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## Social Media? The Unsocial Character of Capitalist Media

Social media are commonly understood as media that foster social interaction, collaboration, sharing and participation. Shirky argues that social media “increase our ability to share, to cooperate, with one another, and to take collective action, all outside the framework of traditional institutional institutions and organizations” (Shirky 2008, 20f). Van Dijk stresses that “The very word ‘social’ associated with media implies that platforms are user centered and that they facilitate communal activities, just as the term ‘participatory’ emphasizes human collaboration. Indeed, social media can be seen as online facilitators or enhancers of *human* networks – webs of people that promote connectedness as a social value” (van Dijk 2013, 11). According to boyd the term social media “is often used to describe the collection of software that enables individuals and communities to gather, communicate, share, and in some cases collaborate or play” (boyd 2009).

These definitions show that qualities such as sharing, collaborating and participating are essential characteristics of social media. The current debate on social media however solely focuses on the level of productive forces. Following this rhetoric new technologies increase the degree of social interaction and thus make certain media social.

Media and media technologies however not only are productive forces but also embedded into certain relations of production<sup>1</sup>. Private companies dominate the contemporary media system. Today’s media not only satisfy certain needs, but also are a profitable business. By neglecting the level of relations of production accounts of social media do not capture the entirety of the social and/or unsocial character of the media today.

This paper aims at extending the debate about social media to the level of relations of production that shape media production, distribution and consumption. I will therefore look at the social impacts of the practices of media companies and discuss whether this contributes to a social or unsocial media system.

### 1. Unsocial Media

Looking at the activities of the most successful media and communication companies reveals that their practices often have a negative impact on individuals, society and the environment. I will in the following consider some concrete examples:

#### Apple

Apple is one of the most successful computer hardware producers in the world. In 2011 Forbes Magazine ranked Apple as the biggest computer hardware company and the second most profitable company in the world<sup>2</sup>. Between 2000 and 2012 Apple’s profit grew 39.2% each year and reached 41.7 billion USD in 2012 (Apple SEC-Filings, 10-k forms).

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<sup>1</sup> In Marxist theory the notion of productive forces describes labour power, raw materials, and means of production (technologies etc), while the concept of relations of production refers to the social relations through which production, distribution, and consumption are organized. Marx described the unfolding of an antagonism between productive forces and relations of production: “At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or – this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms – with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto” (Marx 1859/1987, 263).

<sup>2</sup> Forbes Magazine 2012. The World’s Biggest Public Companies. Retrieved from [http://www.forbes.com/global2000/list/#p\\_1\\_s\\_d4\\_All%20industries\\_All%20countries\\_All%20states](http://www.forbes.com/global2000/list/#p_1_s_d4_All%20industries_All%20countries_All%20states) on February 15, 2013

This economic success comes at a price – a price that is paid mainly by workers in Apple’s supply chain. In May and June 2010 many major western media reported about a series of suicides at factory campuses in China. The factories, at which 17 young workers jumped to death<sup>3</sup> belong to the Taiwan-based company Hon Hai Precision Industry Co. Ltd, better known as Foxconn, which is a major supplier for computer giants such as Apple, Hewlett- Packard, Nokia and Sony Ericsson (FinnWatch, SACOM and SOMO 2011, 8). For some weeks public attention was directed at Apple’s supply chain and gave a glimpse of the working reality behind the bright and shiny surface of computer products.

However, these suicides only are the tip of the iceberg. For several years NGOs have stressed that computers, mp3 players, game consoles, etc are often produced under miserable working conditions. Far away from shopping centres and department stores, workers in developing countries are producing these products during 10 to 12 hour shifts, a minimum of 6 days a week for at best a minimum wage. Apple’s suppliers are no exception.

Among the main critics of Apple’s supply chain business practices are China Labour Watch and SACOM as well as member organizations of the European project makeITfair, which have investigated and criticized working conditions in Apple’s supplier factories. Based on interviews with workers outside factory premises these organization detected:

- Compulsory and excessive overtime (SOMO 2007, 22; FinnWatch, SACOM and SOMO 2009, 37; SACOM 2011b, 5f)
- Low wages that are barely enough to cover basic living expenses such as food and housing (SOMO 2005b, 27; SOMO 2007, 21; FinnWatch, SACOM and SOMO 2009, 44; SACOM 2011b, 4).
- Major restrictions of the freedom of association (Finnwatch, SACOM, SOMO 2009 & 2011).
- Lack of health protection equipment (SOMO 2007, 23; SACOM 2011a, 14), exposure of workers to hazardous substances that resulted in poisoning (SACOM 2010, 2; SACOM 2011a, 14; SACOM 2011b, 7), as well as insufficient information of workers about the chemicals they were using (SACOM 2011a, 14).
- Harsh management style, strict disciplinary measures and harassment of workers (FinnWatch, SACOM and SOMO 2009, 38)
- High work pressure (FinnWatch, SACOM and SOMO 2011, 30) and social isolation (FinnWatch, SACOM and SOMO 2011, 30; SACOM 2011a, 12f)

After the suicide tragedies Apple put renewed emphasis on its commitment to meeting its supply chain responsibility. In its 2013 Supplier Responsibility Report Apple states: “Workers everywhere should have the right to safe and ethical working conditions. They should also have access to educational opportunities to improve their lives. Through a continual cycle of inspections, improvement plans, and verification, we work with our suppliers to make sure they comply with our Code of Conduct and live up to these ideals“ (Apple 2013, 3). In order to demonstrate this commitment Apple in early 2012 published a list of its suppliers and was the first electronics company to join the Fair Labour Association (FLA 2012).

