Main Article

Tweeting ourselves to death: the cultural logic of digital capitalism

Petter Törnberg ⓘ and Justus Uitermark

Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Abstract

Media scholarship has long argued that public discourse is a function of the architecture of the media by which it is carried. Media architecture is, as political economists have argued, in turn shaped by the capitalist regime of accumulation within which the media operate. This paper draws together these two strands of literature to ask: as the accumulation of data is coming to define contemporary capitalism, what cultural logic does this produce? The paper argues that, as media are shaped around the extracting user data, they become organized around personhood and the extension of commodification deeper into our sense of self. The lifestyle fragmentation and segmentation engendered by new media technologies carry over into public discourse, shaping a public, and political life defined by identity and difference. If, as Neil Postman suggested, a society's way of knowing reflects its media technology, the emerging epistemology of the social media society is *truth as identity*, as our very ways of knowing are reduced to expressions of who we are.

Keywords

commodification, culture, identity, polarization, public discourse, social media

Introduction

In 1985, Neil Postman published a now classic exposition on the impact of television on Western society, entitled 'Amusing Ourselves to Death'. Postman argues that the superficial, fragmented, and short attention-spanned society he saw around him was

Corresponding author:
Petter Törnberg, Urban Geographies, Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research, University of Amsterdam, Postbus 15629, Amsterdam, NC 1001, The Netherlands.
Email: petter.tornberg@gmail.com

the indirect product of the television. The argument leaned on the broader suggestion that the nature and structure of the public discourse of any society is a function of the medium that carries it. Media forms encourage and dissuade certain thoughts, certain definitions of truth, certain content. The arrival of a major new media technology will thus change the very culture of society. Postman observes a transition from the fixed, immutable, and structured form of the written word to the television's 'sequencing of information so random, so disparate in scale and value, as to be incoherent, even psychotic' (Postman, 1985: xi). With television, form became more important than content, and authenticity more than authority, producing a decontextualized information environment.

Postman was not the first to argue that the culture of a society is shaped by the affordances of its media technology; he followed in the path of early media scholars like Innis (1950, 1951) and McLuhan (1962). Political economists, starting with Karl Marx, have developed a historical materialist argument to the same effect. In *The German Ideology*, Marx rhetorically asks: 'Is the Iliad possible when the printing press and even printing machines exist? Is it not inevitable that with the emergence of the press, the singing and the telling and the muse cease; that is, the conditions necessary for epic poetry disappear?' (p. 43). In Marx' account, however, this is more than just a question of 'the medium is the message' (McLuhan, 1962): for Marx, media technology is intertwined with the larger capitalist regime of accumulation.

Harvey (1989) argued along similar lines that cultural shifts in the 1970s and 1980s can be traced back to changes in the regime of accumulation. While the media of industrial Fordist mass-production had high modernity as its expression, post-Fordism, or 'late capitalism' had postmodernity as its corresponding cultural logic (see also Jameson, 1991). Harvey's account suggests that the conditions of capital accumulation are central to determining the structure of technology, which in turn come to shape the medium – and, ultimately, the message. Media technologies can thus be conceived as important mediators between the regime of accumulation and the logic of culture; media act to channel the dominant form of production to a dominant structure of culture.

Today, a growing literature argues that data having become the defining commodity of accumulation: a condition variably termed 'digital', 'surveillance', or 'platform' capitalism (Dean, 2005; Fuchs, 2010; Sadowski, 2019; Srnicek, 2017; Zuboff and Chalier, 2019). In exploring the political economic relationship between data and contemporary capitalism, this literature casts social media as part of a transition in which digital data have become the central object of accumulation (Van Dijck, 2014). We seek to add to this literature a historical-materialist account that examines – with a broad brush – recent changes in the regime of accumulation and attendant changes in media technology. As most of the literature we draw upon, we focus on the West, specifically the United States.

This paper draws together diverse work by media scholars and political economists to situate social media within the larger shifts of accumulation, with the aim of throwing light on the cultural logic resulting from social media becoming the defining media technology of the current epoch. As the mass-media of modernity was shaped by mass-production and mass-consumption, so is social media shaped by the accumulation of data and the logic of data extraction. These changes in media technology shape our notions of

value and truth: 'As a culture moves from orality to writing to printing to televising, its ideas of truth move with it. . . . every epistemology is the epistemology of a stage of media development'. (Postman, 1985: 24). Tying together these literatures, we here ask the question that Postman might ask today – what is the epistemology of digital capitalism? – or, to paraphrase Jameson: what is the cultural logic of digital capitalism?

