

Introduction: What is Online Social Capital?

In 2014, Jonny Byrne, a 19 year old from Ireland, drowned in the River Barrow after participating in the NekonNominate social media game: an online version of a chain letter style challenge to drink copious amounts of alcohol in perilous situations in an effort to gain 'likes.' This was followed by the death of Ross Cummins (22) of Dublin, who was also said to have taken up the challenge.

In the run-up to the US 2016 presidential election, Donald Trump made extensive use of Twitter to attack his political opponents, media companies, and various celebrities critical of him as a means of bolstering his base of supporters. As President, Trump has continued to make use of this medium, and on various occasions has pointed to his number of followers as proof of his popularity and political legitimacy.

In May of 2017, a Russian reporter recorded a few short videos of a sophisticated click farm in China where over 10,000 smartphones were placed in docks connected to a network with the single purpose of providing 'likes' and comments to social media content.

What these examples have in common is the subject of this book: the pursuit and accumulation of online social capital, and what implications these have for political economy and critical media studies. With the nearly ubiquitous presence of social media, there has also arisen a great deal of emphasis on online social capital. The number of articles on how to improve online branding strategies, the growing use of click farms, and orchestrated botnet campaigns to artificially inflate social proof are testament to the increasingly perceived importance of acquiring likes and followers on social media. What significantly differs from a time before digital social media is that popularity can now be better measured, as well as displayed as a form of status. And, despite the awareness that some of these numbers may be inflated by the use of automating features,

How to cite this book chapter:

Faucher, K. X. 2018. *Social Capital Online: Alienation and Accumulation*. Pp. xi–xxv.
London: University of Westminster Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16997/book16.a>.
License: CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0

there may still be a sense of assuming the value of an individual online user via an appeal to the numbers associated with her or his profile. And for those who do not garner higher numbers, there is the risk that others will assume they have lesser value as social beings.

Beginning with the very personal and individual experience when using social media, I want you to picture yourself having posted an interesting piece of experiential content on your social media profile, such as photos of a recent vacation, notice of a new publication, or the birth of a nephew. A few hours pass and you decide to log back into the account. You are reasonably sure that many of the people in your network will have checked the newsfeed since then, and you are looking forward to comments and possibly seeing a few likes and comments. However, no one has interacted with your content. If you reflect on how you feel at that moment, it might vary from indifference to disappointment. So you log back off. Assume in this hypothetical example that one of your app-enabled digital devices is synced with your social media account, and that it is programmed to provide you an alert any time someone interacts with your content. A few more hours pass and you see a small '7' on the top right corner of the icon for your social media app. How would you describe how you feel? Excited with anticipation and eager to tap into your account to see what others have said? A few days pass, and using our hypothetical example, would it make a difference to your mood if there were 10 likes? 100 likes? 10,000 likes?

For some people, these numbers may not be important, whereas for others it is a reflection of personal value that may increase in making those numbers rise. Some will find ways of sharing their content more broadly in the hopes of garnering more likes, while others may even alter their online performance and content tailored to what will be perceived as more popular. Just as avid market watchers may gain gratification in watching their stock portfolios increase by large amounts, or be disappointed when the increase is lower than anticipated, it may be a similar situation for those who invest a great deal of value in these social media counters. If the pursuit of such numbers were unimportant, then we could ask why a Google search for 'how can I increase likes on Facebook' produces a result of over 427 million hits.

If this book were just about the individual and her or his accumulation of online social capital, it might not warrant lengthy treatment; however, the processes that occur behind the visible world of social media, the ideological implications of how online social capital is positioned as a deliberate strategy by major social media networks to encourage participation for profit, and the immiseration of labour on click farms *do* justify bracketing out online social capital for closer analysis.

