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Abstract

The critical literature on commercial monitoring and so-called ‘free labour’ (Terranova 2000) locates exploitation in realms beyond the workplace proper, noting the productivity of networked activity including the creation of user-generated-content and the profitability of commercial sites for social networking and communication. The changing context of productivity in these realms, however, requires further development of a critical concept of exploitation. This article defines exploitation as the extraction of unpaid, coerced, and alienated labour. It considers how such a definition might apply to various forms of unpaid but profit-generating online activity, arguing that commercial monitoring redoubles the conscious, intentional activity of users in ways that render it amenable to a critique of exploitation. Given the role of commercial monitoring in the emerging online economy, the paper emphasizes the importance of supplementing privacy critiques with approaches that identify the ways in which new forms of surveillance represent a form of power that seeks to manage and control consumer behaviour.

Imagine that, once upon a time, a community was faced with the prospect of a new kind of roadway that provided exciting new opportunities for commerce and communication, politics and even social life. Imagine further that the members of this community were told it would be much more efficient for the private sector to control and develop this roadway if only it were allowed to set the terms of access, which would include tagging everyone who used the new road and tracking their activities so that anything they did would be recorded, stored, and eventually used to manipulate them without their consent or knowledge. Faced with the prospect of such a trade-off, the community would likely express its concern not just about privacy, but also about the social relations that empowered a private, commercial entity the power to both set the terms of access and claim the benefits that flowed from tracking the populace. Indeed, such a formulation might have encouraged reflection on alternative possibilities: might it be feasible to obtain the advantages of the new road without relying upon a commercial model of data collection and target marketing?

Returning from this imagined ‘once upon a time’ to the reality of the recent commercial development of the internet, however, the emerging business model was not laid out quite so clearly or in such stark terms. With little in the way of public deliberation, we have been party to the aggressive privatization of what started as a publicly funded communication network. The public’s enthusiastic embrace of the affordances of digital communication has been taken as tacit, if largely uninformed, consent to the privatization of the internet and the commercial colonization of an ever-growing portion of our communicative lives. Despite the somewhat dramatic scope of these changes, the discussion about the emerging monitoring-based economy has been largely limited to questions of threats to an increasingly

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contested and variable conception of privacy. The larger question about the power relations that have shaped control over the capture and use of personal information, resulting in the trade-off between convenience and control over our personal information – remain largely outside the frame of discussion.

Privacy debates thus come to stand in for discussions that might more directly address the question of who controls the information infrastructure and for what ends – questions, in other words, of the power that both shapes the use of new media technologies and the ways in which these uses in turn reproduce existing power relations. Perhaps this logic of deflection explains both the intensity and the frustrating character of discussions of privacy – there is something disconcerting about seeing issues related to the concentration of corporate control over economic, social, and informational resources squeezed into the much narrower frame of threats to personal privacy. The goal of this essay is to open up some avenues for inserting questions of power, control, and, in particular, exploitation into a consideration of the implications of the privatization and commercialization of communication resources in the digital era. The notion of exploitation helps invoke questions of power and control – and while it is frequently invoked in discussions of the digital economy, more work needs to be done to update it for the interactive era.

Specifically, most discussions of exploitation in the online economy fail to mark important distinctions between different types of so-called ‘free labour’ (Terranova 2000) supplied by consumers via interactive platforms, including intentionally created forms of user generated content (such as the original videos posted to YouTube), the promotional work done by fans (such as the indie music fans studied by Baym and Burnett (2008)), the building and maintenance of online social networks of various types, and the activity that underlies all of these: the generation of increasingly detailed information about all of these activities – and more. It is the monitored aspect of networked interactivity that lies at the heart of the account of exploitation advanced in this essay. Because all forms of online activity contribute to the creation of this data, they are all implicated in the account of exploitation developed here. At the same time, however, this account distinguishes between the two layers of online productivity described by Gehl: “In a typical Web 2.0 site, there is a surface, where users are free to produce content and make affective connections, and there is a hidden depth, where new media capitalists convert user-generated content into exchange-values” (2009, 25). This is particularly true in the case of user generated data – the wide range of information collected by interactive platforms about users, usually invisibly as they go about the course of their wired lives, or at least that portion of their lives that involve digital, networked devices. As Gehl puts it,

Users are allowed much control over the surface of Web 2.0; they are the ones who fill in the ghostly frames, make connections, remix content, and process digital artifacts. However, all too often in Web 2.0, the depth – the code (both computer and legal) and the material behind the ghostly frames - is controlled by new media capitalists, who deny users the ability to determine how their content is used (2009, 25).

