CHAPTER 3

Capitalism and the Ideologies
of the Social

The question now turns toward how the use value of online social communication gets converted to a kind of exchange value. The first step will be to discuss the theoretical frontiers of capitalism as it pertains to social media, and to drill down to some specific strategic examples.

The normalisation of social media is expressed by its ubiquity and apparent necessity. To abstain from social media might be considered by some as proof of abnormality and a cause for suspicion. Hiring firms may pass over a candidate if said person does not use social media. In some cases, employers have flouted labour laws in demanding password access to social media accounts of prospective employees to invasively see who they 'really are' – a significantly more overt yet no less disturbing trend reminiscent of Henry Ford's penchant for sending agents to covertly surveil workers in their off-hours to report back on various behaviours, such as alcohol consumption. With the thickening of the US and Canadian border, the US Department of Homeland Security has refused entry to those travellers who do not hand over full password access to their social media accounts, or who may be put under additional scrutiny for not having any social media accounts at all. In less severe cases, some people may become inadvertently excluded from social functions that are organised solely on Facebook, based on the assumption that everyone has an account there. For others, there simply little choice but to engage in social media as part of the requirements of work due to how much social media has become integrated as part of a communications strategy for everything from marketing products and services, to the daily operations of local governments.

Just as there are more opportunities for social inputs using social media, a rise in apparent necessity in their use has been capitalised by social network owners as providing ever more economic inputs for profit generation. As more social competition may become manifest on social media in attempting to

accumulate a larger share of the attention economy, it may be fair to say that capitalism itself has become embodied in social and communicative activities, encouraging a competitive pursuit of online social capital.

Capitalism's colonisation of social time is not entirely new, but yet another of its integrated components aided in part by the ubiquity of social media, the latter's apparent necessity in both labour and leisure contexts and affordances for the automation of data extraction and cross-syndication of content. As such, it shares a border with other forms in the typology of capitalism: communicative capitalism, financialisation capitalism and neoliberalist-informationist capitalism. However, social capitalism in this instance operates within a kind of encapsulated social fishbowl – and to the fish, the world is an ocean. The same functions of capitalist accumulation seem to operate within the social media domain among users, but in ways that adopt capitalist ideology and apply it to the social. There are also still significant and real connections to real capital, yet our focus is on how the social on social media becomes ever more reminiscent of capitalism, and thus seems to operate as its own 'fantasy economy.'

We can define this 'fantasy economy' as the less visible means by which social interactions are not only exploited as data for social media companies, but also how capitalism itself becomes more normalised and embedded in online social media through the use of paid or sponsored content, and in the curious pursuit of obtaining some profit by the accumulation of incremental values associated with social buttons. Problematically, social relations have become ever more quantified and industrialised, right down to the means by which we can manage our connections and rely on ready metrics to engage in value comparison. Likes and other social metrics of this type become a form of standardised currency, to such an extent that for some it becomes a *sine qua non* of online popularity and opportunity. A curious new circuit has taken shape in many online social interactions where reciprocity becomes coded as a form of exchange that is underwritten by the like economy in the unifying form of a 'price' that can be calculated.

Communicative Capitalism

Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello (2005) characterise capitalism as a kind of spiritual exercise that aims to radically shift social values. Capitalism in its current form has discovered a means by which to better optimise forms of circulation as the key to accumulation. Whether it be through modifications to supply chain management in favour of just-in-time production, crowdsourcing, automation, and the development of more efficient networked systems for the extraction and curation of user-supplied data, the rate of circulation continues to increase.

In response to the high-flying promises of how increasingly networked communications would create more informed choice and true democratic engagement,

Jodi Dean identifies a new outcome: 'instead of leading to more equitable distributions of wealth and influence, instead of enabling the emergence of a richer variety in modes of living and practices of freedom, the deluge of screens and spectacles undermines political opportunity and efficacy for most of the world's peoples' (2005, 55). And, as our content can continue to circulate faster, on more networks, more efficiently and receive more inputs from more users, the same unity-in-diversity that was extolled as being the result of such networks has led to more inequalities and certainly more exploitation by those who own these networks. Whether enmeshed in what one might call a kind of fetish or a spectacle, more communication has meant less individual value in communication and more profit to be gained by ever tightening circuits of capital.

The 'ideal' of this social capitalism is predicated upon the idea that free and equal individuals, with free and equal access to the digital tools and opportunities, can pursue their desires online for the purpose of personal wealth enrichment gained through their own immaterial labour. The ultimate goal is to transcend equality via competitive strategies whereby the lucky, Darwinistic few will accumulate a larger share of the attention economy. Just as in capitalism overall, the contradiction is to vigorously promote individual freedoms where said freedoms are legally guaranteed as equally accessible by all, and then to pursue a program whereby disparity and inequality is the end goal. That is, everyone is said to be on the same starting line, but the winners will pull ahead by their own initiative and work ethic.

Neoliberal capitalism has a particularly problematic relationship with notions of the internal and external. According to its broader, macroeconomic goals, deregulated and borderless free trade plus direct foreign investment appears to efface the boundaries of the trade-zone inside and outside. When there are crises and failures, the preachers of neoliberalism will claim that external agents – terrorists, socialists, anti-capitalist fringe groups, which may be irresponsibly lumped together as all characterised as 'opposed' to the neoliberal idea of freedom – it is the fault of something 'external' to the system. When markets fail, responsibility is redistributed to such an abstract degree, which contradicts the extreme gospel of taking personal responsibility (preached to the non-wealthy as the means to wealth), and the laws of competitive, quasi-Darwinistic capitalism are temporarily suspended to permit corporate bailouts. Interestingly enough, the division between neoliberal capitalism and the more socialist or progressive ideologies is in where to pin blame for failure. The more left-of-centre perspective is to consider the citizen as part of a broader system or structure composed of forces – not all of which the individual can control. So, for example, lingering racial narratives may have a knock-on effect on crime, poverty and limits on opportunity as part of broader structural constraints. For the neoliberal, there are no structural constraints as such, for the heroic consumer can adopt a strong work ethic and simply choose to work his or her way out of poverty, discrimination and depressed wages by aggressively pursuing an almost libertarian objective of personal free enterprise. Of course,

choosing unionisation would be rejected as a correct choice since that would be to prioritise cooperation over competition. When people find themselves in dire financial straits due to low-wage jobs, the neoliberal response is to say that said individuals simply made bad choices, and that they should make better choices in the future. This 'tough love' pragmatism is wilfully blind to any of the external factors that may have limited the individual's choices, and will not give a hearing to the context behind certain choices made or very real systemic limitations on opportunity that neoliberalism is complicit in upholding.

