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Alternative Media and Social Networking Sites: The Politics of Individuation and Political Participation

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Alternative Media and Social Networking Sites: The Politics of Individuation and Political Participation

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The rapid growth in usage of social networking sites begs a reconsideration of the meaning of mediated political participation in society. Castells (2009) contended that social networking sites offer a form of mass communication of the self wherein individuals can acquire a new creative autonomy. Stiegler (2009) and the Ars Industrialis collective believe that the processes of individuation, and of speaking out, hold the key to empowerment, agency, and resistance. In this article the authors offer a critical reflection on the logic of mediated participation promoted by social media through a consideration of the differences between individual and collective forms of mediated political participation. Drawing on ethnographic research on alternative media within the Trade Union Movement in Britain and recent research on the political culture of social networking sites, the authors argue that far from being empowering, the logic of self-centered participation promoted by social media can represent a threat for political groups rather than an opportunity.

With the explosion of digital media has come the extension of social media platforms into the lives of many who are technologically privileged and networked to the new communications environment. This new practice of mediated sociality (Sassen, 2004) has also brought with it several claims for

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the transformation of relations between citizenship and the media and the facilitation of new forms of political participation as well as a new means of imagining our political futures. As campaign organizations and political parties have started to turn their attention to social networking sites, we find ourselves at a critical juncture in which the interrogation of the nature of political participation on offer through social media practices becomes paramount if we are to fully understand and critique the broader claims made for the transformation of political participation in society.

In the social sciences, there is much disagreement on the political possibilities offered by social media. Some scholars argue that Web 2.0 and especially social networking sites can enable new political and creative possibilities functioning at once as sites of democratic engagement and mass collaboration, while also offering individual autonomy (Castells, 2009; Ellison, Lampe, & Steinfield, 2009; Erkul & Kes-Erkul, 2009; Shirky, 2008; Stiegler, 2008a). Others have shown that through a politics of dispossess- ion of personal data and corporate exploitation, social networking sites entrap individual creativity within private platforms that subject it to corpo- rate control, surveillance, and the exploitation of users’ immaterial labor (Andrejevic, 2004, 2005; Fuchs, 2009a, 2009b; Jarrett, 2008; Roberts, 2009; Terranova, 2000; Van Dijck, 2009; Zimmer, 2008).

In this article, we argue that debates on the democratic potential of social networking sites have often been constrained by a focus on individual agency, and by the assumption that, through individual participation and a realization of the politics of the self, people will connect to wider move- ments where significant political transformations and social change can take place (Castells, 2009; Stiegler, 2008). However, by focusing on individual agency, we argue, current research on social media has overlooked how Web 2.0 technologies and processes also affect the internal politics of collective groups, and how the self-centered forms of communication that these platforms enable can challenge rather than reinforce the collective creativity of social movements.

Bringing together recent research on the political culture of social net- working sites with ethnographic research in the British Labour movement, we contend that to understand the political possibilities offered by social media, it is important to critically address the concept of participation and uncover its meaning in different and often opposing media contexts. We argue that different media practices enable different forms of participation. Within social movements, the production of alternative media\footnote{The concept of alternative media is complex and the subject of much debate. Many scholars have opposed the idea that it is possible to group together different types of grassroots media under a unique concept such as alternative media. A wide variety of different terms have been applied to the understanding of media forms produced by groups of individuals that operate at a grassroots level. To bring together these understandings, Hadl (2009) provided an efficient summary of the most prominent} is based on
collective rituals and on the collective construction of political messages, whereas social networking practices are linked to processes of individuation and autonomy. When the two come together, as in radical oppositional political campaigns run by grassroots groups whose collective identity is linked to a particular form of news sheet or magazine (be it online or offline) but who also use social networking for campaign building, then these forms of mediated political participation often exist in a relationship of tension. This is because self-centered media production practices, which are promoted by social media, represent a challenge to the construction and dissemination of political messages that are born out of the efforts and negotiations of a collective. We argue that a critical analysis of this tension between different media practices leads to an appreciation of the inequalities of power that are embedded in the concept of social participation that is often promoted by the digital economy (Sandoval & Fuchs, 2009).