It is the role of monitoring in the exploitation of user-generated activity that this essay focuses upon in order to argue that commercial surveillance has a central role to play in the forms of alienation, manipulation, and control associated with the interactive economy.

Accounts of exploitation in the realm of commercial surveillance must contend with the ways in which the commercial promotion of interactivity has framed it as an antidote to the shortcomings of mass society, a means of restoring what was lost in the rationalization and “massification” of culture. A contemporary sense of privacy, such accounts imply, is in part a product of the anonymity of urban industrial life – and perhaps a symptom of its alienation. In the pre-mass era, merchants of all kinds had more personal relationships with their customers, the type of relationships gestured at nostalgically by new forms of personalization, customization, and targeting. These surveillance-based strategies are

typically equated with enhanced consumer service and care by the companies that collect and use the information – as if the algorithms that sift data and target individual consumers are the direct descendants of the corner grocer who packed our groceries for us or the cobbler with a custom template for each client hanging on the wall.

Similarly, so-called user generated content is portrayed as a restoration of more participatory forms of cultural production in which the boundary between performer and audience was more porous. For their part, social networking applications promise to restore the priority of peer conversation, gossip and social contacts over “top-down” mass media as sources of information about the world. In both cases, however, the resuscitation of pre-mass society comes with a twist: it relies upon a thoroughly privatized and commercialized infrastructure, as if industrial capitalism has managed to carve out a niche for pre-mass society in order to encompass it in its commercial embrace. The result has been a kind of split-level combination of past and future; on one level there are DIY forms of media production, enhanced forms of social networking and so on, while at another level all of this activity is captured, recorded, stored, sorted, and mined.

At times, these two levels touch, often to somewhat disconcerting effect, as changes at the level of data-capture affect ‘surface’ level capabilities. Consider the example of Facebook’s frequent modifications, designed to maximize both the level of interaction (and engagement) and thus the amount of data that can be captured and used. If, at the surface level, Facebook hearkens back to the pre-mass-society role of social networks as sources of news and information, it is hard to forget that it does so for distinctly commercial purposes. The anthropologist Danny Miller, for example, has argued that Facebook counters the decline of community commonly associated with “the rise of capitalism and industrialism” (2011, 134). As he puts it, “whatever exactly we mean by the word community, Facebook seems to have revived and expanded it” (2011, 134). As a technology of community, however, it is an extremely malleable one, shaped just as much by the whims of the coders as by rapidly evolving ‘traditions’ of use. If, to put it somewhat differently, Facebook revives some of the aspects of pre-mass society (albeit on a global scale), it has elements of funhouse unpredictability to it: from one day to the next the ability to communicate with others shifts dramatically at the whims of hidden engineers. One day, your friends need to come to visit your page to see what you’ve posted, the next, whatever you post gets “pushed” into their news feeds. It’s as if there is some backstage puppet-master, changing the rules of our interactions as they take place; one day our voices work one way, the next, quite differently. Facebook can constantly change its capabilities and affordances, and frequently does – always with the goal of fostering greater activity on its platform, and of capturing a broader spectrum of information about user activity in order to market to us more effectively – and to the commercial clients who build their applications on its platform.

In this regard, Facebook functions as a kind of Matrix, a virtual construct that allows us to defy the laws of physics by gossiping globally, but one that is subject to manipulation by those who control the infrastructure. In this regard it recalls Zizek’s description of what he describes as the two sides of perversion of cyberspace: “on the one hand, reduction of reality to a virtual domain regulated by arbitrary rules that can be suspended; on the other hand, the concealed truth of this freedom, the reduction of the subject to an utter instrumentalized passivity” (1999, 22). Passivity is not quite right here, given the frenetic level of activity on Facebook; perhaps an instrumentalized hyper-sociality would be more accurate. The flip side of the dramatically expanded capacity for socializing, communicating, networking, is reliance upon a thoroughly commercialized platform, one that will continue to be tweaked, adjusted, transformed in order to more effectively serve the marketing strategies that support it.

