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Chapter 14

The Political Economy of Capitalist and Alternative Social Media

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<165> This chapter provides an overview of political economy questions that arise when discussing the relationship of capitalist and alternative social media. We begin by clarifying the notion of social media, before going on to examine aspects of the political economy of alternative media. We then apply these aspects to the realm of social media in order to discuss the relationship between capitalist and alternative social media. This includes a discussion of the contradictory character of social media in the Occupy movement.

What are social media?

During the past fifteen years, a number of new platforms have become prominent and now range among the 50 most-accessed World Wide Web (WWW) sites in the world (alexa.com 2013). They include:

- social networking sites: Facebook (#2, founded in 2004), LinkedIn (#8, 2003), VKontakte (#22, 2006);
- video-sharing platforms: YouTube (#3, 2005), XVideos (#41, 1997);
- wikis: Wikipedia (#6, 2001);
- blogs: Blogspot (#12, 1999), Wordpress (#15, 2003), Blogger (#38, 1999);
- microblogs: Twitter (#10, 2006), Sina Weibo (#34, 2009);
- online pinboards: Tumblr (#25, 2007), Pinterest (#27, 2010); and
- photo-sharing sites: Instagram (#37, 2010).

These platforms allow users to generate and share texts and multimedia contents and/or to collaboratively create and edit content and/or to communicate with a <166> self-defined network of contacts and friends. Given the focus on sharing, communication and collaboration, some observers have argued that the Internet and the WWW have fundamentally changed. The notions of Web 2.0 and social media have been introduced in this context (Levinson, 2012; Mandiberg, 2012; O'Reilly, 2005; O'Reilly and Battelle, 2009; Shirky, 2011). Levinson (2012) has termed these platforms "new new media".

Is it not the case, though, that all media are social, if only because they enable the organisation of society and the communication of information? The question that therefore needs to be asked is: What does it mean to be social? Finding answers requires engagement with social theories and theories of society (Fuchs, 2014c). Depending on which concept of the social one utilises – for example, Karl Marx's notion of collaborative work, Ferdinand Tönnies's concept of communities, Max Weber's notions of social action and social relations, Émile Durkheim's concept of social facts and so on – we might find different ways to differentiate social media from 'non-social' media.

An integrated model of sociality distinguishes various levels of sociality that are dialectically interconnected (Fuchs, 2014c). For the media world, this means that specific media support specific information processes and do not support others – the telephone, for example, supports communication, but is not well suited for

collaborative work.

The internet has for a long time supported processes of cognition, communication and collaboration (Fuchs, 2008, 2014c). Online collaboration has not emerged with wikis, but was much earlier enabled by Computer-Supported Collaborative Work (CSCW) systems. Blogs, microblogs, wikis, social networking sites, content-sharing platforms and pinboards are therefore not radically new. They do, however, often offer integrated forms of cognition, communication and collaboration on one platform, with the consequence that modes of sociality converge within platforms (Fuchs, 2014c). With the rise of the above-mentioned platforms, community maintenance and collaborative work have become more important on the internet (ibid.). These sites do not constitute a fundamental digital revolution, but rather simultaneously sustain and transform the social online so that the social media world has become more complex (ibid.).

The political economy of alternative media

Definitions of alternative media can be categorised into more subjective and more objective approaches (Sandoval and Fuchs, 2010; Fuchs, 2010). Subjective approaches stress the active participation in the production and circulation of media content; people organise and control the media themselves in DIY processes – alternative media are considered as participatory, as ‘citizens’ media’ (Atton, 2002; Carpentier, 2011; Rodríguez, 2001). Objective approaches are more interested in content. They argue that alternative media diffuse content and worldviews that question dominant realities, provide critical information and give voice to critical viewpoints that tend to be marginalised in the mainstream media – especially the views of progressive social movements and activists – and have a vision of an alternative society without domination (Downing, 2001; Negt and Kluge, 1993; O’Sullivan, 1995).

Table 14.1 provides an ideal-typical model of alternative media. It identifies various potential dimensions of alternative media and contrasts them to capitalist ‘mainstream’ media. The model is based on a media communication model that distinguishes between media actors (media producers, media consumers, audiences and users) and media structures (structures of ownership and control, form and content structures) that are interconnected in a structure-agency dialectic. Media producers create contents under specific organisational structures and media forms that are distributed in society and thereby reach media consumers who react to the provided content in different ways, providing further incentives for media production.

Table 14.1 Characteristics of alternative media and capitalist media (based on Sandoval and Fuchs, 2010; Sandoval, 2009).