The changing business of public discourse

It is often said that contemporary media are structured as an attention-economy: since their business model is based on advertisement revenue, their aim is to find ways to maximize attention and engagement from viewers, readers, and users (Goldhaber, 1997; Marwick, 2015). However, this was arguably the case also for the newspaper and television media of the 20th century: they, too, competed for viewers and readers by maximizing interest and attention. The difference between the two media regimes rather concerns the conditions for the advertisement revenue pursued. The media that characterized most of the 20th century were oriented around the central factor of *scale*: purchasing a television broadcasting station, or printing a newspaper was expensive, and these tended to cover relatively local markets. Because of this, newspapers and television channels were focused on attempting to maximize their audience within their regions of coverage: the larger their audience, the more advertising revenue. Competition in these markets were often relatively limited: one or two media moguls usually dominated the market, and it was challenging and expensive for a new competitor to move in. Media were, in short, driven by the logic of an industrial economy of scale.

The media logic of scale was the result not only of the material conditions of the media production, but also of the broader regime of accumulation: this was the media logic that corresponded to industrial mass-production. The era of broadcast mass-media has been referred to as the era of mass-individuality, as consumer goods were produced at scale and aimed at mass-markets (Harvey, 1991). Consumers were subjected to powerful pressures toward homogeneity, with individuality reduced to a choice from products superficially differentiated by esthetics and accessories. Since the products were not aimed at niche groups, neither was advertising spending (Gartman, 1998, 2004). This implied an advertisement system that was similarly aimed at scale: advertisers wanted to reach as many consumers as possible, regardless of their specific preferences. This was, in other words, the era of the *mass*: mass-media, mass-consumption, mass-production – all catering to a mass-individuality.

The media culture was shaped by the advertising revenue that was the foundations of their business model. The goal of dominating markets implied the need to appeal to as large an audience as possible, creating pressures for a homogenized, nonpartisan, and highly integrated media market. This had implications for what media decided to print or broadcast: newspapers and television channels had to encapsulate and appeal to different opinions, preferences, identities, and political persuasion. To achieve this, media developed various strategies. A central strategy was the creation of a culture of 'nonpartisan' news, based on the central separation between *fact* and *opinion* pieces (Altheide and Snow, 1979). The former were presented as 'neutral' shared common ground, which was not subject to debate or different views – they were the realm of ostensible objectivity.

The latter were demarked as potential territory for disagreement – the realm of subjectivity. This separation allowed for constructive disagreement on some opinion matters, based on a common ground in what the issues were, and shared stories about what is happening in the world.

The idea of media's objectivity of fact was constructed and legitimated through various standardized procedures, aimed at creating an air of independence and neutrality. News anchors were neutrally dressed and trained to present a neutrality of voice and expression. They leaned on the authority of experts and officials representing public institutions such as the police or universities, or the ostensible objectivity of polls and surveys. These practices came together to creating a rhetoric and esthetics of 'facts' (Altheide and Snow, 1979; Van Dijck and Poell, 2013). Mass media presented themselves as neutral platforms, modeled on the idealized notion of a public sphere, drawing their legitimacy from a sense of objectivity and neutrality founded in the notion of a rational exchange of ideas – while rendering invisible their filtering and choice of who and what gets exposure.

It was not that the media were actually neutral in some absolute sense; rather, they rather had the power to *define what was to be considered neutral*. The media had control over what was part of the sphere of public consensus, what was part of the sphere of legitimate debate – and what was to be considered deviant and outside the realm of the respectable. These distinctions were, importantly, associated to the exclusion of minority groups or dissenting views from mainstream discourse, with the constructed objectivity, universality, and rationality being founded on racist, sexist, and classist exclusions (e.g. Fraser, 1990). The civil and compromise-driven political culture which is often seen as characterizing this era was enabled precisely by the exclusion of important cleavages and conflicts, the systematic repression of minority claims to recognition and representation, as well as pervasive voter disenfranchisement. The political discourse was less conflictual in part because existential conflicts were simply not allowed into the realm of legitimate debate. While there was certainly some pressure to highlight conflict and news known to draw audience attention, the limited competition, combined with the need to maintain and uphold an air of seriousness and credibility – which could be damaged by excessive catering to audience attention – meant that there were distinct limits to what was fit to print, and significant space for editorial discretion.