Social Media and Political Participation: The Possibilities of Web 2.0

Social media are increasingly part of contemporary campaign practice. In recent years, there have been a wide variety of examples of how social networking sites have facilitated the growth and extension of grassroots movements (Schulz, 2008) or how they have boosted citizens’ engagement in electoral campaigns (Castells, 2009, pp. 346–364; Erkul & Kes-Erkul, 2009; Metzgar & Maruggi, 2009). Many of these examples foster the logic of interactivity and user engagement that works alongside and in association with mainstream media. The purpose is often not to remain within the enclaves of social media sites but to gain mainstream coverage and infiltrate all media channels as the viral communication spreads. In this manner, social media platforms enable new ways in which to think and act political engagement—ways that facilitate political participation and mobilize grassroots groups or individuals against common goals. Social media blur and cross over into mainstream media just as, in a similar process, the creative autonomy of the individual combines with political intent of the collective. The combination of creative autonomy with political intent is claimed (Castells, 2009; Stiegler, 2008) to offer up a form of political individuation that is radicalizing and that can empower individuals and promote social change.

This understanding is exemplified in the work of the philosopher Bernard Stiegler and in the manifesto of the Ars Industrials collective (International Association for an Industrial Politics of ‘Technology of the existing approaches to alternative media. In this article, we use the concept of alternative media, drawing especially on the insights of Downing (2001) and Atton (2002), to refer to the production of small scale media that are linked to the realities of social movements (but not exclusively), and that are defined by collective practices of participatory communication within a given group.

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Self). Founded in 2005 by Stiegler and other art critics, The Ars Industrials collective (http://www.arsindustrialis.org/node/1472) is grounded in the belief that, in contemporary societies, the “life of the mind” (Arendt, cited in Stiegler, 2006, para. 1) is under threat of being entirely subjected to the law of the market, of the cultural industries, and of the digital economy. In this context, the aim of the collective is to divert the use of technologies as instruments of control in order to empower individuals to develop their own “ecology of the spirit”, which is achieved through the self (Steigler, 2006, para. 2).

In the design and conception of its artistic and political manifesto, the Ars Industrials collective strongly relies on Stiegler’s (2008) theory on the importance of individuation in society, and on the central role played by new technologies in this process. Stiegler believes that individuation is made possible—among other things—by the “act of speaking out” (2008, p. 37). This is because by speaking for oneself the individual is able to establish his or her singularity (2009, p. 35) with reference to a collective. Without dwelling on the philosophical complexities of Stiegler’s argument, in this article we focus on the claims he made regarding the difference between mass media and social media. According to Stiegler, mass media and advertising destroy the interlocution made by language and are responsible for processes of disindividuation (Stiegler, 2006). In his formulation, within mass communication, individuals become addressees without being addressors (2008, p. 38); they are not allowed to speak out and establish themselves as singular beings. On the contrary, Stiegler believed that social networking sites constitute absolutely original processes of psychical and collective individuation (2008, p. 48). For him, social media are the spaces for the construction of a digital singularity; a process that—although at times can be seen as a narcissistic process (2008, p. 42)—can lead to the growth of radical and creative alternatives (Venn, Boyne, Phillips, & Bishop, 2007, 2009).

If Stiegler spoke of individuation in relation to social media, Castells (2009) referred to the concept of “creative autonomy” (2009, p. 136). According to Castells, with the development of Web 2.0 platforms, there is currently a historical transformation of communication practices, with considerable consequences for social organization and cultural change. Castells contended that with the extension of Web 2.0 technologies, a new form of communication has emerged: the “mass communication of the self” (2009, pp. 53–71). This form of communication is made possible particularly through social media platforms where self-generated messages created by individuals have the possibility of reaching global audiences (and hence are a form of mass communication). In analyzing this new form of communication, Castells referred to Eco’s idea of the “creative audience” (2009, p. 127), and contended that with the development of Web 2.0 platforms, the potential for the audience to take charge of its communicative practices has increased, giving rise to unprecedented levels of autonomy. Despite maintaining a more dialectical and less techno-deterministic approach than
Stiegler, Castells, similar to Stiegler, strongly believed that self-expression through social media platforms can act as a tool of resistance maintaining that “... the construction of communicative autonomy is directly related to the development of social and political autonomy, a key factor in fostering social change” (2009, p. 414).

