**Capital Experimentation with Person/a Formation: How Facebook’s monetization refigures the relationship between property, personhood and protest**

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**Abstract**

This paper examines the conditions of possibility for protest that are shaped when we open our browsers and are immediately tracked by Facebook. It points to the significance of tracking in the making of contemporary personhood showing how the relationship between property and personhood is being currently reconfigured as Facebook experiments with ways to accrue maximum profit. It outlines in detail the different ways by which Facebook operates financially, arguing that it is better understood as a powerful advertising oligopoly that lubricates the circulation of capital rather than just as a social network. By charting the movement from the liberal ‘possessive individual’, to the neo-liberal ‘subject of value into the present disaggregated ‘dividual’. it reveals inherent contradictions as Facebook builds its financializing and monetizing capacity. We show how the contemporary neo-liberal imperative to perform and authorise one’s ‘self’ is more likely to produce a curated persona rather than the ‘authentic’ self demanded by Facebook, making accurate dividuation more difficult to achieve. We draw on our ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council, UK) funded research project, on the relationship between values and value, which uses custom built software to track Facebook’s tracking. Our research revealed how Facebook drew clear distinctions between high net worth users and the remainder, making the protesting bourgeois ‘subject of value’ much more likely to be subject to expropriation. We ask: what does it mean if the communicative networks for protest are just another opportunity for profit making and lubricating financialization?

Keywords: Facebook, software, personhood, protest, monetization, labour

**Introduction**

This paper examines the conditions of possibility for protest that are shaped when we open our browsers and are immediately tracked by Facebook. It points to the significance of tracking in the making of contemporary personhood showing how the relationship between property and personhood is being currently reconfigured as Facebook experiments with ways to accrue maximum profit. It outlines in detail the different ways by which Facebook operates financially, arguing that it is better understood as a powerful advertising oligopoly that lubricates the circulation of capital rather than just as a social network. By charting the movement from the liberal ‘possessive individual’, to the neo-liberal ‘subject of value’, into the present disaggregated ‘dividual’, it reveals inherent contradictions as Facebook builds its financializing and monetizing capacity. We show how the contemporary neo-liberal imperative to perform and authorize one’s value in public is more likely to produce a curated persona rather than the ‘authentic’ self demanded by Facebook, making accurate dividuation more difficult to achieve. We draw on our ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council, UK) funded research project, on the relationship between values and value, which uses custom built software to track Facebook’s tracking.

Now what has this to do with protest you may ask? We think analysis of property, protest and personhood can enable us to understand the conditions that underwrite protest – both in terms of who is protesting, what sort of person, and the wider ecology by which the different variants ofcapitalism and algorithmically mediated social relations shape the conditions for protest.

We come to this having been involved in the UK miners Strike in 1984-5. This was one of the longest and hardest protests in UK history and its result rendered the future possibility of trade union protest mainly ineffective, and the power of the working class, of labour against capital, massively weakened. When we were on picket lines, mass marches, collecting funds and distributing food, we had no idea that a plan had been hatched in 1977 by the Conservatives, before Margaret Thatcher came to power in 1979. It was called the Ridley Report and is now publicly available. We had no idea that enough coal had been stockpiled to compensate for stopped production, or that workers had been recruited from Poland to replace striking miners. Nor had we any idea that a special logistic unit had been established to move regional police around the UK, with the army on standby to support the police, or even that a spy network had been established by M15 to infiltrate the miners union and support groups. Nor did we know that funds had been set aside to support the establishment of an alternative union (the UDM)[[1]](#endnote-2) (Milne, 2004). Literally we had no idea. Had we known clearly the resistance would have been of an entirely different form. But who could have known? What is significant is how an infrastructure had been developed to achieve the demands of capital of which we were unaware, but also how our action, our public performances were organized through a collective call to protect labour against the state.

Now, obviously the UK miner’s Strike was a drastic and exemplary case of statecraft in the interests of capital, and the world has changed since the defeat in 1985. There will be no mines left in the UK by the end of 2015, [[2]](#endnote-3) and the new Trade Union Bill to be introduced in 2015 by the Conservative government focuses on social media intending to make any form of trade union protest almost impossible.[[3]](#endnote-4) Notably also in 1985 there were no global digital media companies, although Microsoft was emergent from 1975 and Apple from 1976. However we are not interested in fetishizing “asphalt activism”, rather we use the example to work through significant changes in the possibilities for personhood and protest. To do this we firstly outline the legacies that inform the possibilities for personhood, we then map how Facebook’s monetization enframes different versions of personhood in the present.

