

# How does the commercial and personal use of data influence and shape notions of value and worth?

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**Abstract:** *In the age of social media, the generation and use of data are at the heart of how media operates. The media sector is a popular area for capital investment. In the process, commercial use of data has become more frequent. At the same time, the values of individual users collectively shape the media value system, and the importance of media platforms in turn influences individual behavior and values. This paper discusses the impact of commercial and personal use of data on contemporary values through the commercial use of data, the management of quantitative values, and changes in social values.*

**Keywords:** *Media platforms, Personal data, Commercialisation*

## 1. Introduction

With the development of digital media technology, data has now taken on a new meaning and function, and data has changed significantly. For businesses, in the age of mass media, Smythe<sup>[1]</sup> points out that radio and television programs are just a 'free lunch' to attract audiences and that the tangible commodity produced by the media industry is the 'audience,' whose exchange value is their demographic profile. The actual commodity produced by the media industry is the 'audience,' and the exchange value of users is their demographics - that is, the media sells generalized, abstract demographics such as age, gender, and income of users to advertisers twice. In the age of digital media, the media uses big data on users' internet usage behavior to make intelligent, holistic, and even predictive analyses to determine the distribution of content, including the precise placement of advertising.

For individuals, it was difficult for ordinary people to access data in the era of mass media. Nowadays, data is becoming less accessible and less expensive to obtain, analyze and use, and people are using it in various ways. People can visualize their own and others' popularity, daily activities, and physiological indicators on social media through data on the medium. Also, people have begun to produce large amounts of data, both passively and actively, both as consumers and as significant social media producers, i.e., prosumers<sup>[2]</sup>.

The relationship between commercial forces, users, and the production of data and its value has changed. In the era of mass media, information was costly to produce, and information and its value were mainly produced by a limited number of producers and supplied to an unlimited number of mass consumers<sup>[3]</sup>. In the age of digital media, however, technology not only produces information, but technology permeates all aspects of the production, distribution, and consumption spheres. The concept of mediated information becomes more prevalent and the primary producers of data, monopolized by the powers that be, shift from the media to the user, while UGC becomes the dominant part of digital media. It is the user's cultural and technological free labor that activates the Internet, and free labor is a feature of the entire cultural economy and an essential but unrecognized source of value in post-capitalist societies<sup>[4]</sup>. The transformation of value producers and value production methods in the social media era is bound to influence and shape notions of value and worth.

## 2. Commercial use of data and quantified value management

Firstly, commercial forces for user production and use of data are encouraged through the ideological discourse of audience empowerment and democracy. Manzerolle<sup>[5]</sup> argues that web 2.0 is

more than a specific technology or application but should be seen as a series of marketing discourses that market the interactive and personally empowering attributes of the Internet, thereby engaging users in digital labor. This is done by strategically employing user-generated content in the positioning of production and commercial information. The ideology of web 2.0 is much more than a set of moral assumptions of this cult of creative amateurs. It is an ideological embedding reinforced by industry elites: they define the impact of the Internet on society using a filtered set of public discursive frameworks, such as this constructed common sense that guides people's imagination of the future<sup>[6]</sup>. Faced with the crisis of the Internet bubble at the end of the 20th century, the industrial elite cleverly adapted technology to empower audiences, strategically encouraged user data production and made the Internet space a constant source of content and data, that is, vitality and value, through ideological questioning about democracy and autonomy, in order to defuse the industrial crisis and bring the Internet industry back to life.

This encouragement of user-producer sharing, participation and exchange, and the ideological questioning of democracy and autonomy has also led to a significant increase in the value of activism in the Internet space. Cyberactivism is known by many different names, such as Online activism, Digital campaigning, Digital activism, Cyberactivism. This means that, as a result of different forms of activism, citizen activists use electronic communication technologies such as social media, especially Twitter, Facebook, Youtube, Podcasts. to facilitate a faster flow of information and to make local information available to a broader audience.

This makes it possible to deliver local information to a broader audience<sup>[7]</sup>. Online activism has three main dimensions: Awareness/Advocacy, Organisation/Mobilization, and Action/Reaction<sup>[8]</sup>. Such online actions, on the one hand, promote civic engagement and collective identity, resulting in Individualized Collectiveness<sup>[9]</sup>creates support for vulnerable groups, for example, even small online actions such as posting personal signatures on social media, give marginalized groups a more supportive environment and lead to more awakening<sup>[10]</sup>. However, this low cost of social engagement can also easily lead to clicktivism or slacktivism . It only creates an illusory sense of satisfaction and achievement for the actors themselves psychologically<sup>[11]</sup>without actually bringing about effective change for society<sup>[12]</sup>. Thus, the value of citizen participation in social life through action is reinforced. However, citizen social participation is also transformed into quasi- participation, and social action itself is influenced and transformed by the logic of technology and the pursuit of capital, even as the added data contributes to the value-added of the technology company.