On one level, Castells and Stiegler seem to be right: Through the mass communication of the self, social media enable the participation of citizens in politically significant ways. However, it is important to further critique the nature of participation that is heralded as promoting social change. In this context, it is appropriate to ask the question, “Participation for whom and for what purpose?” Castells (2009) and Stiegler (2009) chose to focus on an approach that prioritizes the importance of self expression that originates from an individual formulation and act. Castells referred to creative autonomy, Stiegler talked about the power of individuation. In both circumstances, political participation is construed through the role of the individual. The individual subject is asked to develop new techniques of the self to resist the dominant hegemony (Stiegler, 2009) or is encouraged to mobilize in favor of political issues or is persuaded to get involved in the debates that precede political elections (Castells, 2009). Whereas we would not want to deny that individual political subjectivity is central to political engagement, political participation is frequently defined by and takes place in relation to and in coordination with others. Foregrounding creative autonomy and the power of individuation may well be appropriate analytical tools for social media, but to do so negates the collective dimension of political participation and thereby dissipates the political properties of the participatory communicative act itself.

This article contends that in assessing the political potential of social media it is important to consider the differences and relations between individual and collective forms of mediated political participation. As it will be shown in the next part of the article, far from being empowering, the logic of self-centered participation promoted by social media can represent a threat for political groups rather than an opportunity. Drawing upon ethnographic research within the Cuba Solidarity Campaign (CSC), an international solidarity campaigning organization closely linked to the Labour Movement in the United Kingdom, we show that self-centered media production practices promoted by social media can represent a challenge to the construction and dissemination of political messages that are born out of the efforts and negotiations of a collective. These reflections trigger important questions concerning the political culture of social media, and the ideological discourses of social participation that they promote.

Social Media an Ethnographic Approach

The data presented here are the product of a year of ethnographic fieldwork within the CSC. The Labour Movement in Britain is constructed by the
political and economic exchanges between many different, albeit broadly left-wing organizations including the main trade unions, single issue campaigns (e.g. Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament), left-wing publications (e.g. *Morning Star, Tribune*), political parties (e.g. Labour Party, Communist Party), international solidarity campaigns (e.g. Palestine Solidarity, Cuba Solidarity), and many other political entities and grassroots organizations.

The CSC, previously known as British Cuba Research Centre, was founded in 1978, out of a group of left-wing activists who were interested in Cuba’s political situation and sought to inform the British public on the positive reforms brought forward by the Socialist Government, especially in terms of public health and education. Today, consisting of 4,000 individual members, 450 trade union branches affiliates, 28 local groups on national territory, and two sister organizations in Northern Ireland and Scotland, the CSC has become the leading political organization in Britain with a focus on Cuba and Latin America. The headquarters of CSC are based in North London, and although the organization was born as a grassroots group based on volunteer contributions, it counts today 5 full-time staff, 25 executive committee members, and around 10 volunteers.

The 1-year-long ethnographic project involved volunteering on a daily basis in the national office of the CSC, participating in trade union conferences and events, and following CSC members and organizers to social gatherings and activities in a variety of different ethnographic spaces (Marcus, 1998). Participant observation and informal conversations, therefore, were the principal methodologies, which provided the research with a thorough understanding of the social world of CSC, and its internal conflicts, practices, and beliefs. The ethnographic analysis was also enriched with qualitative textual analysis of the online and offline media that the CSC and its networked organizations produced, and 37 audiorecorded interviews lasting 1 hour each. Interviews focused on a life history approach, which provided the research with an historical dimension that is often missing from participant observation (Dewalt, 2002).