What is online social capital? How does it differ from more traditional forms of social capital? Why does the term seem to enjoy some degree of consensus without an operational definition? What are the implications that arise from a focus on accumulating likes and leveraging our online profiles through acts of conspicuous display? Who essentially profits by these actions, and how do they

do it? Where does online social capital fit in a broader context of capitalism? At this point, a provisional working definition may serve as a bridge toward a much closer analysis:

- 1) At the user-end, online social capital is a product of online exchanges that in many cases can be expressed in some numeric form, which may or may not be correlated with a perception of an online user's value in a digitally networked community. Online social capital becomes a kind of offering to the social marketplace when users attempt to leverage the quantifiable measures of friends, followers, views, and likes for some goal.
- 2) On the network owner's end, online social capital is the labour of users that can be mined as a data commodity and converted into profit, while also existing as a strategy to keep a digitally networked community active in providing their unpaid labour.

This statement (1) does not imply that *all* forms of online social capital have a numeric basis (likes, followers), as it may also include non-numeric forms (knowledge sharing, community building). The basis by which we furnish this provisional definition will become clearer as we proceed, particularly in unpacking the competing and complementary definitions of social capital in the first chapter, and later speaking directly to metrification,¹ the 'like economy,' and platform capitalism in the chapters that follow.

As we delve deeper into this topic, a variety of other issues will arise that challenge some of the more basic assumptions we might hold as to what online social capital is, and how this intriguing 'like economy' functions. To this end, the book seeks to answer the four following questions:

- 1) How does the process of acquiring online social capital align with the goals of capitalist accumulation?
- 2) How does this process lead to alienation?
- 3) In what way does this process echo the goals of neoliberal capitalism specifically?
- 4) What ties this accumulation to some of the unfortunate by-products of social media, such as aggression and narcissism?

It is important to have some grounding in what social capital is, and how online social capital is both similar and different from it. In both instances, social capital involves *social networks*, with online social capital having the added dimension of residing within the structural ecosystem of digital networks. This is not to say that the affordances of digital networks does not permit considerable overlap between the two types of social capital, but that these digital networks upon which ever more social interaction occurs, manifest a whole new host of opportunities and problems that are unique to the nature of online interaction. Notwithstanding the pioneering work of those such as Pierre Bourdieu (1984),

James Coleman (1988), and Robert Putnam (2001) in particular on the concept of social capital (which we will cover in the first chapter), the rise of big data, commodified social networks, and platformisation has created new conditions through which we come to understand social capital.

In the past few decades, the concept of social capital has received a considerable amount of attention, expanding into the disciplines of the social sciences, critical media studies, history, economics, managerial literature, and as a policy instrument. Although its initial mention can be traced to Alexis de Tocqueville (1960 [1835]) and was later more popularly reprised in the 1960s by Jane Jacobs (1961) to signify the power of a social collective to spur change at the political level, social capital as a term has enjoyed a few surges of recent interest: in new public management theory, social theory and policy, and with respect to online social networks. In the common parlance of the day, social capital generally refers to two somewhat different, yet also similar, phenomena that relate to networks in general.

Three main theoretical approaches are used:

- 1) Social capital as a resource acquired and/or mobilized by social actors. This resources is derived through social relations and the creation or maintenance of social connections in some form of community (Putnam, Bourdieu).
- 2) Social capital as part of the broader system of capital and its inherent contradictions where labour is socialized, and the potential for exploitation and alienation arises (classical Marxism).
- 3) Social capital as the social product of immaterial labour that, in turn, (re) produces social relations (Autonomist Marxism).

For the purposes of this book, I define online social capital as wrapped up in an artificial economy, represented by numeric counters in a ‘like’ and ‘attention’ economy, facilitated by social buttons and operated by social media sites to encourage more participation for their own real economic interests (data collection, targeted advertising, and the exploitation of digital labour). Online social capital operates in such a way that it follows a market-based logic of instrumental rationality for the accumulation of a resource that cannot be directly converted into other forms of capital. It is an ideological product of neoliberal-informationism that champions competitive individualism rather than community-based collaboration within a broader network spectacle, fostering the conditions of conspicuous prosumption, status display, and a metric by which to falsely compare social value with other users. The social media site leverages users’ pursuit of online social capital for exploitation, while also further alienating those users according to Marx’s four main aspects of alienation.

My definition follows Marx’s concept of capital, and views this pursuit of online social capital as part of the commodification of the online self through a form of digital labour on social media from which surplus value is extracted.

