Data Shadows and Digital Personae: Alienated Figures of User Identity in Social Media

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Abstract

This paper attempts to briefly synthesize an understanding of social media through the lens of Marxist alienation. What is the usefulness of applying Marx’s theory of alienation to critical social media studies, and what are its limitations? This paper aims to trace possible meanings of alienation and how they relate to processes of identity commodification on social media platforms. By distinguishing two types of digital identity characteristic of social media, this paper outlines possible conditions of objective and subjective alienation, as well as their political, economic, and social implications.

Keywords: alienation, social media, identity, digital labour, exploitation, surveillance, Marx, data shadow, digital persona

Signing up for a social media account is now easier than ever. The only information required is for identification purposes; typically consisting of: a first and last name, a valid email address, date of birth, and gender assignment, which is often dichotomized in terms of a binary structure. In this sense, a major function of social media platforms is to mediate the production and management of the user’s digital identity. The business of social media is to know who you are, to manage data that tells others who you are, and, thereby, to provide a platform for the self-expression and connectivity of users. It is praised by some as a new means of communication that enables a greater speed and scope of free expression and connectivity, while others warn that it creates conditions of alienation. The aim of this paper is to address this controversy with two main questions. What is the meaning of identity and alienation in relation to social media? How do social media users experience alienation? In this paper, I will make the distinction between two kinds of commodified digital identity concerning social
media: the data shadow, comprised of all the metadata that users unconsciously generate through their online activities, and the digital persona, which refers to communicative user content produced on these platforms. Both of these forms of digital identity function as information commodities in the digital economy that social media users experience as alienation by participating in their production.

Marx originally wrote about alienation in 1844 to refer to the industrial worker, factory, and commodity, which is a much different historical and technological context from the post-industrial terms of user, platform, and data commodity. How, then, can the digital economy of social media be understood in terms of alienation? Canonically, Marx’s theory of alienation refers to how, in a capitalist society, the industrial worker is alienated from their labour in four distinct ways. Workers were exploited, since they possessed neither profit nor product of their labour, and instead the commodities they produced confronted them as something alien in the sense that the only way to attain them would be to purchase them back from corporations and businesses with wages stipulated beyond their control. Nor did the worker possess or control the means of production, as factories were owned and controlled not by workers, but by businesses and business people. In addition, workers were alienated from their own humanity, or ‘species-essence,’ as they were reduced to the status of objects through what was effectively dehumanizing, coerced labour. Finally, workers were also alienated from one another. They were isolated from their peers and pitted against one another for survival through the wage labour system in competitive, rather than cooperative, social relations as a form of ideological control by the ruling classes, or bourgeoisie (Marx, 1961). Critical new media scholars have shown how Marx’s alienation thesis can be a useful tool for studying the political economy of social media. Applying the alienation thesis to social media means that the online activities of users are made strange to them, and come to act upon them in a way that is similar to the exploitative and alienating process of capitalist industrial production (Jarret, 2016a). In an understanding of alienation on social media platforms, users take the place of industrial workers, and their online activities are a form of labour with data as its product. In social media, this data takes the form of digital identity: an information commodity.

For the purposes of this paper, digital identity refers to a process in which users create data through their activities online. This data contributes to their identification as part of a particular group, category, or as an individual. There are two distinct types of commodified digital identity in social media: the data shadow and the digital persona. The data shadow refers to all information pertaining to a user that is not consciously produced for communicative purposes. The digital persona terms all data created by an individual for communicative purposes; it refers to all user-generated content, as well as interactions between users through the social media platform. The point of this paper is to explore the usefulness of this theory by looking at how it can be applied in critical media studies. It is not to argue that all digital identity on social media is necessarily commodified and alienated. However, when addressing the data shadow and digital persona, this will only be referring to commodified forms of digital identity in social media.

