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**New Media and the category of work:
Between “labour of love” and exploitation**

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Abstract

The article discusses the role the category of work plays for the process of communicating on and through the new media. While the impact digital media have had on broadcasting and journalism has been intensely researched, the status of non-professional media communication, i.e. the internet-user's everyday communication on the web remains conceptually vague. Two ideal-types of conceptualizing people's activity on the web are identified and labeled as expression and exploitation. Subsequently the category of work is evaluated with regard to its suitability for characterizing new media communication, as is the concept of knowledge as the product of decentralized, digitally networked communication. The paper points to shortcomings of the hitherto dominant approaches and concludes with suggestions for the layout of a Critical Theory of the Internet.

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1 Introduction

This paper¹ discusses the role the category of work plays for the process of communicating on and through the new media. The impact the rise of new digital media has had on occupational profiles in professional communication, and first of all in journalism, has been researched for a fairly long time (see for example Terranova, 2000). My focus here, however, is a different one:² the status of non-professional media communication, that is, in internet-user's everyday communication that has emerged with the new decentralized communication and media technologies of the so-called Web 2.0.

A review of recent literature shows that most of the texts dealing with the on-going change in communication and the media do not address the category of work at all, or only as a side issue. Other perspectives prevail. From a theory-of-democracy viewpoint, for instance, the focus is on the new plurality of voices: previously passive recipients, once at the end of the information chain, have now at least potentially turned into active communicators whose input enhances public debate. The key concept here is participation rather than work. Journalism studies, for their part, have responded to the ever-increasing network communication by focusing on the status of the communications (blogs and other lay media) that are generated by a widening range of communicators. Here, the focus rests on the impact of media technological and media economical change on the traditional role of professional journalism as an agency of modern society's self-observation and self-understanding. This implicit emphasis on the structure and the process of the public sphere eclipses the fact that it, too, is constituted by work. A third and classical line of debate in this context is the critical tradition that explicitly approaches societal communication from the perspective of the distribution of the means of production. Here the technological availability of a feedback channel was seen as the most momentous driver for change in the power structure of societal communication (Brecht 1992, Enzensberger 1970). But here again the question of concrete communication work – and its quality or appeal – is largely evaded (the prominent exception being Enzensberger 1970).

2 The new-media debate

There is wide consensus that the rise of new media has led to an unprecedented enhancement of the possibilities for low-threshold pluralistic and democratic communication: the era of one-sided mass communication or, the paradigm of broadcasting, is being replaced by the narrow-casting of net-based multimedia platforms functioning in the mode of "mass self-communication" (Castells 2009). The work on and by means of these "new media" – henceforth media work – is conceived of as user generated content (Schweiger and Quiring 2007), created by "producers" (Bruns 2007). This perspective gains in prevalence as the Internet is being transformed into the participatory Web, the Web 2.0 (O'Reilly 2006) of Social Media (Schmidt 2013). Collaborative platforms such as Wikipedia create new patterns of communication and a new kind of media content that rely on a new organization of voluntary and mostly unpaid media work. Free software development is in the hands of self-organizing programming communities (e.g. the Open

¹ An earlier version of this text has been published as Adolf (2015) in German.

² Full-time employment or employment as a side job in media communication is from the start linked to a different concept of work, as we will see.

Source Initiative), and the global success of Social Network Sites (SNS) generates not only new media forms but also new patterns of societal communication and cooperation – and, as a consequence, new social relations (Adolf and Deicke 2015). Observers disagree on the evaluation of this transformation as well as on the consequences it may have. In the divergent debates on the networked communication of the new media, two heuristic ideal types stand out:

A (1) techno-optimist position focuses on those individual and civil-society actors who make active use of the new possibilities by creating public goods by contributing to knowledge repositories such as Wikipedia, whistleblowing platforms such as WikiLeaks, or watchblogs such as Guttentag Wiki, and many more. The media technological regime of digital network communication is conceived of as a new level of participatory democracy and cooperative economy. Media work is discussed in the context of concepts such as creative commons or sharing economy (cf., among others, Jenkins 2006, Benkler 2006, Shirky 2008). From this perspective, the new media are welcomed as a techno-social development and emancipatory factor and are positively if not euphorically evaluated as a novel tool for individual and political expression.