The definition deviates from Marx on the basis of the price relation between commodified selves as it does not lead to any reliable exchange. Online social capital operates as a false economy of conspicuous status display within a real economy, and it is for that reason Marxist insights will be appended to the insights of Veblen and Debord.

Definitional Problems

There is little consensus about social capital beyond a few assumptions: that it is relatively tangible, generally positive, that it can be associated to economics and rationalising the production performed on social networks, and that more of it is better than less (Mikiewicz 2011). In the hands of those promoting particular political and economic agendas, it becomes a somewhat nebulous motherhood statement with a positive cachet. The main cleavage of the term is whether it refers primarily to sociological or economic phenomena. Moreover, there is considerable debate as to whether or not social capital should be understood as either the result of our interpersonal relationships, or as an economic term. Those who favour the first interpretation (Robison et al. 2002) reject the capital(ist) metaphor.

If we abandon the metaphor of capital in the term of social capital, we may risk being blind to the underlying ideological and economic processes that condition online social capital as a form of accumulation and alienation, particularly through the reification of interpersonal communicative relations as a source for profit by network hosts, and the reality of a potentially infinite surplus value that may be extracted from these acts of communicative exchange – a point well covered in many of the works of those such as Christian Fuchs. As I will argue throughout this book, it is not possible to entirely separate social capital in its online context from the enclosure of capitalist ideology and the strategies of instrumental rationality particularly endemic to neoliberal capitalism. Online social capital and the environment in which it is accumulated and measured is inextricably bound up in many of the same assumptions that underpin capitalist accumulation. The pursuit of numeric social capital in our social media context – the ‘like economy’ – is built on a foundation of conflict minerals, super-exploited sweatshop labour, precarious ICT services labour, rampant commodification and exploitation of user-generated content, data extraction and sale. In other words, the pursuit of likes is not entirely benign.

Another sense of social capital as it is referred to in popular culture quickly degrades into a placeholder for ease or efficiency of connectivity and communication, and this largely resting on digital networks. Online social capital becomes a substance which may be measured in terms of number of friends/followers and approbation cues, such as likes and retweets, or on a more granular basis (especially among search engine optimization specialists and social

media strategists, demographic reach and engagement). In this way, online social capital is something to be *built through strategies of accumulation*, ideally by means of reaching a critical digital mass whereby the capital increases autonomously with little intervention apart from an adjustment to a social media campaign, content refreshing, and incentives to other digital users to carry on the task of increasing capital (sharing, digital word-of-mouth, etc.).

Networks

It is important to consider the ecosystem in which it operates: networks, social buttons, and platforms. When we speak of networks, there are two senses by which we should understand them: as *structural* (digital network architecture) and *social* (human interaction, group dynamics, and – in the case of social media – computer-mediated communication).

The structural nature of digital networks facilitates the online functions of the social aspect of networking, but the structural nature is what appears to make the social ‘measurable,’ and thus of value to those who would seek to exploit networks for a wide variety of purposes.

Social networks in their own right became an object of study by the psychotherapist, Jacob L. Moreno (1934), particularly in developing a way to measure them using sociometry, out of which one could plot a visual diagram of a social network in what is called a ‘sociogram.’ Social network analysis (SNA) can show us how actors, nodes, or entities in social networks are connected; how information flow occurs in the affinities between nodes, as well as the particular affordances of each node pending placement within a network configuration; we can measure degrees of separation (or steps along a pathway) between nodes and their ability to transmit information; and we can determine if the ties between nodes are weak or strong, and what probable implications emerge from this. This bears some resemblance to other attempts to theorise and quantify networks in terms of systems theory, whereby we study objects (people, channels, procedures) that have attributes, and relationships in a broader environment (or a series of nested systems within systems). The holy grail of such approaches has been the promise, implicit or otherwise, that social relations can be measured, can be explained and possibly predicted in an analytic and objective way. This has opened up new vistas for potentially predicting behaviour, and has been used in areas as diverse as understanding group dynamics in organisational behaviour studies, the use of Game Theory during the Cold War, combatting terrorist networks, and to aid political and marketing decisions. In its more unfortunate applications, it has played a role in the use of racial and cultural profiling.