In February 2012 the FLA audited three Foxconn factories in Guanlan, Longhua, and Chengdu in China. This audit shows that major violations of labour rights at Foxconn

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<sup>3</sup> Wired Magazine. 2011. 1 Million Workers. 90 Million iPhones. 17 Suicides. Who’s to blame? By Joel Johnson on Februar 28, 2011. Retrieved from [http://www.wired.com/magazine/2011/02/ff\\_joelinchina/all/1](http://www.wired.com/magazine/2011/02/ff_joelinchina/all/1) on October 23, 2011.

campuses still persist (FLA 2012). The FLA summarizes the results of the audit as follows: “FLA found excessive overtime and problems with overtime compensation; several health and safety risks; and crucial communication gaps that have led to a widespread sense of unsafe working conditions among workers”<sup>4</sup>.

Doubts need to be raised whether any fundamental changes of working conditions in Apple’s supply chain will occur in the near future. According to the 2013 Supplier Responsibility Report the steps Apple is taking in order to improve the situation focus on worker training, monitoring working hours in order to ensure that they do not exceed 60 hours per week, strict policies against child labour and conducting worker safety assessments (Apple 2013). These steps leave one of the most fundamental and most structural problems untouched: the extremely low wage level. Watchdogs have argued workers often depend on overtime work in order to increase their income because their wages are too low to cover their basic living expenses (SACOM 2011a, 10). Apart from the fact that a 60 hours working week is still very long, the measures Apple is proposing do not include any wage raises. Higher wages would have a direct negative impact on Apple’s profit margins. However, as the second most profitable company in the world<sup>5</sup> Apple certainly could afford ensuring higher wage levels.

iPhones, MacBooks, iPads, iPods – are a symbol for modern 21st century lifestyle and progress. The conditions under which these products are produced on the contrary resemble the early days of industrial capitalism. The fact that for example an iPhone costs at least twice or even three times as much as a average monthly salary of a worker in the electronics supply chain reveals a deep separation between workers and the fruits of their labour.

Low wages and long working hours in manufacturing factories on the one hand enable high profit margins on the other hand. Such business practices are unsocial as they conflict general social well-being and the common good - economic success requires the misery of workers and thus hampers the emergence of decent work and self-determined labour in the media and communication sector.

## Google

Google controls 84.77% of the global search engine market<sup>6</sup>. According to the Alexa Top Sites Ranking Google.com is the most frequently accessed website on the Internet<sup>7</sup>. The company’s profits between 2001 and 2010 on average grew by 103% each year and reached 8.5 billion USD in 2010 (Google SEC-Filings, 10-k forms 2004-2010). This income is almost entirely based on advertising: In 2010 Google’s revenues were 29.3 billion USD, 96% of which was generated through advertisements (Google SEC-Filings, 10-k form 2010).

Users can access all of Google’s services free of charge. While using these services users however produce a huge amount of information. This data ranges from demographic

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<sup>4</sup> FLA. 2012. Foxconn Investigation Report. Retrieved from <http://www.fairlabor.org/report/foxconn-investigation-report> on April 10, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Forbes Magazine 2012. The World’s Biggest Public Companies. Retrieved from [http://www.forbes.com/global2000/list/#p\\_1\\_s\\_d4\\_All%20industries\\_All%20countries\\_All%20states](http://www.forbes.com/global2000/list/#p_1_s_d4_All%20industries_All%20countries_All%20states) on February 15, 2013

<sup>6</sup> NetMarketshare. 2012. Search Engine Market Share. Retrieved from <http://netmarketshare.com/report.aspx?qprid=4&qptimeframe=M&qpsp=145> on January 19, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Among the top 100 websites are 19 Google websites: Google.com (rank 1), YouTube.com (rank 3), Blogger.com (rank 7), Google.de (19), Google.com.hk (20), Google.uk (23), Google.co.jp (24), Google.fr (25), Google.com.br (33), Google.it (35), Google.es (41), Google.ru (46), googleusercontent.com (50), Google.com.mx (55), Google.ca (58), google.co.id (69), google.com.tr (80), google.com.au (81), google.pl (92). Source: Alexa.com Top Sites. Accessed from <http://www.alexa.com/topsites> on November 17 2011.

user information, to technical data and usage statistics, to search queries and even the content of emails. Google turns this data into a commodity in order to generate profit: Instead of selling its services as a commodity to users, its business model consists in selling user data as a commodity to advertisers.

Google considers this business model as socially responsible. Its famous corporate credo is "You can make money without being evil"<sup>8</sup>. The company describes its business model as beneficial for both advertisers and users. Advertisers would benefit from personalized marketing opportunities while users would receive relevant ads: "We give advertisers the opportunity to place clearly marked ads alongside our search results. We strive to help people find ads that are relevant and useful, just like our results"<sup>9</sup>.

