12 CONCLUSION: SOCIAL MEDIA AND ITS ALTERNATIVES – TOWARDS A TRULY SOCIAL MEDIA

KEY QUESTIONS

- What common social media ideologies exist?
- How does the exploitation of digital labour undermine the social aspect of social media?
- What alternatives are there to corporate social media? What could truly public, social and common media look like?

KEY CONCEPTS

Corporate social media
Neoliberalism
Crisis
Alternative social media

Commons
Social media commons
Commons-based social media

12.1 SOCIAL MEDIA REALITY: IDEOLOGIES AND EXPLOITATION

IDEOLOGY

Social media have been the subject of lots of ideological myth-making, speculation, hopes and fears. It has been seen as bringing new forms of democracy, re-invigorating the public sphere, creating wealth, employment, job growth, political change, revolutions and so on. At the same time some have said it is the cause of crime, terror, misogyny, hatred and so on. Capitalism, crisis, class and unequal power relations are the main contexts of social media and society today. The mass media tend to present a simplistic picture about the role of the
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Internet in society. It has become so obvious today that we do not simply live in a society, but that we live in capitalist societies and that capitalism needs to be considered as the context of the Internet.

Technological determinism overestimates the role of technology in society. It ignores the fact that technology is embedded in society, and that it is not technology, but humans living under and rebelling against power relations who create revolutions and unrest. The rise of new technologies often creates an “eruption of feeling that briefly overwhelms reason” (Mosco 2004, 22). Technological determinism ignores the political economy of events. Social media determinism is an expression of the digital sublime, the development that “cyberspace has become the latest icon of the technological and electronic sublime, praised for its epochal and transcendent characteristics and demonized for the depth of the evil it can conjure” (Mosco 2004, 24).

Critical theory and critical political economy of the media analyse how exploitation, domination, commodification and ideology interact in shaping media communication in society, what potentials for alternatives there are, and how struggles can use and advance these potentials.

Talking about social media requires that we engage with the concept of the “social” and social theory. It requires us to specify which notions of the social we are using. Applying a multidimensional understanding shows that we are experiencing at the same time continuity and discontinuity of the sociality of the media. The media’s development is dialectical.

EXPLOITATION

I have stressed throughout this book the double logic of commodification and ideology that shapes corporate social media. Capital accumulation on corporate social media is based on user data commodification, the unpaid labour of Internet users, targeted advertising and economic surveillance. Google is the dominant player in this business. It is not a communications company, but the world’s largest advertising agency. It has developed a sophisticated targeted advertising system that collects a multitude of data about user interests and activities (demographic, technological, economic, political, cultural, ecological information), communications, networks and collaborations. Facebook is the dominant social networking site. It has developed a commodification system that is especially based on commodifying networks, contacts, user profiles and user-generated content that are created by unpaid user labour. Twitter is a microblog platform that has become the object of political mythologizing. Edward Snowden has revealed how the class structures sustained by communications companies are embedded into a surveillance-industrial complex that stands in the context of the naïve right-wing belief that more surveillance and law-and-order politics can prevent and control terrorism and organized crime. In the surveillance-industrial complex, big brother, big capital and big data converge. The surveillance state fuses with surveillance capitalism.

The analysis has shown that politics is a minority issue on Twitter, that the urban middle class dominates the platform and that Twitter is not a political public sphere. Non-profit non-commercial Internet projects like Wikipedia advance the logic of common production, common control and common ownership. Alternative online media (such as WikiLeaks, Indymedia, AlterNet, Democracy Now!, OpenDemocracy, etc.) try to make alternative, critical information available and to foster critical debates (see Fuchs 2010a; Sandoval and Fuchs 2010).
SOCIAL MEDIA: ANTICIPATIVE AND LIMITED SOCIALITY