In contrast, a (2) critical position stresses the persistent structural inequality among users who, moreover, pay a high price for Web 2.0 functions and contents. On the one hand, converging on the concepts of surveillance (Altheide 2006) and Big Data (Meyer-Schönberg and Cukier 2013), there are fears of a technology-supported digital economy bent on creating the transparent consumer, that is, on establishing a comprehensive knowledge of the latter's preferences and habits in order to fine-tune marketing strategies (Stalder 2012, Adolf 2014). On the other hand, concerns focus on the immense growth of state security apparatuses and a politics of fear that are steadily eroding civil rights and liberties. The focus is on the persistence, in the new-media world, of patterns of structural inequality that shape the society and economy (see Gerhards and Schäfer 2007). Accordingly, a critical political economy of the new media is called for (cf. Fuchs 2010, Fuchs and Mosco 2012) its primary concern being with the way political power is usurped and economic exploitation is practiced under the new media regime.

These ideal-type perspectives on contemporary change in the media serve as points of departure in an attempt to identify their prevailing concepts of media work done in everyday Internet usage. The aim is to explore this category, marginal in communication studies, and to locate the various conceptualizations on the continuum between the poles, outlined above, of expression and exploitation. As a preliminary, what is needed is a closer examination of the concept of work.

3 The concept of work

In a majority of European languages the terms for “work” are etymologically related to the notion of “effort” or “toil” – as, for instance, in Latin where labour is often found in conjunction with dolor, pain.³ The concept of work has thus had a hard time from the very start since the dominant association has so long been almost exclusively that of toil and sorrow. Work is a human

³ An archetypal example may be found in the well-known lines of the Old Testament reciting the Fall of Man: “Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you; and you will eat the plants of the field; by the sweat of your face you will eat bread, till you return to the ground, because from it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (New American Standard Bible, Genesis 3: 17-19).

activity that has to do with matters of life and death: satisfying fundamental human needs, and above all providing a sufficient amount of foodstuffs as well as protection from the elements is hard work – and work done involuntarily.

Socially, work is characterized by the fact that it is to a large part done by those who have no other means of subsistence, which means that it always implies societal relations of power. Another distinction that runs like a common thread through its conceptual and cultural history is that between manual and intellectual work. As early as in antiquity, the banausoi do the manual work while intellectual work is for the scholares. In modern industrialized society, wage labour has changed the way the concept is construed, as is evident to the present day in the distinction between productive and reproductive work. The former commonly refers to gainful – that is, in most cases, dependent – employment. Furthermore, (female) reproductive work has long been overshadowed by (male) gainful employment (cf. Voß 2010: 46f.). Even today, the socially dominant understanding of work is that of gainful employment, as different from both subsistence work (labour) and creative work (work) oriented to individual self-fulfilment. In modern societies, gainful employment is the central mode of securing income for satisfying one's needs. Yet a vocation, or "calling", already defines a special case of work: work as an ethical value and geared to the exercise of a person's talents and inclinations (Weber 2002 [1905]). To this day the concept of work thus oscillates between labour and dependency, on the one hand, and fulfilment and self-empowerment, on the other hand.

It is immediately clear from this short outline that no debate on work can dispense with a recourse to the historical background of the concept, which defines the very core of how it is understood. This means that work is more than a term for what people do – not everything is work – and that the activities that go by the name of work are subject to cultural and moral evaluation.⁴

Two results of this clarification of the term are, in a first step, important for the present discussion: First, referring to "work" without further qualification is insufficient as a means of delimiting the human activity, or activities, it describes. Without a more detailed definition of the concept, unproductive amalgamations of traditional dimensions of meaning are bound to occur. Second, given the continuum between the connotation of (anonymous) toil on the one end, and (personal) fulfilment on the other, it makes a difference which of these poles is closer to the understanding of work implied in the discussion. In the following, I propose to explore how the concept of work is dealt with in the theorizing of digital media communication and, more specifically, with the role attributed to work in the digital communication regime by the different academic approaches. I will do so along the lines of the typical distinction made above between an optimistic-affirmative (expression) and a pessimistic-critical (exploitation) position.

⁴ Consulting traditional dictionaries (here: the German Brockhaus 1997: 234ff) helps to reconstruct the change undergone by the concept of work and to clarify its current understanding: In the wake of the Reformation the nature of work changed. It was no longer understood to be a "vital duty and an atonement" but increasingly also a "service to God and a service to one's fellow humans". At the same time Calvinism began to assess its value in terms of outcome. With German Idealism, and in particular Hegel who "characterized [work] as a means of building awareness of the self and of liberating man" (ibid.), work took on a positive connotation. Philosophical anthropology eventually conceived of human work as such as a core element of the human condition that essentially defines human nature: "You are what you do!"