However, critics highlight that Google's business model is more problematic than this description suggests. Scholars (e.g. Fuchs 2010, Fuchs 2011, Vaidhyanathan 2011, Tene 2008, Tatil 2008, Zimmer 2008, Blackman 2008) as well as corporate watchdogs (GoogleWatch.com<sup>10</sup> Privacy International 2007, Privacy Rights Clearinghouse 2004, Corporate Watch 2008, Google Monitor 2011) highlight that Google's business model of selling user data to advertisers for creating personalized advertisements constitutes a fundamental invasion of user privacy. Google Monitor for example stressed: "Google's targeted advertising business model is no 'privacy by design' and no 'privacy by default'" (Google Monitor 2011). Likewise Vaidhyanathan argues that Google's privacy policy is "pretty much a lack-of-privacy policy" (Vaidhyanathan 2011, 84), Zimmer points out that the model of "search 2.0" which combines search infrastructure with web 2.0 applications leads to "the concentrated surveillance, capture, and aggregation of one's online intellectual and social activities by a single provider" (Zimmer 2008), and Maurer et al. stress that "Google is massively invading privacy" (Maurer et al. 2007, 5). These critics show that the commodification of user data entails the threat of surveillance and invades of the rights of Internet users. The use of user data for advertising purposes requires the creation of databases that contain huge amounts of information about each Google user and to make information about individuals available to private companies. The information stored in databases can be combined in different ways in order to identify different consumer groups that might be susceptible to certain products. For Internet users it becomes impossible to determine, which of their data is stored in which databases and to whom it is accessible. The fact that this information is available could at some point in the future have negative effects for an individual user. The available data could for example support discriminatory practices (Gandy 1993, 2) by allowing to identify which individuals have a certain sexual orientation or political opinion or suffer from a certain disease.

Furthermore extensive advertising does contribute to the commercialization of the Internet. As a consequence of an advertising-based business model, which characterizes not only Google, but most web 2.0 companies (Sandoval 2012), users are permanently confronted and annoyed with ads for consumer goods and services.

Google's philosophy is based on the principle of not being evil. The inventor of this famous motto, Paul Buchheit stressed in an interview that this slogan was intended to demarcate Google from its competitors which "were kind of exploiting the users to some extent" (Buchheit 2008, 170). However, Google's business model is also based on the

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<sup>8</sup> Google. Philosophy. Retrieved from <http://www.google.cn/intl/en/about/company/philosophy/> on February 15, 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Google. Competition. About Ads. Retrieved from <http://www.google.com/competition/howgoogleleadwork.html> on November 18, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> GoogleWatch.com And then we were four. Retrieved from <http://www.google-watch.org/bigbro.html> on January 21, 2012.

exploitation of users (Fuchs 2010, 2011) as it turns data, which Google users produce while using their services, into its property that is then sold as a commodity to advertisers.

Google, like many other online media companies such as Facebook or Yahoo, provides services that are highly valued by most Internet users. However, if they want to use these services they have no other choice than consenting to Google's terms of services and the usage of their data for advertising purposes. This gives Google a high amount of power over deciding about how user data are used and to whom they are made available. The free accessibility of Google's services thus comes at high costs: the renunciation of the right to determine the use of personal information. Despite the fact that Google's products and services enhance social interaction collaboration and sharing, at the level of corporate practices the company remains unsocial as its business interests contradict the possibility of a freely shared and socially controlled online infrastructure.

### News Corp

News Corp owns TV channels and newspapers around the world that supply millions of people with their daily news. Arsenault and Castells estimate that News Corp today reaches around 75% of the global population (Arsenault and Castells 2008, 491). At the same time News Corp ranks among the economically most successful companies in the world. In 2011 the company's founder Rupert Murdoch was the 24th most powerful and the 108th richest person in the world<sup>11</sup>. His power and money are based on the operations of News Corp, the worldwide 158<sup>th</sup> biggest public company and the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest media content company<sup>12</sup>.

For News Corp the production of news is a profitable business. News Corp's media empire extends through North and South America, Europe, Australia and Asia. The company's extensive reach does not only guarantee high profits, but at the same time gives it the power to influence the knowledge, beliefs, and worldviews of its recipients around the globe.

The bigger the economic success of a media company the more capital it can invest for employing journalists, purchasing production technology, advertising etc. This again increases the likelihood of further expansion. Media, that are unsuccessful in attracting recipients and advertisers, run danger to remain marginal. In order to be attractive to as many recipients and advertisers as possible, media content needs to be oriented at the interest of the majority and create an advertising friendly climate. Media that touch oppositional topics or topics that are of interest to political, cultural or other minorities, are critical of consumerism and corporations, or that provide alternative, critical content are less likely to generate enough income to fund high quality production and to advertise their products. A commercial media system thus privileges media that provide mainstream media content and advocate corporate capitalism and consumerism.

In the media content sector, economic power is inherently connected to cultural power. Economically successful media companies can distribute their content to a large number of people. As critics highlight, News Corp uses this power to promote a specific political agenda, while arguing that its journalism is neutral and objective. Critical studies show that News Corp's media content

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<sup>11</sup> Forbes Magazine. 2012. Rupert Murdoch. Retrieved from <http://www.forbes.com/profile/rupert-murdoch/> on April 22, 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Forbes Magazine. 2012. The World's Biggest Public Companies. 2010. Retrieved from [http://www.forbes.com/global2000/list/#p\\_1\\_s\\_a0\\_Broadcasting%20&%20Cable\\_All%20countries\\_All%20states](http://www.forbes.com/global2000/list/#p_1_s_a0_Broadcasting%20&%20Cable_All%20countries_All%20states). Retrieved on March 26, 2013.

