

Analysis of Digital Labor Process of Social Media Use: The Examples of WeChat and QQ

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Abstract

With the popularity of smart phones, as the representative of the social media, WeChat and QQ, which can form the media environment, are profoundly changing the social structure and social habits and affecting people's thinking path, and even the majority of people start to establish new behavior patterns. Combined with Dallas Smythe and Jhally's audience commodity or labor theory, this study attempts to introduce the new concepts of labor under the digital economy. Furthermore, this article uses Critical Political Economy Theory, rethinking digital labor in the field of social media, in order to avoid the alienation of communication process, and revealing the hidden exploitation and secondary distribution of user-generated content that are created by users. Finally, the findings of the study provide insights into understandings of digital labor.

Keywords

Digital Labor; Audience Commodity; Social media; Political Economy.

1. Introduction

With the advent of 5G (Five Generation) technology, widespread popularization of smart phones, the way people have access to information is undergoing rapid change, represented by WeChat and QQ are profoundly changing the social structure and social habits, affecting the person's behavior and thinking path, and even more and more audience begin to form a new habit. On the one hand, users use WeChat or QQ, posting Moments and posting Qzone dynamics, which can be seen as the true embodiment of "participatory culture" and it plays a role in promoting the formation of a new cultural model. At the same time, users take the initiative to interpret different texts, try to break the existing rules and obtain a kind of democracy on the semantic level under the popular culture.

On the contrary, some scholars take a cautious attitude and think that the school of cultural studies seems too optimistic. Qiu points out that the current Internet field is full of the atmosphere of capital and exploitation. According to the analysis of Marxist theory, the average worker's work is an hour of cumulative calculation and digital labor on social media is measured in minutes or even seconds. Networked social relationships are reorganized and integrated by capitalist business logic, and the primary function of social media changed from socializing to profiting, resulting in digital labor becoming increasingly "atomic" [1]. Chen also pessimistically believes that we have simply increased our freedom to choose information, but our deep dependence on technology has made us forget critical questioning and has not changed the current communication situation dominated by elitists [2].

In reality, we may encounter such situations: our personal information and social relationships are exposed to the society and we are in a state of being monitored. The most important thing is that we have become compelled to use the Internet. It seems that if we do not use it, we will be cut off from the world, and if we do not use social media, we will be disconnected from

society. We created social media, but now it is more like social media "created" us, and we are trapped in an unreal social world.

Based on the above critical thinking, this paper intends to take Chinese social media WeChat and QQ as examples from the perspective of Communication Political Economy. This study attempts to introduce the new concept of labor under digital capitalism and reflects on how commercial capitalism uses social media WeChat and QQ to dominate the audience and then analyze how the audience works on WeChat and QQ.

2. The New Development of Labor

After entering the 21st century, autonomous Marxists represented by Negri began to reflect on Marxism and reinterpreted Grundrisse. In today's capitalist organization structure, the relation of exploitation is constantly moving from the perspective of time and space. Living labor becomes completely transfigured, abstract, magical, intermittent and changeable. The shift from Fordist factory to post-Fordist social production, from the material labor of the mass of workers to the immaterial labor of the socialized workers, from the socialized workers to the pluralities. This tendency to shift can be seen as the labor of "biopolitics," creating not only material goods but relationships as well [3].

There have been profound changes in the forms of Labor. At the end of the 20th century, immaterial labor was replacing industrial labor. The concept of immaterial labor was first put forward by Maurizio Lazarato. He believes that immaterial labor contains two aspects of labor: namely the information content of goods and the cultural content of goods. Its specificity lies in the fact that the goods it generates are created and transformed into further consumption incentives through the ideology and culture of the consumer. The commodity of immaterial labor primarily produces a kind of social relationship and a kind of innovation, between production and consumption. And this kind of social relationship not only produces the production, but also produces the subjectivity [4].

In the post-modern society, more and more non-material labor investment starts from the life itself, incorporating the body kinetic energy and the power of action under the body into the capital investment. Therefore, the value it produces is "from the bottom up", that is, from the most basic and essential level of human life. Immaterial labor is directly involved in social interaction and cooperation. Its cooperative aspect is not the same as the previous forms of labor, and it is not produced by external imposition or organization. In fact, cooperation is entirely inherent in the activity of Labor itself. The cooperative power of labor provides the possibility that labor itself can increase in value (especially in the immaterial labor force) [5].