In the mid-70s, however, the Fordist system of mass-production and mass-consumption came under growing pressure and so did the associated media model (Harvey, 1989). The crisis of Fordism was simultaneously cultural and economic, as a new regime of production drove and was driven by a rise in cultural diversity and fragmentation, in a revolt against the assembly-line individuality, associated to an escalation in demand for product diversity (Amin, 1994; Hebdige, 1994). This demand stimulated the development of a new production regime, aimed at economies of *scope* rather than of *scale*.

The response to this crisis saw the development of a new production and consumption regime. While Fordist mass-production was narrowly focused on efficient production at scale, the aim now moved toward economies of *scope*. For industrial production, this meant replacing mass-production with flexible specialization, allowing quick adaptation of output (Mort, 1989; Murray, 1989). The aim and focus of these production processes differed from those of their predecessors: as they operated in an economy that was

'increasingly characterized by diversity, differentiation and fragmentation, rather than homogeneity, standardization and the economics and organization of scale which characterized modern mass society' (Hall and Jacques, 1989: 11). This fragmentation meant that the countercultural alternatives to the mainstream could now be brought in and transformed into market segments, employed to generate demand (Fraser, 1990). Production moved from aiming to appeal to as many people as possible to being as appealing as possible to specific people.

As production became focused on economies of scope and market segmentation, advertising spending followed, aiming to capture specific market segments – that is, particular types of people. This means a decline of the spending directed toward 'one-size-fits-all' media, and a shift toward targeting niche audiences. This shift was supported by falling fixed costs in media, with printing and broadcasting equipment becoming more affordable due to much the same technological innovations that enabled the flexibilization of industrial production. The business model for advertising changed from reaching mass-markets, to micromarketing and the identification of precise market segments (Gartman, 2004), bringing about a logic of specialization in which production, advertising, and media all segmented, specialized, and segregated. Shifting revenue pressures and falling costs of radio and television broadcast equipment allowed smaller players to enter the market, resulting in media fragmentation, with channels catering to more niche audiences and views.

This is the context within which digital media emerged, characterized by an unprecedented flexibility, and near-zero fixed costs. While falling costs of television broadcast equipment allowed smaller players to enter the market, resulting in a nominal increase in fragmentation, digital technology constituted nothing less than a seismic shift. The Internet enabled virtually anyone to set up a website and start producing content for whichever audience niche, anywhere in the world. In the place of local advertising monopolies thus emerged an all-out competition for every slice of a national or even global audience. Media business models went from seeking to dominate a diverse local audience, to targeting a specific slice of the global audience based on some particular attributes. They went from capturing a city to capturing a certain type of person.

This fragmentation in terms of audience initially drove a corresponding corporate fragmentation, with large media corporations finding themselves struggling to compete with a myriad of smaller scale online blogs and news media often operating on shoe-string budgets (Castells, 2013). Much of the initial optimism surrounding digital communication technologies stemmed from this early growth of fragmentation, which was taken as hopeful premonition of a coming fall in the oligopolistic power of media conglomerates. However, the initial market fragmentation proved transient. The rise of digital platforms enabled combining fragmented and individualized targeting of audiences with an oligopolistic ownership structure. Social media are a generalized solution on the part of oligopolists, to win the competition for the attention of diverse audiences by creating internally competitive environments in which small-scale content production is brought in under the influence of a single media platform. While digital platforms design their interfaces and tune their algorithms to encourage users to create and share content, the flexibility of media technology further allows creating different experiences for different users, so-called 'filter bubbles' (Pariser, 2011), that constitute the logical

progression of the media for the postindustrial regime of production: fully automatized and tailor-made information products. This allows media companies to become monopolistic while serving audience segments that are more fragmented than ever before: the public splinters while corporations consolidate.

The digitalization of the economy has meant that capitalism is now on the precipice of a new regime of accumulation, as production and advertising have become data-driven. Harari (2016) argues that this sets us on a course where humans become 'hackable' as proprietors of digital data are able to know users so well that they are easy to dupe and manipulate. Sophisticated computational methods aimed at predicting and manipulating user behavior contribute to instill great value in the user data that ultimately fuels these processes of production and marketing. Explored under concepts such as 'informational capitalism' (Fuchs, 2010), 'communicative capitalism' (Dean, 2005), 'platform capitalism' (Srnicek, 2017), 'surveillance capitalism' (Foster and McChesney, 2014; Zuboff and Chalier, 2019), and 'digital capitalism' (Sadowski, 2020), the literature on the relationship between data and capitalism now describes the contemporary era as a period of capitalism in which data have become the defining commodity, and the extraction of user data has become a central capitalist aim.