Social media companies do not face the same way towards labour, but instead combine a romantic pose with capitalist experimentation (Streeter, 2011) promoting ‘flexibility’, outsourcing to where labour is both cheaper and more disposable, and strategically exploiting Open Source models (Fuchs 2015). Peter Thiel, Facebook board member notes “You can’t have a worker’s revolution to take over a bank if the bank is in Vanuatu” (Hodgkinson, 2008). When in 2011 an Apple retail worker attempted to set up a trade union in the US, it was such a shock that he gained international media coverage.[[4]](#endnote-5) The global media companies have found ways to circumvent traditional labour relations.

They have also become a *service* for the state, offering up data on a scale that most national states cannot generate, as we saw with PRISM. Facebook founder Jim Breyer has a relationship to the venture capital wing of the CIA In-Q-Tel, whilst Peter Thiel is a major investor in Palantir, an intelligence gathering company working with the CIA and US military. Ippolita (2015) detail the involvement of key Facebook members and libertarian politics in the US, including TheVanguard.Org, a neoconservative pressure group set up to attack Moveon.org. Just like the robber barons of the nineteenth century who were creating their own monopoly rent through the communication networks of their time -- the railroads – contemporary global digital companies use the state to support their activities.

We therefore think it is necessary to understand capital’s new lines of flight and how these effect our possibilities for action, especially as it is almost impossible to go below the radar of Facebook (even if you are not on it), as our research and research commissioned by the Belgian government found (Gibbs, 2015). Facebook tracks you whenever you have your browser open. Even if you are logged out or don’t have a Facebook account or have explicitly opted out of tracking, you are still being tracked (Gibbs, 2015). This is the new form of capitalist capture that is shaping the possibilities for our current connectivity.

**Propertising personhood**

Rather than rehearsing the long history of the Western self, including variants based on colonialism (Skeggs, 2004a, 2004b, 2011), here we want to draw out key legacies that linger and inform how we understand personhood in the present. Macpherson (1962) identifies the ‘possessive individuala’ as *the* model of classic liberal personhood, institutionalized in the social contract and legalized as the reasonable and ‘fit and proper’ person capable of the ownership of others. The possessive individual is defined through his (he was always masculine (Pateman, 1988) and white ( Harris 1993))capacity to own property in his person, and draw value to himself thought the acquisition of objects, other people and property. Central to the recognition of the possessive individual was the idea that he was NOT exchangeable to others, unlike labour and slaves.

Possessive individualism shaped ideas of singularity, of the unique self, one that has exclusive properties. Economic theorists, such as Adam Smith, added in ‘motives’ for possession (self-interest), with religious justifications (conscience). The possessive individual always required its constitutive opposite to establish its limits; the working class, the urban poor and slaves stood as markers at the boundaries to proper personhood.

Elements of these classic liberal legacies carry through into most contemporary sociological theories of the self, which describe a singular individual who can add value to themselves through the conversion of their culture and experience into property. Feminist legal theorists name this process ‘propertising’ (Davies, 1998). Sociological theories of reflexive, mobile, post-modern, prosthetic, possessed, enterprising and aesthetic selves, to name a few, all describe the accruing, excluding, distinction-making, propertising self, a subject that can convert their culture and experience into property in themselves. Rose (1989) and du Gay (1996) show how a ‘new self’ is now compelled to ‘enterprise itself’, not just to compete for middle-class jobs (to sell its ‘mental’ labour), but to also legitimate itself as a ‘subject of value’. Bourdieu (1987) demonstrates how the imperative and the possibility to add value to one's self is closely tied to one's class position.

This imperative to enterprise the singular bourgeois self is evident globally, as shown in studies of German unification, new forms of subjectivity encouraged by the global state financial structures such as the World Bank and IMF (Smith, 1996), and incentives offered by the Chinese government to become a new 'enterprising' subject (Anagnost, 2004). Even political protest, as Erica Lagalisse's (2015) longitudinal ethnography reveals, is not immune from promoting -- inadvertently-- the bourgeois 'subject of value'. Terms such as 'slacktivism' suggest there is an imaginary of a proper protesting subject (Morozov, 2012).

But only some people could be the possessive individual and only some people can have access to the resources to propertise their culture and become a subject of value. Although the imperative to individualism has expanded, leading Taylor (1991) and Strathern (1992) to argue that we are now in a period of ‘compulsory individuality’, what our previous research has consistently shown is that becoming a subject of value is a limited classed subject position. One that we are increasingly forced to display in public.

