of new social media in working towards a truly open, democratised, and people-centric form of social media. This is but one of numerous examples where groups have united to move from critique to action.

This solution is but a half-measure. What is needed is to resolve a great number of issues pertaining to exploited social media labour and a reconfiguration of what online social capital could be, returning to the forms of open community exchange and sharing that granted the concept more lustre before the emergence of the like economy. In the end, our task remains to confront those entities that perpetuate exploitation and alienation, remaining critical of social media and demanding fairness and transparency. We must accept that social media is not going away anytime soon, nor are its plethora of problems.

Devising solutions can only be based on what we know matched against a current state of affairs, and any efforts to be anticipatory would be speculative at best. As we know, social media is in constant flux. A corporation such as Facebook is highly flexible and adaptive, and they have the money and the human resources to find new ways of integrating itself into our social lives in order to turn a profit and keep its users appeased.<sup>26</sup> I am choosing to close this book by offering a few general potential solutions, possibly idealistic, as a point for further discussion as we continue to engage in robust critique of social media phenomena. Some of these are far from new, but bear reiterating.

## 1. Education: Critical Digital Media Literacy

Given the ubiquity and significance of social media in everyday life for a significant portion of the world's population, critical digital media literacy ought

to be introduced earlier in public education curricula. It is hoped that this will cultivate more critical consumers and producers of social media content, some of whom may one day be in a position to help shape the social media of the future.

There are several entwined issues in our usage of social media that deserve our attention and should become part of a broader discourse, be it the psychological implications of how social media is used, critical issues pertaining to labour and exploitation as we enter into a ‘new collar’ disruptive economy, how we understand community and extralocal issues, how the democratic process itself may be endangered by filter bubbles, astroturfing efforts – just to name a few. Social media has a presence in every aspect of many people’s lives, politically, legally, psychologically, socially, economically and even at the level of our physical health. One of the many benefits of increasing our critical digital awareness is that it may lead to a groundswell effort to ensure some principles of fairness, accountability and transparency.

## **2. Legislative Change in Terms of Data–Ownership and Control**

The extraction of data from social media users, app-adopters, and site visitors has become normalised in everyday web usage, and is a significant business practice. From the use of cookies in browsers to the use of location services for better understanding our behaviour, data collection feeds big data in terms of improving predictive software and the delivering advertising to ‘enhance’ our online experience. In most cases, there are laws whereby social media and other sites have a legal duty to inform us that our data is being collected, either by a notice on our first time visit to a site, or as part of a user agreement such as a terms of service. At bottom, however, the general idea is that we ‘pay’ for these services by trading our data, from which site owners may profit in selling that data or engage in data-pairing with targeted ads based on the data profile that has been created using algorithms. The notion that we could receive a ‘cut’ for the sale of our personal data is simply not on the table.

Seemingly progressive attempts to gain control over our own data have had mixed results. The European Union’s ‘right to be forgotten’ law would seem to empower individuals to make requests to have certain sites naming them not appear in search engine results. Although this may seem a good idea, it has also been used by public figures seeking to revise their own public image to remove scandalous events from the public record. In this way, the right to be forgotten may conflict with a right to know. Moreover, we might argue that this only obfuscates data, not permanently deletes it. In addition, it does nothing for how data is used by social media to target users with advertisements, nor how the algorithm will use this data to control what is made visible in a newsfeed or Twitter stream.

One possible solution would be legislative changes that allow for better disclosure on precisely how one's data is used. Social media users, for example, ought to have access to how the data provided has led to algorithmic decisions beyond vague statements of 'according to your interests, location, and demographic information, these ads and content were chosen specifically for you.' This disclosure should also make clear to whom this data is being sold, and even provide a choice for users to conceal portions of their personal data from algorithmic sorting.

### 3. Legislative Change in Terms of Digital Labour

Given the expansive growth in, and reliance upon, digital labour in of terms non-routinised cognitive labour, labour crowdsourced from the general intellect, and routinised digital support labour (online tech support, for example), better protections may be required. Recognising all digital labour *as labour* should be considered under all laws pertaining to the labour laws of the land, including provisions for overtime pay, leaves, right to form unions, minimum wage, eligibility for state-run retirement and unemployment benefits, and workplace safety.

With respect to social media-based digital labour performed by those hired as employees on salary or on contract to manage a social media account, fair labour laws should apply. Moreover, there ought to be an acknowledgement of the precarity of such positions, and a further recognition of the intellectual, cognitive labour that is employed to perform these tasks to deliver persuasive experiences on behalf of the company that hires such people. It goes without saying that companies should not be permitted to rely on unpaid internships to occupy these key public-facing roles.

When we consider social media users who are not employed by any companies to perform marketing or support duties, there needs to be an acknowledgement of the general labour being performed by users. As they continue to contribute to the circulation of data in communicative capitalism, we may need a new accord with social networking sites to dispel the old canard that our labour is compensated by access to the service.

### 4. Cracking Down on Botnets and Click Farms

We have since seen what can happen when social media and comment boards become flooded with a well-orchestrated botnet, or when 'political action groups' attempt to astroturf the web to persuade a populace that there is more support for something than there actually is. Such efforts qualify as propaganda, and more stringent efforts are required to prevent the gaming of social media. In order to achieve this, there has to be international consensus in recognising

the problem and in taking steps to put a stop to it. This, of course, is a major hurdle. With ongoing allegations of covert state-sponsored social media botnet and astroturfing campaigns emerging out of Russia, the US and Turkey, both domestic and foreign-directed, this will prove a very daunting task.