Management gurus, marketing strategists and uncritical academics have used the notions of “web 2.0”, “social media” and “social software” as ideology that overemphasizes novelty and democratic potentials. One of the goals of this ideology has been to create new business models and attract financial capital investments. In contemporary capitalism, the boundaries between play and labour have become fuzzy. Google’s management philosophy is characterized by stressing play labour (playbour), which is the expression of a new spirit/ideology of capitalism. Many analyses of Google are one-dimensional and therefore ideological in the sense that they only see positive or negative aspects. Google is a dialectical system reflecting the contradictions of contemporary capitalism. It advances the socialization of the networked productive forces and has thereby created new potentials for cognition, communication and co-operation, but within capitalist class relations limits and exploits these potentials for commodity purposes. The mainstream of social networking sites research is based on an individualistic and bourgeois privacy ideology that sees information sharing as necessarily bad and ignores the problems created by targeted advertising and user exploitation. Corporate social media use privacy policies and terms of use that legally legitimate Internet prosumer commodification. They are expressions of a privacy regime that is based on the ideology of corporate self-regulation of privacy. In these terms and policies, social media corporations tend to assure the users that they deal with user data responsibly, but at the same time define and enable consumer privacy violations so that these terms and policies become ideological documents. There are many claims about political social media use: that Twitter and other platforms revitalize the political public, cause political revolutions, are the source of violence and so on. Neither techno-optimism nor techno-pessimism is the appropriate method for analysing social media. Rather, one needs to decentre the analysis from technology and focus on the interaction of the power structures of the political economy of capitalism with social media.

Social media in their current forms advance the socialization of human activities. But these activities are on corporate social media trapped in private relations of ownership so that social media advance social production and private ownership of data in the form of commodification of data, human creativity and social relations. Corporate social media are incompletely social: they are controlled and owned in a particularistic manner by an elite, although their social form of production points towards an existence beyond capitalism. Social media anticipate a full sociality of human existence, but in their corporate form this potential is limited by capitalist structures of ownership and capital accumulation. Social media today have an anticipative and simultaneously limited sociality: they anticipate a full socialization of human existence that is limited by the capitalist reality of social media. Alternatives are needed.

JARON LANIER: TOTAL COMMODIFICATION OF THE INTERNET

Jaron Lanier (2013) shares digital labour theory’s insight that corporate social media’s “value comes from the millions of users who contribute to their network without being paid for it” (Lanier 2013, xii). His answer to this problem is, however, not the suggestion to abolish digital capitalism. He rather wants to deepen it. He argues that working for free has destroyed the “middle class” and that one should pay “people for information gleaned from them if that information turns out to be valuable” (4–5).
We want free online experiences so badly that we are happy to not be paid for information that comes from us now or ever. [...] Siren Servers gather data from the network, often without having to pay for it. The data is analyzed using the most powerful available computers, run by the very best available technical people. The results of the analysis are kept secret, but are used to manipulate the rest of the world to advantage. [...] The latest waves of high-tech innovation have not created jobs like the old ones did. Iconic ventures like Facebook employ vastly fewer people than big older companies like, say, General Motors. [...] The middle classes that have already lost their levees and economic dignity to Siren Servers are sometimes called the “creative classes.” They include recording musicians, journalists, and photographers. There were also a significantly larger number of people who supported these types of creators, like studio musicians and editors, who enjoyed “good jobs” (meaning with security and benefits). [...] anyone interested in liberal democracy must realize that without a dominant middle class, democracy becomes vulnerable. [...] Valuing all the information on networks [...] will create an economy that can continue to grow as more and more activity becomes software-mediated. [...] A monetized version of a many-to-many network could create an organic path to middle-class wealth that would be better than the ad hoc mountain of levees that sustained middle classes in pre-digital capitalism. [...] So, for instance, if Google placed the ads that referenced your marriage, and earned a certain amount based on auction and click-through results, your instant remuneration would be proportional to Google’s. [...] I am not condemning big business data, but celebrating it. [...] In the world foreseen in this book, a Siren Server of any type would have to pay for the information gathered about you proportionally to the value of that information, as determined by expectations for future transactions. “Spying” on you would still occur, especially when you are the customer for a service related to you. However, in the event a company offers you something worth paying for over the network, that success would have to be based primarily on some creation of value beyond spying, based on the unique competence of the seller. (Lanier 2013, 12, 50, 51, 84, 200, 228, 234, 271, 282, 306)

In a capitalist world, wages and profits are both inherent parts of capital. If one believes in capitalism as the best way of wealth creation, one therefore has to increase profits for increasing wages. Lanier does not question, but fully believes in capitalism. He suggests deepening and totalizing capitalism and surveillance on the Internet in order to commodify the whole online world. All digital labour should then be remunerated. The problem is that a totally commodified world is also a class-based world of exploiters and the exploited. Lanier cannot any other political economy than capitalism. Non-profit public service and civil society media do not exist in his political universe. The middle class that Lanier would like to see re-emerge presupposes a distinction between the poor, the rich and the middle. Today, the poor as well as the rich often define themselves as middle class. The poor because they are ashamed to say they are poor, the rich in order to play down their wealth. Digital capitalism is based on a class conflict between digital capital and digital labour. The solution is not to introduce an additional class, but to question class on the Internet and in society.
12.2 SOCIAL MEDIA ALTERNATIVES