Within the CSC, activists rely on a variety of different and converging (old and new) media platforms. Of the many media platforms that define the production of information within the campaign the *CubaSí* magazine is the oldest, and remains the most important. Today the organization publishes between 5,000 and 6,000 copies quarterly, which are then distributed freely to all members and affiliated organizations, as well as to key figures in the Labour movement. The magazine is also sold for £2.00 to the general public at conferences and events, or for £0.75 to all local groups who wish to sell it at their own meetings. Alongside its printed media, the CSC also relies on a variety of different online platforms, which include an HTML website, an e-mail newsletter, and different social media accounts on Facebook (1,360 members), on YouTube, and on Twitter (260 followers).
Fieldwork was undertaken between the beginning of 2007 and 2008, at a time of profound transformation for the trade union movement, which was defined by a sense of disillusion toward the politics of New Labour. This was also a time in which social networking sites were starting to become important tools for political campaigning and action. One particular advantage of ethnographic research on the media, is that it enables scholars to place media forms and practices in context, and consider the human tensions, negotiations and beliefs that are embedded in the everyday interaction with media technologies. As we subsequently reveal, ethnographic research can provide many important insights that can enable a deeper understanding of social media and of their political potential, and encourage scholars to distance themselves from techno-deterministic assumptions of their effects. This is because, once we consider the everyday struggles, fears and problems that activists face in the promotion of their messages via Web 2.0 platforms, it is clear that there are many elements that need to be taken into account when eulogizing about the emancipatory qualities of these new technologies.

Social Media and the Problem of the Politics of Individuation: Reflections from the CSC in Britain

Toward the end of 2007, the CSC started to take the first steps in the world of social media, by creating a YouTube account, opening a Facebook group, and creating a profile on Twitter. For the people involved, it was extremely important to secure a presence on social networking sites because they were felt to offer the organization an unprecedented opportunity, namely, the possibility of spreading the message within individual networks of communication, and maximizing the role of individual members. This is illustrated in an interview with Catriona, a 22-year-old executive committee member who was in charge of setting up the Facebook group.

C: ... it’s very important to have a presence on Facebook and other social networking sites, as we have to tap into the possibilities of technology, both to improve communication with current members, and to potentially attract new ones. One disadvantage is that many people don’t pay much attention to messages they get on Facebook, as they get overloaded. However, promoting specific campaigns or events through Facebook is important because you can rely on individual networks of communication, which was not possible before.

As soon as CSC opened its social media accounts, organizers started to link the content that they published on social media with the one published on other media platforms (e.g. the website, the e-mail newsletter, and the CubaSí magazine) through a process of repetition and intertextuality, which maximized the reach of the campaign’s message. By bringing forward the
example of Cuba, CSC’s aim is to provide a critique of the neoliberal system in Britain through the example of Cuba. The intention of the campaign is not to propose that Britain should undergo a socialist revolution, but to highlight how state intervention—and the limitations of corporate power—can lead to important civic transformations. Therefore, from the beginning, in the CSC social media platforms were understood as important tools of political action because they enabled organizers and activists to spread their message through a different channel of communication; one that was created by individuals and their relationships, and that was strengthened by word of mouth through the sharing of links and posts.

At the end of 2007, although some within CSC believed that it was important to start taking full advantage of social media platforms, many were concerned that focusing on social networking sites as tools of political action would have a negative effect on their campaigning strategies. This is expressed vividly in a joint interview with two members of CSC: Matt, who worked for the Venezuela Information Centre and at the time of the interview was 24 years old, and his girlfriend Sian, who at the time of the interview was 23 years old and worked as a researcher for the trade union AMICUS, which merged with TGWU (Transport and General Workers Union) in late 2007 to form UNITE:

S: I think it is noticeable in the last years, amongst the different campaigns and the Trade Unions, things have changed. Today people think that having a Facebook group is a level of political activity, and they concentrate on online media action a lot. But then things are deteriorating. Members start to think that merely joining a Facebook group shows that you are committed. But actually it doesn’t mean anything... it doesn’t change things. There is too much information around, to be effective.

M: You are right, but I think it’s also useful...

S: I mean it’s useful in terms of advertising and promoting what we do. But you also want lobbying, you want demonstrations, you want protests. Facebook and other online spaces are useful in terms of promoting these activities, but cannot be perceived as a substitute. But that’s what’s happening now...