1. Database Manipulation

One potentially disturbing fact frequently gets lost amidst debates about the fate of privacy in the digital era and the crossfire between celebratory and critical claims about the online economy; namely, the

emerging commercial model for the interactive economy has become reliant on the prospect that information-based target marketing and data mining will be increasingly effective in manipulating and channeling consumer desire. This prospect may be nothing more than marketing hype, but the point is that whether or not such a model *actually works*, it serves as the basis for the developing of an online economy. We might dismiss the claims of marketers in theory, but in practice we are betting they are right – otherwise we would need to develop a different way of supporting many of the interactive services and applications that have become an important part of the commercial and professional lives of so many.

The model of data-driven target marketing relies, in turn, on the promise of statistically robust powers of prediction, a promise fed by techniques with names like ‘cluster analysis’, ‘biological response analysis’, ‘collaborative filtering’, ‘predictive analytics’, and ‘sentiment analysis’. What all of these have in common is their reliance on the capture of large amounts of detailed data about people, products, and their various attributes in order to predict behaviour. The goal is not so much to follow the lead of consumers as to find ways to predict how various modulations in message, timing, context, and other relevant factors might influence behaviour in accordance with the priorities of marketers. As one accounts puts it, “predictive analytics” – the attempt to unearth correlations from mountains of data – “uses past behaviour and complex algorithms to anticipate future behaviour by customer segments in a way that cannot be accurately performed using human intuition” (*Business Times* 2010, 8).

The goal of predictive analytics is, in a sense, both pre-emptive and productive, predictive and manipulative: to manage risks before they emerge or become serious while at the same time maximizing sales. The goal, in other words, is to integrate possible futures into present behaviour and thereby to manage the future. This type of management requires ongoing monitoring, modulation, and adjustment to bring the anticipated consequences of a modelled future into the present in ways that account for the former, and thus alter the latter. In so doing, it gives “populations over to being a probe or sensor of the improbable future” (Clough 2009, 53) – or, in the case of marketing research the obverse: a probable future. To treat a population as a probe is not simply to measure and record it but, at the same time, to subject it to ongoing experimentation. This is the form that predictive analytics takes in the age of what Ian Ayres (2007) calls super-crunching: not the attempt to get at an underlying demographic or emotional ‘truth’, but the ongoing search for productive correlations. Marketers and advertisers use the flexible, controlled, interactive environment to subject consumers to an ongoing series of randomized, controlled experiments. Access to the database is crucial for generating this kind of information. As Ayres puts it, “The sample size is key” (2007, 49) – the bigger the better, which is what makes the internet such a rich site for this kind of research.

2. Exploitation 2.0

Given its importance to the commercial development of the online economy, surveillance has a central role to play in any account of its distinctive forms of exploitation. The notion of exploitation is a recurring theme in critical accounts of the digital economy, although it is more often invoked than explained. In what has become a canonical discussion of the ‘free labour’ provided by chat-room moderators in exchange for access to online services, Terranova notes that such productive activities can, in some contexts, be described as both voluntary and subject to exploitation: “Free labor is the moment where this knowledgeable consumption of culture is translated into productive activities that are pleasurably embraced and at the same time often shamelessly exploited” (2000, 37). Similarly, Michael Hardt’s (1999) discussion of the network economy notes that, “in those networks of culture and communication, collective subjectivities are produced and sociality is produced – even if those subjectivities and that sociality are directly exploitable by capital” (1999, 93). Petersen’s (2008) account of the exploitation of user-generated content argues that the commercial “architecture of participation turns into an architecture of exploitation and enclosure, transforming users into commodities that can be sold on the market”.

For Ritzer and Jurgensen (2010), the capture of value online represents the extension of the logic of capital into new spaces and temporalities: “it appears that capitalists have found another group of people – beyond workers (producers) – to exploit and a new source of surplus value. In this case, capitalism has merely done what it has always done – found yet another way to expand” (2010, 21). For Comor, forms of interactive participation reinforce rather than revolutionizing the social relations upon which exploitation relies: “as long as private property, contracts and exchange values are dominant mediators of our political economy, disparities and exploitative relationships will remain largely unchallenged – unchallenged, at least, through the auspices of presumption” (2010, 14).