We have also to consider those who have little option but to work on click farms under wretched working conditions. These are not industries any person of conscience ought to support. Better detection software with full cooperation by major social media companies is required to put a stop to troll farms such as those operated by the Internet Research Company (IRA), and to develop a mechanism for the proper sourcing of information provided online, such as making clear that particular messages are arising from coordinated political action committees, etc.

## 5. Social Media as Public Utility

Social media sites will claim that displaying advertisements to users is the price paid by users to have access to the features of the social media site. And, certainly, the costs of running a major social media site are not trivial. Less convincing may be the justification for the ownership and control of user content.

The creation of a publicly-run, non-profit online social media network to be promoted as an alternative can be considered, but would have to be done carefully to avoid legal wrangles of anti-competition laws. In such a case, existing laws governing the provision of national broadcasters could be repurposed for this initiative. The question of where funds would be acquired to launch and maintain such an initiative remains an open one. It would in essence be funded by taxes and either operated by a government or – possibly more ideally – by an arm's length body that would receive funding as a subsidy, and fall under a nation's telecommunications laws. The one downside of such an idea would be that it would tie users to a site that might only admit citizens of that state. Opening up such a site for global access might present conflict between different nations' respective laws and would raise serious questions from taxpayers who might feel as though they are subsidising free access to citizens of other nations.

There are a few examples of social media that are non-profit. The example of The Fossil Forum is but one of many online forums that runs on donations to keep the proverbial lights on. Not every forum has to run ads in a sidebar, nor allow corporate sponsors to occupy the space by posting adverts.

## 6. Third-Party Algorithmic Sorting

Algorithmic sorting for what content becomes visible to users ought to be under a trusted, third-party regulatory framework. The objection might be that making the 'recipe' public would result in unscrupulous people being better

able to game the system. In the earliest days of search engines, what appeared in search results on the first page was determined by a very simple algorithm, compared to the ones that function on search engine giants like Google and Bing today. In those early days, the artful manipulation of back-linking could artificially inflate the visibility of a website, and thus give it a higher priority in returned search results. These would be cautionary tales in whatever algorithmic ‘recipe’ is adopted in this case.

Although this solution may go some length to make social media companies more accountable in how they deliver visible content, as well as how much of the content is linked to advertising, the one major legal hurdle would be patent protection: social media companies carefully guard their algorithms as proprietary, and might argue any attempt to open the proverbial black box and permit a third-party regulated service to manage the algorithm might have detrimental effects in terms of data security, site functionality and logistics, and potentially making the social media sites less competitive or capable of attracting corporate ad buys.

A compromise, however, is possible as there already is an existing model used by some sidebar advertising services. As algorithms are only as good as the data that feeds and refines their processes to deliver more relevant output, providing options to social media users to choose with a click if they wish to see more or less of particular kinds of content may help better customise and tailor a user’s environment by granting the user more control.

## 7. Ending ‘Metrification’

Urging existing social media companies to remove the numeric counters from social buttons is another possible solution. Although this may not resolve the issue of competition in the attention economy, a stronger emphasis on engagement and sharing without counters, and not using these to inform the algorithm that may be indexed on what is popular, may reduce social herding and the evaluation of other users simply based on numbers.

What would happen if there were concerted pressure to dismantle the ‘like economy’ by removing all these counters? It would not prevent corporately controlled social media companies from continuing to extract surplus value from its users, nor the use of other forms of social buttons, but it might remove the emphasis on accumulating likes and engaging in numeric comparison with other users. Quantification would still run in the background, within the social media algorithms that will still deliver content on the basis of numeric popularity, but it might help in getting more users to use a more quality-based criteria for evaluating user-generated content and reduce a capitalist-inflected kind of competition on social media. And, perhaps, the incentives to participate would take on a whole new direction. The likelihood of major social media companies to even consider removing that feature is virtually nil as it is so

thoroughly integrated as a strategy for higher user participation and in their business models.

With that being said, assuming social media companies might see good reason in discontinuing visible counters, this would potentially render the business model of exploitative click farms irrelevant. This would not, however, undermine the use of botnets to carpet social media with bulk content designed to alter the behaviours and opinions of potentially susceptible users who might mistake a very high proportion of one-sided content as representative of a majority view. In that case, the quantity aspect is embedded rather than visible as a metric.

The removal of visible social counters may, however, reduce overall demand on the black market for those services that provide clicks, even if it would not put an end to those services entirely as long as there is some residual demand.

Admittedly, this is not an exhaustive list, and some of these suggestions may be naive and idealistic. However, as I have argued in this book, there is a very real need to continue critically addressing these issues and to question if there are other ways by which we can enjoy online social capital in a different way without being caught up in the games of capitalist-inspired accumulation, which only seem to result in alienation in one form or another, and which only serves to increase competitive rather than collaborative social activity, while it is the social media sites that continue to profit.

If the promise of social media is to unite us, to provide for equal communicative exchange free from creating a system of winners and losers, we know that the use of visible metrics implies hierarchy, and invites comparative valuation based on those numbers. Social media perhaps ought not to be a space where 'winning' is the goal, but actual socialising. The alternative where we 'metrify' our social relations is far too reminiscent of capitalism's values, and reinforces the network spectacle by playing into a strange fantasy game based on accumulation, but a game that has very real human costs.

Can we reimagine social media as truly communicative without capitalism? Can social media users reclaim the space as one that encourages conversation without becoming a kind of competition for popularity and artificial gain in a like economy? I, for one, would like to hope so.