4 Expression: media work as a “labour of love”

Proponents of the ideal-type techno-optimist approach to theorizing the new media tend to abide by a Hegelian rather than biblical understanding of the media work done at, on and through the new communication technologies – provided they address the category of work at all. As it is, the focus here is on the possibilities (“affordances”) offered by the new technologies and on their technological-dispositive qualities, of which the enabling and furthering of individual expression appears to be an inherent feature. In this context, technological innovation and societal progress are often confounded. Already with Web 1.0, and all the more so with Web 2.0, the new media are primarily conceived as low-threshold, widely accessible communication platforms, and often normatively opposed to the old media. The winner in this confrontation is the Internet, every time. It affords new means of production for people to express themselves while their global reach and massive use enable new social relations. The core issues are the emergent potentials of productive media use (i.e. media work) that variously – depending on the author – lead to novel modes of communication (dimension of social relations), novel modes of cooperation (dimension of the communal production of informational goods) and all in all to a freer, more democratic and more equal society (political dimension).

The works of Clay Shirky provide an apt illustration of this techno-optimistic perspective, offering a number of succinct formulations of many of its positions. Shirky (2012: 237f) describes technological innovations as a surplus for society as a whole and capable of transforming it as such. The concept of work is not an issue in this context; rather, the driving developmental forces are creativity, a pioneering spirit and the hope of creating something new and successful (ibid.: 238f). Besides its basic emancipatory-evolutionary tenet, this discourse is marked by an implicit characterization of human work – thus largely evading the question. The same is true for the much-quoted writings of Jeff Jarvis whose theses of “publicness” as the one feature that will shape the future may not require an explicit recourse to communication work but do refer to technology and markets. In his view, the new media “[...] empower us. They grant us the ability to create, to connect, to organize, and to aggregate our knowledge. They provoke generosity and collaboration. They allow people to make their living in new ways and to build new industries and markets.” (Jarvis 2011: 218). In much the same vein, Tim O’Reilly refers to “net-enabled” “collective intelligence” (O’Reilly 2012: 37f), while still others extol the emergence of a “gift economy”, or at least a “sharing economy” where even the creation of something new will then be accomplished through a communal effort.

These arguments, however, often build on a rather hazy concept of participation as well as a stunted concept of work. Thus, the basic tenets of those contributions that adopt the affirmative perspective of expression can be resumed as follows: with the social-media propositions and the multiple low-threshold and easy-to-use communication channels an essential means of production is now, if not in the ownership, at least in the possession of its recipients and users. Thanks to the affordances of the Internet more people than ever are in a position to choose among, comment on and share a previously unknown range of multi-media offers and to create

and distribute their own communications.⁵ However, to simply celebrate the new media-based communicative modalities as the self-implementation of a new commons model seems to be rather short-sighted, all the more so as grand notions such as “crowd sourcing”, “sharing economy”, “collaborative media” or “free culture” tend to mask the concrete effort, time and energy that is needed for them to exist. Consequently, Felix Stalder critically summarizes the myopia inherent in such accounts: “[V]oluntary user contributions are [...] expressions of authentic personal opinions (‘love’) with no institutional agendas (‘money’). Second, there is a free market of ad hoc communities where institutions play no role. Third, this is a world beyond economics. And, finally, (virtually) all forms of cooperation are beneficial” (Stalder 2012: 245).