John McKenzie (2001) details, performance has now taken on a greater significance than self-discipline (as described by Foucault). He maintains that now we have to perform our culture to have our self-value publicly recognized, something we found spectacularly evident in our research on reality TV (Skeggs & Wood, 2012) which trades on visualising the limits to proper personhood through pathological public revelation. However, what our research also reveals is that most people learn to curate their “selves”, producing a persona to portray themselves in ways that will not disadvantage, damage and diminish their value.

We hope you can see where this is leading. Classic liberalism hinged property to personhood via the institutionalized figure of the possessive individual, for whom acquiring the ‘right’ culture and experience were central to claiming ownership of proper personhood. In the four centuries from liberalism to neo-liberalism, authorization of one’s value has become an individual prerogative, indeed a measure of responsibility, a matter of public display. Facebook protocols build on this imperative to display one's value. As Gehl (2014) shows the early development of the platform was designed to encourage revelation. The platform uses traditional techniques of biographical telling (the timeline), emotional expression (likes), encourages the revelation of interiority and revels in the display of uniqueness and sensation.

When Mark Zuckerberg claims that: "Having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity," the integrity of which he speaks is not that of one user to another but rather the integrity of Facebook’s brand as a source of authenticated data. As the *Facebook Statement of Rights and Responsibilities* (checked July 10, 2015) makes clear, users are explicitly contracted as unique authentic subjects:

“You will *not* provide any false personal information on Facebook, or create an account for anyone other than yourself without permission. You will *not* create more than one personal account. … You will keep your contact information accurate and up-to-date.”

Whilst Facebook encourages the performance of the user as a subject of value, it does so in a reverse mechanism through which Facebook extracts property *from* the person rather than attaching property *to* the person. It is this gap between the wider social imperative to perform one’s value in public, and the Facebook algorithms that simultaneously aggregate and disaggregate a person's culture to sell to advertisers, that opens up interesting contradictions in capital's new lines of flight.

These algorithms, and the protocols that facilitate them, work at the level of aggregates of data. As Galloway and Thacker (2007) note:

What follows from this is that control in networks operates less through the exception of individuals, groups, or institutions and more through the exceptional quality of networks or of their topologies. What matters, then, is less the character of the individual nodes than the topological space within which and through which they operate as nodes. (p.40)

If we substitute the word control for value we can see the difference between what Facebook desires and what those curating their persona may do. For Facebook, as for Deleuze (1992), subjects as individual people are just one mode of individuation “dividuals”, which are continually modulated to enable infinite variation. Contrary to the coherent singularity upon which the subject of value is premised, for Deleuze “people are lines” threading together different lines, endlessly divisible and reducible to data representation, not in-divisible entities. Facebook projects singularity as a responsibility of the user so as to claim integrity of its data sources, whilst simultaneously ‘dividuating’ that data into multiple aggregate representations to be monetized as targeted ad space. However we need to understand the loops between what Facebook builds upon on its platform, its platformativity, and then what it does with the data, which has consequences for those who have been sold (or not). These are very different processes, and to understand further we now map the financial operations of Facebook.

**Facebook finance**

An educated guess is usually made as to how much a person is worth to Facebook (approx. $40 each)[[5]](#endnote-6) and that online social networks will reach a monetizable scale of consumer expenditure of at least $200 billion in 16 countries. However, there is very little detailed financial information available to evidence these estimates. They are usually based on multiplications of use, which do not take into account the main sources of monetization for Facebook.

Firstly, Facebook makes its money through financialization. Facebook *is* capital, it is *financialized stock***.** It generates profit from *selling itself* on the stock market. $104 billion when it floated on 18 May 2012 (although less than anticipated) and changing every second, with a value of $270.37 billion on 16 October 2015. It is not yet in the top ten global companies (with Apple, Google and Microsoft) but is very close.[[6]](#endnote-7) Financialization always depends on intangible property being given an estimated value based on the ability to accrue future profit. Property is created by exclusion, a denial of common use. The ability to financialize is dependent upon controlling monopoly rent -- access to the means for extracting profit. Facebook’s diverse strategies of information-acquisition extends their position to create monopoly rent ([Perelman 1998](#_ENREF_24), [Bohm and Land 2012](#_ENREF_2), [Ekman 2012](#_ENREF_11)). As a non-financial institution Facebook also operates as a collector of significant information such as credit worthiness established through Facebook tracking. Money market credit has links into capital circulation and accumulation as a whole. Facebook literally spreads financialization.