Since the earlier days of SNA (Moreno 1934, Barnes 1972, Granovetter, 1973, Krackhardt 1987) and actor-network theory (Law & Lodge 1984, Latour 1987, Latour 2005), more sophisticated approaches have integrated the use of

probabilistic algorithms, whereby data collection and analysis can be rendered more automated and changes to a network can be deployed more efficiently in real-time. This has presented enormous benefits for social media platforms and their commercial partners. For example, even the use of loyalty cards provided by retail stores has permitted the collection of consumer data based on various inputs (geographical location, demographic information, and purchase data) in order to create a consumer profile for more effective targeted marketing in the form of coupons or email alerts recommending products that the algorithm ‘predicts’ will have a higher probability of resulting in appealing to a consumer’s interests based on an algorithmically-constructed profile and past purchasing behaviour. Algorithms have also served in potentially identifying influencers who are more likely to adopt and disseminate political or consumerist messages through interpersonal persuasion. What began somewhat innocently with the use of SNA, the Mass Observation movement (Madge & Harrison 1937), and focus groups would eventually become ever more efficient in delivering persuasive events by tracking individuals, social interactions, and social context. What remained was some way to ‘eavesdrop’ on these social interactions, if not also encourage more interaction so that the data could be obtained. The first step was to find a medium or venue where such social interactions could occur which would allow unobtrusive surveillance. The second step would be to harvest this data and find a means to analyse it efficiently and effectively using computers rather than rely on the slower and more labour intensive process of human beings. The last step was to develop a way to incentivise these social interactions without prodding, and this development would be actuated partially through the use of social buttons.

Social Buttons

The integration of social buttons on popular social media platforms such as Facebook has introduced a whole new dimension to online social interaction. Social buttons include a range of possible and prescribed interactions such as sharing content, commenting, voting, recommending, and various approbation cues such as likes, hearts, and stars. With the introduction of these buttons, these activities could be measured and, in some cases, result in the earning of digital badges to recognise a user’s content as being popular or informative by a community. In the earlier days of Facebook, certain cues and push questions were used, such as asking ‘what is going on?’ in the status update field to encourage the user to supply that content, which would then be disseminated to that user’s network. Since then, social buttons may include incremental features such as liking where each click adds one to a numeric counter. However, as Gerlitz and Helmond note, the use of social buttons is not innocuous as they provide a wealth of data to the social media platform for the purposes of data mining and the sale of this data to third-party entities. It was understood that

‘[u]ser activities are of economic value because they produce valuable user data that can enter multiple relations of exchange and are set up to multiply themselves’ (Gerlitz and Helmond 2013, 1360). At the user level, the like economy of the social web functions to metrify and intensify user activity and engagement which perpetuates more activity and engagement, while on the back end these social media platforms have been successful in moving from a centralized data collection model to one that opts for decentralised flows (Gerlitz and Helmond 2013, 1361). This model for encouraging social participation quickly becomes user-perpetuated and feeds Big Data as the process becomes decentralised. This seems on the surface at odds with any dreams of command and control – the province of cybernetics. Yet, despite this decentralising process, data flows could still be subject to centralised processing, almost like a global scale feedback loop that would then be channelled to a number of other network systems for various purposes.

On the more technical and less social end of understanding networks, emerging out of statistical electrical systems, we might credit the rise of computing and cybernetics in the 1940s. Claude Shannon’s (1948) mathematical theory of communication became a foundational model for the development of the first technical communication systems, while the work of cyberneticists such as Norbert Wiener (1948) began to have an appreciable impact on several other non-technical disciplines. The value of feedback systems could be seen in new ideas explored in the domains of anthropology, linguistics, biology, education, and management studies. We might even credit the earliest days of ecology – and the coining of the term ‘ecosystem’ – to the influence of cybernetics and its principles. Understanding networked systems as a kind of struggle between information as coherence and entropy as noise may be useful on its own, but it is far from the whole story.

