

Consumption, Capital, and Class in Digital Space: The Political Economy of the *Pay-Per-Click* Business Models

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Abstract

Theories of digital capitalism have attempted to solve two interrelated conceptual problems: 1) the conundrum of how seemingly ‘free’ use of social networking websites is compatible with capitalist commodity production, and 2) how the Marxian apparatus of class exploitation can be extended to grasp newly emerging digital social relations. In this paper, I present a dialectical approach that begins by problematizing digital production in relation to its counterpart, digital *consumption*, before proceeding to connect the two ‘moments’ to the organization of the surplus in digital space via a fundamental and subsumed class framework. With consumption as its analytical point of entry, a major aim of the paper is to present a link between capitalist and non-capitalist human activity in digital space. It distinguishes between the commodity and *non-commodity* forms in digital space, giving visibility to the dialectic of *free* vs. *forced* consumption. I argue that an identification of the commodity versus non-commodity digital use-values (and for *whom* they serve as such) is, in turn, non-neutral to how we conceptualize digital production and hence, class relations. While clients are consumers of the *commodity*, users are lured into providing the conditions of existence (network formation) necessary for this concrete form of capital to accumulate. Having distinguished them from one another, I then demonstrate

how the leading social networking website *Facebook* transverses a multiplicity of geographically segregated class interactions to extract unpaid surpluses from direct-producers across the globe via capitalist as well as non-capitalist modes of appropriation and distribution.

Keywords: Digital capitalism, audience-labor, immaterial labor, Marx, value theory

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