- pushes a specific ideology while it at the same time claims to be fair and balanced - studies found biased reporting practices in particular in regard to the US war on terror (Greenslade 2003, Project for Excellence in Journalism 2005; Arsenault and Castells 2008, 501) and climate change (McKnight 2010b, Goodell 2011; Media Matters 2010, Toffel and Schendler 2012, 1). Furthermore critics argue that News Corp is promoting a neoliberal and market populist worldview (Thussu 2007, McKnight 2003 2010a)
- diminishes diversity through enforcing a uniform editorial line throughout its media outlets around the world (Manne 2005, 75f; Greenslade 2003)
- creates misperception among its audience regarding important issues such as climate change or the US war in Iraq (Goodell 2011, PIPA and Knowledge Networks 2003), and leaves its audience uninformed about current political events (Morris 2005, 68, Fairleigh Dickinson University 2011, 1).

Media content companies have the power to act as public watchdogs, to hold the powerful accountable, to provide information, and to spur public debate. News Corp exploits this power to promote a destructive worldview: War, the destruction of nature, economic crises and social inequality pose a threat to individuals and society and are socially undesirable. When arguing for the necessity of war, downplaying the threats of climate change, and advocating neoliberal policies News Corp is presenting the particular interest of some individuals who benefit from war, environmental destruction, and neoliberalism as the general interest of society. News Corp instrumentalizes its media power for distributing ideologies. Furthermore News Corp's reporting creates disinformation and ignorance in society: studies show that its audience often is less informed than people who do not consume any news at all (Fairleigh Dickinson University 2011, 1; Morris 2005, 68). News Corp's practices contradict the potential of media to provide information, to foster education, enlightenment, critical thinking, and debate in society. Quite on the contrary the company instrumentalizes its power for promoting destructive and anti-humanist ideologies that present the particular interests of privileged groups as the general interest of society.

### Microsoft

Microsoft is the largest software company in the world. People around the globe are using Microsoft's proprietary software: In September 2011 the operating system MS Windows had a worldwide market share of 86.57%<sup>13</sup>. Given this dominant market position, it is not surprising that Microsoft is economically highly successful: In 2011 it was the largest software company and the 42<sup>nd</sup> largest company in the world<sup>14</sup>. In the financial year 2012 Microsoft's net profits were almost 17 billion USD, its revenues amounted to 73.7 billion USD and its total assets were 121.2 billion USD (Microsoft SEC-Filings, 10-k form 2012). The business practices that made Microsoft such a successful company, have been strongly criticized. In the late 1990 the company was criminally

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<sup>13</sup> NetMarketshare. 2011. Top Operating System Share Trend. Retrieved from <http://www.netmarketshare.com/os-market-share.aspx?qprid=9> on October 14, 2011.

<sup>14</sup> Forbes Magazine. 2012. The World's Biggest Public Companies. Retrieved from [http://www.forbes.com/global2000/list/#p\\_1\\_s\\_a0\\_Software%20&%20Programming\\_All%20countries\\_All%20states](http://www.forbes.com/global2000/list/#p_1_s_a0_Software%20&%20Programming_All%20countries_All%20states) on February 15, 2013.

convicted both in the United States and in Europe<sup>15</sup> for maintaining “its monopoly power by anti-competitive means”<sup>16</sup>.

Apart from these violations of anti-trust law, critics highlight that even on a more basic level Microsoft’s business model is socially irresponsible. Microsoft’s business success is based on proprietary software and thus on software patents: Until today Microsoft has registered 22,501 patents at the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office<sup>17</sup>. Further 26,398 patent requests are currently pending<sup>18</sup>.

Civil society initiatives such as the Free Software Foundation’s End Software Patents in the United States and No Software Patents in Europe highlight that software patents are problematic in several respects: Their main arguments against software patents include that software patents create advantages for large corporations and lead to monopolization; hinder innovation; threaten the freedom of information; create artificial scarcity and that software consists of mathematical formulas and abstract ideas, which are not patentable<sup>19,20</sup>. Open Source Watch stresses that “For many in the open source community, the company [Microsoft] represents all that is troubling about closed source software development” (OSS Watch 2011).

Software is a form of knowledge - its development requires certain skills and previous knowledge ranging from mathematical rules to specific programming languages. Microsoft’s software thus contains previous knowledge and through patenting software Microsoft exploits the common stock of knowledge of society for creating private property. Based on this privatization, Microsoft is able to prevent others from accessing this knowledge.

Microsoft is aware of the fact that patents are a fetter to creativity and innovation. Bill Gates in 1991 stressed that patents hamper technological innovation: “If people had understood how patents would be granted when most of today’s ideas were invented, and had taken out patents, the industry would be at a complete standstill today” (Gates 1991).

Microsoft’s business practices thus deprive society from the best possible software. Making all software source codes publicly available would allow other programmers to further adapt, develop, and improve software. Collectively, the chances are higher that software is developed that matches the various needs of individuals and society. Microsoft’s business interests conflict with the common good: Instead of allowing the collective capacities of the human intellect to develop the best possible software for society and making it universally accessible. Microsoft patents software and

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<sup>15</sup> The Guardian. 2006. EU Hits Microsoft 280.5m Antitrust Fine. By Mark Tran on July 12, 2006. Retrieved from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2006/jul/12/europeanunion.digitalmedia> on October 3, 2011.

