

## The Dialectics of Empowerment and Exploitation of Using Social Media

A Review Article by

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***OccupyMedia! The Occupy Movement and Social Media in Crisis Capitalism***

By Christian Fuchs  
Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2014. 182 pp.  
ISBN: 9781782794066.

***Reverse Engineering Social Media: Software, Culture, and Political Economy in New Media Capitalism***

By Robert W. Gehl  
Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2014. 236 pp.  
ISBN: 9781439910351.

***Tweets and the Streets: Social Media and Contemporary Activism***

By Paolo Gerbaudo  
London, UK: Pluto Press, 2012. 194 pp.  
ISBN: 9780745332482.

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Commercial social media are contradictory tools that can simultaneously facilitate the empowerment as well as the exploitation or domination of their users. On the one hand, protest movements such as the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street use commercial social media to organize for action and to promote their views. On the other hand, social media owners appropriate the activities of their users (user-generated content and surveillance data). Beside exploitation, corporate and state surveillance as well as censorship of social media are key user concerns. This article reviews three books that have discussed various topics surrounding the role of social media in social and political activism, especially in the communication and organization practices of contemporary social movements.

*OccupyMedia! The Occupy Movement and Social Media in Crisis Capitalism* by Christian Fuchs (2014) presents the results of a quantitative study on the occupy movement's use of social media in organizing for protests. This book contributes to the "political economy of communication's task to analyze communication contradictions in capitalism by focusing on the Occupy movement's communication forms and strategies" (Fuchs, 2014: 4), especially to the question of how commercial and non-commercial media can enable or limit the movement's communication and protest capacities. The *OccupyMedia!* survey, conducted in English between November 2012 and February 2013, and implemented using SurveyMonkey, contained close to 110 closed- and open-ended questions. Invitations to participate were posted on websites and social media platforms frequented by Occupy activists worldwide. The survey found that the most frequently used form of cooperative communication within the movement was face-to-face conversation at about 60%, followed by communication on Facebook at about 45%. Occupy activists expressed concerns about state surveillance, censorship, and the corporate domination of social media platforms.

*Reverse Engineering Social Media: Software, Culture, and Political Economy in New Media Capitalism* by Robert W. Gehl (2014) is a political economic critique of social media software engineering. Gehl uses the software engineering concept of architecture and implementation to analyze how software architecture can shape the process of the division of labour on social media sites. Software studies are concerned with the "social politics of software" (Gehl, 2014: 7)—how software is developed and used by various social groups. Gehl adopts the science and technology studies theory of heterogeneous engineering, a specialized articulation of actor-network theory, to elaborate the dialectics of empowerment and exploitation in social media architecture. He argues that "the predominant architecture of social media has been drawn from the methods of managing labor in the production of software" (Ibid: 17). Social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, are "simultaneously sites of user freedom and rigid structures of exploitation" (Ibid: 6). The task of the political economist is to "reverse engineer" the software to uncover the various hidden contradictions within it: "[c]oncrete, particular instances of software are the starting points for analysis that drives toward an understanding of larger sociotechnical systems that precede it" (Ibid: 11).

*Tweets and the Streets: Social Media and Contemporary Activism* by Paolo Gerbaudo (2012) examines how contemporary activist movements mobilize for collective action. Gerbaudo studies the three uprisings of 2011—the Egyptian revolution in Cairo, the indignados movement in Madrid, and Occupy Wall Street in New York—but devotes much of his attention to the Egyptian revolution. An ethnographic-phenomenological approach employing 80 qualitative interviews with protest activists and organizers allows Gerbaudo to "recuperate so much of what gets lost in contemporary techno-deterministic accounts" of social movement studies (2012: 9). Gerbaudo focuses on the use of social media as means of mobilizing for street protests. Mobilization "involves a physical concentration of participants in space and time" (Gerbaudo, 2012: 37). Social media act as channels to disseminate opinions and they play a key role in shaping the way people come together and act; that is, in how activists "choreograph collective action" (Ibid: 4). Gerbaudo finds that influential social media administrators become soft leaders or choreographers of assembly who lead the process of constructing a collective identity for the movement coalesced around an emotional trigger and anchored in a symbolic physical space.