Today when we speak of the rise of the network society, this generally refers to a span of time from the development of the personal computer, the internet, to the situation in which we find ourselves today where so much of the world’s technical and economic processes depend exclusively on digital networks. And within this digital ecosystem resides our online social networks. If social capital itself applies to non-digital networks of our social relations, it must therefore exist wherever there are social relations in a digital context.

Platforms

Social media platforms shape the affordances of our online social lives not only by devolving the work of social media upon its users according to specific micro-tasks of ‘liking’ etc., but also function as a broker of our online communications. More perniciously, they structure and govern our online activity in less than visible ways. Benjamin H. Bratton describes platforms as something

institutional, fixed, yet at the same time operating by a form of distributed control:

It is important as well to recognize that ‘platforms’ are not only a technical architecture; they are also an institutional form. They centralize (like states), scaffolding the terms of participation according to rigid but universal protocols, even as they decentralize (like markets), coordinating economies not through the superimposition of fixed plans but through interoperable and emergent interaction. Next to states and markets, platforms are a third form, coordinating through fixed protocols while scattering free-range Users watched over in loving, if also disconcertingly omniscient, grace. (Bratton, 2014, n.p.)

Nick Srnicek tells us that platforms can be characterised:

by providing the infrastructure to intermediate between different user groups, by displaying monopoly tendencies driven by network effects, by employing cross-subsidization to draw in different user groups, and by having a designed core architecture that governs the interaction possibilities. (Srnicek 2016, n.p.)

In other words, Srnicek points to how the new model of platform capitalism no longer requires the creation of a marketplace: it is simply the infrastructure upon which, say, users on a social network interact. The network effects facilitate the perpetual growth of a user-base, while direct costs need not be paid by users to access the service, due to cross-subsidisation which means money can be made in other areas (such as the sale of user data to other companies in the form of ad space).

The merger of network effects and new forms of digital capitalism can be said to function as an enclosure around our online social ecosystem. The integration of social buttons not only encourages more user participation with the promise of intangible, numeric reward, but is one of the most effective tools for social network platforms to extract data for the purposes of monetisation while still providing a ‘free’ service to its users who perform a kind of unwaged labour for the network. Gamifying the process through social buttons and their incremental counters does not banish the spectre of exploitation or eliminate alienation; it merely provides a venue for real accumulation for the platform and non-monetary accumulation for the user. The problem is that such data extraction for profit is masked by the incentive to ‘play’ the games of accumulation using these social buttons designed by the social network platforms. Unlike a traditional arcade game or pinball machine where players will insert a quarter in exchange for an experience and possibly achieve a high score for some social cachet, in this instance it is the arcade game that is ‘free’ for the user

to play, but in exchange for having every one of her or his movements tracked, traced, recorded, and sold as data.

As we operate these 'machines' for social play, we obtain a kind of token currency. What is the nature of this currency? What we call online social capital is not isolated from other forms of social capital. How online social capital and traditional forms of social capital intersect creates the conditions of an interconnected problem.

Management and Accumulation of a Resource

We notice how the two senses treat of social capital as a resource. In management theory literature, it is an existing resource that needs to be properly managed, whereas in digital culture it is something to be aggregated or collected before it can be properly managed. The question then turns on how to understand online social capital. Should we define it as a resource that can be capitalised and thus part of an economy of exchange, or is it a process more aligned with building community? If we take the former view, it is not difficult to see how social capital becomes reduced to, and motivated by, an economic understanding. More to the point, the use value of social interaction becomes subordinate to the economic rationality of accumulation.

With the emergence of the internet, and specifically the participatory framework of Web 2.0 which allows users to produce and share content, the utopian ideal of an entirely decentralised network of media producers and consumers (or prosumers) has been lionised as an inclusive and democratising antidote to top-down, largely unilateral media hierarchies that dictate content to a passive audience on a one-to-many basis. However, this new media arrangement narrows options to ever fewer media conglomerates and hosting services that extract surplus value from our online participation. The idea that we can pursue our own rational-individual or collectivist agenda using an array of online tools, boosting our social capital, conceals the marketisation and privatisation of online social activity. The affordances of social media promise a kind of 'sovereignty' by our ability to create, connect, and build social capital any-time and anywhere, but the only sovereignty of social media appears to privilege consumption. While we pay the entrance fee for joining cheap or 'free' online social services by volunteering our personal data, which is then sold to advertisers for pinpoint marketing, ultimately the concept of social capital takes on a largely economic definition as most of what we share, produce, or say in the digital milieu is commodified, along with the social network user as a worker-commodity.²