It is hard to think of social media use as alienating labour when most users seem to enjoy using it.
P.J. Rey writes that because users are not coerced into their everyday online activities, it is incorrect to think of social media use in terms of alienation (Rey, 2012, p.416). It is true that most users are consenting, or at least tolerant of how the data they unconsciously generate is collected and used by the corporate platform provider. While these social media users are exploited in the sense that platforms (and not users) profit greatly from this data collection, Rey argues that because most people are eager to participate in these activities, social media is exploitative, but not alienating for users. As a direct counter to this, Mark Andrejevic highlights the problem of surveillance in social media. Terming data collection as surveillance in social media is more than a matter of semantics: it addresses specifically the one-sided and secretive nature of this data collection. It is not only that users are unaware of the ways metadata they produce is being collected, but that they are also “largely incognizant of the breadth and depth of the information being collected about them, and of the increasingly sophisticated ways it is being put to use” (Andrejevic, 2015, p.183-4). From this perspective, the exploitation of the data shadow is, therefore, also necessarily alienation: users create a commodity that is appropriated by means of surveillance, and the product of their labour comes to confront them as something alien that is serving the interests of corporate platforms. Digital alienation in this sense is a product of property relations relating to data, since this data is not owned or controlled by the users who create it, but instead is imprisoned in databases owned by corporations.

Examples of the data shadow as an identity commodity that confronts users as something strange and alien to them can be found in studies on protest in social media. In the case of the Arab Spring of 2011, Twitter submitted the data shadows of its users to the Egyptian state, which then used this metadata to identify potential protesters, and to further track and monitor their online activities (Hintz, 2015). By clicking on Twitter feeds and posts and generating metadata for Twitter, Egyptian state agencies could access and use this data to create a category that identified individuals who could possibly be protesters, which then intensified the surveillance of their online activities. Sets of data can be collected by state agencies in this way to identify precisely discriminated groups of people, and can then be used against them through well-informed surveillance. By agreeing to the terms and services of social media platforms, users effectively lose all control over the ways data about them is collected and controlled, and platforms do not have to be held responsible or accountable for the potential consequences of mass surveillance. This ‘back-end’ configuration of digital identity means that users do not possess or control their data shadows, and also have no control over the terms that determine their identification, or how this identification is put to use by agencies external to them.

The classification of social media users based on the metadata they produce is largely an automated process. Algorithms provide the means for platforms to perform not only metadata extraction, but also the definition and redefinition of the very categories that identify users. These algorithms create value for data shadows as data commodities by statistically defining categories of identification that are built to target advertising to users. John-Cheney Lippold refers to this process as algorithmic identity, and argues that the “modularity of meaning” of these categories results in a
complete loss of user control over the definition of their digital identities (Cheney-Lippold, 2011, p.176). One study claims, for example, that in this way Facebook can predict the sexual orientation of its users with 88% accuracy (Guertin, 2016). What remains beyond the logic of algorithms, however, are the complexities, contradictions, actions, and opinions that lie beyond the boundaries of binary yes or no answers. Facebook users are subjected to an algorithmic logic that models a binary and static structure of sexuality that is used to define who they are. The designers of this algorithm determine the meaning of sexual orientation and its categories of identification. Users themselves are completely removed from this process aside from being subjected to it as producers of metadata and as targets of categorical identification. Algorithmic identity is determined by a process of constant automatic modulation in which the feedback of user metadata informs and profits the interests of the platform and their complementary interests, and is thereby commodified.

To what economic end does the data shadow function? As commodified identities, they are exchanged for profit with advertisers and marketing agencies. Through everyday online activities on social media platforms, users, as audiences, engage in leisure that does the work of today’s marketers for them (Jarret, 2016a). When a user produces a data shadow, it operates within capitalist economics as an object that serves market interests in the form of targeted advertising. As an audience to advertising, social media users are implicated in the marketing machinery that serves capital through the production of their data shadows (Reverley, 2013). By drawing meaning and value from this targeted advertising, users, as consumers, ensure the continued consumption of goods and services that gives value to the harvesting of data shadows. The data shadow is a figure of alienated identity insofar as it is a product of labour entirely beyond the possession and control of users, and in that it confronts them as a “fully compliant and unprotesting puppet of neoliberal capital” (McCucheon, 2016, p.145). The data shadow is our commodified metadata double in the possession and control of others; a ‘self’ whose actions are largely invisible to us, but who intervenes unknowingly in our daily online lives in ways that embody the imperatives of others, and is, thereby, turned back upon us. As its producers, and as the subject of this data, users are alienated from it through its appropriation by others through surveillance. Social media users are then categorically identified by the modular functioning of algorithms that define and categorize them for the exploitative purposes of marketing and profit-making. The data shadow objectifies the online activities of social media users, and reduces their identity to the status of a commodity that exists to be traded and used in the service of interests that are beyond them.