Advertising revenue has thus moved from targeting a mass-audience, to then targeting specific niche market segments, to now pursuing the extraction of audience data. This has come to again transform the business models of media, aiming no longer to merely capture the attention of a certain audience segment, but to extract surplus user data. Social media platforms have therefore become designed around the aim of gathering information about their audience; they 'datafy' social relations, turning social action into quantified data, to enable tracking, and predictive analysis (Van Dijck, 2014). Just as house owners with mortgages keep afloat the financialized real estate industry, so social media users are at the very base, and at the very bottom, of the financialized information industry, with the value of stocks reflecting opportunities for data extraction (Sadowski, 2019).

Media are thus no longer just competing for audience attention; they are competing for their personal information. The aim of data extraction means that media aim not merely to compete for audience attention, but to entice users to *engage*, that is, to give attention and interact with the media in such a way as to produce marketable data on their preferences, behaviors, and lifestyles. The data that platforms extract is valued on the basis of how useful it is to predict and shape user behavior and consumption, which implies particular value on data about *who their users are.* This has implications for how these platforms are organized and designed, in turn affecting the type of public culture that the platforms shape. Just as mass-media shaped the mass-individualist public culture of its time, and the fragmentation of the post-Fordist media landscape shaped its time, so is the media of data extraction coming to shape ours.

Media of the self

Central to social media is a persistent focus on selfhood and identity-oriented content, which can be seen as a continuation of trends of both post-Fordist accumulation and postmodern identity (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005; Harvey, 1989). On virtually all

social media and digital platforms, we are welcomed by a familiar textbox next to a picture of ourselves – beckoning us to share, to express ourselves, to engage in performances of self-presentation (Hearn, 2008; Marwick, 2013). Social media platforms like Facebook and LinkedIn have pushed the art and science of 'mass self-communication' to a new level, as their interfaces nudge users to consciously and unconsciously release information about themselves (Castells, 2010; Van Dijck, 2014). Social media platforms have become tools for storytelling and narrative self-presentation (Van Dijck, 2013), with Facebook's encoded activity resembling the analog real-life shoebox experience: people reassembling pieces from their old photo albums, diaries, scrapbook, and weblog into one smooth presentation of their past. This emphasis on self-presentation is central to shaping the public culture that these media afford, with broad social implications.

Long before the emergence of online communication, Goffman (1959) developed a theory on the relationship between self-presentation and identity centered on playacting. In every human interaction, we put on performances to create an impression for our audience. In Goffman's view, it is not that we perform our identity, it is rather that our identity is constituted by the totality of our performances: 'A correctly staged and performed scene leads the audience to impute a self to a performed character, but this imputation – this self – is a product of a scene that comes off, and is not a cause of it' (Goffman, 1959: 244). The notion that the narrative self emerges from the performances of self-presentation suggests that that social media, by providing us with a particular form of technologically-inscribed stage on which to tell ourselves and others who we are, affect our very selfhood (Papacharissi, 2011). The designs and algorithms of this digital stage set conditions on our self-presentation, that in turn come to shape our sense of self.

These performances of self-presentation are evaluated and valued on the basis of the ubiquitous 'liking' and 'sharing' mechanisms, which aim to both fuel the social media platforms and extract valuable user information. Which messages are selected to be shown and highlighted, and which are hidden and left out of sight, is decided through the fundamental mechanism of whether they are *shared*, *starred*, or *liked* by users, functioning as a way of determining which messages are most engaging. This mechanism is presented as enabling a social experience, while figuring into an automated 'like economy' (Van Dijck and Poell, 2013; Veszelszki, 2018), employed to gather quantified data about the lifestyles, preferences and interests of individual users.