THE INTERNET AND THE LOGIC OF THE COMMONS

Exploitation and ideology can and should be questioned and challenged. Capitalism is not the end of history. The capitalist Internet is not the end of history. An alternative society is possible. An alternative Internet is possible. Changes to the design of both Internet and society’s fundamental structures are needed. But alternatives require struggles. We have seen that alternative platforms like Diaspora*, Wikipedia and WikiLeaks have a contradictory character. They are shaped by the logics of commodification and bourgeois ideology, but at the same time have potentials that point beyond capitalism and the capitalist Internet. They anticipate a commons-based Internet that is not based on capital accumulation, advertising, profit, ideology or a stratified attention economy, but rather enables knowledge, communication and collaboration for their own sake as social activities between humans. A commons-based Internet is possible—an Internet on which people share, communicate, decide, discuss, play, create, criticize, network, collaborate, find, maintain and build friendships, fall in love, entertain themselves and each other, educate themselves as a common activity without corporate mediation.

The logic of the commons is the logic of a common humanity that has realized that all humans should be equal participants and beneficiaries in society (see Dyer-Witheford 1999, 2007, 2009; Fuchs 2011b; Hardt and Negri 2009; Žižek 2010). Technology and the media are not the main aspect, but a part of society. Therefore all humans should be able to truly participate and benefit from media and technology, which is not the case today. Capitalism is a class society. The capitalist Internet is a class-structured Internet: corporations and other central actors dominate attention and symbolic, social and material benefits. A just society is a classless society. A just Internet is a classless Internet.

CAPITALISM, NEOLIBERALISM, CRISIS

All forms of capitalism are contradictory and create crises. The world economic crisis that started in 2008 was the result of decades of neoliberal capitalism. Neoliberalism is based on “the subordination of the totality of socio-economic fields to the accumulation process so that economic functions come to occupy the dominant place within the state” (Jessop 2008, 132). Neoliberal ideology’s focus is almost exclusively on capital accumulation:

Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can be best advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private rights, free markets and free trade. [...] It holds that the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions, and it seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market. This requires technologies of information creation and capacities to accumulate, store, transfer, analyze, and use massive databases to guide decisions in the global marketplace. (Harvey 2007, 2–3)

Negative social consequences are subordinated to economic logic: “The fundamental mission of the neoliberal state is to create ‘a good business climate’ and therefore to optimize
conditions for capital accumulation no matter what the consequences are for employment or social well-being” (Harvey 2005a, 19). Capitalism is intrinsically crisis-ridden. The history of capitalism is also a history of economic and political crises. Neoliberalism has intensified inequality. We have also discussed in this book that non-Western countries do not automatically bring about an alternative framework to global capitalism and neo-liberalism. China has seen massive economic growth, but has at the same time to a significant degree adopted neoliberal policies and seen a strong increase of inequalities. In India, right-wing Hindu nationalism mixed with neoliberal politics has become the ruling party’s dominant ideology.

STRUGGLES

The main political reaction to the crisis has been the rise of hyper-neoliberalism. Hyper-neoliberalism is an intensification of neoliberalism that uses employees’ tax money for consolidating the financial system and, as a result, extends and intensifies budget cuts to social security, education, health care and the pension system, and has resulted in a shift towards the right and extreme right in elections in many countries. Large protests in countries such as Greece, Portugal and Spain, student protests in many countries, rebellions and revolutions in Arab and North African countries (e.g. Tunisia and Egypt), the emergence of various Occupy movements and riots have constituted another important, although weaker, consequence of the crisis. However different these consequences may be, they express discontent with capitalism and remind us that we need a classless society in order to overcome inequality. There seem to be only two options today: (a) continuance and intensification of the 200-year-old barbarity of capitalism or (b) socialism.