The lionisation of the individual as free-floating and self-determining is not only an essential piece of the neoliberal ideology, but also in the gospel of online social capital. This occurs despite the reality that these individual nodes (as they are networked) are not free-floating radicals simply pursuing their own unfettered pathways, but are instead locked-in monads. Individuals can choose their pathways and practices online from what appear to be an endless array of choices without visible obstruction, but more choice does not necessarily equate to actual freedom, particularly when what is made visible and 'personalised' for the user is structured by social media algorithms. Even search engine results on Google will favour businesses.

If communicative capitalism is little more than the circulation of content (Dean 2009, 22), a monologue staged by a multitude without much substantive engagement or subsequent offline action that could not be considered politically progressive.[10] It is akin to a village where everyone speaks and so few listen. And those who should be listening – governments and corporations with the economic power and control of assets to make responsive changes – will generally contribute to the dialogue with their own canned or talking point content, adding more circulating content to the monologue of the many. Or, worse still, tap into the conversation as a means of surveillance and as a strategic starting point for manipulation, persuasion and other tactics to further ideological agendas.

What Dean and others point to is a dilution of individual voices, ever more problematised by the convergence aspect of social media. Unlike previous forms of media that were communicative channels designed to inform and entertain, the number of purposes social media is put to creates a multiple divergence of uses, not only diluting voice, but functions. Such potential dangers of mass communication means were already considered even with the rise in popularity of the radio, pointing to a kind of rise of pettiness, banality and tribalism:

> Only after the human voice had been transmitted around the world with the speed of light did it become plain that the words so widely disseminated might still be the same words one could hear from the village gossip or the village idiot or the village clown or the village hoodlum. (Mumford 1944, 395)

John Stuart Mill's 'marketplace of ideas' takes on a more economic interpretation of market in terms of finance and commodification. Instead of ideas, we

might witness more of a clearinghouse of half-digested, reactive rather than reflective, redundant, frivolous sentiments and opinions that either valorise corporate brands, prop up hate-based beliefs, traffic in mis- and disinformation, disseminate propaganda, or provide the data fodder for advertisers to embed their story-branding via targeted advertising on privatised social networks. David Harvey (2005) points to this absorption of human social interaction into the digital domain of networked culture, and it is Gilles Deleuze's prescient 'Postscript' (1995) that tells us that this turn to a largely cybernetics-inspired communication-control feedback technology creates *dividuals* and data blocs that are easier to predict and control because all behaviour and choice in that milieu is prescribed.[11] Possibilities on these networks are limited to what the network architecture permits. Ultimately, participation is a necessary but not sufficient condition of engagement and constructive action; however, participation in the network functions as a support and uncritical celebration of the network spectacle itself.

Just as classical capitalism succeeded in the abstraction of labour power from previous forms of labour, so too does digital communicative capitalism now succeed in abstracting social power as something derivative, quantifiable and imbued with the promise of exchange value. The user becomes the site of a new production, just as much as a member of the social factory performing 'socialised' immaterial labour. Even though the material advantage that may be gained by accumulating social capital may appear promising for many, it is still largely a process of alchemy, a transmutation experiment indexed on producing the more prosperous, popular future self. A life dedicated to accumulating social capital through promiscuous connectivity to increase the odds of receiving validation for one's online content production loses its intrinsic, experiential, social value. Taking pride in one's accomplishments, travels, personal benchmarks, and life events without feeling obliged to broadcast them on social media as a guiding means to validate experience is much more in alignment with our status as social beings as opposed to leveraging such events in the seeking of profit. Or, to apply a homily by William Bruce Cameron, '[n]ot everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts' (1963, 13).

The idea of social media as a kind of social factory aligns with the idea of the user as the site of production. The role communicative capitalism plays in the colonising of social life outside of work blurs the once static boundary between labour and leisure. At issue is the very ontological status of the social media user given the level of exploitation employed to extract ever more surplus value from those who produce content. The incentives to participate, and to do so often, with the subtext of remaining socially valid or relevant is caught up in the circuit of purchasing the means of production (hardware devices and software services), making it a 'pay to play' phenomenon. More importantly, it is the ontological question that speaks directly to how alienation emerges as a by-product of the circuits of digital communicative capitalism and the degree of importance attached to contused notions of social capital as a site of accumulation.

Participation on social media is voluntary for most, although there is ever more ambient pressure to subscribe or potentially lose out on reaping the social, cultural and professional opportunities afforded by such large networked spaces. Although social media participation in no way compares to forced or sweatshop labour (Hesmondhalgh, 2010), Dyer-Witheford rightly points out the parasitism of this shadowy capitalist world in which people are organised and mobilised according to the needs of the network:

> [Facebook posting] does not replace the 'normal' structures of daily class exploitation at work and home, but is added to and superimposed upon them, to constitute a regime in which the user is habituated, on pain of exclusion from social worlds, to surrendering the elements of their personality–identity, creativity, sociality–to enhance the circulation of capital. (Dyer-Witheford 2015, 93)

The grim appearance of necessity here is reinforced according to the ubiquity of social media, influential pressure from peers, and the shift in information being posted on these sites for various opportunities. This heavy degree of normalisation of social media is not without its risks, particularly as this normalisation favours the private sector owners of social media (and, subsequently, the shareholders) as it was this group who were the main beneficiaries of heavy financial investment after the dot-com crisis of the early 2000s.