<sup>16</sup> United States of America vs. Microsoft Corporation. 2000. Conclusions of Law. Retrieved from [http://news.cnet.com/html/ne/Special/Microsoft/conclusions\\_of\\_law\\_and\\_order.html](http://news.cnet.com/html/ne/Special/Microsoft/conclusions_of_law_and_order.html) on October 3, 2011

<sup>17</sup> U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. List of Microsoft Patents. Retrieved from <http://patft.uspto.gov/netacgi/nph-Parser?Sect1=PTO2&Sect2=HITOFF&p=1&u=%2Fnetacgi%2FPTO%2Fsearch-bool.html&r=0&f=S&l=50&TERM1=microsoft&FIELD1=ASNM&co1=AND&TERM2=&FIELD2=&d=PTXT> on September 28, 2011.

<sup>18</sup> U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. List of Microsoft Patent Applications. Retrieved from <http://appft1.uspto.gov/netacgi/nph-Parser?Sect1=PTO2&Sect2=HITOFF&u=%2Fnetacgi%2Fsearch-adv.html&r=0&p=1&f=S&l=50&d=PG01&Query=an%2Fmicrosoft%24> on September 28, 2011.

<sup>19</sup> End Software Patents. Why Abolish Software Patents. Retrieved from [http://en.swpat.org/wiki/Software\\_patents\\_wiki:\\_home\\_page](http://en.swpat.org/wiki/Software_patents_wiki:_home_page) on October 6, 2011.

<sup>20</sup> No Software Patents. The Dangers. Retrieved from <http://www.nosoftwarepatents.com/en/m/dangers/index.html> on October 6, 2011.

monopolizes access to knowledge in order to create the highest possible profits for the company.

## HP

HP according to the market analyst International Data Corporation (IDC), in September 2011 controlled 41% of the worldwide hardcopy peripherals market (IDC 2011). In 2011 its profits amounted to 5.9 billion USD and Forbes Magazine ranked HP as the second biggest computer hardware company worldwide<sup>21</sup>.

HP generates profit through the sale of computer hardware. Computer products often contain various toxic substances that threaten human health and the environment. HP is no exception. The company has been criticized for

- high concentration of toxic substances in HP products (Greenpeace 2006a, 109; (Greenpeace 2009, 32; Greenpeace 2005a).
- untrue claims about the elimination of certain flame-retardant PDBE chemicals (Greenpeace 2006b)
- insufficient take back programs, especially in developing countries (Greenpeace 2011, 1)
- HP products found at waste dumps in developing countries (BAN 2005, 37, Greenpeace 2005b; Greenpeace 2007)

Insufficient take back programs increase the likelihood of used HP products being inadequately disposed and ending up as part of (illegal) eWaste exports to developing countries. The recycling of eWaste without proper protection equipment, as it takes place in many developing countries, can have devastating effects on human health and the environment.

One important measure to reduce these dangers is to avoid the production of waste. HP is one of the largest hardware companies in the world. Generating profit requires to continuously sell computer hardware. Short life-spans and high obsolescence of computer products allow to increase sales numbers. Most computers today are built in a way that makes the exchange of individual parts difficult. The difficulty to exchange individual computer parts, combined with high prices for repair services force many computer users to replace their computer devices as soon as one part of it breaks. Advertising and rapid introduction of new product versions and follow up-products that promise increased functionality and improved optical design, albeit often containing little technological innovation, further contribute to the creation of a throw-away culture. In financial terms HP benefits from this throw-away culture. The design of HP's ink cartridges for example directly fosters the production of waste. HP's inkjet printers are sold at relatively cheap prices. The corresponding ink cartridges are not refillable. This means that after having printed some hundred pages the ink cartridge needs to be disposed and a new cartridge needs to be bought. AlterNet therefore called HP's printer cartridges an "e-waste disaster"<sup>22</sup>. For example, HP's most popular printer on Amazon.com is the HP Deskjet 1000 Printer. It ranks on bestseller rank 5 in the category

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<sup>21</sup> Forbes Magazine. 2012. The Biggest Public Companies. Retrieved from [http://www.forbes.com/global2000/list/#p\\_1\\_s\\_a0\\_Computer%20Hardware\\_All%20countries\\_All%20states](http://www.forbes.com/global2000/list/#p_1_s_a0_Computer%20Hardware_All%20countries_All%20states) on March 26, 2013.

<sup>22</sup> AlterNet. HP's Printer Cartridges Are an E-Waste Disaster – Does the Company Really Care. Retrieved from [http://www.alternet.org/environment/65945/hp%27s\\_printer\\_cartridges\\_are\\_an\\_e-waste\\_disaster\\_--\\_does\\_the\\_company\\_really\\_care/?page=2](http://www.alternet.org/environment/65945/hp%27s_printer_cartridges_are_an_e-waste_disaster_--_does_the_company_really_care/?page=2) on November 15, 2011.