The notion of exploitation, in short, has become a recurring theme in recent accounts of the productivity of networks. Most of these critiques refer to the conscious productive activity of users beyond the confines of the workplace proper – activity such as fan labour, chat room moderation, and the creation of user-generated content – that users engage in voluntarily but which also generates value for commercial entities that are able to piggyback on user activity. The tendency has been to locate this kind of creative activity in the category of immaterial labour described by Lazzarato as the “activity that produces the ‘cultural content’ of the commodity,” noting that it, “involves a series of activities that are not normally recognized as ‘work’ – in other words, the kinds of activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and, more strategically, public opinion” (1996, 137). Such labour corresponds to what Michael Hardt (also following Lazzarato) describes as an ‘affective’ form of immaterial labour: “the production and manipulation of affects,” which, “requires (virtual or actual) human contact and proximity” (1999, 93). This is not, however, an account that lends itself directly to the economic value generated by the capture and use of user data – at least insofar as this is not consciously created as part of deliberate social networking activity.

Zwick, Bonsu and Darmody (2008) also have recourse to the critique of exploitation in their perceptive discussion of the much-hyped marketing paradigm of consumer co-creation (the reliance of producers on consumer participation to help build and communicate brand image) as a form of governance. They argue that the economic success of sites that rely on various forms of user-generated content (including Facebook, MySpace and Second Life), “expropriate the cultural labour of the masses and convert it into monetary value: each in their own specific way, but all according to the same general logic” (2008, 180). Here again, however, it might be useful to distinguish between some of these different ways – including active user participation in marketing to themselves, the expropriation of user-generated content, and the capture of information that can be turned back upon users. This is not to say that any of these categories are exempt from exploitation, but rather to argue that we might need to think a bit differently about how exploitation functions in these varying instances.

The invocation of some notion of exploitation is compelling for a number of reasons, including the fact that a critique of privacy invasion does not do justice to the economically productive character of consumer surveillance. The prospect that advertising might become more effective because it will be able to predict human behaviour with a greater degree of reliability, and thereby to help manage the populace more efficiently in accordance with commercial imperatives, is disturbing in a different way from privacy concerns. There is more at stake in interactive forms of surveillance than violations of traditional privacy norms: specifically the concentration of new forms of predictive power in the hands of commercial interests. We might add to this the redoubling of exploitation in the realm of consumption. As Zwick, Bonsu and Darmody put it, “consumers are asked to pay for the surplus extracted from their own work” (2008, 186).

One of the challenges of mobilizing the notion of exploitation in online contexts is that it takes a critical concept traditionally associated with industrial labour’s sweatshop conditions and transposes it into a realm of relative affluence and prosperity – that is, a realm inhabited by those with the time and access to participate in online activities. For good reason, it is harder to get worked up about the ‘exploitative’

conditions of user-generated content sites than about the depredations of sweatshop labour and workforce exploitation. In the case of user generated content, for example, we are talking in many cases about affluent consumers engaging in what might be described as optional activities: you don't *have* to join Facebook or Twitter, it is not necessary for survival in contemporary society (yet?) to get a Gmail account, or to shop online.

Thus, rejoinders to critiques of exploitation in such contexts typically invoke both the lack of coercion and the pleasures of participation. As Nancy Baym and Robert Burnett (2008) put it in their account of the promotional work done by indie music fans: "We are loathe to dismiss their claims of affective pleasure and the desire they feel to spread what brings them joy as evidence of exploitation" (2008, 23). Her study invokes the claim, so familiar to accounts of the promise of interactive technology, that their activities recapture the pleasures of pre-mass society: "Their social response to the pleasures of music is situated in deeply meaningful social phenomena that hearken back to much earlier phases of musical history, phases before there was an industry, when music was always performed in communities by locals for locals rather than by distant celebrities for adoring fans" (2008, 23). Such forms of enjoyment are, then, allegedly, incompatible with the notion that they are being exploited: "To claim that these people are exploited is to ignore how much these other forms of capital matter in the well being of well rounded humans" (2008, 23).