Given the (techno-)optimistic excitement surrounding the notion of social capital as a source of liberation and self-actualisation that circumvents authoritarian controls, be those of the state, big business, or medical and educational institutions, subjecting the term to an appropriate interrogation and critical

analysis has all but been drowned out by the chorus of those who praise the apparent benefits of increasing one's social capital almost as an end in itself.

The leveraging of social capital may be said to increase access to information and opportunities for collective social action (Ellison et al. 2007). We might note here that there is no guarantee that such outcomes will arise, but may be a function of several factors, including the current state of popular attention migration, content viability for an audience, network reach, effective persona and message management, and so forth. Yet what is overlooked in many attempts to describe the movement and accumulation of social capital is precisely the structures that enable, inhibit, and ultimately exert control over online social behaviours. Beyond being merely a concern for network analysts and social software engineering, we may grasp this control of data in terms of power, and the trade-off being a user's potential to accumulate social capital as one of the markers of status.

One of the central premises of Thorstein Veblen's (2010 [1899]) notion of conspicuous consumption involves the display of status as resulting in a proportionate increase in social preference. Arguably, online behaviour as a function of conspicuous consumption is indeed highly conspicuous in its nature, but also involves some degree of conspicuous production, especially with regard to the construction of the digital self as something 'unique' and ego-idealistic, at least insofar as there is an attempt to bracket off the digital self as something of a singularity that will 'stand out.' It is for this reason that we might revise Veblen's insights to speak of conspicuous *prosumption*, and how this factors in our current 'like economy' of social capital.

The very nature of the most popular online social networking sites seem to actively encourage a kind of entrepreneurial self-promotionalism in creating branded identities linked to consumer tastes that make it much easier to extract sellable data. The seeds of this shift – largely a blend of neoliberal economics and the rise of personal digital technologies – can be recognised in an article by Tom Peters who argues the one way with competing with large multinational companies is to become its 'micro-equivalent': 'We are CEOs of our own companies: Me Inc. To be in business today, our most important job is to be head marketer for the brand called You' (Peters, 1997, n.p.). Peters goes on to provide advice on how to make use of the affordances of the web at that time – website creation and emails – as a means by which to influence others to associate value with one's 'brand.' Peters declares that self-branding is an inevitable necessity in the future of work, and that one must be a mix of leader, teacher, visionary, and businessperson. One may note that such an argument speaks to a range of strategies of converting the non-commercial aspects of the self into something marketable and profitable. The self becomes the very locus of investment for the specific purposes of deriving profit, and it is the 'miracle' of digital technology to actualize this potential. It is in this way that neoliberalism perpetuates a major shift of the self as *Homo juridicus* (a legal entity of the state) to an economic subject where entrepreneurialism becomes key to this new relationship

(Read 2008, 28). This self-branding activity is part of the social factory, and this factory 'seeks to involve the worker's personality and subjectivity within the production of value' (Lazzarato 1996, 3) whilst there is 'the transformation of social human activities into directly productive work' (Morini, 2007, 45).

Inasmuch as self-branding in the pursuit of online social capital appears to appeal to the freedom of an entrepreneurial self, in true neoliberal fashion it is the downshifting of responsibility and risk-taking to the user, while profit is extracted by the social network platform from this labour. As Alison Hearn defines it, 'the branded self must be understood as a distinct kind of labour; involving an outer-directed process of highly stylized self-construction, directly tied to the promotional mechanisms of the post-Fordist market' (2008, 167).