This review article aims to discuss the above three books within two main themes, social media as technological tools and social media interaction dynamics, to shed light on the dialectics of using social media. It concludes with highlights on the main strengths and

limitations of each book in terms of the research method, the theoretical perspective, and the research findings or results.

### **Social Media as Technological Tools**

Gerbaudo charges that the neoliberal news media, techno-optimists, and techno-pessimists have turned social media into “a fetish of collective action” by endowing them with mystical qualities that “obscure the work of the groups and organisers using them” (2012: 8). He says, rather than being concerned “merely with the efficiency” or with the information processing speed of communication technologies, “I pay attention to what activists actually do with them, to the concrete and local ‘media practices’ activists develop in their use”, (Gerbaudo, 2012: 9) “focusing on their role as means of mobilization of collective action” (Ibid: 4). “My claim is that social media have been chiefly responsible for the construction of a choreography of assembly” (Ibid: 5). Facebook admins and activist tweeps became “‘soft leaders’ or choreographers, involved in setting the scene, and constructing an emotional space within which collective action can unfold” (Ibid: 5).

What set the conditions for the 2011 Egyptian revolution was more than powerful communication technology. On June 6, 2010, 28-year-old Egyptian blogger Khaled Said was killed by the Egyptian secret police after posting a video allegedly documenting police corruption on the Internet. Two days later Google marketing executive Wael Ghonim opened the Facebook page Kullena Khaled Said (we are all Khaled Said), which quickly became the most popular anti-regime Facebook page with about 36,000 users joining the page on the first day. Gerbaudo (2012) argues that social media played a limited, very specific, and yet crucial role in the Egyptian revolution of 2011, in the coalescence of the initial revolutionary nucleus around which participants progressively clustered. As admin, Ghonim constructed a compelling emotional appeal with the page’s users, which helped to coalesce Egypt’s Internet-savvy middleclass youth, the shabab-al-Facebook (Facebook youth), around a common identity. The page “acted as a site of emotional condensation” (Ibid: 50) for the youth that played the key role of street agitators of the shaabi lower classes who make up the majority of the Egyptian society. Ghonim turned Said into a national hero, which Egyptians coalesced around. The early organizing on social media was soon followed by intense ground level efforts to agitate the shaabi masses. “From the very first days of the uprising, face-to-face communication overtook social media as medium of choice for the movement” (Ibid: 50). Only a limited constituency was actually mobilized by social media, as a consequence of low levels of Internet connection. “For the great mass of participants in the Egyptian uprising, mobilisation worked through more traditional channels such as oral communication and the mass media” (Ibid: 49). The organizing framework necessary to mobilize Egyptians for protests on January 25<sup>th</sup> had been established in 2008 when the 6<sup>th</sup> of April group successfully mobilized for protests by publicizing a strike by textile workers in the Nile Delta on Facebook. When Kullena Khaled Said publicized for mass demonstrations on January 25<sup>th</sup>, an estimated 50,000 Egyptians took to the streets of Cairo, kick-starting the 18-day national revolt, which unseated Mubarak from power.

Fuchs (2014) takes a page from Gerbaudo (2012), also citing Clay Shirky, Malcolm Gladwell, and Evgeniy Morozov to distance his approach from techno-deterministic views that he argues, fail to provide a theoretical and empirical understanding of the role of social media in society. Fuchs undertakes a quantitative study on the contradictory use of social media by Occupy activists, especially as tools for purposive information communication. Fuchs presents a

theory of information to analyze the survey results, specifically to classify the movement's media use according to the mode of sociality a medium is likely to facilitate—cognitive, communicative, or co-operative. Fuchs' model of knowledge creation is based on Durkheim's social facts, Weber's social actions/relations, and Marx and Tönnies' co-operative labour and community. Cognition refers to the knowledge processes of a single individual. In communicative sociality, knowledge is exchanged between individuals. Co-operation refers to "the shared production of new qualities, new social systems, or new communities" (Fuchs, 2014: 24). Information cognition is a prerequisite for communication and a precondition for the emergence of cooperation.