Secondly, Facebook’s starter costs and fixed capital costs are very low. It is not capital intensive. From 2004 when it launched it has expanded at a rapid rate of six times its base in five years. Its debts are negligible: 0.005% debt to equity with assets of $40 billion gained through financialization and monetization.

Thirdly, advertising revenue accounted for 82-85% of FB profits, which it draws from attracting 901 million people to its platform every month. Advertising is *the* major source of revenue for Facebook. An Ads API enables Facebook to monetize primarily through self-service granular targeted advertising revenue. It aggregates individual user data for advertisers via different data capture and tracking mechanisms such as the like button, user posts, sharing, etc.. Gehl (2014) demonstrates how the software architecture of Facebook shaped advertising standards. He maintains that the IAB (Interactive Advertising Bureau) should not be seen as a separate issue but instead be seen as integral to the design and usability of Facebook, another layer in the stack of network protocols. He cites Arola’s (2010) analysis of design templates. She argues that the IAB standards were in part determined and “template-driven” by Facebook. Advertising was built into the design of Facebook, and Facebook defined what online advertising could be in relation to its own goals.

Facebook’s dependence on advertising revenue means that *Facebook depends on consuming value produced elsewhere in the economy* (Robinson ([2014](#_ENREF_29)). The relationship to and circulation of other capitals is central to understanding how Facebook operates ([LiPuma and Lee 2005](#_ENREF_17)). Key to advertising revenue is the promise of accelerated time between product advert and sale. This, as Robinson (2014) points out, is a transfer of value from advertisers to Facebook, rather than the creation of new value. It reduces advertisers’ costs of circulation. Robinson maintains that this does not mean that Facebook is a commodity; rather that Facebook enhances the relationship between the consumer of a product and the advertiser. Circulation does not create value. It results in profits, but these derive mostly, though not exclusively, from redistributing surplus value that has been created elsewhere which lubricate financialization (Lapavitsas 2013).

Facebook’s’ fourth source of monetization is revenue from in-game purchases, sponsorship pages, including Promoted Posts and tie-ins, transactions costs (e.g. payments made through FB), loyalty card type systems, gifts and deals. Facebook also generates money through freemium revenue (eg HootSuite), and virtual currency, such as selling credits for games like FarmVille, which generated $186 in revenue in 2012. These sales are likely to be more effective in creating monopoly rent and tie-ins.

Fifthly, although not directly a source of capital, Facebook’s tax avoidance strategies have enabled it to keep a substantial share of its earnings. In 2014 in the UK Facebook claimed it ran at an operating loss of £28.5m, paying only £4,327 in corporate tax for the whole year despite claiming that at least 1/3 of the UK population visited its site and declaring £105m in UK revenue. [[7]](#endnote-8)

As well as financialization through monopoly rents, advertising revenue, free marketing, tax avoidance and the speeding up the circulation of capital, for Facebook the market functions as a test, an experiment in amassing information, predicting and selling the bits of personas that have the greatest value to the highest bidder. Neither accountants nor lawyers can keep up with the speed of the experimentation ([Mierzwinski and Chester 2013](#_ENREF_20)).

By tracking across multiple sitesFacebook operates as a powerful junction point. Just as we demonstrate below, Brugger ([2015](#_ENREF_4)) also shows how a great deal of the activity that takes place on the Web outside Facebook flows through the Facebook universe in one form or another in an exponential process. He further notes, just like the IBA standards outlined by Gehl and Arola above, the design of Facebook as a junction was built into its development. Facebook was new because of the way it combined numerous forms of activity that could be consolidated, connected and integrated within an ecology based upon trading and circulating personal data.

Facebook is now expanding into the mobile communications market with its SIM card adding new infrastructure to its digital computing capacity. Facebook is number one social networking app in one hundred and thirty countries, and now 73% of its advertising comes from mobile devices. In China, where online banking is underdeveloped, Facebook has expanded into finance services and taken ‘first platform’ status again. With this ever accumulating and expanding network, with more of everything constantly being added, Brugger (2015) documents how new areas are appearing while hardly anything ever disappears. With its flexible and adaptable structure, Gehl (2014) maintains that Facebook is almost as diverse as the Web, in terms of software types, usability and users. Indeed Facebook’s recent diversifications and buyouts reveal that it is moving away from it’s original structure as an all-in-one website into an ecology of different apps and brands that restructure our general use of the internet.