“printers” and on bestseller rank 1 in the category “inkjet printers”<sup>23</sup>. The printer costs 29 USD. The black cartridge is sold at 14.5 USD and the tri-colour cartridge at 16.65 USD. According to HP the black cartridge allows printing up to 190 pages<sup>24</sup> and the tri-colour cartridge prints up to 165 pages<sup>25</sup>. The price of the printer seems low compared to the price of ink cartridges, which need to be repurchased regularly. Based on this business model it seems obvious that HP has no interest in selling fewer cartridges. As the above example show one ink cartridge allows for printing less than 200 pages. If the cartridge is empty consumer have no other option than disposing the cartridge and replacing it through a new one. HP does not remanufacture ink cartridges or provide refilling options. On its website HP states that this policy is due to less printing quality of refilled cartridges<sup>26</sup>. A refilling model however could contribute to avoiding waste and therefore be more sustainable than a model that is based one-way cartridge that have to be replaced frequently.

HP has the power to decide about how computer products should be designed. They could be built in an environmentally friendly way. In this regard important measures would be to foster innovation that allows reducing the amount of hazardous products to an absolute minimum, to construct robust products with long life spans and exchangeable parts, to build refillable ink cartridges, etc.

In its CSR communication HP commits to environmental protection: “Environmental protection is a complex undertaking, but the laws of nature are simple. We will provide leadership on the journey to an environmentally sustainable future, with efficient products and creative recycling systems” (HP 2001,1). HP’s goal regarding waste is to increase the total amount of recycled products (HP 2010, 119). However, an absolute increase of the amount of recycled products does not necessarily indicate an improvement. Only if the total number of sold products remains the same or is reduced, this would mean a reduction of inadequately disposed waste. HP however does not aim at increasing product-life spans or reducing the amount of products sold to users. At a certain point, every computer product will need to be disposed. The shorter product-life spans, the more products can HP sell, and the more waste will be produced. Short product life cycles thus benefit the profit interests of HP, but increase the amount of eWaste which threatens the environment and human health, particularly in developing countries in which HP’s take back programs are insufficient, and to which eWaste continues to be (illegally) exported.

The practices of the media companies discussed above are unsocial as they privilege private profit interests over general social wellbeing. Rather than fostering self-determined work, developing sustainable IT products, creating a shared and safe online infrastructure, an open, accessible culture and collective knowledge resources or encouraging critical thinking, the practices of these companies rest on the exploitation of

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<sup>23</sup> Amazon.com. Bestsellers in Computer Printers. Retrieved from [http://www.amazon.com/Best-Sellers-Electronics-Computer-Printers/zgbs/electronics/172635/ref=zg\\_bs\\_unv\\_e\\_3\\_3071697011\\_2](http://www.amazon.com/Best-Sellers-Electronics-Computer-Printers/zgbs/electronics/172635/ref=zg_bs_unv_e_3_3071697011_2) on November 15, 2011.

<sup>24</sup> HP. Home & Home Office Store. Retrieved from [http://www.shopping.hp.com/product/CH561WN%2523140?landing=supplies&category=ink\\_toner&family\\_name=](http://www.shopping.hp.com/product/CH561WN%2523140?landing=supplies&category=ink_toner&family_name=) on November 15, 2011.

<sup>25</sup> HP. Home & Home Office Store. Retrieved from [http://www.shopping.hp.com/store/product/product\\_detail/CH562WN%2523140](http://www.shopping.hp.com/store/product/product_detail/CH562WN%2523140) on November 15, 2011.

<sup>26</sup> HP. The Truth About Remanufactured Ink and Toner Cartridges. Retrieved from [http://www.hp.com/sbso/product/supplies/remanufactured-ink-toner.html?jumpid=ex\\_R295\\_go/suppliesreliability](http://www.hp.com/sbso/product/supplies/remanufactured-ink-toner.html?jumpid=ex_R295_go/suppliesreliability) on November 15, 2011.

workers, threaten human health and the environment, push the commodification of user data, create cultural enclosures and monopolize knowledge or promote destructive ideologies.

Based on these examples that evidence the unsocial character of corporate media I will in the next section move on to a more theoretical level in order to further explore why capitalist relations of media production have implications that are unsocial.

## **2. Private Media vs. Common Media**

The unsocial media I discussed above have in common that they are private companies that are producing media for a profit. In order to do so they need to sell commodities. For that purpose, either media products themselves such as hardware, software, movies or books, or data about as well as the attention of audiences are transformed into commodities. While the former are sold to media consumers, the latter are sold to advertisers. Private media companies therefore adhere to the logic of property that is based on private ownership of means of production and individual property holders that engage in the purchase and sale of commodities. The exchange of commodities thus rests at the centre of the logic of property. Opposed to the logic of property lies the logic of the common. Nick Dyer-Witheford argues that the common, contrary to the commodity, is not sold, but shared: “A commodity is a good produced for sale, a common is a good produced, or conserved, to be shared” (Dyer-Witheford 2010a, 82). Similarly, David Harvey points out that the common is collective and non-commodified: “At the heart of the practice of communing lies the principle that the relation between the social group and that aspect of the environment being treated as common shall be both collective and non-commodified – off limits to the logic of market exchange and market valuations” (Harvey 2012, 73).