Identity can also be understood beyond the lens of alienation as a process through which a collective becomes a collective. Stefiana Milan writes that user-produced content and culture on social platforms can be instrumental in reproducing and regenerating interpersonal bonds, promoting inter-group solidarity, and strengthening collective identity. However, she also warns that it often supports, reinforces, and reproduces hierarchies when collective identity becomes an intermediary stage, or a filter that merely provides relational context that ends instead with individualized “selves” merged in an indistinct and harmonious “we” (Milan, 2015, p.61-2). This condition of “networked
individualism” involves what some critical new media studies have termed digital personae to refer to the premediated condition of individual user profiles, user-produced content, and their interactions on social media platforms. Because corporate social media technologies fuse digital sociality within the logic of neoliberal capitalist market dynamics, what tends to manifest instead of an identity that is politicized and defined in terms of collectivity and belonging is a commodified identity based on the terms of individualism and consumership (Stefianik and Wall, 2016). This is exemplified by the technical infrastructure of Facebook as a platform in which users are divided and isolated into individualized “newsfeeds” whose programme editors are algorithms designed to cater personalized content and advertising (Leistert, 2015, p.39). The corporate social media platform is not designed with collective identity in mind, but instead facilitates what critical social media studies have termed “networked individualism”. The ability of neoliberal discourse to stifle our identity as common citizens extends itself in this way to digital social relations in the form of the commodified digital persona. This digital persona may therefore be considered to have the alienating effects of user isolation and identity reification.

The individualization, privatization, and commodification of identity on corporate social media platforms occur primarily when the platform makes demands for the authenticity of the user’s identity. Social media sites routinely make demands for the ‘real identity’ of their users in order to authenticate their accounts, either by linking them to a mobile device in the user’s possession, or by receiving the user’s photocopied government-issued identification (McCucheon, 2016). Not only does the demand for authenticity enforce, normalize, and legitimize the mass surveillance of social media users, it also forces them to concede to the corporate insistence that our digital personae are accurate and true reflections of who we really are. The demand for authenticity implies that identity is something private, personal, individual, and biologic. It forces users to accept the terms of authenticity set by the social media platform as something ownable and possessable that we ‘trade’ in exchange for the free services of social media platforms. The commodification and alienation of the digital persona is compounded further when users are only able to define themselves through the platform’s services in terms of commodifiable characteristics. When Facebook users are asked to define themselves through their profile and timeline in terms of marketable skills, approvable attributes, and preferred objects of consumption, their digital personae are restricted within the parameters of commodification (Dainow, 2011). This is reinforced by the logic of the personal brand on social media, which dictates that qualitative values such as friendship must be reduced to quantitative values in the number of “friends” or “followers,” in service of the private accumulation of visibility and social capital. The logic of the personal brand also threatens to pit users against one another in competition for visibility and social capital, effectively isolating and alienating users from one another. These ‘personalization technologies’ within the technical infrastructures of social media platforms limit the means of user expression and organization in a logic of visibility that is deeply rooted in neoliberal individualism.

The economy of visibility in social media platforms is one in which users are able to and
encouraged to network with others only to the extent that their individual interests coincide. Social media technologies support a condition of networked individualism, in which users are enabled, as individuals, to express their private thoughts and responses, but they do not guarantee an audience, a following, and most significantly, they do not guarantee solidarity (Bakardjieva, 2016, p.286). In order to post anything on Facebook, the user is asked to first consider “what’s on your mind?” as the isolating, individualizing frame in which they are able to produce relatable content. Additionally, the definitive logic of Facebook is to “like” – “you click on people that you ‘like,’ i.e that you are ‘like’ yourself. Differences tend to get filtered out, and the end result is a network of like-minded individuals” (Dahlgren, 2015, p.168). In this economy, users are pitted against one another in competition for the number of ‘likes’ or ‘shares’ their content receives as the material basis for the visibility of their digital personae (Milan, 2015). The logic of visibility in social media thereby emphasizes the value of publicity, recognition, reputation, and personal experience over belonging and solidarity. It isolates users into means of expression that are inherently based on the definition of identity as something private, individual, and marketable to other like-minded individuals. The digital persona is not meant to be a means of bridging individual differences between people that builds toward solidarity and collectivity. It is instead an alienated object of user identity: a condition that divides and disconnects users, as labourers, from one another. This results in a form of political discourse in social media that works to serve the visibility of the digital persona. Collectivity becomes a transitory, intermediary stage, and the value of the digital persona as the true representation of an individual becomes the ultimate end goal for users.

