



Extended Abstract

Capital Control, Privacy Crisis, and the Work of Being Watched

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In this contribution I shall provide, using the example of social media, reasoning for the following theses: a) To work of being watched is a relevant aspect of contemporary informational capitalism; b) capital controls the work of being watched; and c) from this control follows a structural privacy crisis.

Online participation leaves data traces on the Internet. These traces promise to be a profitable business in a growing “surveillance-driven culture production” (Turow 2011). There is a strong nexus between data creating online activity and commercial profits. Personal information is emerging as a new class of assets and it “is becoming a new type of raw material that’s on par with capital and labour” (World Economic Forum 2011, 7). Mark Andrejevic supports this perspective by contending that “whatever the debates going on in the world of orthodox materialism, the business world understands this as work that generates demographic commodities to be bought and sold” (2004, 114). At least, it is fruitful (Mosco 2009, 138) but also theoretically justifiable to speak of this activity as work (Fuchs and Seignani 2013), namely the specific “work of being watched” (Andrejevic 2004).

This form of work is an instance of what Post-Operaists have termed “immaterial labour” (Lazzarato 1996; Virno 2004) in order to grasp changes of work particularly through the ubiquity of new information and communication technologies. This theoretical school suggests that the subjective aspects in the work process, that is labour power, become dominant positions in comparison to the instrument and products of labour that are controlled by capital. They speak about the dominance of living labour over dead labour that would legitimate calling informational or cognitive capitalism a third stage in capitalism’s development, succeeding mercantile and industrial stages (Boutang 2012, 50; Vercellone 2007). This third stage of capitalist development would erode the real subsumption of

labour forces under capital and would be much more similar to the age when capitalism rose and had only formally subsumed labour forces under its control. „Industry does not form or create this new labor power, but simply takes it on board and adapts it” (Lazzarato 1996, 137).

In this presentation, I will challenge this Post-Operaist autonomy thesis in respect to the work of being watched. First, users are forced to work online and, second, they experience capital control during their work. Users are legally independent actors that consent to Internet services’ terms of use and no authority forces them to use a particular service. I would, however, argue that they are also free from the means of communication and surveillance, which exercises force over them to use at least one of the available commercial services in a highly concentrated Internet to be able to benefit from its various functions and generally to socialise and live a good thus connected life under given circumstances. Users are forced to contract their privacy. On the other hand, I will argue that due to accumulated money and network power capital is able to set the terms of using the Internet by determining online information flows, e.g. on social media wall pages, and clicking behaviour according to their business interests.

Capital control of online activity is likely to raise privacy concerns because it usually entails an intimate relationship to the product for the user and also an intimate relationship to the co-workers. Capital control simultaneously denotes that users lose some control over their data and the setting within which they communicate and collaborate. Consequently, thus privacy crises are immanent to the capitalist organisation of the Internet and they are a place where capitalism comes into conflict with its own bourgeois values. I qualify the privacy contract as a “political fiction” (Pateman and Mills 2007, 17-18; see also Ellerman 2010, 583) that enables “civil subordination” (Pateman 2002). It is a fiction to assume that users can exchange their personal data and that this exchange would not affect their person. A disembodied piece of data property is not what is required by capital; privacy or personal data cannot be separated from the person. Collected data must have a relation to a user since the user is a potential buyer of a product in the view of the advertising corporations. I think whether privacy is alienable, a “contested commodity” (Radin 1987; 1996a), or simply inalienable, is a historical construct and depends on social struggles just like the movement for democracy has rendered certain contracts impossible. And it looks like that capital prevails in these struggles?

References and Notes

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