Gehl (2014) uses the software engineering concept of architecture and implementation to explain how software architecture turns social media into tools that extend the terrain of class struggle against capital. Real software abstraction, a synthesis of software abstraction and Marxian real abstraction, conceptualizes the division of labour within social media. The abstraction of the user as a core part of interactive models is a key trend in Web 2.0. Abstraction in software engineering is rooted in the rationalized management of labour. Marxian real abstractions produce real effects when they become socially valid. Social media owners "create real software abstractions and allow their implementation to be carried out by the free labor of users" (Gehl, 2014: 18). Citing Frederick Brooks, Gehl writes that the "production of software centers on a fundamental conceptual division between the architecture of the program and its implementation" (Ibid: 73). Architecture refers to the complete and detailed specification of the user interface. Implementation "involves what is popularly thought of as the work of making software: coding" (Ibid.: 73-74). It is achieved by "coding the interlocking components that will enable the architecture to function as specified" (Ibid: 74). Gehl argues that this arrangement has been replicated in social media, where users are abstracted in the role of implementers.

### **Social Media Interaction Dynamics**

Fuchs (2014) and Gerbaudo (2012) argue for the need to rethink the perspective of cyberspace as the central organizing space for movements—a perspective exemplified by Manuel Castells' (2009) description of the Internet as a "network of brains", and by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000) as a multitude of "non-place". Modern society, Castells argues (1996; 2000), is restructured after the model of networks. The "network society" (Castells, 1996) is horizontal and decentralized, and it is where the "space of flows" of the Internet overtakes the "space of places". Castells' view of modern communication entails a "withering away of the logics of place", leading him to marginalize the importance of local interactions and the identities constructed therein (Gerbaudo, 2012: 25). The concept of swarms for Hardt and Negri represents a decentralized multitude "which can act together without being reduced to one identity or one place" (Ibid: 27). By suggesting that swarms act similar to flash-mobs, Hardt and Negri acknowledge the corporeal charter of contemporary activism. However, these swarms of bees are seemingly without hives (in Gerbaudo's metaphor). Activists, like bees, need a fixed place to which they can return. If Egyptian activists captured the attention of the world "it was thanks less to their Facebook pages and tweets than to their physical occupation of Tahrir square in central Cairo" (Ibid: 11). Gerbaudo argues that a crucial element in understanding the role of social media in contemporary social movements is "their interaction with and mediation of emerging forms of public gatherings and in particular the mass sit-ins" (Ibid: 5). In their analysis, Castells,

and Hardt and Negri “fail to take into account the emplaced character of collective action, the fact that it requires physical locations as stages for its performances” (Ibid: 28).

Fuchs (2014) charges that Castells’ reductionist approach leads him to suggest that the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia, the protests in Iceland, and Occupy Wall Street were born and based on the Internet. Fuchs’ empirical work corroborates Gerbaudo’s (2012) contentions about the centrality of physical space and face-to-face interaction in contemporary social movements. The survey finds that the most frequently used form of information cognition was face-to-face conversation at about 60%; close behind were Facebook at about 55%, and Occupy websites at about 45%. The most frequently practiced form of user-generated content was taking pictures and uploading them on Facebook and Flickr, with about 17% of respondents creating or sharing content on Facebook one-three times per month. Personal conversation was the most frequent form of co-operative communication within the movement at about 60%, followed by communication on Facebook at about 45%, email and mailing lists at about 30%, and Twitter at about 32%. The survey further reveals three relevant results about the process of interaction among Occupy activists. First, occupying public spaces is a method of protesting. Second, activists are aware of the contradictory character of social media and have concerns about corporate and state surveillance and censorship. About 45% of respondents saw social media as simultaneously empowering and dominating; about 41% saw that Occupy was both a social media rebellion and a rebellion in society. Less than 7% of respondents took a deterministic view, that social media created the movement; another 7% were dismissive of the role of social media in the protests. For about 56%, the main problem activists faced when using commercial social media was corporate and police surveillance. Third, results indicate that commercial social media are used more frequently for obtaining information, sharing content, and mobilizing than non-commercial platforms such as Occupii and N-1—about 33.5% of activists shared videos about Occupy on Facebook at least once a month compared to about 15.5% who shared on an alternative platform.