It is, we argue, the adaptability of its offer, its computing capacity and its monopoly control that is likely to enable Facebook to financialize and monetize even further, as it captures other apps, develops into telecommunications and drone technology. Facebook has flexible and adaptable capacity built into its design. It has helped set industry standards and forms of regulation and has protected these through proprietary rights. It is this expansive technological capacity, its ability to move across other sites, enter into other markets and operationalize and consolidate different technologies that will also expand advertising opportunities.

As Des Freeman ([2012](#_ENREF_7)) argues, Facebook’s financializing and monetizing capacity makes debates about labour a red herring, distracting attention from the significance of the circulation of other capitals and the sources of value and monetization, which for Facebook is primarily advertising.

Not labour

In March 2015 Facebook only had 10,082 employees.[[8]](#endnote-9) Most of the debates about ‘free labour’ have been made from analysis of open source development ([Terranova 2004](#_ENREF_38); Brugger 2015), with others made about user contributions as a major source of revenue even though the value of these cannot easily be known or even estimated. There is no extraction of surplus value produced through the regulated work-day and consolidated in a commodity that can be exchanged for a known value. Facebook does not exist in the sphere of production, instead as the above analysis shows, it is like all advertising firmly located within the sphere of circulation. This is why the traditional understandings of the capital/labour relation explain very little for Facebook.

In traditional terms it is impossible to make the labour theory of value work when there is no form of labour contract that pays a rate for given labour, when labour is not exchanged. It is impossible calculate the exchange made when the total socially necessary labour time cannotbe determined. In traditional understandings of the labour-capital relation it is only when the average labour time required for a typical commodity in all branches of the industry are determined that labour time be determined. This can only be done when the average rate of profit is agreed. Value is a representation of socially necessary labour time ([Postone 1993](#_ENREF_26)). To understand value we must have commensurability so the exchange value must be known and relatively transparent – be it through wages or prices, but the key issue with digital data is that the value of data is concealed. As Benkler ([2007](#_ENREF_1)) notes, in a digital network a system of equivalence is impossible and scarcity reveals itself as a social construction when access restrictions are technologically implemented, as for example in DRM (Digital Rights Management).

Unlike labour the same personal information is traded again and again. It is not similar to a quantum measure of time that can be built into the calculation of value. Also, as our research shows below, it is not the amount of time or quality of input (liking, sharing, etc.) that gives value to a person’s data but how a person’s connectivity relates to an aggregate value of advertising space. It is therefore not the amount of time one spends on Facebook that matters but the type of network one has that matters.

Significantly, there is no element of compulsion involved in the performance of what has been defined as ‘free labour’. It is voluntarily given. Unlike the labour relation described by Marx, disguised by the “myth of equivalence”, those who use Facebook would not starve if they stopped providing free software development or divulging personal information. Although, the enterprising subject of value who feels compelled to use Facebook to display their value may be disadvantaged and social isolation may ensue for certain friendship groups, this is not about the compulsion to survive. The time and energy offered to Facebook operates much more like a gift economy than formal exchange in an institutionalized labour structure. Whilst such gift economies are neither inherently altruistic nor symmetrical, Facebook users are not comparable to people on zero-hours contracts.[[9]](#endnote-10) We know from the extent of Facebook’s tracking that if developers and users withdrew their time on the Facebook platform it would make little difference. Even with ad blockers on we would have to stop using the internet completely to stop Facebook tracking us.

This is why we argue that Facebook draws on earlier traditions of expropriation rather than exploitation and why the alienation that is central to understandings of labour in the field of production are not significant. In our research people felt angry about Facebook making money out of their data but not alienated through their use of time. However, the comparison between freely given information to contracted formal exchanged labour reveals how value can still be extracted from the person in radically different ways without any of formal compensation (exchange-value). Giving away personal information exists in the realm of use-value not exchange–value. Facebook is an infrastructure that extracts capital from people's use of it, just as railways are an infrastructure that extracts capital from people's use of it, but travelling by rail does not mean you are labouring for the railway company. Facebook certainly has a use-value to the person even if they describe it as “a contract with the devil” or a “necessary evil”. As Andrejevic (2014) notes, people cannot make sense of their data in the same way as Facebook algorithms can. Ownership and control and the circulation of capital are much more significant questions to ask of Facebook rather than ‘free labour’.