In everyday terms, social media becomes yet another task to manage, another obligation to fulfil, on top of one's already existing obligations. The apparent necessity, buttressed by normalisation, begins to colonise both home and work, at times effectively blurring the distinction. However, it may not be recognised as such due to a view that socialising is not typically considered work. This does not take into account the very real conditions of labour time involved in online socialising activity, nor the fact that such leisure activities are being driven toward ever more 'eyeballs on ads':

> The more time a user spends on Facebook, the more profile, browsing, communication, behavioural, content data s/he generates that is offered as a commodity to advertising clients. The more time a user spends online, the more targeted ads can be presented to her/him. (Fuchs 2015a, 27)

Such advertising need not simply be what one sees in a social media site's sidebar or as sponsored content, but can also be entwined with the production of desire by other users, colonising the high-trust culture of networks and indirect word-of-mouth marketing:

> As social media allows us to be more open about our desires, we produce our own ontologies and metadata on such sites as Facebook: Sam

> is a friend of Sue; Sue is a fan of BMW. When Sue 'likes' the latest BMW
> model, her desire is pushed out in the social stream. (Gehl 2014, 106)

Another aspect of increasing alienation might be the artificial creation of 'needs.' Although it may be hyperbole to accept the premise that if one is not on social media, one doesn't exist, there is an existing pressure to join. This happens in a context where some users will claim that it is justified along the lines of being the only way to view the lives of distant relatives or in not being excluded from social plans. The aspect of FOMO (fear of missing out) indicates the anxiety someone may feel in not being connected, and thus subscribing to these social media sites becomes more identified as a social necessity.

This necessity extends beyond the social, as some job recruiters have been reported of not hiring applicants because there was no social media history to better assess the character of the applicant. Refusal to join, and thus refusal to work for, a popular social media site can lead to diminished employment opportunities. Refusal to join may be construed as being in bad faith. Abraham Maslow's famous hierarchy of needs does indeed identify the social function as one of the human requirements, and social media has provided an additional space where this may occur, promising self-actualisation while reaping profit.

The Fourth Fantasy

When it comes to the role of communicative capitalism in the use of social media, Jodi Dean identifies three main fantasies: the Fantasy of Abundance, the Fantasy of Participation and the Fantasy of Wholeness (2005).

In the Fantasy of Abundance, Dean references the heady, dot-com years with all its optimism about how the information age would lead to moving away from economies of scarcity and toward an economy of abundance due to the affordances of new digital technologies in being able to manage larger volumes and faster speeds facilitating more efficient transactions (2005, 58). This idea of abundance has helped propel the alliance of neoliberalism-informationism (Neubauer 2011), allowing for the kind of creative destruction that has seen the shift between roll-back neoliberalism during the Reagan/Thatcher years to a modified, market-centric form of 'state-building' of roll-out neoliberalism in legitimising flexible labour markets, constant skills upgrading and the creation of a 'knowledge economy' (Peck and Tickell, 2002) while developing nations took on the burden of intensive industrialisation as Western nations became increasingly deindustrialised. Abundance is also associated with the reproduction of data and knowledge in ways that are not apparently tied to finite materials; i.e., the near infinite replicability of digital data as opposed to a limited print run of a book. However, there are very real-world finite limits, such as the materials that are required to manufacture the devices that access the online

world (such as 'conflict minerals') and limits to energy in order to power and sustain the networks upon which more people depend.[12] Yet it is this fantasy of abundance at the broader economic scale of demand and supply that may have arguably presented a boon to major corporations that would have otherwise fallen victim to Marx's law of the falling rate of profit as certain forms of both fixed and variable capital costs can be reduced (or devolved to consumers).

Dean's treatment of this fantasy of abundance concerns communication, and that the 'exchange value of messages overtakes their use value' (2005, 58). All that matters is circulation of data: the message, the sender, the receiver, are all irrelevant or at least secondary to the circulation itself. As more users contribute content, the less value each instance of communication has, which then may precipitate a need or desire to be more shocking, outrageous, offensive and extreme in order to garner attention. So, with the abundance of messages we can send over social media, the more this becomes devalued as just contributions to data flow and circulation.

In the Fantasy of Participation, Dean speaks of the registration effect (2005, 60), which is the belief that our opinions and contributions online matter on their intrinsic merits, that they have a value more than simply contributing to circulation. On social media we are presented with numerous opportunities and prompts to contribute, be it a suggestion by the site to provide a status update, a reminder that one has not logged in recently to view what one has 'missed,' to rate one's experience using a hotel booking service, to connect with a number of people harvested from one's email contact list, and so forth. Added to this would be forms of clicktivism and slacktivism associated with various causes whereby merely clicking a button replaces more substantive action and engagement. When we apply this to online social capital accumulation, we may also feel an obligation to 'like' the content of someone we like, which may prove much more convenient than writing a more substantive response, or as a form of obligatory reciprocity because said person has 'liked' our content. The notion that our contributions are significant is undermined by the fact that social media users are encouraged to participate more, but that content matters little beyond cross-syndicating the content and in providing ready fodder for keyword analysis performed by algorithms to deliver content and targeted advertising.