Visibility is an essential pursuit in online activities, and not only that but the value of visibility is also increased in people's daily lives. Intelligent analysis of data, also known as algorithms, links people and information, calculates, prioritizes, classifies, associates, and filtering information<sup>[13]</sup>, thus determining the visibility of content. Therefore, people try to increase the data of the content they produce and penetrate the algorithmic logic to make their content more visible. On the other hand, algorithms also exert control over users through the mechanism of visibility: i.e., users are forever confronted with the invisible threat that they and their published content will become obsolete or disappear<sup>[14]</sup>. Users are thus both actively seeking to be seen by more people and at the same time are forced to constantly speculate about data, algorithms, and visibility, passively keeping themselves from being left behind in the internet space. In addition to visibility in online actions, as people's social relations and social behavior become digital and quantifiable, they are also forced to use social media in their daily social lives and to pursue their visibility in social relations, which confirms the compulsion of digital platforms as argued by Fuchs. Moreover, in the information explosion and increasingly fragmented internet space, the quest for visibility often requires polarised perceptions, emotions, and expressions, hence the increasing number of emotional polarisation and confrontation in digital media. Social values have produced significant shifts in organization, structure, and execution through changes in data and metrics. These shifts reflect the embedding of everyday neoliberalism and the deep integration of technology into culture through data.

In addition to this, the emphasis and focus on quantification, standardization, and detailing of body and health is an essential strategy for commercial organizations to motivate users to upload, produce and use data. In response to this call, people have begun to self-track: recording and uploading data about their daily routines and physiology, tracking their weight, sleep, and calories to increase their understanding of their bodies<sup>[15]</sup>, and believing that on this basis, the self can form changes that enhance their personal lives<sup>[16]</sup>. This quantification, monitoring, and tracking of the self also create a community quantification of the self, in which ritualized communication leads to self-awareness and self-discovery (Wolf and Kell).

### 3. The production of immaterial values and changes in social values

In terms of commercial value, the value produced by data is not necessarily quantifiable and tangible. The production and use of data in the digital media era demonstrate a value logic known as the 'ethical economy'<sup>[17]</sup>, where brands interact with their audiences to create a two-way relationship, the value of which is 'philia', i.e., a positive, emotional community bond, and therefore value in social media is mainly intangibles.

Therefore, value production in social media cannot be analyzed using the concept of labor time in classical Marxian political economy value theory<sup>[18]</sup>. The production of value in social media does not depend on the labor time of the producer and consumer but on the affective quality of the social connections added by the user's participation in the activity, which is difficult to quantify precisely. Therefore, in the digital media era, the abstract, unquantifiable value that commercial organizations are trying to produce in their content output, service provision, and advertising is more important than the direct material value.

In terms of public value, the use and production of data by users can also be seen as a gift to others and the community and creates a certain amount of public value. The data and content produced by users on digital platforms can be seen as a kind of gift economy, a system of redundant transactions within a moral economy, where users in communities on the internet trust each other because of shared emotions, lifestyles or purposes, and fulfill their respective obligations, seeing their labor as a gift to other individuals or the community as a whole, thus sustaining this virtual social relationship<sup>[19]</sup>, contributing to the vitality of the online society. As a result, values that act directly on the self are no longer the only values sought by digital media users; co-production and altruistic values become the choice and pursuit of users. For example, Wikipedia has become one of how people in modern society access knowledge. The ability of Wikipedia to compile information about recent events very quickly and the ability of anyone to drill down into the data and edit the content has led many people to view Wikipedia as a news source as well. The vast majority of Wikipedia entries explain complex concepts in as simple terms as possible. This knowledge is shared freely by users on the Wikipedia platform, thus helping to make knowledge more accessible. Furthermore, as Jenkins<sup>[20]</sup> argues, fans are at the heart of how culture works. In fan art on the Internet, it has become the norm for fans to reset texts to the fan community. Fans leave comments to evoke empathy with those who share their interests. This data becomes the link between them, while it is through this voluntary behavior of fans, many virtual communities under virtual relationships are formed on the Internet.