So how can we apply this framework of personhood and profit to our research.

Our recent research project, funded by the **E**SRC on ‘A Sociology of Values and Value’ (see: [https://values.doc.gold.ac.uk/](https://values.doc.gold.ac.uk/firstfindings)) demonstrates how the imperative to perform one’s value in public connect with Facebook’s forms of monetization.

**Studying Facebook with custom built software**

This study was part of a larger project that began with the question: “is anything beyond the logic of capital? ” It addressed this by conducting a digital survey of people’s Facebook use and developing software to understand the rhythms and interaction on the platform, investigate the newsfeed, track Facebook tracking, understand social networks and identify targeted advertising (see Skeggs and Yuill 2015 for discussion of methodology and more detailed description of software).

Many analytic tools for Facebook focus exclusively on activity within Facebook yet, as outlined above, we know that Facebook's data gathering and monetization is based as much upon activity outside the site and that Facebook disperses itself across the web as a whole. We therefore built custom software tools to map different aspects of Facebook activity, both within the site itself as a participant made use of it, and externally as a participant browsed elsewhere. We were particularly interested in those areas of activity where a user's own actions came into contact with the actions of the algorithms that Facebook uses to gather information (from monitoring user interactions and tracking web use) and to stimulate new user activity through the placing of other user posts and advertising content in a user's newsfeed and personal Facebook page, such as Sponsored Stories.

In order to analyse the different temporalities and contexts within which participant and Facebook activities were taking place we produced a range of visualisations including conventional bar charts and social network diagrams as well as our own custom visualisations of three specific areas of activity: the *interactions* over time of Facebook users as recorded through posts, likes, comments, etc. . as it related to advertising and tracking activity (Figure 1); the way in which the order of posts displayed in a participant's *newsfeed* changed over time, showing what patterns might be evident within that (Figure 2); and how Facebook's *tracking* of a participant across the web related back to advertising content targeted at that participant within Facebook (not shown).

From the interaction diagrams we were able to see the varying relations between a participant’s activity within Facebook, the density of advertising and tracking they encountered outside of Facebook, and regularity and intensity of advertising being targeted at them through Facebook Sponsored Stories and side-bar adverts. We could also see patterns over time in the density and variation in the number of Facebook posts they interacted with as well as variation and continuity of other users interacting with these. Examples varied from participants with very sparse interaction diagrams who interacted with a small set of other people to participants with dense, highly active diagrams in which many different users appeared and disappeared. Some participants interacted at specific and regular times of the day, others almost constantly. For some participants, new advertising content appeared frequently, for others there was little change.

Insert Figure 1

Caption: Visualisation of interactions between users and posts within one participant’s Facebook account plotted over time along the horizontal axis. User activity is juxtaposed with internal Facebook advertising and advertising and tracking activity.

These could be compared to the newsfeed diagrams from which we could see how Facebook’s EdgeRank algorithm was seeking to determine what content was of most interest to a given participant. Whilst there is a common assumption that the newsfeed presents a constantly changing sense of ‘the now’ (Bogost 2010) our visualisations demonstrated that there could in fact be significant differences in how much the newsfeed changed over time and how much users themselves sought to counteract the algorithmically determined order. Some participants did indeed have an almost constant turn-over of new content, which generally coincided with a sparse interaction diagram, whilst in other participants’ newsfeeds certain posts would continually move up and down the ‘ranking’ over a long period of time. We also noticed phenomena such as blocks of posts becoming ‘stuck’ in the same positions within the newsfeed whilst those below churned over. Some participants actively scanned the depths of the newsfeed (sometimes as far as 20 or 30 posts down), possibly looking back to posts they continued to have an interest in but which were being demoted by EdgeRank.

By comparing patterns in both the interaction and newsfeed visualizations with the social network diagrams we could draw inferences about how the network of users within which posts appeared related to activity in the newsfeed. In general, strongly connected (in SNA terms) users tended to influence content in the newsfeed, sometimes more strongly than a participant’s own actions, whilst network graphs with sparser, less well connected users related to newsfeeds with a more variety and higher turnover of content, suggesting that the EdgeRank algorithm is less able to identify ‘attention-worthy’ content for such users.

Insert Figure 2

Caption: Visualisation of how posts change position in a participant’s newsfeed. Different coloured blocks indicate different posts, lines connecting blocks show how individual posts change position over time (along horizontal axis).