The feedback mechanisms built into the 'like economy' mean that certain users are elevated to the status of social media celebrities based on their ability to play the media and accumulate attention. These celebrities are sources of value for the social media platforms, and the platforms are thus engaged in promoting their popularity and ranking (Abidin, 2018; Marwick, 2013). As social media are embedded within larger media ecosystems, social media celebrities are drawn into mass-media and recognized as stars. Platform-defined metrics similarly grow in importance outside the platforms, becoming seen as legitimate standards to rank ideas and individuals in mainstream media and public life (Van Dijck, 2014). As influencers are commissioned by companies to promote products, boundaries between advertising and sociality dissolve, bringing what Goffman (1979: 23) calls the 'pseudo-reality' of advertising into daily life: promoting and branding the self has also become a normalized, accepted phenomenon in ordinary people's lives. As individuals attain recognition and value through successful self-presentation,

popularity, and worth are increasingly measured by their online manifestation. The self has thus turned into an object of marketing and promotion now that connectivity could transform online social value to real rewards in the offline world. Performances of self are thus valued in likes and shares – 'influence' – that is in turn translatable to economic value.

Consumption is central to our performances of self; our digital performances are construed through an assemblage of goods, clothes, practices, experiences, appearance, activities, visits to iconic places, and other objects consumption (Featherstone, 1987). On social media platforms – essentially stages for enacting the self for appraisal by others – these symbols are brought together to tell a story that simultaneously defines a unique self and positions someone within a larger field (Bennett et al., 2009; Bourdieu, 1979; Currid-Halkett, 2017; Featherstone, 1987). This expansion of the symbolic means that we engage with places, experiences, ideas, information, material goods, and activities as communicators – for their symbolic value. Much of contemporary consumption should thus be understood not primarily as the consumption of use values but signs. This role of consumer goods became dominant with postmodern capitalism in which consumption gains more weight as a marker of identity, and its meaning becomes disassociated from its material properties (Jameson, 1991). In the ideological code of consumerism, identities are fashioned primarily through the exchange of symbolic differences: 'The social logic of consumption, is not at all that of the individual appropriation of the value of goods and services . . . It is a logic of the production and manipulation of social signifiers' (Baudrillard, 2016: 60).

Social media has expanded and become tightly interlinked with these postmodern expressions of distinction, as they enable and encourage certain types of symbolic expressions (Bourdieu, 1979). As these performances move online, the dynamics of the larger symbolic economy and the social system of distinction with which they interact are reshaped by social media logic. As social media platforms become stages for self-presentation, they are key sites for turning consumption into symbolic capital. This positions social media as part of a flexible regime of accumulation centered on differentiation and lifestyle. The emergence of these possibilities of distinction is coinciding with scholars observing a gradual shift in our class distinctions. The emphasis of class distinction has moved from expensive material goods aimed at displaying economic capital, to more mundane forms of consumption that serves to display not primarily economic capital, but rather values and competence associated to status within certain groups (Currid-Halkett, 2017). This expansion of the symbolic dimension of consumption into new segments of life is part of longer trends of flexible accumulation. Social media continues this trend by providing means to publicize our everyday consumption and lifestyle through posts and stories, elevating otherwise inconspicuous acts of consumption into markers of status, and thus further expanding the realm of the symbolic.

As actions and expressions are brought into performances of self-presentations, they become treated for their symbolic value and surface, rather than their reality and effects. As the symbolic grows in important over the real, this suggests a continuation and culmination of cultural trends that were identified by scholars following the early stages of consumer society: Baudrillard (1994) referred this growing importance of the symbolic relative to the real as the *precession of simulacra*, arguing that reality is gradually

replaced by symbols and signs. Social media can be put in the context of a capitalism based on the production and marketing of symbolic goods and the expansion of cultural commodification (Baudrillard, 2016). This is also linked to the type of superficiality that Postman (1985) lamented in relation to the television, now seeping into the interactions of everyday social life. Just as television, social media do not reward decency, reason, or virtue but their appearances and expressions – whether the performance is genuine of not, the challenge remains to convincingly act it out so that others believe it is (Uski and Lampinen, 2016; Van Dijck, 2013).

Datafication thus brings a commodification of selfhood that constitutes both an expansion of commodification into new cultural domains, but also an *inward* expansion of commodification, as datafied performances of self-presentation allow commodification to creep deeper into our very sense of self. Datafication is not only an 'expansion of quantification into parts of our lives and the world that have never been quantified before' (Cukier and Mayer-Schoenberger, 2013), it is simultaneously a *commodification* of parts of our lives that have never before been commodified.