5 Exploitation: media work from a Marxist perspective

Proponents of a political economy of the Internet (Fuchs 2009: 61) pursue a completely different approach to the work done on and through new media. Christian Fuchs, for instance, explicitly aims to propose a critical theory of the Internet as part of a “larger canon of Marxist theories of society and communication” (ibid.: 73). In this, Fuchs adheres to all the essential figures of thought of classical Marxism, such as, for instance, an economically founded concept of class (see Scholz 2013 for a comprehensive discussion of the problem in the context of Marxist theory). If, according to Fuchs (2010: 190f), the new media are analysed in terms of the Marxist conception of surplus value, the following picture emerges: transformed into a “producer” (Bruns 2007), the recipient who relies on the new affordances of Web 2.0 “social media” to fill the global digital platforms with life and content. But to use these services means to produce knowledge in the broadest sense, that is, communications that represent intellectual, artistic or other kinds of (immaterial) work. Naïve producers not only create the product but are, at the same time, themselves sold with unprecedented accuracy to the advertising industry: “The difference between the audience commodity on traditional mass media and on the Internet is that in the latter case the users are also content producers; there is user-generated content, and the users engage in permanent creative activity, communication, community building, and content production” (Fuchs 2010: 192). Capitalistic exploitation thus hits a new peak. Those who operate the technological infrastructure (Flickr, YouTube, Facebook etc.) are conceived of as capitalist exploiters in two respects: in their capacity as employers they defraud the knowledge workers in their employ – the technicians, the programmers and the creative workers – of their surplus value; and in their capacity as media providers they also exploit their users. The novel “many-to-many” mode, i.e. the creative, communicative and cooperative activities of the users of these privately owned platforms, results in a “total commodification of human creativity” (Fuchs 2009: 82). The users’ participation becomes a commodity, the surplus value they generate is appropriated by the operator, and on top of it all the users “pay” for all their precious work by customized advertising that, in turn, draws on the ever-closer surveillance of these users’ behaviours.

⁵ See also, for instance, the so-called “fan-based production”, comprehensively discussed by Henry Jenkins, among others (Jenkins 2012: 203f). However, here again the discussion is not primarily about the (material) recognition of the work done by fans (e.g. of the Star War Universe) but rather about the re-negotiation of the boundaries between intellectual property, on the one hand, and the freedom of using and appropriating media-cultural symbols and narratives. The commercial exploitation of “grassroots activities” remains a marginal concern (Jenkins 2012: 226; see also Jenkins 2006).

Against the background of the Marxian theory of work, this amounts to the ultimate loss of control over one's own products and the value that is being created from them. In the final analysis, the users' engagement with and participation in the "participatory Web" is itself subject to the commodity form.⁶ Fuchs thus comes to the conclusion that the low-threshold network structure of the Internet does by no means imply that communication is being democratized. On the contrary: "Social networking has an ideological character: its networking advances capitalist individualization, accumulation and legitimization" (Fuchs 2009: 84).

An interim conclusion drawn from the reflections subsumed here under the concept of exploitation would be that from a perspective of critical political economy the new media are far from being a tool for individual expression or social participation. Nor, contrary to the hopes expressed by Enzensberger (1970) and others, are they a likely vehicle for resistance against hegemonic media products. Rather, these arguments refer to the way media platforms are organized, and evaluate them relying on the classical premises of a Marxist critique of capitalism. The question is not really who profits from the communication (and why does he or she participate in it) but whether the platform – as an infrastructure for and product (in the sense of aggregate) of innumerable communications – yields a profit that accrues only to a small number of individuals (the media company owners and investors).⁷

6 Communication as work, knowledge as a commodity: probing the adequacy of two concepts

As it is, both perspectives discussed here – the optimistic sharing approach as well as the totalistic exploitation thesis – fall short when it comes to an adequate analysis of what people actually do when using new media. While techno-optimist contributions to the debate remain silent, in so many words, about the (media) work that goes into the cooperative process on network media, the Marxist perspective tends to overuse it. But media work in the context of decentralized communication on the new media is not the only element that needs to be re-conceptualized. There is also the issue of what is being created in the process. The following section discusses both the process as well as the result of communicating on and through the web.

6.1 The process of communication: the limits of the concept of work

The concept of work, as has already been suggested earlier, has a most prominent place especially in the tradition of Marxist theory since in the latter, the human as a natural being is defined by his work on and exchange with nature. This conception provides the basis for historical materialism that from a Marxist perspective is the essential historical dynamics of human sociality.

⁶ Fuchs (2009: 81) refers to Smythe's critical political economy of mass communication: "Because audience power is produced, sold, purchased and consumed, it commands a price and is a commodity. [...] You audience members contribute your unpaid work time and in exchange you receive the program material and the explicit advertisements." (Smythe 2006: 233; 238). Given that the "gift" is merely apparent, framing the Internet as a "gift economy" is therefore just an update of Smythe's concept of "audience commodity".

⁷ As a result, this criticism of media work done on the new media is unspecific in so far as it ultimately targets private property, in this case media organizations, and is therefore not confined to the phenomena of network communication. It would similarly apply to traditional publishing companies and media corporations, or any other type of media. Moreover, this criticism builds on an inherently economic, or rather productivistic perspective on communication (cf. Heller 1981), ultimately evaluating it in terms of its economic benefits.