It is not clear however, that the Marxist inflected critiques of exploitation invoked by such accounts are incompatible with a sense of enjoyment or pleasure. The fact of exploitation need not prevent workers from taking a certain pleasure in their craft or in the success of a collaborative effort well done. Nor is it the case that accounts of exploitation necessarily denigrate the activities or the meanings they may have for those who participate in them rather than the social relations that underwrite expropriation and alienation. The point of a critique of exploitation is neither to disparage the pleasures of workers nor the value of the tasks being undertaken. To argue otherwise is to stumble into a kind of category confusion: an attempt to reframe structural conditions as questions of individual pleasure and desire. Taken to the extreme, such accounts recapitulate familiar but less savory defences of exploitation. The critique of exploitation does not devalue individual pleasure any more than such pleasures nullifies exploitative social relations. More work needs to be done to define what might be meant by exploitation in non-wage-labour contexts to bolster both the critiques of exploitation in the digital economy and to address the way in which these are, in turn, dismissed (for failing to acknowledge the benefits and pleasures received by those engaged in various forms of 'free labour').

Since the critiques of exploitation that concern this essay hearken back to Marx's critique of capitalism, it is worth exploring the core elements of this critique. Holmstrom offers a clear summary of a Marxist conception of exploitation: "The profits of capitalists, then, according to Marx's theory, are generated by surplus, unpaid and forced labour, the product of which the producers do not control" (1997, 80). Central to such an account is the notion that coercion is embedded in the relations that structure so-called 'free' choices. That is to say, coercion does not require someone standing over the worker with a gun or some other threat of force. As Holmstrom puts it, "Persons who have no access to the means of production other than their own capacity to labour do not need to be forced to work by chains and laws" (1997, 79) – those are in place, however, to ensure that they cannot gain control of resources other than their labour power. The presence of background forms of coercion in seemingly free choices is true not just for industrial wage labour, but also for unwaged domestic labour. Coercion is inscribed into the social relations themselves. Indeed, the elaboration of the ways in which coercion operate within seemingly free relations of exchange is a touchstone of critical accounts of marketplace exploitation.

The further point to be made is that exploitation is not simply about profit, but also alienation. As Holmstrom puts it, "what workers really sell to the capitalists, according to Marx, is not labour, but the capacity to labour or labour power, which capitalists then use as they wish for the day" (1997, 79). In

selling this capacity, workers relinquish control over their own productive activity – what Marx (1844/2009) also describes as the form of conscious control that distinguishes ‘species-being’ from unreflective life. Alienation subsists not just in the surrender of conscious control over productive activity, but also, consequently in its product. This is a formulation that draws its force not from the description of exploitation in *Das Kapital*, but from the *1844 Manuscripts*, where Marx forcefully elaborates the wages of estranged labour: “The worker places his life in the object; but now it no longer belongs to him, but to the object. [...] What the product of his labour is, he is not. Therefore, the greater this product, the less is he himself” (1844/2009, 27).

Exploitation is not simply about a loss of monetary value, but also a loss of control over one’s productive and creative activity. To push a bit further, it is the latter sense of exploitation that drives the critique, insofar as the deprivation of economic resources, in the end, is about reproducing the forms of scarcity that compel freely given forms of submission. In the end, exploitation is “evil,” as Holmstrom puts it, “because it involves force and domination in manifold ways and because it deprives workers of control that should be theirs” (1997, 88). This overtly humanist formulation, it is worth nothing, is perhaps not so distant from post-humanist inflected accounts such as Smith’s (2007) elaboration of an immanent ethics which is opposed to, “anything that separates a mode of existence from its power of acting” (68).

It is also worth noting that the empowering promise of the internet is based, in large part, on a direct if not deliberate invocation of this notion of exploitation, insofar as it envisions the prospect of overcoming the alienation of control over productive activity. This implied critique of alienation lies at the heart of the celebration of the de-differentiation of consumer and producer, of audience and performer, reader and author, and so on. It is also an important element of those accounts of digital media that discern in them the ability to recapture salutary elements of pre-mass society. Such accounts are not to be dismissed out of hand, even if they do refer only to that subset of the population with access to the skills, technology, and resources for using the internet and related digital technologies. As is frequently pointed out, however, these transformations require a reworking and a revisiting of the critique of exploitation: industrial-age critiques need to be updated for the digital era. The following section outlines the elements of an updated critique that takes into account the productive and, I will argue, alienating role of surveillance in the interactive economy.