Social media are part of a regime of hyperflexible production, centered on differentiation and lifestyles. The role of identity on social media can be positioned both in relation to larger economic trajectories of capitalist accumulation, and in cultural trajectories of shifts in postmodern identity. In the former, the focus on self-presentation serves the role of nudging and coercing users to share valuable personal information in stories written in the language of datafied assemblages of consumer products. In the latter, it can be seen as the response to demands for self-expression linked to longer trends in postmodern identity, in which identity has become a project, making self-absorption a virtue (Giddens, 1991). Digital capitalism is in this sense continuing and expanding trends that post-Fordism began; as post-Fordism was linked to the emergence of postmodern consumer culture, so is data capitalism linked to the expanding and shifting role of selfhood in contemporary culture and capitalism (Harvey, 1989).

Social media have thus signified the emergence of a public culture that is centered around selfhood and identity-oriented content, construed through assemblages of symbolic goods. These are given value in 'like economies', serving to track user behavior and to identify the most engaging [content], and simultaneously providing a measure of 'influence', translatable to fame and economic gains. Since everything – actions, beliefs, everyday consumption – is quantified and datafied, everything becomes reified, symbolic, and part of constructing our narratives of self. Social media are, in short, spaces that enable us to express who we are, through what we consume, implying that datafication brings the expansion of commodification, both inward – deeper into our sense of self – and outward – in that a broader range of activities can be subsumed into the symbolic marketplace.

Political discourse as self-presentation

As Castells (2010: 241) puts it, 'a political message is necessarily a media message. And whatever politically related message is conveyed through the media it must be couched in the specific language of the media'. As the language of social media is identity, political discourse is couched in the language of self-presentation, meaning that we engage

with politics through the expression of personal identity. We thus see the public world as projected on our selfhood: information, thoughts, and stories are all seen and valued as ways of expressing *who we are*. Events, ideas, anything around us are seen through their symbolic role, as markers of identity, used in a symbolic language to tell stories about ourselves. The political discourse that is afforded by social media is thus one based on the underlying mechanisms of identity and group belonging.

This means a form of politics that is obsessed by surface and appearance, and that values symbols over content. This is expanding and continuing a trend observed both by Sennett (1977) and Postman (1985) in relation to the television's impact on political discourse, in which the public sphere is disintegrating, as politicians came to be assessed less for their views expressed in public and more for their personal character. Televised political debates brought an obsessive interest in moral character and appearance, in surface and symbols over content. As Postman (1985) puts it, 'If politics is like show business, then the idea is not to pursue excellence, clarity, or honesty but to appear as if you are, which is another matter altogether' (p. 133). Social media has intensified and expanded the importance of surface and appearance, centering the role of staging and signaling in everyday social interaction.

As political expressions are treated as a form of symbolic consumer goods, the segmentation and fragmentation of consumer groups that is central to the flexible regime of accumulation and thus to social media, enters also into political life. As political messages are conveyed in the commodified and symbolic language of these platforms, political opinions become part of lifestyle assemblages, functioning as expressions of distinction and group belonging. One's political affiliation joins other lifestyle choices – *Do you drink your coffee plain or latte?* – to become part of self-presentation, signifying values and competence associated to status within certain groups (Currid-Halkett, 2017; DellaPosta et al., 2015). Political discourse thus comes to be driven by a logic of lifestyle fragmentation and segmentation, as ways of expressing group belonging.

The notion of a politics that is based on the logic of group identity, in which political positions as symbols expressing social status and group belonging, resonates with an emerging literature within political science. This literature argues that identity is gaining an outsized role in contemporary politics, describing an emerging political logic driven by the logic of partisan identity (Iyengar et al., 2019; Klein, 2020). As Achen and Bartels (2017) argue, in this form of politics, voting behavior is primarily the result of partisan loyalties, social identities, and symbolic attachments. Over time, engaged citizens may construct policy preferences and ideologies that rationalize their choices, but those issues are seldom fundamental. Politics as self-presentation in other words means that opinions serve to signal values and group belonging, casting reasoning not as the foundation for political belonging, but an expression of it (Kahan, 2017). In social media politics, as Schmitt (2004) succinctly puts it, 'it's not what you say about the issues; it's what the issues say about you'.