We get to be what we are through work, and work shapes not only nature but man himself. This is the conceptual origin of all the explosive philosophical and political consequences of the alienation thesis: "In estranging from man (1) nature, and (2) himself, his own active functions, his life activity, estranged labour estranges the species from man" (Marx 1970: 112). Not unlike biblical toil, there is no redemption for work in capitalism even from the Marxist point of view since in capitalism, the "relation between man and his own work, which actually is a positive one, [...] is in more than one respect transformed into a negative relation" (Jochum 2010: 109). Thus, from this critical point of view, the verdict on media work (done on and through the new media) is in a way predetermined by its very definition of the respective human activities as work. This, however, raises the fundamental question whether the concept of work is at all adequate as a description of the human activities involved in this context, that is, communication in and through social networks.

Not every human activity can be conceived of as work. Accordingly, the sociology of work has proposed a more differentiated understanding (cf. for instance Voß 2010) that not only avoids an earlier narrowing-down to wage labour, or gainful employment. The attempt to delimit the concept of work can even draw on Marx himself, in a passage found as early as in the *Capital* (Marx 1976: 290):

"The labour process [...] is purposeful activity aimed at the production of use-values. It is an appropriation of what exists in nature for the requirements of man. It is the universal condition for the metabolic interaction [Stoffwechsel] between man and nature, the everlasting nature-imposed condition of human existence, and it is therefore independent of every form of that existence, or rather it is common to all forms of society in which human beings live."

Thus, the Marxian concept of work is more comprehensive than it is often assumed to be but reflects "more strongly than one would at first believe the rationalist, objectivist and productivist spirit of classical (if not industrial) modernity [...]" (Voß 2010: 43).

This, then, is the very connotation that also defines Marxist Internet theory, where the focus on production prevails in so far as (communication) work is equated with production. The result is a disproportionate narrowing-down of the concept of communication to an understanding that runs counter to its communication studies counterpart in a number of essential elements. Moreover, there is another defining criterion of work that is hardly consistent with the established concept of communication, that is, its purposive orientation and its non-immediate creation of value. Bahrtdt (1983: 124) defines work as a "[...] skillful, continuous, organized, demanding, useful activity oriented to a purpose that transcends the act of work itself" (quoted in Voß 2010: 46; my emphasis). The criterion of work being oriented to something non-immediate and non-identical that transcends it and lies in the future is an essential element of its definition and can be found in other conceptualizations, as well (cf. Atteslander 1984: 132). But if this sociology-of-work criterion is applied to the question of how to classify communicative action in the context of

various media platforms, then work in the narrower sense is what network proprietors do rather than what users do in their active network use.⁸

A critique of the concept of work and its largely undifferentiated application to the communicative activities that go on on the Web is all the more important as there actually is a number of alternative conceptualizations that have emerged from critical communications and media studies.⁹ No use is made, for instance, of Jürgen Habermas' seminal distinction, based on his reading of Hegel, between the concepts of work and interaction. In Habermas' theory of communicative action (1984 [1981]) interaction in terms of "symbolically mediated interaction" among individuals is what defines the very concept of "communicative action" and is clearly demarcated from work conceived of as "instrumental action [...] governed by technical rules" (Habermas 1971: 91).¹⁰ Another fruitful source for a sufficiently differentiated, critical analysis of the special relation between work and communication is Hannah Arendt (Arendt 1998 [1958]): along with "labour" (Arbeit) as an existential necessity (ibid.: 79) and "work", that is, fabrication (Herstellen) (ibid.: 136), human "action" (Handeln) (ibid.: 175) is a profoundly social activity that, in a broader sense, is based on understanding and is seen as distinct from the other two realms (cf. also Voß 2010: 48f). Proposing that human communication as social action should be conflated with production erases these analytically helpful distinctions. Given these conceptualizations, critical Marxist Internet theory fails to avail itself of the conceptual potential established in decades of critical media studies.