We can already see how there are two forms of accumulation taking place: one at the site of the self-branded user operating within the affordances of the network structure to accumulate friends, followers and likes; and the second situated within the platform itself to have a ready searchable database of active online users performing the labour of broadcasting their consumer preferences for easier data accumulation and sale. As Hearn argues, the online user's push for accumulation of these resources is a mirror of post-Fordist capitalism:

Arguably, these sites produce inventories of branded selves; their logic encourages users to see themselves and others as commodity-signs to be collected and consumed in the social marketplace. How else to understand the accumulation of hundreds of virtual 'friends' (usually people one barely knows) and the view that this constitutes 'popularity' than as the channelling of age-old human desires into the hollow, promotional terms of post-Fordist capitalist acquisition? (Hearn 2008, 177).

This exploitation also extends to those users who have no interest in accumulating more 'likes.' In clicking on these social buttons, this not only cross-syndicates content, but also functions as data for the algorithm to tailor and 'personalise' what content will be made available. The more we are encouraged to 'like' content, the more of our data is being collected and used to deliver related content, and the more of our data can be matched against advertising. Every click of a social button is a speech statement, and as social media users are encouraged to partake of ever more social interaction online, it is surely the social networking sites that profit from every exchange, be it in the production of new content to accumulate more likes, or in liking someone else's content.

Theoretical Approach

In taking a Marxist view, the wealth of social capital can be viewed as a historically developed form powered by circulation and nesting circuits. Marxist analysis will be the proper fit given the macro-level emphasis on class structure

and the exploitation of labour in the creation of the surplus value on social networking sites. By contrast, an emphasis on human capital focuses on micro-level analyses of family, gender, etc., which speak to how these networks inform individual access and mobilisation of social capital. There will also be occasion to bring cultural capital into this discussion given that it also places emphasis on class divisions, in bringing the insights of Thorstein Veblen to discuss the nature of conspicuous forms of display as an instrument of socially reproducing status.

What remains is to examine the social relations that underpin social capital, and what sort of social relation it is when we speak of a distinctly *digital* form of social capital, and how this is situated in an encompassing framework of capitalism itself. Capital as accumulation is historically grounded in the circulation of commodities that lend themselves to the money relation; i.e., that which mediates the relation of *value* between commodities, but in such a way that the money relation leads to the purchase of some commodity for the purposes of selling it (such as, for example, someone who buys houses for the purpose of flipping them for profit). The apparent absence of any clear money relation to mediate social capital in the 'like economy' problematizes our return to Marx for guidance, and so it is incumbent upon us to reconstruct this newer relation.

What makes this task more challenging is rooted in the very term of social capital itself, and its numerous (sometimes contradictory) definitions. Social capital has no apparent quantifiable measure.³ That is, how would one measure one's social capital on Facebook or Instagram? One might say that the number of connections, likes, comments, and other approbation cues have a numeric value, and thus represents social capital with a unit of measurement. However, there are a few problems with this view. Despite some services that claim to measure social capital or one's social media profile value, there is no consensus, with monetary values ranging from effectively zero to hundreds if not thousands of dollars. Recalling Marx's definition of capital, it is not an inert 'thing'; that is, simply totting up the number of connections or retweets associated with a user profile does not translate into capital *unless it is in circulation*. This signals a second major issue: in the acquisition of likes, followers, connections, etc., is there a direct line from this acquisition as an increase in capital toward the 'sale' of such things to increase profit? In other words, can one sell their accumulated 'social capital' to a buyer, and thus increase personal profit?

If there is a commodity relation to online social capital, it will not be necessarily determined by a numeric value indicating likes and such, but within the less visible sphere of data in the hands of the social network host. It is here that real circulation is exceedingly important, for the profit increases of many of the most popular social networks depends on their user bases: the number of users who join and actively participate and share content, when volunteering their time and personal information to these sites in exchange for access. An increase in the number of service subscribers is also an increase in data, which can be accumulated and curated, and then sold as a commodity to advertisers.

This increases revenue, and in the case of publicly traded companies such as Facebook and Twitter, potentially increases share price. What we might term a ‘critical mass’ of prosumers or the exploitation of a mass general intellect is well-suited to the business model of these social network sites that exploit users and exercise control to extract surplus value from users’ labour.