From our analysis of external advertising and tracking we were able to gather not only evidence of which sites Facebook was tracking a participant on as they browsed the web but also, by inspecting data sent by tracking and ad-brokerage components within the web pages, what keywords were being used to identify and profile a participant. We found that in some cases this revealed quite accurate details of an individual’s activities and interests whilst in others such data was wide off the mark. More significantly the data could indicate how participants were being rated in terms of their value as advertising targets. Whilst not all of this data could be directly linked to Facebook, some of it was being collected by rival companies such as Rubicon, we were nevertheless able to trace some connections from external tracking back to internal Facebook content.

We found strong attempts to infrastructure communication: as noted above Facebook pushes posts and organizes your feed via the EdgeRank algorithm. Our findings detail how their desire to generate advertising revenue means:

* They influence how your network is shaped over time
* They shape how you interact – with whom, when, how
* They are constant tracking you via Facebook and all other sites (using API’s)

However, we also found that the density of network influenced how robust were Facebook algorithms. Our participants offer a variety of different positions on Facebook’s attempts to identify and match to advertising. If a participant has a strongly connected, influential network Facebook can match interests via adwords and manipulate the newsfeed, so that people see adverts that match their interests. The best match was made with a high profile, regular Facebook user, who had a dense and influential network. But with other participants the match was much less effective. With a participant whose group is small but dense but less influential the algorithm fails to make a good match. With a participant with a loose network group EdgeRank appears confused. They can’t make him out so they keep pushing new stuff. They keep trying to make him pay attention via Sponsored Stories and Newsfeed manipulation. But we also found with one participant with a loose group and no influential or powerful connection that Facebook did not display much interest at all. The algorithm was not trying to match, gain attention or making much effort. What we read from this through the interactions, the newsfeed, the ad words and the survey, is that this participant is not an influential ’high net worth individual’ (a term used by digital marketing companies to classify individuals for advertisers). It appears, following Turow (2012), as if she has been ‘remaindered’, sent to a digital silo for people identified as not worth monetizing. Although we are aware that they could also be parked for future digital sub-priming where they are sold onto debt agencies. What we can definitively conclude from our findings is that the Facebook monetizes most effectively those who enterprise themselves. At this point we can see connections between the neo-liberal subject who performs their persona on a public platform and in so doing enable monetization.

However, our advertising analysis revealed even further lack of precision in the identification of a person/a. But building upon the above comparison of networks, interactions and newsfeed manipulation, what became very clear was how much data trading depended upon the revelation of significant amounts of information which could only be fragmented and sold when it was matched to a predictive persona. Facebook incites the singular aggregated narrativised ‘coherent’ enterprising, connective persona alongside all the tracking across other sites *in order to* fragment and disaggregate via keyword matching to sell us to advertisers. The more coherent and predictable we can be the easier it is to fragment and disaggregate our data in order to trade it. This is why monopoly rent is so important in the monetizing process, for it is all the tracked data that builds up the profile that offers the advertising revenue potential. It is the sheer scale of the Facebook tracking process that enables it to operate like an oligarchy. Its value lies in its huge capacity to track across the whole Internet. As our participants reveal, we are part of experimentation in algorithmic connection and prediction to extract the maximum value possible.

**Conclusion:**

There are many differences to be drawn from the story of the miner’s strike with which we began that are significant here; firstly, social media protest is now completely enframed by capital. We may protest on Facebook, but as we do our personal data is tracked and traded, especially, our research showed, if we are a (potential) high-net worth individual with a large and influential network.

Secondly, by using a platform which organises our connectivity in the interests of monetization we cannot guarantee that the connections we think we are making are actually the one’s being put into effect by Facebook’s algorithms as they experiment with our newsfeed to direct our attention. Thirdly, although Facebook tracks us to trade us, it may give up our data to the State (eg via a PRISM request in 2009). However, unlike the British State in 1984-5 it is interested in our use not our destruction. Fourthly, we know from the extent of Facebook’s tracking that if developers and users withdrew their time on the Facebook platform it would make little difference. A whole state apparatus would not be put into place to make us re-engage. We would have to stop using the internet completely to stop Facebook tracking us and we are so enmeshed that this is unlikely.

Fifthly, the British miners had spent years trying to protect their labour and lives and did not willingly gift their time and energy to capital. Fifthly, protesting against the closure of mines did not require us to give a deliberative public performance of our value. When the extent of spying was revealed and paranoia increased (see Milne 2004), evidence of legitimacy could be called for but this was not part of a landscape of revelation. Milan (2015) notes that “ it is the very publicity of participation rather than the sense of belonging that has become the defining feature of collective action, serving as a proxy for any collective ‘we’” (p.6).