The exposure to identity-oriented content constitutes a type of activation that tends to strengthen and deepen our identities, making new aspects of our selves salient as social identities. Social media turn shared interests into identities by segmenting and clustering users into like-minded groups, so-called 'echo chambers' (Garrett, 2009; Quattrociocchi et al., 2016) or 'filter bubbles' (Pariser, 2011). As Tajfel and Turner showed in 1979, a group

interacting over shared traits will tend to strengthen those traits, forming a group identity, and potentially leading to prejudice and inter-group conflict (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Once this has occurred, being exposed to the messages of an opposing group will not serve to reduce conviction but rather fuel outrage and strengthen dislike of the out-group. Indeed, messages from the opposing side are among the most common way to affirm and activate common identities on social media: that a public person that your group commonly dislikes says something bad serves to confirm prejudice and creates a spiral of collective outrage that focuses attention, generates emotional energy and strengthens the group's identity (Collins, 2012). This has been confirmed by experimental research showing that Democrats and Republicans who agreed to be exposed to views from the other side did not revise or moderate their positions; the Republicans even hardened their views (Bail et al., 2018).

Social media not only tend to draw new traits and activities into the realm of identity, but the constant exposure to identity-oriented content also tends to strengthen and deepen salient social identities (Tajfel, 1974; Woodward, 1997). In relation to political identities, this strengthening of political identity has been linked to political polarization (Iyengar et al., 2012): as identities become stronger and more salient, elections, and other forms of politics collapse into a form of inter-group conflict (Mason, 2018). The growth of political polarization in recent years has been linked precisely to politics having become increasingly driven by identity, and the logic of group difference (Iyengar et al., 2012; Tajfel, 1974), with partisanship emerging as a strong social identity (Huddy et al., 2015; Iyengar et al., 2012, 2019).

Social media furthermore affords the tendency interlinking and connecting different identities. As political expressions are put in the same language as postmodern consumption, political identity grows in importance also outside the political arena, as partisan affiliation not only shapes political behavior (Bafumi and Shapiro, 2009), but also issues such as what car we drive (Hetherington and Weiler, 2018), whom we marry (Alford et al., 2011; Klofstad et al., 2013), where we live (Cramer, 2016), whether we believe in God (Inglehart, 2020), and more (Center, 2014; Iyengar and Westwood, 2015). While social media's interfaces and algorithms allow people to participate in a wide range of communities and adopt a diversity of lifestyles, the homophilic networking typical of social media results in the self-organization of users into larger groups. Through such networking practices, seemingly nonideological lifestyle choices (such as preference for certain brands, types of sports, or food items) become associated with politics and ideology. Users thus self-organize into larger groups in which users have consistent preferences on a range of seemingly disparate items: liberals like latte, conservatives prefer their coffee plain (DellaPosta et al., 2015). While such patterns are far from new, social media provide the affordances for this type of politics, by flattening political affiliation with other forms of identity expressions. The result is a broader social polarization, in which partisanship or ideology are drawn into broader social and cultural conflicts, and become part of a larger culture war (Jacoby, 2014). The reduction of cross-cutting identities which this brings further strengthens the sense of difference and distrust (Mason, 2016, 2018). As even the most mundane everyday consumption expresses values and invites recognition, it inevitably becomes political, so much so that the most basic acts of consumption – whether to get a latte macchiato or a regular coffee – come to be identified with political stances.

This tendency toward conflictual and polarizing politics is further emphasized by the mechanisms of how media attention is allocated to different messages. That the number of 'likes', 'shares', or comments shape what messages get through and become dominant creates important inherent biases in media attention. Quiet and reasoning voices do not engage people to click 'share' – people share ideas that *move* them, that help them express who they are, and how they feel. Sharing is biased toward messages and ideas that produce emotional reactions, that activate us, and resonate with us. Importantly, negative feelings have been shown to engage more than positive, and therefore tend to spread more, meaning that things that make us angry, upset, or outraged are more likely to spread in our public discourse (Berry and Sobieraj, 2013; Crockett, 2017). While algorithms and culture vary considerably between platforms, the sharing mechanism tends to promote political discourse that is more evocative, colorful, and confrontational.