Plan of This Book

If one could summarise the goal of this book, it would be that the *social networking sites by design may function as a bridge between accumulation of online social capital and alienation that results from this activity, and this is enabled by platform capitalism and the network spectacle*. The question of online social capital involves issues beyond user exploitation, as it also contends with alienation that is the result of this conspicuous form of accumulation. In order to achieve this objective it will be essential to ground the discussion by exploring the context of online social capital.

In chapter 1, I trace the contours of what is precisely social about online social capital, and how it compares to cultural capital. For this contextual chapter, it will be our goal to take stock of some of the movements within the literature of social capital itself, and what bearing this may have on better understanding online social capital. Due to the fact that social media is both a structural and social phenomenon, powered by digital network architecture with its affordances as well as a space of social interaction, beginning with what is social about these networked environments will provide us with a bridge between how social capital has been traditionally understood in the literature and how it compares to a distinctly online form of social capital.

In chapter 2, I pivot to understanding online social capital from a more economic standpoint as a ‘capital’ resource to prepare us for understanding how strategies of economic accumulation may seem to colour the social aspects of accumulation. There is certainly a precedent for this connection given how closely aligned economic and cultural considerations may be in the broader understanding of social capital and community.

In chapter 3, attention will be paid to how capital accumulation occurs in the process of acquiring online social capital. I explore the role communicative and platform capitalism plays as a bridge that unites the social and economic aspects of online social capital. This will function as a means to better assess such aspects as the mobile ‘prosumer’ and the system ‘gaming’ use of social buttons. What are the implications of capitalism’s co-opting of social functions in the online social media environment?

In chapter 4 I determine how this process of accumulation is alienating by recourse to the works of Marx and Veblen. Both figures have a view of alienation that is in some ways similar, but differ in terms of the outcomes of increased alienation due to their respective views of capitalist society. The importance will

be stressing how the pursuit of online social capital can not only be considered a form of work, but that there are consequences to such a pursuit as it may increase our alienation from each other, ourselves, other workers, and the world.

In chapter 5, I follow this line of alienation to explore some of the less savoury consequences of a highly competitive social media environment, spotlighting two major strains that seem emblematic of a pursuit of online social capital: the narcissistic turn, and a potential increase in online aggression. By exploring some of the foundational work in narcissism, it will be important to stress that social media may enable more *apparent* narcissistic behaviours, but it may not be the case that users are generally more narcissistic. Instead, the nature of online social capital competition may appear to compel users to adopt a more narcissistic form of content production as might be expected from this environment. In terms of aggression, I will explore some – but not all – disinhibition effects that can be considered aggressive and hostile, and how it is linked with an increasing perception of needing to be heard on social media in order to accumulate more stake in the online attention economy.

In chapter 6, I delineate how the specific form of online social capital and its transactional framework resides within what one might call the network spectacle, allowing us to revisit many of the insights of Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*. In some ways, there is something far more literal about this form of spectacle. If Debord's description of the spectacle says it is all encompassing, and that any attempt to critique the spectacle must rely on the language of the spectacle, what can be said of a *network* spectacle? Is it all-encompassing – an enclosed social ecosystem with its echo chamber effects where *what* we are permitted to say (prescribed by the affordances of the social media platform) is conditioned by the language of this network spectacle? Would the gamifying aspects of social buttons prove somewhat reductive of our social interactive capabilities, economising communication in such a way that social exchange is Taylorised for easier and more efficiently channelled data extraction? Is what we as users see just the wide mouth of the funnel, while the platform can incrementally narrow our social exchanges into those that fit the requirements of this network spectacle? How does our pursuit of online social capital, enabled and surreptitiously used as an instrument of profit and control, serve the ends of a network spectacle, which is to grow in perpetuity?

In the concluding chapter, I explore some of the more urgent implications of where the process from online social capital accumulation to alienation can lead us as researchers, advocates, and critical users of social media. It is not simply a case of 'unplugging' from social media, nor of simply adopting wholesale the optimistic rhetoric surrounding social media usage as emancipatory. Instead, it will be of the utmost importance that we continue to be diligent and critical on a go-forward basis and continue finding new ways of resisting capitalist appropriation of what perhaps ought to be our shared, global, public commons.