The other aspect of immaterial labor is affective labor, which is about human contact and interaction. Information technology is the ability of audiences to create emotional participation through experience, repetition and reading texts in their personal situations, and to absorb and integrate it into their daily lives. Affective labor is immaterial, and its output is intangible: a feeling of relaxation, comfort, satisfaction, excitement, or enthusiasm. For example, medical care mainly relies on caring and affective labor; The entertainment industry is equally concerned with the creation and manipulation of emotions [6]. Similar to the concept of immaterial labor, Tiziana Terranova has critically argued that free labor is an essential element of value creation in the digital economy. For example, building a website, updating software and building virtual space are all free labor and are voluntary and unpaid [7]. The audience becomes the capitalist's followers.

In addition, Qiu (2009) also introduces some concepts of labor in the new network society, such as self-programmed labor, original labor, knowledge workers, non-material labor, play-labor, network labor and so on [8]. In 2014, Qiu and other scholars further propose that a new conceptual framework has been applied to the forms of labor in ICT, such as the transition from

free labor to play-labor, and from network labor to creative labor [9]. Wu and Shi believe that now in the Internet era, the concept of "audience goods" has been developed into "digital labor", which provides a new research perspective for the critical school [10]. Wu (2017) also propose the relevant classification based on the Internet platform "digital labor", one of which is the content production and consumption of social platforms [11]. In conclusion, based on relevant concepts and practical experience, this paper regards WeChat and QQ as examples based on the framework of digital labor to explore how the audience works on social media and is exploited by commercial capitalism.

3. Analysis of the Labor Process of Social Media Use

In 1977, the Canadian political and economic scholar Dallas W. Smythe published the article "Communication: The Blind Spot of Western Marxism". According to Smythe's views, Marxist scholars mainly focus on ideology and regard mass media as a part of the superstructure, but ignore and fail to analyze the fact that mass media has been integrated as a link of the economic basis [12]. Smythe's audience commodity theory argues that under the commercial media system, commercial television which relies on advertising as a source of revenue, sells a commodity not in the form of programs but in the form of audiences. By audience goods, Smythe means the "power of the audience" or "services provided by the audience". The implication is that audiences are watching TV commercials, which are tantamount to doing work for the advertiser and helping to market the product. What is generally considered to be commercial television is a "free lunch" to attract audiences and keep them focused on watching television. The goal is to recruit sufficient audiences and maintain their television viewing loyalty [13].

From the above, it is clear that the main service target of commercial media is advertisers, and the media produce content not to serve the audience, whose purpose is to try to sell the audience to advertisers. In other words, the audience does not watch the program for free; they must pay for the labor to watch, and this labor has an economic value. At the same time, the audience will generate consumption awareness through watching the advertisements in the program, and their services will be sold to the advertisers through the media, and the consumption of the products will be returned to the advertisers. The media further classifies, calculates, and integrates these audience profiles and sells them to advertisers in the form of commodities once again, thus turning the audience into "audience commodities" with different values [14].

But Jhally believes that the labor of the audience is not for the advertisers, but for the mass media. The labor of the audience is a part of the audience's commodities, and the program is their salary [15]. They would not watch television if there were no programming, and the cost of acquiring advertising must exceed the cost of producing an audience for value to be created [16]. If the reference scholar Wei Wei's insight, we can from the advertiser, commercial TV two points of view [13]. First, advertisers want the audience to promote their products, but the reality is that advertisers can't really grasp the audience's buying behavior. Advertisers can only increase the necessary viewing time through the means of increasing the viewing time of ads. At the same time, commercial TV produces different kinds of TV programs to attract audiences to watch them, and inserts commercials into the TV programs. When the audience sees a certain amount of advertising, commercial television is sufficient to cover its costs. And when the audience sees more than this amount of advertising, that is, the remaining viewing time, which constitutes the source of commercial TV's profit.

Second, for commercial television, only by reducing the necessary viewing time, increasing the surplus viewing time, and then increasing the absolute surplus value, which can obtain the maximum profit. However, according to the relevant national laws and regulations, the advertising time is restricted by the state and generally cannot be extended, so we can only

make the audience more focused on the existing advertisements. There are two means to achieve this: first, by classifying the audience according to certain demographic characteristics, including age, gender, income level, household composition. The advertisers are charged a higher price for advertising by allowing specific viewers (especially those with high spending power) to watch more attentively based on the preferences of different groups for specific programs. Second, splitting the existing advertising time to make each ad shorter in order to accommodate more advertisements in the advertising slot and thus get more advertising profits.