M: That is a problem. I think it’s a matter of balance. You know blogs are important, and they are important in society, but then people end up working just on blogs. And that’s so individualistic. Since there are lots of negative things on Cuba and Venezuela in the press, it is obvious that for us the social networks and online action in general becomes more important. But if people concentrate only on the information side of things, they don’t really get involved in lobbying, demonstrating, getting engaged or actively changing people’s minds.

The frustration expressed by Matt and Sian in their interview was shared by many others within the campaign as they believed that political
participation on social networking sites distorted people’s understanding of collective action, by reinforcing the idea that simply joining a Facebook Group was enough. However, during fieldwork, it emerged that—as Matt briefly mentioned—the real problem of social networking sites is that they are too individualistic.

Within CSC and other networked organizations, people felt frustrated with the individualistic logic of social media and other online practices. This is because according to many, in an era of blogs, individual websites, and social networking sites, individual messages are often given the same importance as the messages that have arisen out of the tensions and negotiations of a collective of people. In this context—suffocated by the information overload of the online space—the messages produced by oppositional groups, which are the product of negotiations and conflicts, get lost. This situation is making them question the idea that online platforms, and especially social media, create a space in which the collective voice of oppositional groups can be heard. One day, for example, the director of CSC was reflecting on the campaign’s online and social media practices and added: “We try our best. But what should we do when the message of a single 11-year-old can achieve a greater importance than our own?”

The understanding of the way in which people within CSC feel threatened by the individualistic logic of social media, enables us to better appreciate one paradoxical element that can be found in their social media practices; namely their rejection of interactivity. In fact, during fieldwork it emerged that CSC organizers believed that unmediated interactivity on social media platforms from individual members (and nonmembers) represented a direct challenge to the efforts of the campaign in constructing a coherent and positive message about Cuba, which would enable people to reflect on the negative aspects of a neoliberal government in Britain. It is important to note that it was also felt to challenge the construction of a collective symbolic identity within the group. This challenge could only be met through the constant and resource intensive process of interactive discussion and deliberation that was simply too big an undertaking for a small organization such as CSC.

Consequently, when the CSC opened its YouTube account, the national office of CSC chose not to allow others to post comments beneath their videos. As Tasha—the communication officer of the campaign—explained, the choice of not allowing people to post comments on their YouTube account was not motivated by a will to be undemocratic, but by the fact that they “simply couldn’t afford interactivity.” This is because, according to Tasha, CSC did not have the resources to reply to individual messages that appeared beneath their videos. This was considered to be a real problem for the campaign because often individual messages would constitute a challenge to the one of the organization but the lack of time and resources prevented organizers from engaging with such discussions.
Alternative Media as Collective Spaces of Political Participation

One simple yet critical conclusion that emerges from the ethnographic context of CSC and enables us to critically reflect on the notions of political participation promoted by social media platforms, is defined by the finding that according to activists different media practices enable different forms of mediated political participation and that these forms of political participation do not sit easily with each other. Rather, they coexist in a relationship of tension, which affects the felt experience of political involvement. While CSC organizers and activists believed that social media were problematic tools of political action because of their self-centered logic, they also believed that their alternative media—such as their printed magazine, website, and newsletter—were instead spaces for the construction of a collective voice. This is because through the production of these media formats people found themselves collectively involved in the construction of a shared image of the group.

The construction and negotiation of collective images (within or outside of media platforms) is a central process for the development of collective action. As scholars engaged in the study of social movements or alternative media have shown, communication practices and the construction of collective discourses are often central to the creation of and consolidation of political groups (Atton, 2002; Della Porta & Diani, 1999; Downing, 2001; Melucci, 1996). In the context of the CSC, their magazine—the CubaSí—represents a space for identification with a collective project. Since its origin in 1986, the magazine has always been central to the campaign, and its development as an organization. Members, organizers and volunteers often attach collective memories to the production processes and technological development of the CubaSí. The magazine is a central component in the symbolic construction of the organization, because it represents the way in which the CSC has developed, and the way identity is bestowed upon the organization by its members.