Struggles for a commons-based Internet need to be connected to struggles for socialism. In Chapter 8, I introduced the concept of socialist privacy protection. One can achieve privacy protection of consumers, prosumers and workers only in an economy that is not ruled by profit interests, but controlled and managed by prosumers, consumers and producers. If there were no profit motive on Internet platforms, then there would be no need to commodify the data and usage behaviour of Internet users. Achieving such a situation is, however, not primarily a technological task, but one that requires changes in society. Socialist privacy policies are part of a struggle for a just society. Oscar Gandy (2011, 183) argues that just as societies have, in respect to pollution, realized that “markets will not work on their own to insures the maintenance of healthy and sustainable environments” and “agree that the regulation of pollution and other threats to the environment should be treated as explicit and important public policy goals”, they should realize the need for consumer protection in cyberspace as part of a policy that protects the information environment.

Seven strategies for achieving this goal are: (1) the use of data protection legislation; (2) the advancement of opt-in online advertising; (3) civil society surveillance of Internet companies; (4) digital labour unionism; (5) the establishment and support of alternative platforms; (6) corporate taxation and a participatory media fee; (7) the establishment of an alternative societal context of Internet use.

DATA PROTECTION LAWS

One strategy is to use existing data protection laws to force Internet corporations not to put profit interests above user interests, and to strive for strict data protection laws that protect consumer interests.
Struggles against the corporate and commercial character of the Internet can also make use of existing data protection laws. On 18 August 2011, members of the initiative “Europe vs. Facebook”, which was founded by Austrian law students, filed a complaint against Facebook to the Irish Data Protection Commissioner. Facebook Europe is legally registered in Ireland. The initiative’s members asked the Commissioner to check whether Facebook violates European data protection laws in these 16 privacy areas. The complaint was, however, relatively unsuccessful because the Irish data protection authorities accepted Facebook’s commodification of personal data as legitimate economic strategy.

OPT-IN ADVERTISING POLICIES

Oscar Gandy (1993) argues that an alternative to opt-out solutions to targeted advertising are opt-in solutions that are based on the informed consent of consumers. Opt-in to advertising and automatically activated Do-Not-Track cookies in all web browsers as standard setting are progressive design principles that can help changing the problematic reality of the internet. Consumer organizations and data protectionists typically favour opt-in privacy policies, whereas companies and marketing associations tend to prefer opt-out and self-regulation advertising policies in order to maximize profit (Bellman et al. 2004; Federal Trade Commission 2000; Gandy 1993; Quinn 2006; Ryker et al. 2002; Starke-Meyerring and Gurak 2007). Socialist privacy legislation could require all commercial Internet platforms to use advertising only as an opt-in option, which would strengthen the users’ possibility for self-determination.

Within capitalism, forcing corporations by state laws to implement opt-in mechanisms is certainly desirable, but at the same time it is likely that corporations will not consent to such policies because opt-in is likely to reduce the actual amount of surveilled and commodified user data significantly, which results in a drop in advertising profits. Organizing targeted advertising as an opt-in instead of an opt-out or no option does not establish economic user privacy, but is a step towards strengthening the economic privacy of users.

CORPORATE WATCH PLATFORMS AS A FORM OF STRUGGLE AGAINST CORPORATISM

In order to circumvent the large-scale surveillance of consumers, producers and consumer-producers, movements and protests against economic surveillance are necessary. Kojin Karatani (2005) argues that consumption is the only space in capitalism where workers become subjects that can exert pressure by consumption boycotts on capital. I do not think that this is correct because strikes also show the subject position of workers that enables them to boycott production, to cause financial harm to capital, and to exert pressure in order to voice political demands. However, Karatani in my opinion correctly argues that the role of the consumer has been underestimated in Marxist theory and practice. The fact that in the contemporary media landscape media consumers become media producers who work and create surplus value shows the importance of the role of consumers in contemporary capitalism and of “the transcritical moment where workers and consumers intersect” (Karatani 2005, 21). For political strategies this brings up the actuality of an associationist movement that is “a transnational association of consumers/workers” (295) and engages in “the class struggle against capitalism” of “workers qua consumers or consumers qua workers” (294).
Critical citizens, critical citizens’ initiatives, consumer groups, social movement groups, critical scholars, unions, data protection specialists/groups, consumer protection specialists/groups, critical politicians and critical political parties should observe closely the surveillance and exploitation operations of Internet corporations and document these mechanisms, as well as the instances where corporations and politicians take measures that threaten privacy or increase the surveillance of citizens. Such documentation is most effective if it is easily accessible to the public. The Internet provides the means for documenting such behaviour. It can help to watch the watchers and exploiters and to raise public awareness. In recent years, corporate watch organizations that run online watch platforms have emerged. Examples for corporate watch organizations are:

- CorpWatch Reporting (www.corpwatch.org)
- Transnationale Ethical Rating (www.transnationale.org)
- The Corporate Watch Project (www.corporatewatch.org)
- Multinational Monitor (www.multinationalmonitor.org)
- Responsible Shopper (www.greenamerica.org/programs/responsibleshopper)
- Endgame Database of Corporate Fines (www.endgame.org/corpfin.html)
- Corporate Crime Reporter (www.corporatecrimereporter.com)
- Corporate Europe Observatory (www.corporateeurope.org)
- Corporate Critic Database (www.corporatecritic.org)
- Students and Scholars against Corporate Misbehaviour (http://sacom.hk)
- China Labor Watch (www.chinalaborwatch.org)
- Center for Media and Democracy’s PR Watch (www.prwatch.org)

For example, Transnationale Ethical Rating aims at informing consumers and research about corporations. Its ratings include quantitative and qualitative data about violations of labour rights, violations of human rights, lay-off of employees, profits, sales, earnings of CEOs, boards, president and managers, financial offshoring operations, financial delinquency, environmental pollution, corporate corruption and dubious communication practices. Dubious communication practices include an "arguable partnership, deceptive advertising, disinformation, commercial invasion, spying, mishandling of private data, biopiracy and appropriation of public knowledge".\(^1\) Corporate watchdog organizations’ task is to document corporate irresponsibility. Corporate watch platforms can not only monitor ICT corporations and the corporate media (as well as corporations in general), but can also situate corporate behaviour in the larger political-economic context of corporate social irresponsibility (the counterpart of the corporate social responsibility (CSR) ideology).

Figure 12.1 shows as an example an article about Google from the corporate watchdog platform Corpwatch.org. The article argues:

Children have become lucrative targets for data mining companies [...] Just weeks after Google settled a lawsuit for selling student data for advertising, the publication revealed an entire industry devoted to marketing data gathered from Internet applications offered to students and their teachers.

\(^1\) www.transnationale.org/aide.php (accessed on 22 November 2015).
On the one hand, it is important that watchdog organizations document and gather data about the corporate irresponsibility of Internet corporations. On the other hand, it looks like these data are not very complete and not many Internet corporations are thus far included. So one could, for example, also document Google’s targeted advertising practices and many other irresponsible practices (see Chapter 7). These practices are highly opaque to users and they leave it unclear for the single user what data exactly about her/him is stored and commodified. In any case, more efforts are required in order to advance the documentation of corporate social irresponsibility of Internet corporations and to contextualize privacy violations within the process of watching the watchers.

Corporate watch platforms are attempts by those resisting asymmetric economic power relations to struggle against the powerful class of corporations by documenting data that should make economic power transparent. Online corporate watchdog organizations document and gather data about the corporate irresponsibility of corporations. Making data about corporate irresponsibility available to the public does not abolish exploitation and oppression. It can, however, be a useful tool in the struggle against exploitation and oppression. Action is always related to events. If there is no knowledge about oppressive practices because they are hidden from the public, then reactions to it are unlikely. Watching the powerful does not necessarily result in struggles, but it can make struggles more likely. This also requires that watchdog organizations do not present examples of corporate irresponsibility as exceptions from the rule and bad practices, but rather as necessary irresponsibilities and necessary bad practices that are caused by the systemic logic of corporate irresponsibility that is inherent in capitalism. Marisol

![Figure 12.1](https://www.corpwatch.org)
Sandoval (2015) argues in this context that the ideology of CSR is not just masking corporate social irresponsibility, but shows a need for the responsibility to socialize corporations (RSC):

In order to discover its “rational kernel” within the “mystical shell,” CSR must be turned from its head to its feet; turned from its head to its feet, corporate social responsibility (CSR) turns into the responsibility to socialize corporations (RSC). [...] Whereas CSR entails idealistic hopes about reconciling corporate and social goals within capitalism, RSC highlights that material transformations are necessary to achieve a truly socially responsible and socially just economy. [...] RSC is a reminder of the possibility of socially responsible economic alternatives beyond capitalism, which realize collective decision power and satisfy social needs rather than individualized profit goals. (Sandoval 2015, 619, 620, 621)

Also WikiLeaks is an online watchdog platform that tries to make power transparent by leaking secret documents about political and economic power. Watchdog organizations (just like alternative media in general; see Fuchs 2010a; Sandoval and Fuchs 2010) try to exert counter-power. But they are facing resource asymmetries that result in antagonism between resource precariousness and political autonomy. They are facing three serious limits in capitalism:

a) They are frequently based on precarious, self-exploitative labour.
b) They often lack resources.
c) Resource provision by politics or the economy may threaten their political autonomy and make them vulnerable to corporate or political filtering of their contents.