6.2 The product of communication: the knowledge of the commons

Interestingly, both ideal-type positions analyzed here, expression as well as exploitation, converge on the figure of the immaterial goods created through media work. Proponents of a post-privacy ideology, or a digital era of "publicness" (Jarvis 2011), stress the element of "collaboration" in the "social media" context. Web 2.0 users create "content, products and services" and do so in the mode, often left unproblematized, of "peer production" (Gallaughier 2012). According to Jeff Jarvis (2011: 43f, 137f) social networks are about cooperation (Wikipedia, etc.) and about reviving old relationships and building new ones. They create new "publicness" and in the process generate new possibilities for decentralized information and organization. The mode is a new transparency (referring here both to democratic politics as well as the prices of products or the quality of services) that may lead to both more honesty and more recognition for the individual (ibid.). The pervasive suggestion of a close link between these social activities and an economic surplus value seems to be not so much a matter of concern but rather a gratifying by-product. From this perspective, the mobile Internet of Web 2.0 consists of "platforms that fuel

⁸ Of course most communicative activities are also geared to the pursuit of a specific (communicational) interest; but they cannot be reduced to it. The characterization fails to include the fundamental element of understanding, as well as the often dominant ritual, habitual and relation-oriented purpose of communication.

⁹ Such as the concepts elaborated under the influence of culturalist works emanating from British Cultural Studies; cf. for instance Williams (1974), Göttlich (1996).

¹⁰ This is not to say that one needs to follow Habermas in his engagement with first-generation Critical Theory; but his perspective deserves to be mentioned, anyway, since it initiated a reorientation of Critical Theory (of communication) (cf. Ganßmann 1990).

sharing” (Jarvis 2011: 138), and what is being shared and increased are immaterial goods that can ultimately be subsumed under the term of knowledge.

Similarly, critical Internet theory that conceives of its object as “informational capitalism” also sees “knowledge labour” done by knowledge workers whose cognitive performance has become a productive force as the pivotal mode of production (cf. Fuchs 2010: 186; 195). Knowledge work is “labour that produces and distributes information, communication, social relationships, affects, and information and communication technologies” (Fuchs 2010: 186f). Accordingly, knowledge is a

“productive force [which] is produced not only in corporations in the form of knowledge goods, but also in everyday life, for example, by parents who educate their children; citizens who engage in everyday politics; consumers of media who produce social meaning and hence are prosumers; users of MySpace, YouTube, Facebook, and similar sites [...]” (Fuchs 2010: 186f).

Here again the core category of informational capitalism – that which is produced in media work – is knowledge. It is conceived of as a very special good, i.e. a good that is cooperative, collective and cumulative and the result of cooperation among individuals and, primarily, their net-based communicative activities.

An emphasis on the social as well as economic role of knowledge as an axial principle of contemporary society has since the early 1970s been a hallmark of the works of social theorists such as Daniel Bell. In the line of thought that theorizes modern society as a post-industrial society (Bell 1973), an economy-of-knowledge perspective emerged, discussing the importance of knowledge from the perspective of its specific cognitive, social and economic qualities (cf. Böhme and Stehr 1986). Nico Stehr (1996: 4) summarizes this perspective:

“[the] most common denominator of the changes in the structure of the economy seems to be a shift from an economy driven and governed, in large measure, by ‘material’ inputs into the productive process and its organization to an economy in which transformations in productive and distributive processes are determined much more by ‘symbolic’ or knowledge based inputs.”

Interestingly, both of the above-discussed perspectives on media work also converge on the concept of knowledge that, moreover, in terms of social theory seems to be compatible with the theory of the knowledge society. Both factions conceptualize knowledge that circulates and is generated on the new media as a collective good created through communicative social activities on new-media platforms and channels. The classical natural “commons” (air, water, soil) are thus supplemented by the new “artificial commons” – that is, by all the so-called immaterial goods that originate from a cooperative social process (knowledge, language, codes, information, affects). Communication and its objectifications (to borrow a term from Schütz and Luckmann, 1973: 286), the creative and innovative processes through which various kinds of knowledge emerge – albeit not necessarily from the start in a concrete and ready-to-use form – are subsumed under the umbrella category of knowledge.

Drawing on Michaels Hardt's and Antonio Negri's "Commonwealth" (2011), a concept they rely on to propagate the communal, equal and solidary use of all material, affective and cognitive resources, the "commons" also play a key role in the conception advocated by Fuchs. "Whenever new information emerges, it incorporates the whole societal history of information: that is, information has a historical character. Hence, information in essence is a public good, freely available to all" (Fuchs 2009: 77f). But, Fuchs points out, while the general public indeed benefits from the various forms of knowledge, corporate actors profit to a much larger extent: entertainment and educational knowledge, practical knowledge, technological knowledge ultimately accrue primarily to commercial companies. And companies profit most from the appropriation of knowledge that is often at least partially produced in a communal setting or with public funds (as for instance in basic research) because they can implement it to boost the surplus value of their production (Fuchs 2010: 190). Rather than power, knowledge here amounts to profits.