In the Fantasy of Wholeness, Dean points up the myth that the internet is a democratised, smooth space of unity, a true marketplace of ideas (2005, 67). The fantasy may put one in mind of the ideal that John Rawls (2005) speaks of in terms of political liberalism; namely, that prejudices and hierarchical considerations can be hung like hats by the door prior to meeting together as equals objectively discussing political conceptions of justice. In reality, communities on the internet are not commonly a McLuhan-style global village, but fragmented, composed of ideological tribes, and exacerbated further by algorithmic sorting that empowers filter bubbles that deliver content that conforms to the respective worldview of each user on social media. The algorithm's role in deselecting visible content maintains the social media space as a mostly

positive one free of conflict, yet also free of the diversity one would expect of a truly globalised public that could ostensibly achieve a unity of differences.

Given these three main fantasies that Dean speaks of, I would append a fourth that may also conform to her idea of communicative capitalism, and perhaps overlap with each of the three fantasies: the *Fantasy of Equivalence and Conversion*. There may be a belief among users who actively seek to increase the visible numbers on their social counters that said efforts can be converted into actual capital, or that one's numeric online social capital is equivalent to some other stable value upon which one's personal or social value is based. If there is a belief that the like economy is somehow directly equivalent to a unifying price, there is an attendant belief in the conversion of contribution labour into a kind of payoff. This fantasy occurs in the most blatant and misleading way on sites that peg dollar values on social media accounts on the basis of followers, likes, retweets, etc., such as Klout et al. It may not matter if the content we contribute to the overall circulation of data is understood, just so long as it accumulates measurable attention in terms of likes, retweets and possibly increasing the number of followers as a function of network exposure.

Social Capitalist Strategies

There is no shortage of thinkers who continue to extoll the virtues of building digital social capital. One notable early example may be B.J. Fogg (2008) who lauds the affordances of Social Networking Services (SNS), particularly Facebook and its launch of its API, as a means of employing what he calls 'mass interpersonal persuasion' (MIP). The huge social graph provides access to much larger and better-organised audiences for targeting purposes by those micro-entrepreneurs looking to develop popular apps, while the automated structure allows for the proliferation of an app by effectively 'ghosting' a user's account in enticing others to join. The rapid feedback system also allows for quick and ongoing customisation of the app or its marketing and advanced analytics provide ample data for measuring app adoption rates and various pre-set demographic criteria such as browsers, geographical location, etc. Fogg lauds these affordances, and although he does briefly acknowledge the potential dangers of MIP in the wrong hands, he is overall optimistic about its prospects.

B.J. Fogg's model for mass interpersonal persuasion (MIP) is of some utility in exploring what is effectively *mass impersonal persuasion* (MIP2). Many of the mechanisms he cites such as *persuasive experience, automated structure, social distribution, rapid cycle, huge social graph* and *measured impact* may equally apply to strategies aimed at building online social capital. Despite Fogg's more optimistic conclusion that MIP decentralises authority in media from the top-down or hypodermic model to a recentralisation of power in the empowered[13] individual who can engage in a more open and participatory model of communication, even the grassroots bottom-up model can be co-opted by powerful

entities to give the illusion of popular support. The very same mechanisms that allow for online anonymity or screen nonymity and mass participatory inclusion for expression also allow lobbying groups to leverage these mechanisms to construct an opaque image of a grassroots crowd using a variety of tools to create an artificial public.

Mass impersonal persuasion possesses the possible means of producing a persuasive experience without requiring a human entity to author each communication instance. By coupling an automated message delivery method with persona management solutions, contemporary astroturfing and botnet campaigns can be self-generating and self-renewing, adapting to different social communication requirements through the use of computerised linguistic analysis and textual production. One of the other distinct advantages of mass impersonal persuasion using advanced botnet methods is in increasing the volume and presence of messages that would, if operated by a human entity, be much slower and decrease the probability of broader social distribution.

In Fogg's six-point platform for mass interpersonal persuasion (MIP), each of these are indexed on experiential observations, measures, and effects. Fogg defines a persuasive experience as one that 'is created to change attitudes, behaviours or both' (2008, 4). The close alignment between viral effects and rapid cycle seem to operate according to a similar mechanism for distribution of persuasive experiences via web technology. However, more importantly, the use of online traffic metrics such as Google Analytics allow campaign managers to monitor and measure the success, attrition, or adoption rates of a particular campaign component or meme; and other analytical tools further allow campaign managers to monitor traffic on issues according to hashtags as a means of coordinating the campaign for optimal effect on those social media platforms that make extensive use of hashtags.

Since Fogg's study, the huge social graph has also seen significant changes, especially in the touted features of Open Graph (Facebook 2013) whereby a robust API allows for deeper app integration to maximise the 'Facebook experience,' facilitating cross-platform interaction between app content and Facebook status updates. For example, by adopting the Goodreads app, any action a user makes on Goodreads site such as starting or finishing a book can be automatically updated on the user's Facebook page for broadcast to that user's network. This form of automated message delivery, akin to Fogg's automated structure for message dissemination and successful adoption, minimises on the user being left to construct a message to persuade other users to adopt the app, and instead allows the Open Graph app to write the 'story' on behalf of the user. This form of digital surrogacy takes control of the central promotional message without relying on the user-host to promote the product or service.

Automated methods are vital to the operations and procedures of digital astroturfing and botnet campaigns. Fogg's discussion of how automated structure benefits MIP serves two functions:

> First, software can deliver a persuasive experience over and over. The computer code doesn't take a vacation or go on coffee breaks; the machine keeps working [...] The second point is that the automation makes it easier for people to share the experience with others. (5–6)

Fogg's focus is on the instrumental value of MIP; however, this may conceal some of the dangers that deserve more reflection, such as the potential to exacerbate alienation, the nature of unpaid work, a networked capitalist system that relies on app entrepreneurs shouldering the burden of risk and responsibility, and possibly events Fogg did not anticipate such as the rise of digital astroturfing with the use of sophisticated botnets. Fogg is not alone in seeing the potential advantages of building or accumulating online social capital, with a large number of primers, blogs, and how-to manuals on the subject that all take the accumulation of online social capital as inherently good. The danger of assuming this would be that it obscures the ideological aspects whereby these practices strengthen the hand of capitalist exploitation at the expense of the non-pecuniary online community, if not also the immiseration of workers who toil in click farms or the precarity of the app-development market.