Curbing these limits requires affirmative action politics that tries to overcome the economic censorship (lack of attention, lack of money, lack of resources) of alternative media by providing guaranteed funding to these media. Thereby the problem of potential pressures by the state on alternative media is posed, and this can only be overcome by installing socialist governments that acknowledge the importance of civil society for democracy and social transformation.

Worker-owned and -controlled factories, so-called co-operatives, are alternatives that start in the here-and-now as germ forms of a socialist economy. Marx stressed their importance, but also saw their problems within capitalism:

We speak of the cooperative movement, especially the cooperative factories raised by the unassisted efforts of a few bold “hands”. The value of these great social experiments cannot be over-rated. By deed, instead of by argument, they have shown that production on a large scale, and in accord with the behests of modern science, may be carried on without the existence of a class of masters employing a class of hands; that to bear fruit, the means of labour need not be monopolised as a means of dominion over, and of extortion against, the labouring man himself; and that, like slave labour, like serf labour, hired labour is but a transitory and inferior form, destined to disappear before associated labour plying its toil with a willing hand, a ready mind, and a joyous heart. In England, the seeds of the cooperative system were sown by Robert Owen; the same working men’s experiments, tried on the Continent, were, in fact, the practical upshot of the theories, not invented, but loudly proclaimed, in 1848. (MECW 21, 330–331)
The cooperative factories of the labourers themselves represent within the old form the first sprouts of the new, although they naturally reproduce, and must reproduce, everywhere in their actual organisation all the shortcomings of the prevailing system. But the antithesis between capital and labour is overcome within them, if at first only by way of making the associated labourers into their own capitalist, i.e., by enabling them to use the means of production for the employment of their own labour. They show how a new mode of production naturally grows out of an old one, when the development of the material forces of production and of the corresponding forms of social production have reached a particular stage. Without the factory system arising out of the capitalist mode of production there could have been no cooperative factories. (MECW 37, 438)

On social media, both software engineers creating the platforms and users who create content and social relations are workers. They both create use-values. If social media are operated as advertising-funded corporations, then capital exploits both paid workers and user-workers. Turning a social media platform into a co-operative then requires democratic control and decision-making that brings together all workers, including the user-workers.

**DIGITAL LABOUR UNIONS**

A trade union is a collective worker organization for the struggle to improve working conditions.

Marx stressed the importance of the unions:

The *trade unions* aim at nothing less than to prevent the *reduction of wages* below the level that is traditionally maintained in the various branches of industry. That is to say, they wish to prevent the *price* of labour-power from falling below its *value*. (Marx 1867, 1069)

In a trade union, “workers *combine* in order to achieve *equality* of a sort with the capitalist in their *contract concerning the sale of their labour*” (1070). Trade unions are “insurance societies formed by the workers themselves” (1070).

Not just those who earn a wage are workers. Late twentieth- and twenty-first-century capitalism has been shaped by many different forms of atypical labour, including precarious freelancers in the media/cultural/digital industries and other sectors. They do not earn a lot of money, have high individual risks and tend to work atypical and at times very long hours in order to survive. There are also, however, unremunerated workers, such as homeworkers, audience workers and digital workers, who also need unions in order to represent their interests as workers exploited by capital. Traditional labour unions tend to focus on wage-labour; they have yet to discover the importance of organizing digital and other “free” workers. A step in the right direction is the idea of an Immaterial Labour Union:

The Immaterial Labor Union was born out of a desire to escape from the atomization of the individual into the collective, to think about alternatives to the neoliberal grey area of the multitude and its permanent state of insulation, to
negotiate terms of service and push for the protection of personal data on a trans-national scope. Framed within the context of social media monopolies such as Facebook, Twitter or Google+, the Union aims, on a short-term basis, to redress privacy abuses and unfair working conditions perpetrated through the processing of our online data, and on a long-term basis to conceive and shape alternative social networking solutions. [...] Increasingly, information is becoming the means of production of the digital age. The blurring of lines between work and leisure time means the commodification of the latter, and the monetization of our relationships and online activities becomes the rule. [...] Based on this assumptions, equating social media activity with labour and stating this correspondence clearly becomes key to framing the necessity of a Union which can effectively state its demands in the context of digital economy.2

A digital labour union can organize temporary user-strikes, wage-demands in the form of a universal basic income as remuneration for the world’s unpaid labour, argue for creating funds that support alternative, non-commercial platforms and so on.