According to Hardt and Negri commons on the one hand are “the common wealth of the material world” (Hardt and Negri 2009, viii). On the other hand commons are the “results of social production that are necessary for social interaction and further production such as knowledge, languages, codes, information, affects, and so forth” (Hardt and Negri 2009, viii). Slavoj Žižek distinguishes between the commons of culture such as language, education as well as important social infrastructure, and the commons of internal and external nature (Žižek 2009, 91). Nick Dyer-Witheford identifies different moments in the circuit of the common: eco-social commons as collective planning institutions for internal and external health; labour commons as the “democratized organization of productive and reproductive work” (Dyer-Whiteford 2010b); and networked commons referring to networks as collective infrastructure. In the circulation of the common these different moments reinforce each other and enable the production of common goods and services, a “commonwealth” (Dyer-Whiteford 2010b).

In order to better understand the logic of property and the logic of the common and how they relate to (un)social media, it is necessary to describe both in a more systematic way: Hofkirchner and Fuchs (2003) argue that society consists of an economic, a political and a cultural system. The economy is the system that organizes the production, distribution, and consumption of resources. The central power in this area thus is the possession of ownership rights (Hofkirchner and Fuchs 2003, 5). The system of politics is concerned with making collective decisions regarding all aspects of social life. Power in this system is related to the ability to participate in decision-making processes (Hofkirchner and Fuchs 2003, 6). The system of culture deals with the rules of society. Power in this system means the power to define rules, norms, values, and

morals (Hofkirchner and Fuchs 2003, 6). The three sub-system of society in summary regulate ownership rights, decision power, and the rules and norms of society. The logic of the common and the logic of property differ regarding each of these three aspects:

- *The logic of the common:* In the logic of the common the economy is organized based on the principle of common ownership of means of production. Production is collectively organized. The commons are shared among collectivities. The main principle that guides the sphere of politics is participatory democracy. Every member of society has the power to participate in decisions concerning all important areas of social life, including the economy. According to the cultural logic of the common achieving the common good requires universal values that support economic and political participation such as solidarity, equality, inclusion, sharing and cooperation.
- *The logic of property:* Following the logic of property, the means of production belong to individual property holders. Production is privately organized and individual property holders exchange commodities among each other. Decision power in the logic of property is concentrated in the hands of political and economic elites. Elected representatives decide on the rules of society. Economic life is largely excluded from democratic decision-making. Within a certain legal framework the owners of means of production have the right to decide how to employ them to produce which goods in which way. Following the cultural logic of property the common good can be realized based on particularist values that support economic and political elitism such as self-interest, profit maximization, and competition.

To sum up: The logic of the common is based on common ownership, participatory decision power, and universal values. It is economically, politically and culturally inclusive and solidary and can therefore be described as a social logic. The logic of private property is based on private ownership, elitist decision power, and particularist values. It is economically, politically and culturally exclusive and self-interested and can therefore be described as an unsocial logic.

At these three levels – (a) economy, (b) politics, and (c) culture – the business practices of the companies I discussed in section 1 exhibit the logic of private property:

(a) *Economy:* The studied companies are privately owned corporations that produce commodities that are exchanged on the market. Their business practices require the commodification and appropriation of commons, i.e. transformation of social and collective into private and individual property. This commodification affects all moments of the circuit of the common: eco-social commons, labour commons, networked commons (Dyer-Withford 2010b).

- Commodification of eco-social commons: HP is an example for the appropriation of eco-social commons. Products with short life-spans increase HP's sales numbers and at the same time increase the amount of eWaste that can potentially destroy the environment and that threatens human health. Sustainable IT products with high quality and long life spans would reduce profit margins as they are more expensive to produce and at the same time would reduce sales numbers, as sustainable products can be used for longer time periods. HP's business model on the contrary allows generating high profits while threatening internal and external nature.
- Commodification of labour commons: The example of Apple illustrates that the logic of property depends on the commodification of labour power. Millions of workers, especially in developing economies, who do not have anything else to sell but their labour power, are forced to work in factories in order to be able to make a living. The conditions under which workers in China and other low-cost production countries are

working today resemble 19th century capitalism. Low wages combined with excessive working hours allow companies such as Apple to lower production cost and increase profit margins, while threatening the physical and mental health of workers. These companies exploit the human propensity to work in order to maximize private profit.

- **Commodification of networked commons:** The examples of Microsoft, News Corp, and Google illustrate the appropriation of networked commons through the logic of property. In order to realize profit companies such as Microsoft depend on intellectual property rights that turn cultural and knowledge products into scarce commodities. Instead of allowing an open and accessible culture to flourish, they introduce access restrictions that hamper creativity and knowledge production while fostering cultural inequality.

Google provides free access to its services for all Internet users. This universal access contradicts the logic of property. For being nevertheless able to generate profit, Google depends on the sale of a different commodity: user data. In the logic of property, free access on the one hand comes with further commodification on the other hand. Google's services make the Internet searchable and online content accessible and thus form an important infrastructure of the web. However, Google's business interests prevent this infrastructure from becoming common and collective as its usage comes at the cost of the commodification of personal information, which enforces the logic of property.

News Corp generates profit through selling space for advertisements as well as restricting access to media content. For News Corp's news, information, and other media content is a means for generating profit. Either it is sold as a commodity to consumers or it is used for attracting an audience whose attention can be sold to advertisers. News Corp has been successful in generating profit through producing media content. This allowed the company to expand its reach and to gain high symbolic power, which News Corp uses for promoting the values of the logic of property. Instead of being a collective knowledge and information resource, News Corp turns media content into a means for both generating profit and promoting particularist values that ideologically support the imperative of profit maximization.