The pursuit of online social capital appears to provide a solution in search of a problem. It certainly provides a solution to a very concrete and practical problem for capitalists seeking to increase markets and to seek ways of cutting costs by devolving marketing efforts to the consumers themselves in ways that consumers will actively participate behind the veil of play. However, for the average user seeking to increase likes and number of followers, being caught up in this kind of economy is also to be caught up in a kind of myth. Apparent social needs are magically provided by the social media space, and the metrification of that space provides the appearance of objective, measurable 'proof'. The emergence of social buttons and a metric for online social capital is enveloped within the myths and metaphors that have developed with cyberspace, but also the neoliberal value system where competition and greed are seen as good. The pursuit and accumulation of measurable online social capital emulates the pursuit and accumulation of actual capital, but there are little to no tangible profits to be made by those who pursue it. The pursuit itself is seen as good, as part of the digital sublime Vincent Mosco (2004) speaks of.

Gaming the System of Social Capital

If there were not a potential economic benefit to online social capital, there would not be a burgeoning cottage industry either promising clients to increase their social capital through services or instructional blogs. Some of these services involve arguably unethical practices such as purchasing bogus positive reviews (or negative reviews in an act of sabotage against a competitor), like-farms and the use of botnets. If online social capital is reduced to a kind

of video game style high-score on a publicly available leaderboard, as many multiplayer game apps have as a feature, there must be a way to 'game the system.' This becomes much easier when we consider the affordances of social digital media, as opposed to in-person networking.

Some of the services provided may include digital manipulation of code to increase likes, friends, followers etc. This would involve exploiting or hacking the server, or in deploying automated software where the bots can follow a program script to sign up for the site to 'like' a Facebook page. Or, these might rely on more sophisticated programming to create convincing 'users' with a personality drawn from a list of options tied to geography and other criteria. This latter was exposed by George Monbiot (2011) in a proposal issued by the US Air Force for such services, and is backed by a patent on how this can be done. Generating fake audiences to build one's social capital only requires paying a fee for service to one of a series of providers.

The more labour-consuming practice has been to provide these services using real people, run by exploitative individuals in boiler room situations in the developing world. A worker may be paid by the account, or volume of likes, and quite poorly. AshleyMadison.com, a site which specialises in providing discreet services for those interested in extramarital affairs, endured two major scandals. The most recent of these involved a major hacking incident that revealed the identities of several users, some of whom were prominent public figures.[14] The scandal which received less media coverage was a series of claims that the website was making use of bots to populate the site with more female accounts so as to attract more male subscribers. These claims were initially denied by the parent company, AvidLife (now rebranded as Ruby), and then later admitted. The strategic use of bots to set up female accounts, and possibly associated images peeled from the web, was to serve to even out the gender ratio which was seen to be have a much heavier preponderance of male users. Closely aligned with this scandal was a claim by an employee in the US who was suing the company for injuries sustained working long hours creating fake accounts in preparation for the company's expansion into the Brazilian market.

Other forms may include political trolling where individuals are hired to promote or condemn a political candidate. In other cases, it might be a promotion of government policies, such as China's '50 Cent Party,' a group of bloggers so named because they were paid the equivalent of 50¢ for every blog post that praised or defended the government. Pay-to-tweet services have begun to emerge in the political sphere. A service called @robertsrooms, associated with the Blak political action committee (BlakPAC) in the US and founded by self-proclaimed 'citizen patriots' Robert Shelton and Anita White, promises to deliver conservative candidates electoral success by mobilizing 10 million 'social media warriors.' They have claimed to have helped in getting Donald Trump elected while also 'out-tweeting' Hillary Clinton's supporters. Their pay-to-tweet model compensates users on Twitter to retweet content or create new content under the direction of the service. Unlike the creation of sophisticated

botnets that work clandestinely, this method of social media mobilisation operates out in the open and is ostensibly run by grass-roots supporters who are willing to sell their services to prospective political candidates of the same ideological view. The service runs multiple rooms where supporters can be coordinated in the posting or reposting of short videos, messages, memes and other content on social media in support of a candidate. At other times, these rooms may be coordinated to attack non-conservative candidates and their supporters.

In other cases, there may be direct manipulation using reward. A well-known rum company appeared at a bar that is popular with students, and offered a free drink only if they signed into their Facebook account and 'liked' the company's Facebook page. In order to avoid unfulfilled promises from thirsty patrons, the representatives had on hand a device upon which the patron would sign into his or her Facebook and 'like' the page in the representative's presence. There are many reasons why this aggressive practice can be considered objectionable, including pressuring patrons to publicly endorse a product prior to receiving it, but also the potential for violations of privacy.

In other games of online social capital, the pursuit of positive reviews for products and services is its own special industry, sometimes courting mercenary tactics of planting fake bad reviews of competitors or hiring out for fake positive reviews. Due to the high-trust culture of the web, it may be the case that a site visitor may trust a random user's review much more than the official word of the company being reviewed. In the arts of persuasion, it was Lazarsfeld et al. (1948) who discovered that word-of-mouth through one's peer group has a much more effective impact on decision making than official messages from mass media, but that 'forbidden fruit' (i.e., reporting on what has overheard) can be even more effective.

