COMMENT

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Digital society and capitalism

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ABSTRACT Digital society has been lauded as emancipatory and freeing individuals from the constrictions of time and place and yet also critiqued as introducing a type of techno-feudalism of data extraction. The vaunted freedom of work and leisure time, work-space and leisure-place, has occurred to some, yet for many others it has created the collapse of work and non-work time and space into a digital surveillance of work, identity and social interaction. There are also issues of technological inequality and generational differences. This paper introduces some of the questions that arise concerning the impacts and challenges that digital society provides for and against capitalism.

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Introduction

This paper introduces an article collection that addresses the questions concerning the impacts and challenges that digital society provides for and against capitalism. Digital society has been lauded as emancipatory and freeing individuals from the constrictions of time and place and yet also critiqued as introducing a type of techno-feudalism of data extraction. The vaunted freedom of work and leisure time, work-space and leisure-place has occurred to some, yet for many others it has created the collapse of work and non-work time and space into a digital surveillance of work, identity and social interaction.

The rise of self-publishing, blogging and open-access information has seen a claim and promotion of the creative commons, yet even if content is freely available, contributing can be at a financial cost and access is always determined by access to technology. As such, even the creative commons exists within various forms and experiences of capitalism: digital, industrial, post-industrial, neo-colonial resource extraction and technological production and assemblage, the financialisation of credit and debt to pay for the technology, and so on. So digital society is capitalist society—and even so-called acts of resistance as creative commons are not separate from this. It is resistance from within capitalism, not anti-capitalist space outside the wider capitalist frame.

Thinking and teaching about such things gave rise to a number of questions that helped frame this article collection. Not all of these have been answered or engaged within the papers published at the time of writing (Redhead, 2017; Tupinambá, 2017), but I note them here because, from within the open-access model of this journal, there is always the potential for new engagements to occur. I of course note the tensions of a critical engagement with digital capitalism located within the ‘pages’ of an open-access journal that uses an article processing charge business model. Yet, perhaps central to this is the acknowledgement that the digital is not ‘free’; it is always involved in capitalist structures, institutions, circulations and productions. That there is, at the moment no ‘outside’ to digital capitalism for the digital, means the questions then become how do we use the digital? What for? And what is made ‘freely’ available?

Many other questions arise. Can digital society be now considered the new opiate of the masses of neo-liberal capitalism? Is it part of what can be termed the wider commodity opiates that domesticate us within capitalism? Do we exist within a society of digital distraction that variously de-politicises many, leads others to believe on-line ‘likes’ and ‘activism’ is the same as off-line action and involvement—or, via digital manipulation opens us to fake news, other forms of propaganda and political inferences? What are the issues and possibilities of digital society within the turn to the financialisation of capitalism? Is financialisation the same as the digital dataisation of capitalism?

What does digital labour really mean—and entail? And do we actually have to think and talk about degrees of digital labour in terms of explicit and implicit digital labour? That is, those who explicitly work in the fields of digital labour as paid employment—and then the vast majority of the rest of us who implicitly work in the data fields every time we go on-line—especially via social media. And what does it mean when, as is increasingly prevalent, your non-digital employment requires you to have an on-line, social media presence and activity? Who are you now working for? In what ways can we talk about an App economy and App labour?

We could also ask did digital society contribute to the survival of capitalism after the global financial crisis (GFC)? That is, with the shift to digital capitalism, the GFC was actually only a ‘crisis’ for specific sectors of capitalism, not capitalism *in toto* as it now is. The rise of what can termed the digital oligarchy—or as *Vanity*

Fair celebrates them ‘the New Establishment’—existed and continues to exist above the mundane effects of the GFC. And our on-line critique, outrage, discussion and search for information about and answers to the GFC—or our attempts to organise or distract ourselves from it just added to the astronomical profits—and off-line power—of the new establishment of digital capitalism. Therefore, is the issue the 1% that that the Occupy movement focused on (often via social media and digital society)—or is it those hyper-capitalist entrepreneurs and plutocracy of the digital economy which are calculated to be that far smaller 0.0001%? We also need to ask in what ways can we discuss ethnicity and gender within digital society and capitalism? How have different forms of politics within capitalism made use of digital society to advance their claims and ideologies? How has publishing, news, sports and entertainment within capitalism been affected by the rise of digital society? What are the impacts upon universities and other forms of knowledge production? Where and how do the precariat exist within the matrix of digital society and capitalism?

Such a list could of course go on infinitum, but that is the point; for on one level digital society basically just raises the issues and possibilities of non-digital society and ‘digitises’ them—within capitalism. But the crucial element to be engaged with is what does the addition of ‘the digital’ do?

Our digital world. I am also very aware that there are also issues of technological inequality and generational differences. Compared to my students, or my children, I am very much ‘almost last century’ in my limited digital engagement. I am not at the point where my aging (or ‘embarrassing’ my children tell me!) i-phone is my ‘digital lung’ that I need to have constantly with me in order to exist. I do not need to constantly access social media to ensure that I continue ‘to exist’. I can still concentrate on a singular task, unlike many of my students who sit in lectures taking notes (hopefully!) while having a number of tabs open and effectively seeking to multi-task real world and digital information. It is always a give-away when, face down at the screens, they smile when I have not said anything amusing. I do not spend my hours watching you-tube videos of the inane nor am I am on Facebook. I do not suffer from social media status anxiety. Yet I sit writing this introduction on my laptop at the same as listening to an eclectic selection of 1960s jazz via a digital radio station playing on my laptop. To access this, I had to provide my Gmail address and I do all I can to ignore the digital advertisements that play both down the side of the page and across the head of it. One is currently inviting me to study towards a bachelor of commerce in 2018 at the university I teach at. The other is offering deals on generic menswear, the result of having once visited their website for cheap t-shirts. Now, 5 min later I can get offers of a reduced subscription for *Nature*, or to fly cheaply to Melbourne, Australia. In my pocket that almost obsolete iPhone is connected to a variety of apps, an email provider and to the internet. It also locates me as I move. If I want to check something I will probably open a new tab on my laptop to that first resource of Google, full knowing that my search will be framed by analytics—and that in doing so I am working for them, for free. Earlier today I roamed a series of on-line news providers from around the world, read some on-line essays and reviews and undertook some digital distraction procrastination. Last night I chose from an ever-expanding choice of digital television offerings, having earlier live-steamed the 6 o’clock evening news on this same laptop. Sometimes I Snapchat (why, I still don’t really know) with my eldest daughter who is away at university, and it seems that Skype has

increasingly taken over our household—making the absent temporarily, digitally present. While I do not buy my wine online I do too regularly check out the specials and options on the webpage of my favourite shop.

Therefore the world I live in, the world I work in, the world I consume in, the world I am entertained and distracted in, has become digital to the extent that I am as implicated and involved as those I may wish to critique. I have no moral high ground—even if I wanted to find one. And that is the central issue. For how we choose to engage—and how we choose to think and (perhaps) resist will determine just what digital capitalism means for us—and does to us—collectively and individually.

When religion was the ubiquitous power and influence that under-sat everything, Karl Marx proffered that the criticism of religion is the premise of all criticism; perhaps today it is the criticism of the digital.

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Additional information

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