(b) *Politics:* Also at the political level the studied companies illustrate the logic of property. As they are private companies the decision power over the companies' activities is concentrated in the hands of their owners. Other actors who are either directly or indirectly affected by a company's activities, such as workers or local communities, have no influence on the company's decisions. The only way society can influence the activities of corporations is indirectly via government regulation. Their economic power gives the owners of the studied companies the power over decisions that affect all members of society. The private organization of the media and communication system gives companies the power to decide which hardware products are produced and how, how they are designed, which music is "worth" producing, how software is designed, which topics are worth reporting about, who receives access to the Internet at which speed, and which user data is stored and who can access it, etc. In a commercial media system, the media are individually controlled by its owners rather than being socially and democratically controlled by all members of society.

(c) *Culture:* All discussed companies are economically highly successful. Generating profit is their main purpose of existence. At the same time these companies commit to certain values that go beyond the mere pursuit of profit. They highlight that they do not exclusively focus on the particularist value of individual profit maximization, but care

about how business practices affect the common good. Apple for examples stresses that “Workers everywhere should have the right to safe and ethical working conditions” (Apple 2013, 3); Microsoft repeatedly made a “comprehensive commitment to digital inclusion, and to help address inequities” (Microsoft 2004, 48), News Corp claims to be a “fair and balanced company”<sup>27</sup>, Google stresses that “You can make money without being evil”<sup>28</sup>, and HP highlights that it is “pursuing a vision of corporate success that goes beyond just creating value for shareholders—we are helping to create a better world” (HP 2010, 4).

These statements taken from the companies’ corporate communication draw on values of the logic of the common in order to provide greater legitimacy to corporate behaviour. However, research conducted by corporate watchdogs reveals that despite commitments to social values, corporate practices in many respects are unsocial. During the past 10 years the studied companies could increase their profits, while they at the same time created miserable working conditions, exploited human labour power, threatened human health and the environment, promoted destructive ideologies and restricted access to culture, knowledge, and important technological infrastructure of society. Unsocial media make use of universal values, which characterize the logic of the common, while actual corporate practices privilege profit maximization over the common good. They instrumentalize the cultural logic of the common as they strategically refer to universal values for generating legitimacy for corporate practices that follow the logic of property and the particularist value of profit maximization.

To sum up: The business activities of the studied media and communication companies are based on the unsocial logic of property. They commodify the commons of society, rely on undemocratic decision-making, and are guided by the particular value of profit maximization.

### **3. Social Media as Commons-Based Media**

In principle, private media and communication companies such as the ones presented in section 1 produce goods and provide services that are beneficial for society: computer hardware, software, news and entertainment, music, movies, online search infrastructure, telecommunication infrastructure, etc. Even though some of them are social at the level of productive forces as they enable social interaction and cooperation, they remain unsocial at the level of relations of production as they are privately owned (economy), privately controlled (politics) and based on socially exclusive values (culture).

Through subordinating the production and distribution of media and communication products under the logic of property, commercial media support the profit interests of shareholders but cannot unfold their full benefits for society. The ways hardware, software, music, news and entertainment, Internet and telecommunication infrastructure are produced under the logic of property, have negative side-effects for individuals, society, and the environment. Capitalist media thus remain unsocial in a very profound way.

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<sup>27</sup> Rupert Murdoch quoted in The Guardian. 2004. Murdoch: Fox News Does Not Favour Bush. Retrieved from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2004/oct/26/newscorporation.uselections2004> on February 12, 2012.

<sup>28</sup> Google. Philosophy. Retrieved from <http://www.google.cn/intl/en/about/company/philosophy/> on February 15, 2013.

Truly social media on the contrary are media that are socially owned (economy), socially controlled (politics) and are based on socially inclusive values (culture). They benefit all members of society rather than serving private profit interests. Creating a media and communication system that is truly social requires looking at alternatives that are based on the logic of the common.

The commodification of the common through private media is not unchallenged. Commercial media not only commodify and appropriate the commons but also depend on them (in this context see Hardt and Negri 2009, 153). Massimo De Angelis therefore calls the relationship between capitalism and the commons schizophrenic: “On the one hand, capital is a social force that requires continuous enclosures; that is, the destruction and commodification of non-commodified common spaces and resources. However, there is also an extent to which capital has to accept the non-commodified and *contribute to its constitution*” (De Angelis 2009, 33). Hardt and Negri argue, that “contemporary forms of capitalist production and accumulation in fact, despite their continuing drive to privatize resources and wealth, paradoxically make possible and even require expansion of the common” (Hardt and Negri 2009, ix). By following the “social media” trend and increasingly providing products and services that enable social connections, sharing, cooperation and the production of media commons, private media companies at the same time accelerate the antagonism between the social character of productive forces and the unsocial character of relations of production. However, until today media companies have been quite successful in capturing the social usage of media that produces media commons and transforming it into a means for generating private profit. Sublating this contradiction thus requires resistance against the capture of social media within unsocial relation of production. It requires a political movement that takes up this contradiction and struggles for the expansion of the social logic from productive forces to relations of production in order to establish a commons-based media system that allows the media to become truly social.

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