

SOCIAL MEDIA AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

A Discussion Note¹

Social media are one more interface between what Marx called living and dead labour. They are a new twist on an old issue of capitalist machines and mechanical reproductions.

The social media interface follows the tradition of the interface between the assembly-line machine and the worker.



Between the telephone and its user.



Between the train and its driver.



Between the newspaper and its reader.



Between the screen and its viewer.



On one side, dead labour. On the other, living.

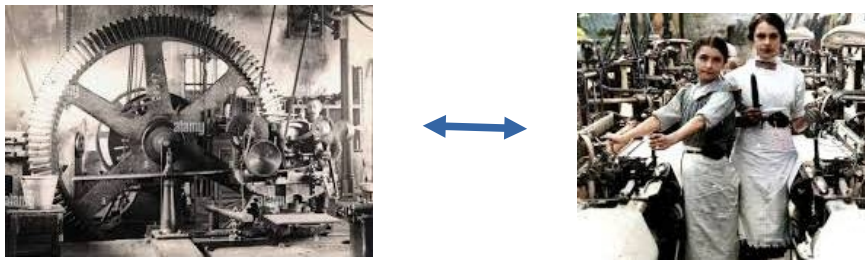
Each interface between the two speeds up capitalist production and circulation. It also produces new consumers and new demand.

What's more, the interface is never really between two separate things. It helps create and recreate what it mediates.

Thus modern living labour was created by making billions of people dependent on the wage. Making billions of people dependent on the wage was made possible partly by assembling a mass of dead labour consisting of billions of industrial machines and mechanical reproductions. Those billions of machines and reproductions function only when they are conjoined with billions of people who can be made constantly available to tend and interpret them. And so on, in an endless destructive loop.

Social media tweak this capitalist loop a bit but don't change the fundamentals.

Social media are machines maintained by billions of workers who have been made dependent – not on the wage relation so much as other relations that the machines make possible. Social media users are a new kind of living labour that the machines that help create that dependence need to keep functioning. Thus in addition to



we now also have



This is new, but not *that* new. The living worker in this interface undergoes some of the same transformations as the assembly-line labourer, the telephone user, the train driver, the newspaper reader. There is a loss of certain kinds of intellect, maybe a gain of some others. There are new strategies of discipline and control that never quite succeed. There is an attempt to speed up turnover that keeps being partially thwarted by bottlenecks.

Thus one ideal of today's social media bosses is to be able to ship consumer goods to you *before you have ordered them*, to report your thoughts to the state *before you have thought them*. Another is to put you in a social media bubble and reduce all activism to "clicktivism." But is this really so different from, say, the "newspaper activism" of the past, when you would get up in the morning, read whatever gossip newspaper bosses thought fit to put in front of you, comment on that to somebody or other, and call the result "politics"?

So in trying to figure out how to contend with social media in a political way, it might be helpful to look to history for pointers as well as encouragement.

Three lessons jump out right away:

(1) It's pointless to talk in abstract terms about social media as "tools" whose contradictions would go away if they could be seized by the working class. Social media are not tools. They are not neutral. They are not like a hammer or bicycle, usable more or less equally by poor and rich individuals. Racism has been bred into them. Colonialism is in their bones, from the global nickel, lithium and coal extractivism they require to the structure of the algorithms that they need. Rather, social media are just another environment of class

conflict. This is not in any way to slight their active role in protests dating back to the Arab Spring and before. Nor is it to overlook the fact that some bits of social media are less bad than others – as when activists choose Signal over WhatsApp due to its better security from surveillance. But necessity does not entail neutrality. Just because factory workers and street protesters have always been able to find loopholes in the logic of capital’s industrial machines does not mean that every machine and its supply chain is someday going to be a bosom buddy of the revolution.

(2) It’s equally pointless to talk as if rejecting all contact with the social media machine were the only way to resist. It isn’t. Fortunately so: in general, the proletariat can’t refuse social media at this point any more than it can refuse wage work, electricity, or fossil-fuelled transport. Far from avoiding social media entirely, most networks in opposition study and participate in them actively. Years ago, one resistance group using Facebook simply demanded that they be paid for their labor in doing so, in the spirit of the old “wages for housework” feminist movement whose long-term horizon was the abolishment of wages. Again, this is not to say that complete refusal of social media is not a crucial *part* of opposition at various times and locations. It is. The Luddites were not wrong.² Neither are the tech company bosses who ban their own children from using social media. Neither is the computer expert Jaron Lanier in his famous book *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now* (2018). The suggestion here is merely that social media present sites as well as objects for class opposition. Smashing machines, seizing them, repurposing them, redesigning them, moving them around, using their weaknesses against them, slowly or quickly starving them of the nourishment they get from the living work of humans and biological and geological evolution – all of these things have happened before in the history of industrial capitalism, and they can happen again.

(3) It’s also pointless to hope that the state might someday have “the solution” to the contradictions of social media, just as it’s pointless to look to the state as being able to take care of all of capital’s ecological contradictions. No state will ever have either the inclination nor the power or expertise to do so. Once again, this is not to say that there is no place for making demands of the state in the course of movement-building. Many effective campaigns are doing just that. But it is to caution activists that they should first try to understand what social media *are* before rushing to assume without evidence that regulation is something that will provide lasting answers.

¹ Requested as a provocation for study groups in India.

² Brian Merchant, *Blood in the Machine* (2023).