Throughout the ethnographic research, therefore, much data has been gathered on the strong emotional attachment between people and their magazine. One expression of this emotional attachment can be found in an interview with Catriona the administrator of CSC’s Facebook group. Catriona’s family has been involved with the campaign since she was 5 years old, and during our semi-structured interview, she relayed the meaning the CubaSí magazine had for her:

C: I wouldn’t imagine the campaign without the magazine. We need it to know what is going on. Without the CubaSí I couldn’t imagine how people would keep in touch with the organisation. If someone did something to the CubaSí I would be very, very angry. You know the CubaSí represents the collective effort of people who struggle for what they believe in . . . and you can’t destroy it.
Here it is important to point out that the construction of a collective image through alternative media production is a complex process for the campaign, because it involves internal conflict, deliberation, and negotiation within the group. Although it is ultimately the decision of certain key members of staff the process of reaching a decision is one of seeking consensus and of managing contention. It is a process that suppresses individual and minority voices, and for this reason needs to be understood in relation to the inevitable power issues that it generates. Despite few internal tensions overall, however, the magazine and other alternative media platforms are felt to convey, in contrast with social networking sites, the collective political ethos of the campaign, to provide a framework for its practice, and are understood as important collective documents of its historical formation.

These later points emerge in an interview with Luke, a long-time member of the campaign who at the time of fieldwork was in his early 40s:

L: Everything the campaign has done is reflected in our magazine, and I wouldn’t imagine CSC without the *CubaSí*. I think the magazine is a written version of CSC, it is a written record of what we have done in the years. But perhaps the most important aspect of the magazine goes beyond the focus on Cuba itself, because the *CubaSí* can be perceived as an archive of our movement, and the progression we have made. You know campaigns come and go, and I think keeping track of them is good for the labour movement and the progressive politics in the UK, and our media enable us to do this.

Therefore, by highlighting the difference between mediated political participation on social media and alternative media platforms, the ethnographic context of CSC raises several questions relating to political identity, political participation, and contemporary forms of mediation. It speaks both to the changing nature of oppositional, grassroots organizations in the United Kingdom and the ways in which social media are challenging the often problematic power structures of groups that have functioned in relatively enclosed contexts where forms of democratic decision making are frequently far from perfect. However, it also reveals that the logic of political empowerment through self-centered participation as foregrounded by Castells and Stiegler and promoted by social media, can represent a threat for political collectivity rather than an opportunity for political becoming through the process of individuation. Part of the problem resides in the automatic syllogism that sees social media as enabling creative autonomy; creative autonomy as a positive democratic process, and thus social media as sites of transformation and social change. In contrast with these conclusions, we believe that it is pivotal to ask when are social media concerned primarily

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2 Fictional name in respect to the choice of anonymity of the interviewee.
with the narratives of the self and forms of self-representation that remain firmly within the bounds of individualism and when, do they enter the territory of political realization through acts of creative autonomy? What does social and or political participation mean in these various contexts?

Web 2.0 and the Powerful Discourses of Individualism

The ethnographic context of CSC shows that social media can be complex tools for political engagement and collective action. It also shows that techno-optimistic perspectives, which understand these new technologies merely as empowering tools for social movements, seem to be making several assumptions regarding the nature of contemporary political participation in a digital world, which need to be critically addressed. First, they assume that individual participation in the creation and dissemination of symbolic productions, the politics of the self, is the premise upon which all other political acts are based. This form of political individualism not only denigrates the collective creativity of politics it also presumes a level of significance for social media that is, at the very least, open to question. In a world of communicative abundance, putting one’s political faith in the ability of individual instances of communicative experience, albeit in a networked form, to deliver social and political change, is a dubious practice. Castells (2009) argued that in mass self communication traditional forms of access control do not apply, and that today anyone can upload a video to the Internet, write a blog, start a chat forum, or create an e-mail list. Access in this case is the norm and blocking Internet access is the exception. This may be true, but although people can produce and diffuse information easily in principle with the help of the Internet, not all information is visible to the same degree and gets the same attention. The Internet presents a constant stream of texts, images, and sound leaving the user to make sense of it all. This is no small task. Even accepting that social media engenders a form of self-communication that is expressive and creative; self-communication to a mass audience is still the individual trying to be heard above the organization; still the small organization trying to shout louder than the large organization. A small organization such as the CSC, lacking the resources to commit to the constant monitoring and feeding of the Internet, stands little chance of rising to the top of the Google hierarchy. Social media cannot escape, and indeed are part of, the stratified online eyeball economy. In this economy, the traditional and the mainstream are still dominant. Mainstream news and information sites still attract the most traffic just as certain celebrities and elites generate the largest networks (Hindman, 2009).