Gehl (2014) explains how user interaction or implementation is abstracted within social media architecture. He argues that the method of managing the labour of coders in the production of software has been carried into social media in Web 2.0 architecture. The labour of software implementation “is breaking out of the firm and being ‘crowdsourced’ on the Web” (Gehl, 2014: 81). In an ideal social media site users are conceived of as implementers, labourers “responsible for realizing the architecture conceived of by the site owners and designers” (Ibid: 81). Myspace failed in social networking services in comparison to Facebook, says Gehl, because Myspace failed to produce an effective real software abstraction—“an architecture of abstraction in which users’ affect and content were easily reduced to marketer-friendly datasets” (Ibid: 72). Myspace “allowed its users to create a cacophony of ‘pimped’ profiles that consistently undermined efforts to monetize user-generated content” (Ibid: 72) whereas Facebook has proven to be “extremely efficient at reducing users to datasets and cybernetic commodities, all within a muted, bland interface that does not detract from marketing efforts” (Ibid: 73).

## **Conclusion**

Gerbaudo (2012) takes an ethnographic-phenomenological approach to explore the use of social media in contemporary social movements as means of mobilizing for street protests. His analytical focus is the activists as a cultural group. He tries to understand human cultural behaviour in its cultural context, as reflected in local languages, traditions, and customs. By

observing and studying what people do (cultural behaviour) and what they say and know (cultural knowledge), cultural patterns of behaviour which guides a group's actions emerge (Jackson, Gillis & Verberg, 2011). Gerbaudo says his approach stands in opposition to the essentialist accounts expressed by some media theorists. These approaches tend to look at social media in the abstract “without due attention to their intervention in specific local geographies of action or to their embeddedness in the culture of the social movements adopting them” (Gerbaudo, 2012: 5). Gerbaudo's approach allows him to understand the unique role played by Facebook in the Egyptian revolution, especially how it facilitated the emergence of soft leadership, which played a key role in setting the scene and “constructing an emotional space within which collective action can unfold” (Ibid: 5). Further, his approach allows him to recognize the imperative of physical space interaction in the process of collective action. Gerbaudo triangulates his findings with field notes collected during visits to protest sites, with data gleaned from an analysis of archived social media, and by asking his interviewees to review the interview transcripts for accuracy.

Fuchs (2014) begins his research by formulating four research questions that are framed within a political economy of communication framework, and which are then turned into approximately 110 closed- and open-ended questions. Results show activists used different media for different information needs. Further, face-to-face interaction was the most frequent form of communication within the movement, followed by communication on Facebook. These results corroborate Gerbaudo's (2012) findings. Open-ended questions asked about the goals of Occupy and its method of organizing. Fuchs used the responses of activists from the qualitative data to contextualize quantitative data on media use. This mixed method approach successfully exposes the contradictory behaviour of activists who tend to use commercial media while cognizant of the risks of state and corporate surveillance and censorship. While web surveys are flexible, they raise concerns about coverage, privacy and verification, and design issues (Neuman & Robson, 2011). Notably, there is a concern that the population sample had some bias in terms of the average participant age, level of education, and accessibility to the Internet. Despite its ability to provide empirical data, the survey was not particularly sensitive to local differences. Close to half the responses came from the United States. The use of the political economy of communication framework allows Fuchs to place the survey results within a dialectical perspective—showing how Occupy activists challenge power by using communication resources. An important limitation of survey research is that it provides data from respondents who may for their own reasons give misleading answers.

Gehl (2014) argues that software architecture and implementation shape the division of labour on social media sites. In his factory analogy, user implementation (interaction)—akin to software coding by programmers—enables the architecture to function as specified. Gehl's research method—actor-network theory articulated within a critical political economy of communication framework—locates the dialectics of empowerment and exploitation within the software architecture of social media. His method explains how the reproduction of social relations is designed within social media software. It offers a political economic account of why and how social media are contradictory. Perhaps Web 2.0 users “now have unprecedented power over popular trends on the Web” (Gehl, 2014: 47), being its prime content producers; but in their interaction with the software in the production of content, in the very act of empowerment, lies their exploitation. In one traditional stream of critical political economy of communication research, commercial media are contradictory products by virtue of their conflicting messages, or are contradictory in the sense of being mere resources which can serve whomever uses them (in

which case, the political economic analytical concern is with the equitable access and use of such resources). For Gehl, social media are contradictory because they simultaneously empower and exploit users. The idea of hegemonic technological architecture is certainly not new; but he eloquently places it within a theoretical framework—the theory of heterogeneous engineering. Building on Gehl’s factory analogy, a suitable theoretical framework to explain the dynamics of user exploitation would be Marx’s labour theory of value.

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## About the Reviewer

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