However, we must not lose sight of the fact that, as Negri and Hardt predicted, the products of this immaterial labor are also integrated into the framework of capital. In the gift economy, emotion is an essential driver of production, quantified, but visualization stimulates the generation of emotion and influences one's cognitive reasoning<sup>[21]</sup>. Maragh, through an empirical study of Black girls' emotional labor on Black girl-themed variety shows and social media topics Empirical research found that the emotions of the Black girl community were unpaid for by the TV show's crew and social media platforms, with the Black girl audience providing both free marketing texts for the TV show's relevant content to boost its viewing figures and huge traffic figures for the social media platforms. The existence and value of online communities as virtual communities is quantified by the volume of discussion, followers, and the number of retweets and likes of their content on the internet, and this quantified value has led to a tendency to recentralize the initially decentralized community organization and to make visibility an essential pursuit for online communities. This has also led to the absorption and management of users' emotional labor by capital. In empirical studies of video game guilds, scholars have found that players' emotional production and social relations are capitalized, and players' use of gaming platforms becomes measurable and manageable labor<sup>[22]</sup>. In today's cultural entertainment industry, users' productive consumption is an essential source of value, and it is the production and use of data by users that enhances the value of the industry. However, this change in the industry's value system, accompanied by deep user empowerment, has led to the control of power over the life politics of users.

### 4. Conclusion

Business and personal use of digital have never been separate points but have always coexisted in interaction and struggle. The development of technology may have empowered users to access, use and analyze data as quickly and easily as they wish, and produce data as they wish, becoming the subject of communication. However, the logic of technology and the ideology of capital appreciation behind it

always permeates, so that data both affirms the value of the user and uses the value of capital to control the user more deeply. And this control does not operate in the form of oppression but in the form of a pervasive power to softly influence people's values to achieve its control. So the media is always a field of value struggle, where the values of the audience and the media influence and domesticate each other.

On the one hand, in the age of the surveillance capital subject, the use of data by businesses and individuals faces a triple alienation of labor, the means of labor, and the products of labor. Firstly, the use of data is compulsive: as everyday communication and social relations become networked and digitalized, people are forced to use the internet. Moreover, users face digital alienation, with internet companies, rather than users themselves, appropriating the platform and making profits from it. At the same time, users' production and consumption are commodified, with personal data becoming a commodity and the content produced by individuals becoming a commodity<sup>[2,3]</sup>. And the computational rationality that has taken hold with the widespread use of data has led to the quantification of human values, thus creating a new and deeper form of social discrimination.

On the other hand, in the context of immaterial labor theory, the production and use of data by users on digital platforms have led society to rethink the question of "what is value." The input and output of pleasure, knowledge, and emotion in digital labor shows that the purpose of labor is no longer just about money, and that self-interest is not the only driver of human behavior, and that the pursuit of abstract, altruistic, and communal values has become evident.

However, we must be aware that in the overall context of the logical antecedents of capitalism, capitalist values permeate every aspect of social perception and daily human life. The fact that the immaterial labor of users producing and using data, as argued above, produces both subjectivity and economic value for capital appreciation, is a stark illustration of how the logic of capitalist antecedents and capitalist production invades everyday life and dissolves the resistance factor. It has been a persistent cognitive tendency in audience studies that active and positive media use behavior is better than passive and passive. But in the game between audience subjects and capital subjects, the exercise of audience subjectivity does not eliminate the presence of power and control in the media and even reinforces the influence of power. For digital capitalism is not about forcing users to perform labor through oppression. On digital media platforms, commercial capital shapes users' values even more invisibly and deeply through the use of data, technological structures, and ideological appeals. The seemingly free and autonomous choices of users are, in fact, permeated by the logic and values of capital and mechanisms, while users' own pursuit of self, social relations, and publicness is also transformed and permeated by the values of capital. The value of audience empowerment, as proclaimed by changes in media technology and in the way mass culture is produced and operated in the era of digital capitalism, is also determined by the logic of capital. Thus, as Marx had insightfully revealed, the paradox of the endogenous nature of free production under the logic of capital is that, in form, the exchange of labor products takes place in superficial freedom and equality, while in substance, at the heart of the exchange of labor products lies an unequal labor production relationship. Although the form of data use and production by users appears to be free and voluntary and creates added value in terms of personal emotions and the public good, the logic of capital continues to see data appropriated and used by commercial forces, which in turn acts to control users, with capital infiltrating its own value logic into social values. How to de-labourism and de-commodify internet users is then an important issue for media literacy now and in the future, and more and more digital laborers are already aware of the excessive vaporization and commodification of their internet use and have engaged in a series of resistance practices. Against this backdrop, users should remember to establish their own values within the media, to uphold their values, to be wary of controls that operate as value invasions, and to be clear in their pursuit of personal and public values in the active production and use of data.

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