If we refer to this theoretical system, then the source of profit for social media, whose main income is advertising, is the time spent by all WeChat and QQ users. The process of seeing or touching the advertisements after users logged into WeChat and QQ is to help them do their work. According to the audience commodity theory developed by Smythe and Jhally, the study will discuss from the following four aspects: salary, necessary labor time, absolute surplus value, and relative surplus value.

3.1. Salary

The "salary" received by the audience for their work refers to the different types of programs offered by the media organization. In contrast to traditional commercial media, WeChat and QQ offer a richer and more diverse range of services. Not just browsing and watching, but also creating a variety of interactive communication behaviors.

In general, they can be broadly divided into two main categories. The first category is similar to the services provided by traditional media. There are two specific types. First, the content on traditional media is disseminated through WeChat and QQ as intermediary platforms, for example, WeChat and QQ users can forward news reports from traditional media on their platforms. Especially, WeChat has become an important way for news dissemination as well as material collection. On the one hand, the synergy of "two ends and one micro" (liangwei yiduan) has improved the scope and speed of information dissemination through a multi-pronged approach. On the other hand, social media has a strong advantage in terms of the type of user groups and the size of the user base, further expanding the sources of news and information with great diversity. Second, traditional media set up their own public accounts on the WeChat platform to create personalized content, which can enable publishing, forwarding and comments and other functions to further extend communication channels.

The second category is the integration of social media services and activities which is the aspect that WeChat and QQ are best at. They integrate instant messaging (text and video), weblogs, web albums, friends, dynamics, sayings, etc. The most important aspect is the social function, WeChat and QQ associate the cell phone address book with their softwares, for example, WeChat's "sweep" (sao yi sao), "shake" (yao yi yao) function; QQ's "nearby" (fujin) function, etc. A strong interpersonal network circle can be formed to create a certain sense of connection between people to meet interpersonal social needs. The above integrated services greatly prolong users' usage time and increase the frequency of use, and enhance the adhesion.

3.2. Necessary Labor Time

The necessary labor time means that the viewer must watch the advertisement for a certain period of time [13]. WeChat has launched two major categories of advertisements, namely the advertisements from Moments and Official accounts platform; and QQ has launched two major categories of advertisements, one is the mobile advertisements. Mainly includes "Today's Hot" (jinri redian), "People Nearby" (fujinderen), and dynamic advertisements, etc. The other category is Qzone advertising, which mainly includes video ads, immersive video streaming advertisements, multi-image rotating advertisements, brand page card advertisements, and friend dynamic information flow advertisements. The diverse forms of advertising in WeChat

and QQ make us spend time watching advertisements, typically represented by WeChat's advertisements from Moments as well as QQ's implantable advertisements and information flow advertisements.

Moreover, WeChat and QQ spend almost nothing to produce content, because all content on WeChat and QQ is user-generated content (UGC). Self-distribution of content are produced by other media, some games or applications are also provided by their respective practitioners. WeChat and QQ have achieved the first goal of increasing profits by users producing their own content.

As for the labor theory, digital labor process from WeChat and QQ would modify Jhally's arguments. He argues that commercial TV viewers are doing labor for the media (watching commercials), not for advertisers (promoting products) as Smythe argues. On August 20, 2015, WeChat's advertisements from Moments were officially launched, and one of its features is to let friends "endorse" the advertiser. When friends see an advertisement and like or comment on it, the probability of you seeing the advertisement is increased. Interaction between friends and advertising on the one hand will create an irreplaceable sense of trust. On the other hand, it actually assists the advertiser in marketing. Just to validate Smythe's claim that advertisers can follow the behavior of users. For example, like, comment, or select "I'm not interested", to conduct precise targeting and determine the user's advertising preference needs, so as to achieve efficient delivery and get potential quality consumers.

According to Jhally's explanatory structure, the television station is equivalent to employing two groups of laborers, one group of people who produce the programs, is responsible for producing the paychecks (TV programs) received by the other group of people, and another group of workers refers to the audiences or viewers [15]. Today, users of WeChat and QQ are not only workers who watch advertisements, but also laborers who produce programs. If there are relations of production in which surplus value is exploited, then the exploitation of their users by WeChat and QQ is clearly twofold. Once to exploit the value of the content they produce, and once to exploit the value they generate when they watch the advertisements.