3. The Role of Surveillance

Two inter-related developments form the basis of an account of exploitation-as-alienation in the digital era: the privatization of digital networks (and the applications that run on them), and the way in which both of these exploit the built-in capacity for surveillance characteristic of interactive media. Commercial entities like YouTube, Blogger, DoubleClick, Gmail (all owned by Google), Facebook, and Amazon.com all avail themselves of ‘free labour’ in specific and sometimes different ways (although YouTube also includes provisions for letting some contributors claim a share of advertising revenues). All of them also rely on the redoubling of user activity in the reflexive form of information about this activity. We might, then, divide so-called user-generated content into two categories: the one that gets all the attention, which includes the various forms of intentional content created and/or distributed online, and the one which unifies these various activities: the fact that all of them are subject to being monitored, recorded, aggregated, stored, and sorted. All of them generate data about themselves – content about the content.

Typically, accounts that interrogate the role of exploitation in the participatory online economy focus on the first kind of user generated content: fan culture and other forms of intentional interactive participation (see, for example, Milner 2008; Postigo 2009; Baym and Burnett 2008; Petersen 2008; Banks and Humphreys 2008). Such accounts tend to find themselves balancing the interest and pleasure users take in participation, on the one hand, against the ways in which this participation generates value for commercial entities, sometimes at the expense of users. Zwick, Bonsu and Darmody’s critique of

consumer ‘co-creation’ outlines the double dimension of online exploitation: “First, consumers are not generally paid for the know-how, enthusiasm, and social cooperation...that they contribute to the manufacturing process of marketable commodities. Second, customers typically pay what the marketing profession calls a ‘price premium’ for the fruits of their own labour” (2008, 180).

A number of questions arise regarding this updated conception of exploitation, including: whether or not the ‘free labour’ is ‘surplus’; what, if any, role is played by coercion; and, in related terms, can a notion of alienation remain operative? The presumed benefit of interactivity in both cases is to overcome alienation. The promise of sites like YouTube and Facebook as well as that of mass customization is that users recognize the results of their productive activity as their own. The fact that consumers are willing to pay a premium for a customized commodity attests both to the persistence of alienation (we pay more, at least in part, to overcome the sense of an anonymous, impersonal, alienated product) and gestures towards its overcoming. If surplus labour is that which is expended over and above the amount of activity that users might otherwise perform in order to meet their needs and desires, it is not clear that these forms of user-generated content represent ‘surplus’ labour. Which gets to the question of coercion: in the absence of surplus labour, it is trickier to make the case that coercion is operative – although it might be possible to argue that background conditions of coercion and expropriation shape the attempt to overcome alienation in the process of consumption. That is, that the desire to recognize one’s own participation in the form of customized consumer goods provides a measure of compensation for alienation in the workplace. For Zwick et al. (2008), even participatory consumers are subject to exploitation in the sense that they do not realize the full value that they have *added* to the commodity via their participation. However, absent compelling arguments for coercion and alienation, we end up with a somewhat thinner conception of exploitation.

The advent of the social Web and its mingling of social and professional networks casts at least some forms of user-generated-content in a different light. Perhaps, in the not too distant future, it may become the case that social networking services become crucial productive resources for some types of work. If we need access to such services to earn our living, if employers require the creation and exploitation of such networks, and if access is privately controlled, then the familiar critique of exploitation becomes operative. Networks that once reflected a certain degree of autonomy become subject to workplace forms of control.

The case for exploitation is somewhat more straightforward when it comes to another form of user-generated-content: the data generated by users as they become increasingly reliant upon interactive networks for a range of activities encompassing the realms of both production and consumption – as well as socializing and communicating with one another. Arvidsson, interestingly, has suggested that this data should not be described as something created by users but rather as a kind of found resource captured and extracted by those who control the information infrastructure. What such a formulation needs to take on, I think, is the way in which the social relations of privatization and commercialization structure the ability to ‘stake a claim’ to such a resource. This ability implies a Lockean conception of property rights: because commercial entities do the work of creating applications for capturing and mining data, they can claim control over it, even though – and here the difference from mineral extraction is perhaps a bit clearer – it is information about people who have very little say regarding how it is captured and used to manage, sort, or manipulate them. It is the private ownership and control over information infrastructures that provides both the incentive and the ability to capture this information. That is to say, it is from the fact of private ownership and control of the network and the applications that run on it, that the right to control personal information seemingly naturally flows: privatization begets privatization, alienation begets alienation.