One of the common features of the online environment is the strong appeal to quantity considerations as a basis for making decisions and assigning value, and this has already been demonstrated to work in what is called 'social herding' (Huang and Chen 2006). Social proof mechanisms may prove more significant in a semi-democratic setting of mass participation since no individual user may have the time or inclination to inspect the claims of each individual user. In addition, given the screen-based (a)nonymity of many users, tracing a message to the profiles of users and comparing these views to those made by the same user on other sites under a different screen name frustrates attempts to construct a comparative picture of the user and may not permit a measurement for credibility across different sites. The use of numerical considerations under herding is simply a quantified version of bandwagon effect. Online social capital has already been naturalised in terms of granting value to certain users and content on the basis of recorded number of likes or comments associated with that user. It is possible, under certain conditions, to 'game' the system such that a large surge in likes may be picked up by the algorithm and thus cause more visibility of the content for more users. Although social media algorithms are likely more sophisticated in flagging sudden surges to prevent like-spamming,

click- or like-farming is still a booming industry. Such operations may rely on outsourced labour, such as in Dhaka, Bangladesh, where click farms hire people to click likes on content. It is not just small companies trying to gain a foothold who might purchases services such as these; it was reported that the US State Department spent an estimated $630,000 on these services in 2013 before the Inspector General criticised this expenditure (Associated Press 2014). The use of human labour (or what is marketed as 'organic likes') was a response to social media companies being able to filter out suspected automated software attempts to artificially increase followers, likes, and views. However, the use of automated software to generate inflated social media scores and fake reviews is not over; more sophisticated software is being developed that can bypass social media filters.

Microburst Gratification and Mobile Prosumers

Personal validation through numeric markers is not unique to social media sites, nor does it have its origin there. A focus on quantitative considerations as being linked to value has taken many forms, from the number of possessions owned, number of home runs, pinball machine scores and bank account balances, to name only a few. However, it is with social media that users can assess their social value via the numeric counters of likes, friends, followers and comments in a synchronous communication environment. This real-time affordance of the network allows for instant notification of any increase in these numeric values, like a stock market ticker. Moreover, these notifications may induce in the user a small burst of gratification akin to a dopamine hit. One anecdotal way of testing this was through an experiment I repeated in several iterations of my social networking course over the last six years. The 'digital detox' experiment asked students to voluntarily remove the use of social media for three days,[15] and to report in diary form what they were feeling in their own words. In order to encourage honesty, reporting on relapses when they occurred was encouraged, and the diaries were anonymised. Of the recurring reported sentiments across several non-linked student cohorts, were narratives closely resembling that of addiction, withdrawal, and feelings of relief during relapse. In other cases, relapses were rationalised in much the same fashion as one might expect among some of those who return to the use of an addictive substance. What was of note was how often it was reported that notification services became the most common trigger for relapse. Some diarists described with some reflection on how responding to the notification provided an immediate sensation of pleasure and relief, an intensity shortly followed by a return to normal, a pattern resembling that of the chemical reward of the dopamine system.

   Such conditioning to stimuli is not new in itself: prior to the internet, there may have been a similar dopamine-like response to the ringing of a telephone or finding a letter in a mailbox. But if there is a chemical incentive to the activity

of increasing one's online social capital, it may be strongly linked to both the system of real-time notifications, as well as the psychological attachment to seeing an increase in numeric counters that are 'proof' of increasing value. Such an increase in quantitative values may be mistakenly correlated to an increase in social or personal value of the user in the similar way some may mistake an increase in personal wealth as an increase in personal and societal value. The acquisition of higher numerical values does not necessarily always correspond to an increase in effort. To reuse the video game metaphor, one of the more popular mobile game genres would be the 'idle' variety where the numeric values of a character, the time-based production of some building, or the accumulation of the in-game currency will occur while the player is not actively logged into the game. This sets up both a feeling of surprise and satisfies a feeling of progress and growth. In sum, validation and accomplishment through a process of accumulation, and the largely capitalist notion of growth for growth's sake.

Inasmuch as practices of accumulation, growth for growth's sake, is part of the constellatory ideological framework of neoliberal capitalism, so too is the notion of mobility. Invocations of mobility will generally tend toward understanding in terms of spatiality and temporality. One is considered mobile if one is not rooted or fixed in a particular location, with a freedom to be migratory or nomadic. When taken in a positive register, this mobility is by choice (rather than, say, a forced migration due to civil war or natural disaster). In terms of temporality, mobility refers to the ability to access content and services at any time. The social aspects of mobility, understood in more corporeal terms, is enabled by a distinctly *mobile* technology that is portable and can access content on a global scale. As opposed to improvements in transportation technologies in the last two centuries, mobility shifts into a distinctly cognitive and person-centred concept whereby one can be nomadic in the virtual domain while remaining rooted or fixed in place. Mobility, then, comes to signify technological mediation of content on demand anytime, anywhere. Perry et al. (2001) critique the 'anytime, anywhere' rhetoric of mobility as it still emerges out of the implications of hardware and software design. These proprietary forms of hardware and software commit the user to develop or access content through very specific channels. This fits comfortably within the principles of neoliberalism whereby choice is trumpeted yet restricted to a pre-set list of options it sanctions: 'neoliberal logic is best conceptualised not as a standardized universal apparatus, but a migratory technology of governing that interacts with situated sets of elements and circumstances' (Ong 2007, 5). What is of note is that *digital* mobility – no longer necessarily tied to time and space – is spoken in almost the same breath as flexibility, and thus granting some form of convenience and 'power' to the individual user.

Such mobility and its closely related virtue-word of flexibility is already witnessed in many workplaces where the worker's subjectivity is cultivated through constants skills upgrading to make them employable in a competitive global market, but this apparent empowerment acts as a cover for lack of

job security (Moore 2010). Despite claims of self-expressive empowerment, the down-shifting responsibilisation of users does not come with actual power. In fact, power is retained within the network while risk is distributed to the user-base. What we see is 'a shift from exchange to competition in the principle of the market' based on inequality rather than equivalence (Foucault 2008, 118). This is little more than a part of the fundamental shift from Fordism to flexible production regimes, packaged in the seemingly positive idea of the creative economy. What we see is an actual retrenchment strategy perpetrated by social networks that seek to enhance their own centralised control over data collection and distribution.