3.3. Absolute Surplus Value

Increasing surplus labor time, and thus improves absolute surplus value. The diversified services offered by WeChat and QQ are a means to achieve their purposes. In addition to the basic chat functions (support for sending voice, video, pictures, emoticons and text, as well as support for multi-group chats), WeChat also provides services such as QQ email alert, QQ offline assistant, address book assistant, voice notepad, WeChat sports, games, shopping, WeChat payment, WeChat cash withdrawal and third-party applications. On January 9, 2017, the "small program"(xiaochengxu) application was officially launched, in which the main body of developers can be individuals, enterprises, governments, media or other organizations, and the diversity of the main body brings the diversity of services, i.e., it can meet the needs of different users. The diversity of subjects brings diversity of services, that is, it can meet the needs of different users. The most important thing is that it has changed the tedious process of installing and downloading in the past, and it is a parallel system with subscription number, service number and enterprise number. Users can swipe or search directly to open relevant applications and enjoy the convenient services they bring.

QQ provides different related practical products in addition to Qzone, QQ Wallet, Public, Diary, Watch Point, Live Streaming, Music, Animation, App Store, Popular Events, Eat, Drink, Play, Same City Services, Sports and other practical functions like QQ mailbox, QQ browser, QQ computer manager, etc. Compared to WeChat, the most representative is the value-added exclusive services provided by QQ. This is a great way to increase the gamification element of QQ, such as QQ members, yellow diamonds, red diamonds, blue diamonds, reading VIPs, etc., so as to better generate the flow experience, consciously prolong the use of QQ, and immerse

yourself in the use of QQ. Because of the variety of services, it is theoretically likely that users will spend relatively more time using them, which in turn will increase the opportunity and time to view the advertisements.

Secondly, the use of WeChat and QQ is different from watching TV, after all we have to spend a relatively complete period of time to watch a TV program. Because the scheduling and broadcasting of TV shows is a "flow", and the content scheduling of WeChat and QQ is not a "flow" but a multiple timeline and a library of content in infinite time zones. In other words, when using WeChat and QQ, there is no fixed relationship between the start of a program and the back and forth between programs, but rather, it can be long or short, and users can move through different programs. Such flexibility allows users to schedule a special period of time for activities, but also to use any odd and available time to use WeChat and QQ.

The representative is its "like" mechanism. The mechanism is perhaps the smallest unit of time for human interaction, and the engagement time is minimal, one second is enough. The "Like" button is based on open source software and includes hyperlink functionality from the World Wide Web, designed to keep the web open for sharing [20]. But in another way, this means that the data left by "forward" in QQ, "favorite" and "comment" in QQ and WeChat are tracked. And if it is not open to other institutional organizations, it will give Tencent, the company behind WeChat and QQ, an effective monopoly on the data information generated by user behaviors. In addition, the "like" mechanism is becoming increasingly structured, making it central to its focus. While WeChat and QQ employees are writing data extraction algorithms or developing protocols like the "Like" button, they are effectively managing and controlling them. They guide user behaviors in such a way that it is more likely to be created as marketable data or to generate content that attracts the attention of other users, increasing the value extracted from it. Subsequently, it can be commercialized through advertising. These actions also reflect the dual mechanism played by its product managers: production and exploitation at the same time [21].

Besides, the Like button is not only an encapsulation technique, it also facilitates a specific form of interaction. In fact, it is probably the most simplified code and allows only two options: what the user likes (dynamics, articles, images, videos, etc.), or no interaction between them. WeChat and QQ designers do not even have a "dislike" option, just a "like" button. Many other design features of the WeChat and QQ can also indicate that they specify and enable certain digital behaviors. In effect, it provides a restricted syntax or a specific set of protocol for social networks that form structured states in such a way as to maximize the generation of relevant data about users and their friends [22].

In order to allow users to spend their fractional time on WeChat and QQ, several mechanisms have been designed successively for WeChat and QQ such as real-time display of the latest responses related to the user or the number of likes and comments, etc. These mechanisms are designed to attract users to keep coming back to WeChat and QQ. The above three means, combined with the display-type advertising characteristics of Qzone and WeChat's advertisements from Moments, the presentation time can last for a long period of time (a day or more), so the time users are exposed to the advertisements can be accumulated and extended, and thus the surplus viewing time will increase, which is to increase the absolute surplus value.