There is a striking tendency in contemporary academic and popular accounts of the emerging digital economy to overlook the political economy of the platform. We often talk about ‘the Web’ and the

networks that support it gives – it is a taken-for-granted and largely neutral infrastructure. The affordances of the internet and the services that run on it, however, change in accordance with the priorities of those who control this infrastructure, and what is taken for granted on one day, such as so-called “net-neutrality” may well disappear the next. The same goes for platforms and applications which are constantly adjusted by their private owners to maximize revenues and increase data collection. The flexibility of the virtual environment makes the privatization of cyberspace malleable: as aspects of users’ professional and social lives migrate onto networked, commercial platforms, these platforms continue to adjust to reflect not just technological developments, but also changing economic models. Control over the platform and the applications that run on it, in other words, helps explain how the work of ‘channelling’ user activity to profitable ends described by Arvidsson (2005) takes place.

4. Surveillance and Alienation

The privatization of the internet’s infrastructure might be described as a form of enclosure of the digital commons: the separation of crucial productive resources in the digital era from a new generation of productive consumers (for more on the notion of digital enclosure, see Boyle 2003). In this respect, the notion of exploitation remains relevant to a critique of the online economy and, in particular, to our reliance upon the for-profit utilities that are becoming increasingly indispensable for online work, collaboration, and socializing. However, an account of exploitation needs to be updated to take into account, on the one hand, the possibility of generating economic value from user participation *without apparent alienation* and, on the other to critique what Arvidsson (2005) describes as a kind of alienation without payment: the channelling of productive activity beyond the confines of the workplace and the wage labour contract. This article suggests that one way to approach such an account is to consider the way in which user activity is redoubled on commercial platforms in the form of productive information *about* user activity – a redoubling that allows alienation and autonomy to overlap.

Monitoring becomes an integral component of the online value chain both for sites that rely upon direct payment and for user-generated content sites that rely upon indirect payment (advertising). From a commercial perspective, we can view every action that takes place online, whether a purchase or an online post, as a reflexively redoubled one. Acts of production and consumption both become, in this regard, productive, insofar as they generate information commodities. It is at this level that we can revisit a critique of exploitation: insofar as the information can generate surplus value, it is by definition not compensated according to its full value. An account of coercion would have to enlist a systemic understanding that locates coercion in the social relations that structure access. If we take seriously the notion that online forms of interaction and socializing can double as productive immaterial labour, we might describe the infrastructures that support them as productive resources, access to which is determined by those who own them.

Maybe a more compelling account of exploitation can be made via the notion of alienation. Each form of intentional user-generated content – a blog post, a Facebook update, a Tweet, is redoubled in the form of ‘cybernetic commodities’ (Mosco 1989). These commodities are distinct from the Tweets, posts, uploaded videos and so on, and yet they are the result of user activity. They are commodities with market value and while they are created by users, they are not controlled by users, who have little choice over how and when this data is generated and little say in how it is used. In this sense we might describe the generation and use of this data as the alienated or estranged dimension of their activity. To the extent that this information can be used to predict and influence user behaviour it is an activity that returns to users in an unrecognizable form as a means of fulfilling the imperatives of others. Estrangement, or alienation, occurs when our own activity appears as something turned back against us as, ‘an alien power’ (Marx 1844/2009).

The alienated world envisioned by interactive marketers is one in which all of our actions (and the ways

in which they are aggregated and sorted) are systematically turned back upon us by those who capture the data. Every message we write, every video we post, every item we buy or view, our time-space paths and patterns of social interaction all become data points in algorithms for sorting, predicting, and managing our behaviour. Some of these data points are spontaneous – the result of the intentional action of consumers; others are induced, the result of ongoing, randomized experiments. Thanks to market monitoring, the distinctions between alienated and autonomous activity, at least in the context of consumer behaviour, start to blur. Intentional, conscious activity does double duty: it facilitates forms of online sociability and creativity on the one hand and, on the other, the data it generates is captured and returned to consumers in unrecognizable form. The complexity of the algorithm and the opacity of correlation render it all but impossible for those without access to the databases to determine why they may have been denied a loan, targeted for a particular political campaign message, or saturated with ads at a particular time and place when they have been revealed to be most vulnerable to marketing appeals. Much will hinge on whether the power to predict can be translated into the ability to manage behaviour, but this is the bet that marketers are making. Or more accurately, this is the bet that a society makes when it turns to a monitoring-based system of data-mining and predictive analytics as a means for supporting its burgeoning information and communication infrastructure.

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