Second, there is a distinct under emphasis on the actual use to which social networking is put. What Stiegler called “an economy of contribution” (2008b) a digital world where the contributor is neither a consumer nor a
producer; a world that is intrinsically social and instinctively collaborative is said to open up the mind to radically alternative possibilities. The claims to self-realization through social media means that in an environment where representative democracy is failing, citizens retreat to the private sphere and a means of communicating that they feel they have more control over. This is argued not to be indicative of a lack of political interest but rather to signal a relocation of that interest to domains that are more intimate. This is resonant of Sennett’s (1974) argument that dead public space (public space that may be visible but is no longer collective) is one reason why “people seek out on intimate terrain what is denied them on more alien ground” (1974, p. 15). However, if participation in this intimate terrain is built on mutual privatism, on the retention and relentless promotion of individualism and private affairs that ever fragments and disconnects individuals from the public terrain of political participation; if it functions to guide people away from a striving towards a communality of collective political endeavor however contentious and contested and focuses our attentions on the personal politics of self-representation, as expressed by the members of CSC, it will remain as a network of singular acts of self-organizing production.

Third and most crucial, there is little concern for the deeper and broader social and political contexts in which the practice of creative autonomy and individuation takes place. These contexts involve the dominant framings of acceptable political action and social organization as well as the broader positioning of political activity within neoliberal discourse. In this contemporary political configuration participation is framed in terms of individualistic values that are clearly identifiable in much of the life and action in social media. Hence, the creative autonomy of individuals enabled by new communication technologies that Castells’ (2009) work heralded as liberatory and Stiegler (2009, 2008) believed brings the individual into being, can equally be interpreted, drawing on Castoriadis (1991), as “individualistic autonomy” (p. 163) conducive to neoliberal practice. The problem with the notions of creative autonomy and individuation forwarded by Stielger and Castells is that they prioritize individual agency over the political and ideological context and resist problematizing the notion of autonomy therein. Autonomy in neoliberal contexts may be guided principally by ego-centered needs and practices structured around the self that may implicitly endorse individualized and fragmented responses—a further push away from a collective public citizenry to isolated, atomized self-hood. Rather, we need to acknowledge the deep context in which any form of creativity or autonomy is situated and seek to understand their various manifestations in relation to it.

Therefore, claims that the starting conditions for social and political action have been radically changed by Web 2.0, while suggestive in some respects, leave crucial issues unexplored, as they are too individualistic.
A similar understanding is expressed also by Fuchs (2009), when he contended:

[the empowerment discourse issue is individualistic because it focuses research primarily on how individuals use SNS for making connections, maintaining or receiving friendships, falling in love, creating autonomous spaces etc. It does not focus on how technology and technology use are framed by political issues and issues that concern the development of society, such as capitalist crises, profit interest, global war, the globalization of capitalism, or the rise of a surveillance society (Fuchs, 2009, p. 18).