ALTERNATIVE INTERNET PLATFORMS

Another attempt to resist corporate domination of the Internet is in the form of non-commercial, non-profit Internet platforms. It is not impossible to create successful non-profit Internet platforms, as the example of Wikipedia — which is advertising-free, provides free access and is financed by donations — shows. The most well-known alternative social networking site-project is Diaspora*, which tries to develop an open-source alternative to Facebook. The four New York University students Dan Grippi, Maxwell Salzberg, Raphael Sotier and Ilya Zhitomirsky created Diaspora* in 2010. The social networking site kaiuo is not only non-commercial; the users can also discuss and edit its terms of use and privacy terms in a wiki.

These projects are facing the same dilemma as all alternative media in capitalism: the contradiction between alternative demands and the reality of resource precariousness and precarious labour. The demand to produce non-commercial and non-profit media is crucial for advancing a democratic media landscape, but the problem is at the same time that money is needed for organizing media within capitalism. Also, organizing media against capitalism needs to start within capitalism. Alternative media projects frequently operate with the help of precarious voluntary labour and face a lack of funds. They are confronted with a permanent threat of commercialization. State funding, donation models and subscription models can help, but have their own limitations. Donations and subscriptions are unstable and state funding can create political pressure that functions indirectly as censorship by way of economic means.

Robert Gehl (2014) suggests to reverse-engineer social media and to create socialized media, systems that involve "true two-way communication, decentralization, free and open-source software, and encryption", user participation in engineering and design (142). Such platforms would run on free hardware (143). The basic design principles that Gehl introduces for socialized media are users’ equal capacity to transmit and receive information; a decentralized technological architecture; radical democratic pedagogy at the interface;

2 http://immateriallaborunion.net/ (accessed on 27 October 2015).
collaboration of users with and without technical skills; copyleft; platform independence; free hardware; anonymity; pseudonymity; identity shifts; play; an ant-archival system.

It is certainly very important to think about what alternative systems and an alternative future could look like. An alternative socialized media system is still a collective organization even though it uses decentralized data storage. Copyleft licences do not always rule out charging money for access. Therefore if, for example, a platform installation fee is introduced, monetary benefits could be derived and then the question of the ownership of the means of production is crucial. Robert Gehl’s vision of socialized media is an “idealized design” (143) that is based on the “gap between the ideal design and the material implementation” (143). Alternatives cannot wait until the day after everything has changed. Utopian socialism dreams of another world, but the point is to change the world so that humans really possess and materialize this dream. We have to start and operate in the here-and-now, which means that alternatives face hard capitalist realities, such as the question of how they obtain money in order to organize their basic resources. Social movements that build and operate alternative social media are important, but civil society alone is not enough. Civil society and social movements need to cooperate with left-wing political parties in order to create legal frameworks that can help channel resources towards alternative media.

THE ADVERTISING TAX AND THE PARTICIPATORY MEDIA FEE

Astra Taylor (2014) in her book The People’s Platform: Taking Back Power and Culture in the Digital Age makes suggestions for the strengthening of public culture. These include, for example, shortening the duration of copyright (170), fees for the limitation of the reuse of culture (171), the introduction of an initial copyright on culture that expires after a limited time so that cultural goods are turned into public goods (171), communal broadband initiatives (226), publicly funded digital archives (220), advertising-free search engines (222), alternatives to iTunes and Netflix that are operated as co-operatives (222), the introduction of press subsidies in the USA (226–227), the public funding of community centres as well as local book shops and movie theatres (175, 217, 228), the collection of taxes that global tech firms such as Google, Apple and Amazon that avoid paying (229), and the introduction of an advertising tax (229).