Social media users also experience the commodified digital persona as something alien when they attempt to use it as a means of political discourse and organization. Solidarity refers to a moment when individuals recognize themselves in one another as a collective, and are able to articulate a shared goal and responsibility beyond their private, individualistic preferences. However, if we derive an understanding of political participation from a sense of agency that is embedded in our isolated, individualized, and personal identities rather than collective ones, the discursive contribution of social media will tend to deflect solidarity and effective political participation (Dahlgren, 2015). The problem with the massive street demonstrations in Brazil that were fueled by social media in 2013, for example, was that as the movement grew larger through these ‘crowd-enabled networks,’ its political agenda became increasingly fragmented, and discourse became diluted as the protest was taken over by a politics of self-promotion and self-revelation (Porto, 201). The alienating ‘politics of visibility’ in social media have the interests of the digital persona at heart, instead of building toward a collectively defined political identity.

Alienation caused by the digital persona can also be experienced on an intense, subjective level. For those without the requisite social capital, or for those who self-identify too heavily with the digital persona, alienation can manifest itself as a psycho-social malaise. For example, such a condition on Facebook is termed “Facebook depression”. This condition emerges when a user concedes to the
insistence of their digital persona’s authenticity, and by comparing it with others they find themselves inadequate according to the competitive logic of visibility in social media. A three-part study shows that “Facebook depression” occurs when social media users habitually compare the content of their digital persona with others, and by self-identifying with it too much, find that they have less ‘friends’, less ‘followers’, and less ‘likes’ than others do, which leads to intense feelings of social isolation, invisibility, and inadequacy (Steers, Wickham & Acitelli, 2013). When taken seriously, the commodified digital persona becomes the alienated figure of a socially isolated and individualized identity. It is largely removed from corporeal or ontologically-based social relations and exists instead as the authentic representation of an individual that must continually vie with others for visibility. Users are socially alienated by the privatization of the digital persona insofar as they are made to submit to the demand for authenticity by corporate platforms, and isolated further as they are placed in competition with one another for visibility.

The purpose of thinking about the production and management of commodified identities on social media platforms as alienation is to try and understand the kinds of effects it has on users, and how these effects might possibly be curtailed. Critical studies have shown how social media users can be understood as subjects to the same alienating conditions as 20th century industrial workers were: they are exploited and alienated from the products of their labour in the form of the data shadow, and are unable to understand or control the way it is used against them by market interests to define who they are. Their identities are reduced to the status of an object commodity that is used for the upkeep of capitalist economics and to keep them surveilled, individualized, isolated, and unable to effectively cooperate with one another in solidarity. The state of alienation in social media is oppressive not only in the objective figure of the data shadow, which involves exploitation, mass surveillance, and the control over how we are categorically identified, but also in the subjective sense when users are unable to effectively alleviate conditions of objective alienation through political organization and cooperation, and are, instead, isolated from one another and demoralized.

Understanding the alienation of identities in social media is helpful in highlighting the ways in which people are oppressed under these conditions. However, this understanding does not immediately provide us with a way out of these alienating conditions. Kylie Jarrett’s most recent work is especially helpful in emphasizing the importance of digital domestic or reproductive labour. Not all labour is necessarily commodifiable; there are ways users can create affective content that works on building toward a collective mutuality of love, care, and solidarity, and is thereby able to counter the alienating effects of digitally commodified identity (Jarret, 2016b). It is in this sense that critical media studies can look beyond alienation, and toward an understanding of ways to subvert its subjective effects through inalienable forms of digital labour. If critical media studies intend to better understand what it means to (re)build collective love, care, and solidarity, then understanding the role of digital reproductive labour must be central.
References