Indeed, Castells’ (2009) own empirical results seem to suggest that digital citizens are far from being autonomous from capital. On the majority of platforms that they visit, their personal data and online behavior is stored and assessed to generate profit by targeted advertising. The users who Google data, upload or watch videos on YouTube, upload or browse personal images on Flickr, or accumulate friends with whom they exchange content or communicate online via social networking platforms such as MySpace or Facebook, constitute an audience-turned-commodity that is sold to advertisers. The difference between the audience commodity on traditional mass media and on the Internet is that on the Internet the users are also content producers. The contemporary turn of phrase, user-generated content, is a catch-all description of the endless creative activity, communication, community building, and content production online. However, this still does not denude the fact that this user activity is captured by and used for corporate gain. We are excessively and ever more deeply commodified as so much more of our daily habits and rituals take an informational technology form. During much of the time that users spend online, they produce profit for large corporations such as Google, News Corporation (which owns MySpace), or Yahoo! (which owns Flickr). Advertisements on the Internet are frequently personalized, which is made possible by the surveillance of, storing of, and assessing of user activities and user data with the help of computers and databases (Andrejevic, 2004, 2005). The audience turned producer does not, in this context, signify a democratization of the media towards a truly participatory system. It certainly does not confer autonomy from capital, but rather the profound and subcybernetic commodification of online human creativity. As several scholars concerned with issues of digital labour have shown, social networking sites strengthen an advanced form of capitalism that binds users to service providers through the exploitation of their immaterial labour (Bauwens, 2008; Fuchs, 2009b; Huws, 2003; Petersen, 2008; Terranova, 2000, 2004; Van Dijck, 2009). An approach that emphasizes political economic concerns reminds us that the Internet does not transcend global capitalism but is deeply involved with it by virtue of the corporate
interests it supports and the discourses of capitalism and neoliberalism that the people who use it are drenched in. In this manner social networking is claimed to further steep individuals in neoliberal ideology in forms of mediation that are deeply commodified while being conducive to sociality and the facilitation of political networking.

Seen from this angle, the participation and autonomy that have been heralded as revolutionary take on a different complexion as individuals are forced to recognize and take account of current structures of power that are ever present in an online context and encircle (but do not enslave) the empowerment of individuals. In other words, it is important to address the age-old sociological dilemma of the relation between structure and agency; this can be done by decentering the media itself. Media or technological centrism resists a deep and critical contextualization of social and political life. As Couldry (2003) suggested, once the media (in any form) presents itself as the center of society and individuals organize their lives and orient our daily rituals and practice toward it, it is possible to fall prey to "the myth of the mediated centre" (2003, p. 47). Media rituals not only stress the significance of media but also allude to the importance of being in the media and of being able to communicate one’s message to others—whether for financial, political, or social gain. The more powerful and influential individuals are, the better placed they are to get their message across. This is as true in the expanded online world as it is in the contracted offline world of the CSC. The millions of people who use social networking sites inhabit a mediated world that offers the possibilities of more control than mainstream media, is mobile, interactive and holds endless creative potential but is nonetheless mythic. The claimed ubiquity of the Internet and social media stress the significance of always being tuned in and online. The seductive power of this mythic center circulates around social life and serves to obscure the legitimation of dominant values of neoliberal society.

CONCLUSION

The question remains: Do social media do no more than serve ego-centered needs and reflect practices structured around the self even in the nonmainstream world of alternative media? These practices may be liberating for the user but not necessarily democratizing for society. The civicly motivated yet self-absorbed user of social media sees the endless possibility of online connectivity against the banality of the social order. The motivation is often fed by a desire to connect the self to society. Bimber (2000) noted that although online technologies “contribute toward greater fragmentation and pluralism in the structure of civic engagement,” their tendency to “deinstitutionalise politics, fragment communication and accelerate the pace of the
public agenda and decision-making may undermine the coherence of the public sphere” (pp. 323–333).

All creative human activity holds the potential for political transformative capacity but to understand how this potential can be translated into a reality requires an appreciation of the enduring social and political structures that surround and preexist certain individuals and their relations with others. Broadening radical political imagination to think outside of neoliberal frameworks is not a solitary project but a collective endeavor. This is not to deny the role of individuals in the single acts of political intervention. As Foucault (1987) stated, at certain points in time, “the problem is not trying to dissolve relations of power [. . .] but to give one’s self the rule of law . . . the ethos, the practice of self, that will allow these games of power to be played with a minimum domination” (p. 129).

The issue that remains, however, is just how minimal the domination of online communications is—Is it freedom to express through a different way of telling or simply an inability to see the practices of domination that are ever deeper embedded in the means of communication?

REFERENCES