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		<i>Capitalist mass media</i>	<i>Ideal alternative media</i>	
Media structure	Economic form of media products	Media product as commodity	Noncommercial media product	
	Content of media products	Ideological content	Critical content	
Media actors	Consumers	Many consumers	Critical consumers	Critical prosumers
	Producers	Few producers	Critical producers	

Capitalist mass media are privately owned and accumulate capital by selling media content as well as audiences for that content. These media often disseminate ideological content that does not question, but rather affirms capitalist society or that advances reductionist views and prejudices against minorities (Fuchs, 2011; Golding and Murdock, 1997; Wasko, Murdock and Sousa, 2011). These media also tend to marginalise critical voices and activists who struggle for a participatory democracy that replaces capitalism. The commercial structure of these media can often act as a form of economic censorship: the profit mechanism is not questioned because corporate media operate on this principle themselves; companies are important advertising clients and the rich important consumers that are especially interesting for advertisers (ibid.). Given these conditions, capitalist media are more likely to affirm capitalism and domination than to be critical of it.

In capitalist mass media, there is typically a division between professional media producers and media consumers. In the ideal type of alternative media, media consumers are also media producers who create engaging, multidimensional, dialectical and critical content, and collectively own and control media organisations. Ideal alternative media also include an engaged critical public that is active in vivid critical public debates about politics, culture and society. In the alternative media model, there is no separation between media producers and consumers. The ideal type of alternative media combines what we have termed subjective and objective definitions of alternative media (Fuchs, 2010; Sandoval, 2009; Sandoval and Fuchs, 2010).

The critical political economy of the media and communication is an approach that studies the production, circulation and consumption of information in the context of capitalism, power structures, domination and inequality (Mosco, 2009). It is a normative approach to the extent that it relates the created knowledge to the ideal of a <168> society and to a media system that benefits all and that practices sympathy with progressive social movements. Given that alternative media exist within capitalist society, a society based on fundamental inequalities, it is therefore not just important to study alternative media practices and structures, but to relate such studies to a critical political-economic analysis of alternative media and corporate media. Not all dimensions of alternative media are always present in one particular alternative medium because of the contradictions of the political economy of capitalism that makes influence dependent on the control of money and political power, which are resources that alternative media tend to criticise. The model of alternative media presented in Table 14.1 is therefore an ideal type with analytical dimensions that may or may not be observed in reality. It enables us to provide answers to the question of

what the term ‘alternative’ in the category of ‘alternative media’ can actually mean: alternatives do not just have one, but multiple dimensions and meanings.

The political economy of capitalism imposes a fundamental limit on contemporary alternative media: within capitalism, to reach the broader public requires money, people, reputation and political influence, but capitalism is a society grounded in the asymmetric distribution of political, economic and cultural resources. The ruling political-economic class, albeit inherently antagonistic itself and therefore split up into competing factions, tends as a contradictory united hegemonic bloc to dominate society. Alternative media tend to be critical of the ruling class and therefore often face resource inequalities: the history of alternative media is a history of precarious voluntary work. Such media tend to lack money, attention, influence and other resources. If, on the one hand, alternative media adopt the predominant mechanisms of power, such as advertising, intellectual property rights, for-profit sales, association with political parties or state funding, they are facing the danger of losing their autonomy and their capacity to be critical. If, on the other hand, they reject these mechanisms, they face the problem of how to mobilise resources. Their voices then tend to remain marginal, and their organisations tend to be based on unpaid and voluntary work of people who in addition to media activism must earn a living in the capitalist economy, which threatens the stability and existence of alternative media.

Alternative media exist against and cannot truly exist within capitalism. *They face a fundamental antagonism between critical autonomy and voice* (Fuchs, 2010; Sandoval and Fuchs, 2010). As Atton and Hamilton (2008: 26) put it, the “general political-economic dilemma for any critical project is that it needs resources with which to work, but those crucial resources are present only in the very society that it seeks to change or dissolve”.

Capitalist social media

Herbert Schiller (1991) revised his early concept of cultural imperialism as American empire by arguing that contemporary cultural imperialism predominantly takes the form of transnational corporate domination, in which transnational capitalist companies tend to control the media and culture, colonise these realms by the logic of capital accumulation and exert pressure in order to make states liberalise, privatise and deregulate media and culture and to create deregulated precarious working conditions for cultural workers.