Although the 1980s marked the beginning of ‘compulsory individuality’ where the call to publicly perform one’s value was extended beyond the possessive individual, the working class had yet to be subject to the sustained regime of spectacular pathological hatred that we have since seen.[[10]](#endnote-11) The incentive to perform as a subject of value has paradoxically been simultaneously accompanied by the power to aggregate big data into infinite dividuality. As Gehl (2014) notes, Facebook works to modulate such differences into an assemblage of difference and repetition that decomposes subjects and objects into variables and potentialities, and then recomposes them into coherent networks of power flows. This loop through different structures and power feeds on and into the legacies that linger, ones that still draw distinctions between those with symbolic, economic, social and cultural capital (the middle class) and those without. Different techniques may be used to make the lines but the distance drawn is not dissimilar, indeed remarkably predictive.

These loops also include a range of social media incentives to ‘enterprise’ our different forms of value (eg AirBnB, Uber, Linked in, Altmetrics, to name a few). It should not surprise us, following our software, and, as Natalie Fenton shows (this volume) that the majority of social media activists are ‘subjects of value’. This suggest that the protesting self is conditioned under similar strategies as the enterprising self, indeed the protester becomes a kind of self-enterprise, or re-shaped as such and linked to the rhetoric of so-called "disruptive technologies", a term that is really about disrupting markets in service of new forms of monetisation: Facebook, Apple and AirBnB are classic examples.

The business operations of Facebook have some similarities to the nineteenth century robber barons who developed the railroads (another form of connectivity). They accrued monopoly rent through new financial techniques, especially for tax avoidance, with complex legal shields to evade regulation, whilst generating high levels of government influence (Jepherson, 1934). Facebook is an advertising oligopoly, extracting rent via proprietary structures globally, using traditional strategies of concentration, consolidation and conglomeration. In so doing they extend the dynamic of financialization through the circulation of capital.

Therefore we argue that it is impossible to understand the workings of Facebook by just studying its content, or by just interrogating its protocols, as it is only one element in the rhythms of our lifeness in which we are entangled and enmeshed. We arrive at Facebook with a history, located in a history. The analysis of how Facebook *extracts* value needs to be separated from how people *offer* their value to Facebook. Theories which assume that Facebook somehow automatically reshapes subjectivity may be missing the mark by not paying attention to the histories and struggles that inform how subjectivity is actually lived. Facebook can dividuate, modulate and dis/aggregate data but no matter how hard it tries to access the ‘authentic’ self they only ever get a curated and likely contradictory persona. This, we argue opens up a craped space for manouevre. There is a gap between a curated persona and totally tracked behaviour, between values performed and value extracted, between dividuation and individuation. It is not a large gap but one with the potential to confuse the all-encompassing economic surveillance that ensnares us, and which may, just like the miner’s strike produce unlikely alliances.

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1. Although we did make significant alliances that have sustained over time (see <http://podacademy.org/podcasts/pits-perverts-revisited/>), the film Pride and The Grunwick Strike. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. See: Death of UK deep coal mines nears, by

   Andrew Bounds (2015) <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/3c6cb7d4-96a8-11e4-922f-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3fNYMupkw>. Retrieved (09.07.2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. See: Patrick Wintour <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/oct/15/trade-union-bill-social-media-vetting-plan-dread-fear-police#img-1>. Retrieved 16.10.2015 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. See: Guy Adams <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/an-app-for-workers-rights-employee-at-apple-starts-union-bid-2297095.html> Retrieved 09.07.2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. See: <http://www.statista.com/statistics/289505/social-networks-value-per-active-user/>). Retrieved 09.07.2015 [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. Source: <http://finance.yahoo.com/q/ks?s=FB>. Retrieved 21.06.15. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. See: Heather Stewart (2015) http://www.theguardian.com/global/2015/oct/11/facebook-paid-4327-corporation-tax-despite-35-million-staff-bonuses [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. Source: <http://newsroom.fb.com/companyinfo>. Retrieved 09.07.2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. As Strathern (1988) demonstrates, gift economies are often systems of exploitation in which those who control the vectors of exchange extract most value. See also Wark (2004) and Barbrook & Cameron (1996). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. See: https://values.doc.gold.ac.uk/blog/17/ [↑](#endnote-ref-11)