3.4. Relative Surplus Value

To increase the relative surplus value, it is necessary to enhance the effect of users viewing the advertisements [13]. Specifically, one is to differentiate users and attract specific advertisers according to their characteristics. WeChat and QQ collect and analyze users' personal information (gender, age, education, occupation, marital status, interests and preferences, etc.) to arrange appropriate advertisements. The above-mentioned "applets" (xiaochengxu) can be

connected with the user data of the developer's existing App backend through the joint login of WeChat, which enhances the integration between the three and enables the developer to understand and track the user data more comprehensively and make effective segmentation. In addition, in March 2017, WeChat launched the mobile search product, "WeChat Index". It is a mobile index based on WeChat's big data, reflecting the hotness of different keywords in WeChat, including WeChat search, public articles and articles publicly forwarded in the Moments. This behavior can be exploited by advertisers in a big way to delineate different groups and commercialize them as one of the data supports for precise placement of advertisements delivery.

The second is to allow users to focus more on watching the advertisements. One of the important features of WeChat and QQ is that they provide a social space between users and their friends and family. WeChat's Moments and Qzone are relatively closed private communities, and the information shared is biased towards emotional interaction between friends, which would make people less wary of advertising theoretically. Besides, the formation of a network of family and friends has changed the possibilities of advertisements presentation. As mentioned above, the most typical one is the advertisement from WeChat's Moments, when the bottom of the advertisement shows that you have friends who click the like button or related comments, it will trigger a sense of connection or affinity.

Lastly, WeChat has developed new features to add relative surplus value through user-related behaviors. For example, WeChat launched the "card pack" function on September 26, 2014, which mainly helps users manage virtual card coupons and can aggregate information such as coupons, movie tickets, membership cards and boarding passes that exist in traditional physical wallets. The coupons include "Friend's Coupons", which shows information about coupons shared by friends and can be used for free. When a friend is seen to have a brand coupon, theoretically, it enhances the impression and memory of its brand on the one hand, and strengthens the interactive relationship between friends on the other hand. In fact, the transfer of physical card coupons to virtual card coupons on WeChat is also an advertising and marketing method, making it closely connected to WeChat users, thus naturally enhancing their attention to its commercial brand.

4. Conclusion

From the perspective of Critical Political Economy of Communication, this paper explores the situation where digital labor on social media are ruthlessly exploited by commercial capitalism, based on the audience commodity or labor theory developed by Smythe and Jhally. In short, users of WeChat and QQ are gradually drawn into the logic of capitalist operations and face the dual exploitation. One is the value of the content produced by the exploited users; the other is the value generated by the users when they view the advertisements. Table 1 shows a summary of the labor situation of WeChat and QQ users.

With the change of new media technology and digital technology, the question of the intrinsic connection between the capitalist mode of labor production and the subject of production (subjectivity) is increasingly worthy of consideration, perhaps bringing about a "return to the tradition of man". According to Foucault's views, it can be understood as a "biopolitical labor". In the past, it was possible to obtain the surplus value of labor by accumulating capital, investing money and introducing machines. Today, the new form of labor, digital labor is the autonomous construction of productive content anywhere and anytime, and has the basic characteristic of being "everywhere and nowhere". With this comes the question of the ambiguity between work time and leisure time, so where is the boundary between the two? And how should they be defined? It is especially important to re-examine the grand topic of labor.

Table 1. WeChat and QQ audience labor process

The social media labor process	Salary	Necessary labor time	Absolute surplus Value	Relative surplus value
WeChat	Wechat Moments circle, WeChat payment, Official Accounts, Shopping, Games, Nearby people, Applet, Card Pack, etc.	Wechat Moments circle ads, WeChat public number ads, Picture ads, picture ads, Card ads,etc.	WeChat payment, Small program, Scan QR Code, Card package, etc.	Small routine, Wechat Moments circle ads, Card Protector, Coupon, WeChat index number, etc.
QQ	Dynamic, Highlight, Live broadcast, App Store, Popular activities, Eat, Drink, Play, City service, Interest Groups, Sports, etc.	QQ shopping information advertising, QQ wallet information advertising, QQ weather advertising, QQ space advertising, etc.	Level setting, Membership, Likes, Retweet, Favorites, Comment, Share, etc.	Gender, age, Education, Occupation, Marital status, Interests and Preferences, etc

Finally, it is worth noting that the people use social media as a form of labor, voluntarily and willingly, without being forced, so what can be said about being oppressed and exploited? Is it a new type of labor exploitation or just an illusion? Have the connotations and forms of its oppression and exploitation also changed with the technological progress of society? Do digital workers have the power to resist? These are all questions worthy of deeper exploration in the future.

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