<169> Dal Yong Jin (2013) analysed the political economy of the most frequently used web platforms and found that 98 per cent are for-profit and only 2 per cent non-profit; 88 per cent use targeted advertising as capital accumulation model, and 10 per cent other models such as the sale of products and services, subscriptions/pay-per-view and classified ads. Jin concludes that the capitalist domination of the internet constitutes a form of cultural imperialism in Schiller’s (1991) understanding of the term. Jin calls this ‘platform imperialism’. Although there was also a minority of Chinese, Japanese, Russian, British, Brazilian and French platforms, 72 per cent of the sites in the sample are owned by transnational US companies. Most non-American platforms also use the targeted advertising model that has resulted in major concerns about users’ privacy, the exploitation of digital labour and the commercialisation of life (ibid.). Chinese companies owned 17 per cent of platforms analysed in the sample, but given the dominance of neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics (Harvey, 2005; Zhao, 2008) it is no surprise that “Chinese platforms, including Baidu, QQ, and Taobao, utilize the targeted advertising capital business model, which is not different from US Internet capitalism” (Jin, 2013: 166).

Social media and protest movements

An important question about contemporary politics is what role social media have played in contemporary political and revolutionary movements, such as the Arab Spring, Occupy, 15-M in Spain, the Indignant Citizens Movement in Greece, Yo Soy 132 in Mexico, the Taksim Gezi Park movement in Turkey, the Free Fare Movement in Brazil and the opposition in the Syrian civil war. Whereas some scholars' claims that contemporary revolutions and rebellions are social media movements or networked protests of connective action (Castells, 2012; Bennett and Segerberg, 2013; see Fuchs, 2014c: chapters 4 and 8 and 2014b for a detailed criticism) reflect the populist and techno-determinist sentiments of the tabloid press about 'Facebook and Twitter revolutions', other scholars have warned that such arguments are technologically determinist and neglect that social media are not only activists' tools, but are also shaped by state and capitalist power (Fuchs, 2012, 2014b, 2014c; Morozov, 2013). In addition, social media do not seem to result in democratic networked organisation structures, but are embedded into hierarchies, internal power structures and the formation of elites within social movements (Gerbaudo, 2012).

The optimism that surrounds social media overestimates the role of digital media in protest movements; we argue that optimism should be substituted by an approach that uses a combination of critical theories of society and empirical social research. This approach would ground a dialectical theory of media and society, and inform empirical studies of the role and relationship of capitalist and non-capitalist media and of digital and non-digital media in contemporary social movements.

Activists' use of social media

OccupyMedia! The Occupy Movement and Social Media in Crisis Capitalism (Fuchs, 2014b) presents the results of a survey in which 429 respondents who described themselves as Occupy activists participated. Studying activists' experiences with and attitudes towards corporate and alternative social media was one of the study's main tasks. The survey confirmed that contemporary movements tend to use capitalist social media as well as activist-run alternative digital media platforms and that there is a contradiction between their use of these two types of media; 48.9 per cent of the respondents say that during the protests they at least once per month shared photos in Facebook–Occupy groups, whereas only 15.3 per cent did the same on alternative social networking sites such as Diaspora*, N-1 or Occupii. Furthermore, 62.8 per cent of the respondents used Facebook at least four times a month during the protests for communicating or discussing with other activists, whereas 30.0 per cent used various Occupy chats for the same purpose at least four times per month and 16.6 per cent Riseup communication tools for the same number of times. Whereas 61.5 per cent of the respondents had at least four personal face-to-face conversations per month during the protests that aimed at mobilising others, 54.3 per cent at least four times a month posted announcements on their Facebook profile for the same purpose. And 43.2 per cent posted at least four times a month mobilisation communications in Occupy groups on Facebook. In contrast, 6.5 per cent at least four times per month posted mobilisation-oriented announcements to their own profile on the alternative social networking site Occupii. The share of the same activity was 4.2 per cent on N-1 profiles and 1.4 per cent on Diaspora* profiles.

The data indicate that contemporary political activists tend to use capitalist social

media to a much higher degree than they do activist-run alternative social media, whether for activist communication, reaching the public or protest mobilisation. Why is this the case? One respondent argued: “All the activists are already there, but so are regular people. I think it’s one of the main goals of the Occupy movement to reach out to the rest of the 99% ... Facebook is the only place where we can speak to the people.” Also, 69.5 per cent of survey respondents said that the big advantage of commercial social media such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter is that activists can reach out to the public and everyday people.