This tendency for social media to highlight content that maximizes engagement constitutes an important shift in logic for not only what content is given attention, but also what discourses are seen as within the realm of legitimate political debate. In Fordist mass-media, editorial decision by professional journalists provided control over what was to be seen as part of the sphere of public consensus, what was part of the sphere of legitimate debate, and what was to be considered deviant and outside the realm of the respectable. These institutional gatekeepers thus served a powerful role of agenda-setting, and in defining neutrality and common ground (Shaw et al., 1997). With social media, this role has been taken by algorithms identifying what content maximizes engagement, which leads to a radical restructuring of the boundaries of legitimate debate. Rather than to impose pressure to mainstream conformism, with the aim of maximizing acceptability and thus the potential audience, a growing literature shows that social media benefits content that drives outrage and strong emotional response (Berry and Sobieraj, 2013; Crockett, 2017). One way of describing this shift is through the notion of 'discursive power', that is, who has the power to control the conversation (see also Castells, 2013). In Koopmans (2004) terminology, social media has brought a shift of emphasis from 'consonance' to 'resonance': it is not the messages that trigger broad agreement that float to the surface, but rather those that trigger broad *reactions* – any reaction, whether good or bad. This implies a dissolution of the boundary between critique and promotion – and thus between thought-leader and troll. This produces a political discourse that highlights outrage and content that most effectively activates – and particularly *threatens* – our social identities, thus further driving the strengthening of perceived difference.

Conclusion

This paper has drawn from scholarship in media studies and political economy to explore the cultural logic of contemporary digital capitalism. The economic valuing of digital data comes from its capacity to represent, and thereby colonize and commodify new aspects of human life. Digital data are able to describe and capture almost any activity or expression, thereby allowing their prediction and manipulation, which in turn gives them a value and brings them into exchange. This means that digital capitalism should be understood as an expansion of commodification: going *deeper* into our sense of self, and

broader into new parts of social life. But this capturing as data also transforms that which is captured, as it must be made fit to encode as data. The logic of accumulation thus shifts the cultural logic of the quantified activity. While scholars of digital capitalism have critiqued digital capitalism for infringements of privacy, for surveillance, and for the undue power it grants to control all aspects of human life (Couldry and Mejias, 2020; Zuboff, 2019), this paper has focused on the way that it reshapes capitalism's cultural logic, revealing the impact of the accumulation of data on public culture and political discourse.

What, then, is the cultural logic of digital capitalism? This paper has argued that as data on personal identity have become the defining commodity of contemporary capitalism, our media have been designed to extract data about *who we are*. By encouraging us to share information about ourselves, platforms are able to extract profitable data. This means that our public sphere is designed as a space for identity performance in which messages and practices become inextricably linked to the expression of personal identity. Public culture thus becomes centered around selfhood, and the cultural logic of digital capitalism is, in short, the logic of identity and difference.

For the cultural realm, this means the expansion of a symbolic marketplaces in which individuals perform using symbols to draw distinctions and show (sub)cultural belonging. The ability of data to capture and commodify more aspects of human life means that social media make visible the inconspicuous, enabling virtually any activity, opinion, value, item, or geographical place to be brought into its symbolic logic. This allows using these inconspicuous activities to express our cultural belonging and draw distinctions, bringing them into the symbolic marketplace, used to tell a story of who we are.

For the political realm, it means that political discourse becomes part of this commodified symbolic marketplace, treated like just another set piece in a story about selfhood. This politicizes and ties together diverse cultural differences, meaning that lifestyles and everyday consumption choices are mobilized politically and become part of class distinctions. As different lifestyles and tastes become associated with political positions, we observe a group distinction that is simultaneously a distinction of class, cultural belonging, taste, and political identity. Public discourse is thus drawn into a logic of identity and difference, producing a political culture war. Social media did not create this form of politics, but they are its media *par excellence*. Whereas the cultural logic of Fordism was characterized by an ostensible rationality and civility – enabled by exclusion, imposed homogeneity, and the systematic repression of claims to recognition and representation – the cultural logic of digital capitalism works in the opposite direction, turning political discourse into a form of self-expression, highlighting difference, and fueling identity conflict.

What, then, is the epistemology of digital capitalism? As the boundary between opinion and fact dissolves, and both become drawn into the logic of difference, the question of truth becomes submerged into the larger process of cultural fragmentation and difference. This means that the emerging epistemology of digital capitalism treats truth as a question of identity: information is evaluated based not on common standards of evidence applied to commonly accepted facts, but on its alignment with our social identity. As our very ways of knowing are defined by identity and belonging, what we know is reduced to just another expression of who we are.

Funding

ORCID iD

Petter Törnberg https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8722-8646

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