Stehr (1994, 1996), in contrast, argues that this novel distribution of knowledge is at the same time the very basis for a transformation of the traditional, materially grounded relations of power that have shaped industrial society. In modern society, knowledge is hard to control and has a social impact in terms of the capacity to act. This capacity potentially accrues to all members of modern society, not least due to the specific characteristics of knowledge. As it is, knowledge is not only a cooperative, collective and cumulative good originating from the cooperation among individuals. It is not subject to the tragedy of the commons-problem and also tends to not get lost. Even if it is divested or realized, for instance in social networks, it remains a property of its original producer since the exchange process does not divest the knowledge producer of his or her power of disposal. And since with knowledge there is no zero-sum situation, it grows with the extension of the social networks in which it circulates.¹¹ This is not to say that knowledge is equally distributed and always available to all members of a society. From a historical perspective, however, those who primarily gain in power in the emerging knowledge societies are individual actors and small social groups while the traditionally powerful institutions had to put up with losses in terms of authority and control (cf. Beck 1986, Giddens 1991, Stehr 2000). Similarly, André Gorz (2001, 2004) sees the emerging knowledge economy as a historical challenge for capitalism since now the conditions of production can no longer be brought in line with the relations of production. The growing role of knowledge points beyond capitalism because knowledge, given that its distribution is hard to control and that as a consequence it is increasingly hard to exploit, resists private ownership.

So, while this development is seen as a new heyday of exploitation by the proponents of a Marxist theory of the Internet it marks, for others, a potential turning point in the societal relations of power. The latter view is grounded on the very relation between knowledge production and knowledge appropriation – and thus media work – and its ongoing transformation on the

¹¹ Fuchs' critical perspective also subscribes to this view: "Knowledge only needs to be produced only once, can be infinitely reproduced at low costs, and can be distributed at high speed. There is no physical wear and tear of the product; knowledge is not used up in consumption, but can be reworked and built upon" (2010: 190). But while Fuchs does recognize the specific nature of the good "knowledge", he paradoxically ignores the consequences that arise from it: "The production process of knowledge is a social, common process, but knowledge is appropriated by capital" (Fuchs 2010: 186f). This exclusive appropriation of knowledge, however, is the very point of contention (see also Adolf and Stehr 2014).

new media. Knowledge and knowledgeability are an ever-present element of unrest in the societies formerly attuned to the large institutions of the first modernity. This perspective helps to overcome both the narrowing-down that prevails in the techno-optimistic emancipatory rhetoric as well as the restrictive focus on exploitation proposed by classical Marxism. In so far as the ideal-type perspectives of both expression (free exchange among the many results in the co-creation of communal goods) and exploitation (the community is a priori dispossessed of its communally produced goods) converge on the concept of knowledge as the key factor of their analyses of contemporary media-society sociality, this is where further theoretical discussions need to start out from; and these discussions must concern themselves with the character and the social role of knowledge.

7 Conclusion: Communication – more than just work and production

The ongoing debate about the work done on and through the new media suffers from a number of constraints, as I have tried to show. Certainly, the new information and communication regime affords the individual more informational autonomy, new possibilities of forming social relations, and enhanced opportunities for voicing its beliefs, opinions and needs in the mode of networked global communication. Nevertheless, certain constraints remain, imposed by the economic realities of a society characterized by gainful employment and the ever-fragile distribution of political power among actors both individual and institutional, as evident for instance in today's struggle over the technological and regulatory standardization of the Internet. To account for all this exclusively in terms of expression and cooperation is to ignore the persistence of these powerful structural constraints.

There is no doubt, therefore, that efforts towards a more differentiated theorizing of social, political and economic inequality on the Internet as a space for communication and interaction are called for. In order to be able to account for the affordances and constraints of this social space, however, this necessary and desirable critical theory of the Internet needs to draw on a broad conceptual basis. The concept of work alone is unable to provide an adequate theoretical framework for exploring the human activity that is carried out in the context of media-based communication. Surely, the technological possibilities of the digital media afford the participants in communication new communicative forms and modalities; and surely such patterns of communication rely on user activity, on the effort and the energy of individuals participating in these exchanges. Yet as an umbrella category for an analysis of these new communication relations the concept of work seems to be of limited adequacy; even more so when applying a materialistic concept of work that came into being during the heyday of the industrial revolution. Using it as an only tool to analyse communication, and in particular the novel forms of interaction, participation and cooperation that have emerged in recent years does not create much of an added analytical value. However indispensable criticism of the current development of the web based communication platforms may be the fact remains that they provide a space for otherwise undetected individual voices and talents, afford recognition for previously private creative activities, help diffuse new ideas and enable new solidarities.