Activists’ use of corporate social media seems to face a contradiction between the possibilities for better communication and the risk of corporate and state control of protest communication. Facebook, Google and other corporate social media are making billions of dollars in advertising revenue every year (Fuchs, 2014c). They are part of the 1 per cent of rich owners and managers that dominate the economy. Why do the rest of the people – what Occupy calls the 99 per cent – trust that these companies will deal with their data in a responsible manner and not censor them? Edward Snowden’s revelation of the PRISM surveillance system shows the dangers of the surveillance-industrial complex, in which Google, Facebook and others support and provide data to the National Security Agency (NSA). Evidence has indicated that social media surveillance has also been directed at protestors and civil society activists (Hodai, 2013). State intelligence institutions and private corporations have long collaborated, but access to social media has resulted in new qualities of the surveillance-industrial complex: it is now possible to obtain detailed access to a multitude of citizens’ activities in multiple roles conducted in multiple spaces that all converge on social media profiles that contain a lot of data about the everyday life, activities and movements of billions of people. Another economic dimension is that the NSA has subcontracted and outsourced surveillance tasks to around 2,000 private security companies, such as Booz Allen Hamilton.

<171> Activists are aware of the reality of corporate and state surveillance on corporate social media; 55.9 per cent of the respondents indicate that state and corporate surveillance of activist communication is a huge disadvantage of commercial social media. Activists expressed this fear in various ways:

My Twitter account was subpoena’d, for tweeting a hashtag. The subpoena was dropped in court.

Individuals I have supported have had Facebook accounts suspended, tweets catalogued as evidence against them, and this available information used for police to pre-emptively arrest them.

The other risk is that commercial sites might collaborate with government or corporate interests to close down sites if a threat to their interests became apparent.

Facebook = Tracebook. We’re contributing to capitalism by putting our content for free [on these sites].

The contradiction of corporate social media that activists are facing is that, while they enable activists to communicate easily among themselves and to the public, at the same time the same media expose activists to police surveillance, corporate control, corporate censorship and the exploitation of digital labour (Fuchs, 2014a).

Alternative social media

There are only two not-for-profit platforms among the 100 most-accessed platforms in the world: Wikipedia (#6) and the BBC’s website (#52). These are non-capitalist

media run by civil society (Wikipedia) and the state (BBC), a circumstance that can be explained with the help of Graham Murdock's (2011) distinction between three modern political economies that are controlled by (a) capital, (b) the state and (c) civil society, and based on (a) commodities, (b) public goods and (c) gifts. Wikipedia is an expression of the gift economy: it is run by a non-profit civil society organisation (the Wikimedia Foundation), is based on the collaborative work of volunteers and provides its content without payment to the public. The BBC is a classic public service broadcaster that is organised by the British state, is funded by a license fee and has no profit imperative. Analyses show that in the political economy of the internet and social media, alternatives to the capitalist internet and capitalist social media are small minorities (Fuchs, 2014c; Jin, 2013; Sandoval, 2012).

Wikipedia can be considered as an alternative social and digital medium in respect to its organisational model, the role of users as producers and its non-profit imperative (Fuchs, 2014c: chapter 10). Public service media have at least one potential alternative dimension in comparison to capitalist media: they reject the for-profit imperative and are not the private property of capitalists. They may or may not (or only from time to time) advance critical content, depending to which level the logic of capital, commercial culture and tabloidisation has affected public service media or left them unaffected (the BBC, for example, broadcasts critical documentaries such as *The Virtual Revolution: The Cost of Free* on the one hand tabloid programmes such as *Bargain Hunt* and on the other hand that are in no way different from many entertainment programmes on commercial channels such as Channel 4). Despite both being non-profit, Wikipedia and the BBC have two very different online models and understandings of social media. Wikipedia encompasses many of the ideals of online participatory culture, whereas the BBC often sees the internet and social media as an extension of broadcasting.

The data from the OccupyMedia! survey (Fuchs, 2014b) presented earlier indicates that contemporary activists tend to use their own profiles and protest group pages and profiles on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube much more than separate non-commercial social media platforms. Progressive social movements seem to prefer corporate social media to communicate counter-hegemonic critical content (a key dimension of alternative media). At the same time, these media platforms are controlled by corporate and state power, which renders the organisational form and the political economy of protest movements' use of corporate social media not alternative at all.

By contrast, non-commercial social media platforms such as Diaspora*, N-1, Occupii, Riseup and the various Occupy fora and networks are alternative in terms of organisational structures, content and actors. They are non-profit media: activists produce, control, own and maintain them. They are relatively independent from state and corporate power, and designed as platforms for the dissemination of critical information and for activist communication. In short, there is a convergence of users and producers. They are ideal-typical examples of alternative social media. However, they face the same problem that confronts all alternative media in capitalist society: the antagonism between critical autonomy and voice.