No longer strictly a disciplinary society, but one of control, the mechanisms that carry out control practices aligned with neoliberal economic thought govern and steer what content is visible, and how it is to be distributed, to guard against the kind of a feeling of ataxia – a loss of genuine control – that might cause users to reflect and question the very tools and principles upon which these platforms rely. It is no longer acceptable in some circles to critique social media and what it may mean ideologically, but to either acquiesce in a spirit of resignation or to wilfully embrace the Joyful Science that marks the techno-optimist drive. The digital model for social interaction, when it is packaged as inevitable or simply necessary to realise the goals of the network's desire to expand into larger markets, leaves very little choice for users but to comply and thus conform to the new model if they wish to participate. The digital model then serves the double function of enforcing compliance among users with the terms of service they agree to, in addition to extracting surplus value from them.

One of the possibly hidden dangers of relying more on social media may be in how these are aligned with aspects of new managerialist-style tactics of surveillance and 'quality control' in terms of principal-agent relations. In the latter situation, content visibility and distribution, user interface changes, and shifts in how data is collected, becomes packaged as a benefit providing more quality and efficiency for users. The power of these increasingly cybernetic networks to surveil (or work with other entities to provide surveillance data), and channel select content, does not seem to speak favourably to user-empowerment. Instead, users are in effect data-farmed as inputs in a feedback system that will restrain choice and possibly shape their behaviour through what the platform decides to make visible. The discursive shaping of the term 'platform' has implications on how the information is distributed and made available, steering a middle course between what is:

> socially and financially valuable, between niche and wide appeal. And, as with broadcasting and publishing, their choices about what can appear, how it is organized, how it is monetized, what can be removed and why, and what the technical architecture allows and prohibits, are all real and substantive interventions into the contours of public discourse. (Gillespie 2010, 359)

Social media sites are not identical in form or function to the industrial sites of confinement where production took place, but instead a new dispersive instrument delegates tasks via digital controls, prompts to contribute content such as a status update, to respond to new content, etc. Social media sites may not be accurately classed as sites of production, and may have entered into the phase of metaproduction where what 'it seeks to sell is services, and what it seeks to buy, activities. It's a capitalism no longer directed toward production but toward products, that is, toward sales and markets' (Deleuze 1995, 181). The product in this case – user-generated content – is not produced as much as it is transformed, and it is achieved through the digital medium of its collection and delivery. The automation that goes along with this shift in data collection and algorithmic distribution opens up the mass of users and their content to global economic flows, possibly leveraged as branding instruments by social media sites to take control of new potential markets, and thus balance the two functions of *marketing* to its 'outside' and *monitoring* on its 'inside.'

When users of social media are restricted in terms of their choice to use the proprietary social software available, there is in this way a very clear command and control mechanism by which there is a push for standardisation and centralisation of online experience and the goal of content generation with more data capture. The transformation of organic social exchange into a social delivery *system* turns away from the species-being of human communication and social fulfilment through interaction and towards executability, predictability and back-end profitability.

> Spurious 'technological' developments [...] are those which are encapsulated by a ceremonial power system whose main concern is to control the use, direction, and consequences of that development while simultaneously serving as the institutional vehicle for defining the limits and boundaries upon that technology through special domination efforts of the legal system, the property system, and the information system (Junker 1980, n.p.)

It is this 'ceremonialist' hangover whereby social networks solidify power and wield the instruments (social software) to increase it, while it simultaneously re-inscribes the values of the elite. When it comes to the power of the users of the digital technologies, they can be said to surrender their labour to the functions dictated by the implications of social software design: 'The message behind the neutrality of screens is not that we are the organization. The real message, to be grasped, is that without the organization, we are nothing' (Thiry-Cherques 715).

The ongoing aestheticisation of social media technologies is packed behind the optimistic and glittering generality of what is one of neoliberalism's most favoured terms: innovation. Despite its frequent invocation, the term innovation is rarely precisely defined, nor are its implications addressed. Innovation

can be seen as largely part of a discursive formation whereby certain assumptions on value are put forth and aligned with positive associations of (linear) progress, change, and novelty. A survey of the vast literature that touts innovation demonstrates inconsistency in its application, pending context, and attempts have been made to arrive at a unified consensus as to what innovation means, or how it is to be measured (Adams et al. 2006, 22). Attempts to construct a universal definition have taken the form of extensive literature reviews on the subject, and parsing out specific attributes such as the nature, type, stages, social context, means and aim of innovation (Baregeh et al. 2009, 1331–2). Inasmuch as procedural and attributional clarifications may assist in better operationalising efforts in the domain of innovation, left untouched are the assumptions that innovation in itself is positive. As Emma Jeanes (2006) rightly argues with an appeal to Deleuze on what is and is not 'creativity,' the mantra of 'innovate or else' is uncritical and the champions of innovation rhetoric staunchly resist criticism. The 'innovation theology' seems inextricably bound to accountancy principles of finding efficient ways to reduce costs and leverage human capital in a perceived threatening, Darwinised economic environment of global hyper-competitiveness.

Accumulation and Time: 'Time is Money'

One of the goals of capitalism is to increase the rate of production over shorter spans of time by seeking efficiencies and rationalising production. During the rise of industrialisation, several techniques were introduced to achieve this end, be it through Babbage's idea of the division of labour into functional specification, standardisation of labour toward mass production, increasing mechanisation, and the application of Taylor's theory of scientific management. Furthermore, the conquering of space through the development of transportation networks such as the railways and communication through the telegraph enabled shorter time intervals for the exchange of goods, services, and information. Today, a global network of shipping routes by land and sea, in addition to methods of just-in-time production to decrease speculation and inventory costs, increased automation, and even the proposed use of drone technologies for the delivery of goods, has shortened the time in the production process as well as bringing a host of goods and services to market much faster. Speed and efficiency in supply chain management, for instance, are generally the hallmarks of a neoliberal economy. However, in the shadow of these gains is increasing reliance on super-exploited sweatshop labour, environmental damage and a growing pool of precarious labour while other types of jobs have been eliminated due to automation.