Another problem of this narrowing-down to work is the productivist bias inherent in both of the two perspectives discussed above. On the one hand, an inherent focus on the strategic usefulness of online networking and collaboration fetishizes the “profitability” of the Web 2.0, and uncritically reproduces the dominant narrative of “the labour of love” so succinctly criticized by Stalder (2012) above. On the other hand, highlighting only the exploitability of communication and the messages communicated, that is, the value (of communication) which is realized beyond the immediate social practice (of communicating), a devotedly Marxist theory of work fails to recognize the emancipatory potentials of the new media as well as the reasons why they enjoy such a huge popularity. If your theoretical outlook only allows you to detect exploitation in every activity, you become blind to the eminently social, beyond-work nature of networked communication. But precisely because communication is a constitutively social process; precisely because new knowledge builds on existing knowledge; precisely because the use of the new media, and the joy of using them, almost always imply the participation of others, there is value arising from its deeply social character.

Hence, the implicit economism of the two ideal-type positions discussed here does not do justice to the social actions that go on in social networks and the new media. It is based on a misconception, namely the adaption of the concept of production to the emergent mode of the incremental and cooperative generation of informational goods: the categories of production and consumption cannot fully grasp the reality of new media communication. It is exactly for this reason that our research keeps proposing new terms and concepts for describing and analysing the processes that go on in the new media. New phenomena do not neatly fit in old categories. There is no denying the fact that in the course of this development a surplus value is generated and partially appropriated privately. But it is also a fact that what characterizes communication, community and knowledge is not a zero-sum situation: the moment of their capitalistic appropriation – to stick to the diction – is also the moment of their consumption by their authors in the very process of creating them.

8 Postscript: A critical theory of the Internet

Given the complexity of communicative activities, an adequate critical theory of the Internet needs to draw on more than one conceptual source. It needs to rely on the many insights gained in an exacting and productive interrogation of historical-materialist theory, among others, suggesting that in the final analysis communication is a very special social process (cf. Hall 1992: 281): a process that due to its fundamental importance for the individual and for sociality defies premature subjection to the interpretational sovereignty of other, privileged theoretical positions, just as the close interconnection that is constitutive for communication and culture defies construal in terms of the reflectivist figure of (media-economic) base and (digital-capitalist) superstructure (Kellner 1995, Göttlich 1996, Winter 2001, Jacke 2004, Adolf 2006). A one-sided productivist perspective ignores too many of the fruitful insights that have been gained in decades of critical engagement with the economic and cultural realities of the ongoing transformation of modern industrial society into a media society. It fails to fully assimilate the productive critical analysis, found in the works of the Frankfurt School, in feminist theory and in

British and international cultural studies, of both the repressive and the emancipatory potentials of the media. It disregards essential concepts that help us analyse current practices of domination such as, for instance, the modes of subjectivation proposed to contemporary individuals or the subtle intrusion of power into dispositive medial forms. It ignores the current conflicts, so often argued out on the media, between hegemonic and marginal interpretations of what goes on in the world. Moreover, any wholesale critique of the new media tends to undermine those activists who use them to pursue their emancipatory political agenda. It fails to take account of the solidary nature of net phenomena such as Wikipedia, the text- and video-based support offered millions of times in forums and chats, the subversive political commitment of all those who challenge techno-political power structures, from WikiLeaks to the Occupy movement. By its very insistence on the exclusive priority of property relations – whose continued importance is undisputed – it fails to recognize one of the genuinely novel qualities of net-based communication and, paradoxically, reduces those who engage in informational work as well as in empathic communication to the “goods” they generate in the network. If, however, both the short-sighted eulogy of expression and the denunciation of a priori guaranteed exploitation fall short of accounting for what is done on the Internet, a critical theory is called for that focuses on the element of autonomy of communicating human and strives to detect, explain and help defend it; an autonomy that also means that we do not only take account of what normatively suits our theoretical beliefs.

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