The OccupyMedia! Survey asked activists what they consider the main advantages and disadvantages of alternative social media (Fuchs, 2014b). A significant share of the respondents (34.1%) could not name any advantages because they were unaware of the existence of alternative platforms. The most frequently mentioned advantages were that alternative social media provide more privacy for activists, that there is less censorship and surveillance and that they are non-profit and non-commercial. One

respondent commented: “We own them, and so risks about monitoring etc. are diminished.” Another one said that these platforms are “more ethical in that they’re probably not putting money into the pockets of the 1%”.

Of the respondents, 27.3 per cent said there are no disadvantages if the Occupy movement uses alternative social media; 30.7 per cent argued that alternative social media only have a low reach and do not allow reaching out to the general public. These respondents fear that by using alternative social media, the Occupy movement isolates itself; it does not speak to the public, only to itself. Of those surveyed, 19 per cent mentioned that operating and using these platforms requires that the movement mobilises significant resources: time, money, donations, workforce, software development and maintenance skills, servers, computers, webspace. One respondent felt that “many ... [alternative social media] are too small to make a difference”. The activists realise the political-economic limits that alternative media face in capitalism: Twitter and Facebook are monopoly capitalists that have centralised social media communication; it is extremely difficult to build alternative channels to challenge these monopolies. At the same time, running alternative media is expensive and work intensive, which poses the problem of resource scarcity for movements. One respondent pinpointed this antagonism: <173> “Alternative platforms ... seem to suck up time, energy and resources, and are ultimately less convenient to use because they are SO SPECIFIC to the movement” (original emphasis).

Conclusion

Alternative media, online and offline, are facing a political-economic dilemma. On the one hand, their self-management renders them more independent from the interests of the power elite whose domination activists want to challenge, but on the other hand, alternative media face the power of media monopolies and oligopolies, as well as the problem of mobilising resources without state support and advertising. Alternative media confront contradictions between *critical voice and autonomy on the one hand and resource scarcity and lack of visibility on the other*. As a consequence, the history of alternative media is a history of voluntary self-exploited labour, the consequence of a political economy that limits the possibilities for civil society because hearing alternative voices is a matter of money and political resources that afford visibility. The oligopoly structure of social media has resulted in a few large transnational companies (Facebook, Google, Twitter) controlling the vast majority of social media use. Given this control, it is very difficult to establish alternatives that question the very principles on which the capitalist media exist. Capitalist media structures limit the liberal freedoms of speech, opinion, expression, association and assembly. Liberalism is its own limit and immanent critique: liberal freedom of ownership limits citizens’ liberal rights.

Are non-corporate social media in particular and non-commercial media in general doomed to failure in capitalism? If this were to be the case, could social movement activism ever expect an alternative communicative dimension that could reach beyond an alternative ghetto?

How to resource alternative media is a crucial democratic question of our times. The conclusion from the arguments in this chapter is to overcome capitalist media oligopolies, which requires major media reforms. Large multinational companies, including Google, Facebook, Amazon and Apple, are avoiding paying taxes in a lot of the countries where they operate. This is not only unfair; it also increases the pressure for austerity measures in times of crisis. We suggest taxing large media (and other)

corporations and channelling this income into non-commercial media. This requires combining the increase of corporate taxation with elements of participatory budgeting that allow every citizen to donate a certain amount per year to a non-commercial media project. Elements of state action and civil society action could be combined: the power of the state would guarantee taxation of large companies; the distribution of this income to media projects would, however, be decentralised and put in the hands of citizens. This measure is far from ideal and has its own limits, but it may be a step forward in order to strengthen alternative media.

Further reading

Sandoval, M. (2014) *From Corporate to Social Media? Critical Perspectives on Corporate Social Responsibility in Media and Communication Industries*. London: Routledge. This <174> book studies the political economy and ideologies of eight global capitalist media corporations and argues for alternatives.

Fuchs, C. (2014) *OccupyMedia! The Occupy Movement and Social Media in Crisis Capitalism*. Winchester: Zero Books. This author presents the result of an empirical survey that studied how the Occupy movement uses and thinks about corporate and alternative social media.

Fuchs, C. (2014) *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*. London: Sage. This title shows how critical theory and political economy can be used for analysing and understanding social media.

Fuchs, C. and Sandoval, M. (eds.) 2014. *Critique, Social Media and the Information Society*. New York: Routledge. The authors discuss how capitalism, power structures and social media are connected, and what an alternative internet can look like.

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