   Capitalism relies on acceleration as its strategy to increase accumulation, and this is no different in the domain of social media where a growth of subscribers to whom will be crowdsourced the tasks of the subscriber base is part of

the strategy for social media's financial success. With respect to social media, users are sold *experiences* via the services of the social media site, while advertisers are sold *space* according to the processed data of users' labour time and personal information. If the goal is to accelerate the rate at which commodities are sold in shorter time frames, refined tactics have been used such as algorithmic sorting and the outsourcing of the function of the commodification of experience to the users who depend on the social media service. These flexible arrangements for more efficient forms of accumulation becomes an embedded practice in neoliberal capitalism (Harvey 2005).

Accumulation of real capital through the extraction of surplus value from digital labour functions at the heart of large social media corporations, but the question turns to how this practice has migrated in a new form into a cultural norm online where users compete and adopt strategies to accumulate more social capital faster, seeking means by which the returns on labour time investment can be higher. Robert Hassan's (2009) concept of network time identifies behaviours that seem patterned by the economic aspects of prevailing neoliberal capitalism. Our social time ever more becomes colonised by digital labour time, and so social time becomes another segment in the chain of production so that it even becomes (socially) produced in line with the speed and expectations of the social media upon which it may be experienced. Various associated behaviours may follow, possibly explained by this patterning by a dominant neoliberal capitalist ethos that is already embedded in the social media network architecture itself. One may then cue the instrumentalist, pragmatic forms of social capital accumulation as yet another form of flexible strategy, but also the less savoury behaviours of aggressive competition, self-promotion, and a lack of empathy in social interactions online. Moreover, the social media sphere is enlarged in scope, reach, and perceived importance until ever more it becomes – to use Lieven de Cauter's (2004) term – encapsulated, or within the kind of fishbowl virtual world of an enormous network spectacle.

The conversion of actual capitalistic tendencies to the social capitalist structures of user-based accumulation has not somehow resolved the issues of inequality or resolved any of the deep-seated contradictions of capital. Instead, neoliberal capitalism has imprinted itself on the sociocultural dimension of social media, if not exercised a complete appropriation of culture and multiple publics. Other forms of inequality may simply be distributed differently, but the inequalities still exist, if not also some alarming upticks in the amount of sexist, racist and homophobic attacks on social media that give voice to fringe hate groups to amplify the historical use of power against marginalised groups.

Moreover, users seeking to increase their social capital are paying in real money and time to do so. Although it may be tempting to think that payment is toward access to a social marketplace, given the labour time involved on social media that colonises leisure time, it is more appropriate to understand it as a social factory. As Fuchs succinctly tells us, '[c]orporate social media prosumption is a form of continuous primitive accumulation of capital that turns

non-commodified leisure time into productive labour time that generates value and profit for capital' (Fuchs 2014, 116).

In this chapter we encountered many instances where the social aspect of social media becomes effectively colonised by neoliberal and communicative capitalism as a form of work-time, and that an increasing sense of necessity has normalised the use of social media. We took on board the insights of Jodi Dean's communicative capitalism to track the fantasies that enshroud and mythologise a great deal of social media activity, while tentatively offering a fourth fantasy. We are also witnessing that those who seek to increase their 'share' of online social capital may either resort to gaming the system or be compelled by the demands of a workplace to adopt the risk and responsibility of becoming mobile and flexible sites of production and accumulation. Such acts may border on the mercenary and unscrupulous, and yet only serve to empower the circulation of capital by those powerful owners of social networking sites. Ultimately, we can pin blame on major network corporations for selling users on an ideology that seems to privilege the social, and yet uses this as a means to increase our participation and contribution activity on these networks for their own financial gain. This kind of commodification of the social is hardly a new observation; theorists such as Christian Fuchs and José van Dijck have amply demonstrated this. However, the accumulation of online social capital and all the gamesmanship that it may entail adds yet another layer of enticement for us to contribute according to principles that mimic market-centric capitalism with the veneer of the social as a way of rationalising the pursuit of these online 'high scores.' Does this pursuit of accumulation make us more empowered, socially whole, and happy, or does it simply route us back into the same or similar forms of alienation Marx speaks of with respect to the extraction of surplus value from labour?

It is my own view that the 'lure' of social media via the self-promotional and gamesmanship tactics to increase one's online 'score' exacerbates alienation, and particularly by substituting a more substantial social connection online with its mere appearance through accumulation efforts that valorise the individual over community. We become divided competitors in the social media 'factory' as opposed to united community collaborators. The solution is to create and maintain a social media platform that evades the capture of capitalism, rejects its alienating principles, and focuses primarily on community over competition or profit.

Main Points

- Communicative capitalism abstracts social power as something quantifiable, and imbued with the promise of exchange value. The user becomes the site of production for the social media site.

- The allure and convenience of measuring online social capital accumulation comes with the false promise of increasing personal validation and wealth through vigorously competitive social comparison. This presents a fantasy of equivalence and conversion through a mode of standardisation of comparative measurement.
- There are two interrelated circuits of capitalism operating here. At the user end, it is the pursuit of accumulating a higher score of social capital through strategic use of the platform, commodification of the self-as-brand, and the buying and selling of likes. The real value is situated in the enclosing capitalist circuit whereby the social media company monitors the inside (users) to sell users *experiences*, while marketing to an outside (advertisers) by selling *space*.
- The more users pursue online social capital via social media sites, the more social media sites profit through the exploitation of the user base and the collection of their data. Social media sites are the real beneficiaries of this simulated social marketplace economy that can primarily only promise a higher 'score' in a gamified environment designed and controlled by the social media site.