Corporate taxation has declined under neoliberal conditions. Neoliberal governments have argued that the left wants to create a big state that engages in tax-and-spend politics and has implemented politics that privilege corporations and the rich and cut public services and expenditures, meaning that everyday people are worse off. Global corporations have used tax loopholes and tax offshoring in order to avoid paying taxes. Taxing corporations constitute an important foundation for creating a post-neoliberal framework of society that fosters social justice. Robert McChesney (2013, 223, 232) argues in this context:

efforts to reform or replace capitalism, but leave the Internet giants riding high will not reform or replace really existing capitalism. [...] Their massive profits are the result of monopoly privileges, network effects, commercialism, exploited labour, and a number of government policies and subsidies. [...] battles over the Internet are of central importance for all those seeking to build a better society.
States usually make companies pay capital taxes and social security contributions for employees. The theory of audience and digital labour assumes that the economic value of advertising-financed media is not simply created by these organizations' wage-labour, but also by their audiences, respectively users who create attention and data that are sold as commodity to advertising clients. Advertising corporations, including Google and Facebook, outsource value creation to consumption workers, whereby they increase their profitability and keep the number of their employees low. An advertising tax can be seen as a kind of tax on the exploitation of audience and digital labour. It is comparable to social security payments that companies pay to the state for their regular employees. It is important to think about advertising as a global phenomenon that is part of the production process and stands in the context of the critique of the totality of capitalism and the political demand for increasing the taxation of capital. An advertising tax exists, for example, in Austria, Italy, Greece, Belgium, Estonia, Croatia, Sweden, Portugal and Romania. Internet advertising tends to be excluded from this tax, although it has a rising share in total advertising. The consequence is that existing advertising taxes are rather ineffective.

Table 12.1 shows that a tax on advertising expenditures can fund a media cheque that amounts to €50–100 per household. Participatory budgeting could be used for providing such a cheque to households with the obligation that they have to donate the amount to non-commercial media organizations. The participatory media fee is one of the possible reforms that could strengthen public and alternative media. It can be designed in different ways, so the data I have provided should just be seen as an example calculation. Different models are imaginable.

Taxing large media corporations, channelling this income into non-commercial media and combining it with elements of participatory budgeting could allow every citizen to receive and donate a certain amount per year to a non-commercial media project. Elements of state action and civil society action could be combined: the power of the state would guarantee taxation of large companies; the distribution of this income to media projects would, however, be decentralized and put in the hands of citizens. Google, Facebook and other large online media companies hardly pay taxes in many countries. The insight that users are digital workers and create economic value on corporate social media that are financed by advertising allows changing global tax regulations: corporate social media platforms should have to tax in a specific country that share of their revenues that corresponds to the share of users or ad-clicks/views in that country. Avoiding corporations' tax evasion is a first step for strengthening the public sphere. The licence fee could be developed into a media fee paid by citizens and companies. It could be made more socially just than the licence fee by implementing it

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advertising revenue 2014 (Austria: 2013)</th>
<th>Number of households</th>
<th>Advertising tax of 10%</th>
<th>Media cheque per household</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>€19.0 billion</td>
<td>39.9 million</td>
<td>€1.9 billion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>€3.2 billion</td>
<td>3.7 million</td>
<td>€0.317 billion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>€19.7 billion</td>
<td>26.4 million</td>
<td>€1.97 billion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>€125.03 billion</td>
<td>115.6 million</td>
<td>€12.6 billion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Data from WARC, Statistisches Bundesamt, Statistik Austria, ONS, US Census Bureau.
not as a flat fee but a progressive one that varies based on salary and revenue levels. It is a matter of fairness that those who earn more should contribute more to the organization of the common interest and public good.

The media fee could partly be used for directly funding public service media’s online presence and partly be used in the form of participatory budgeting to provide an annual voucher to every citizen that s/he must donate to a non-profit, non-commercial media organization. So participatory budgeting should not be used for deciding whether the BBC receives the full costs it needs for its operations. Additional income from the media fee could, however, be distributed to alternative media projects with the help of participatory budgeting. Non-profit versions of Twitter, YouTube and Facebook run by institutions such as the BBC and civil society based on such a model could serve the purpose of the public sphere and strengthen the democratic character of communications. Public service media such as the BBC would be strong in operating an alternative YouTube that requires large storage capacity, whereas non-profit civil society organizations are well suited to operate platforms that contain lots of personal data, such as an alternative Facebook and an alternative Twitter.

12.3 TOWARDS A TRULY SOCIAL MEDIA AND A NEW SOCIETY

The contradictions of the corporate Internet can only be resolved in a framework of society that overcomes inequalities. An alternative Internet requires, together with alternative design principles, an alternative societal setting: a solidary, co-operative information society – a participatory democracy. Calls for the strengthening of privacy in the light of corporate Internet domination are short-sighted and superficial because privacy is intended to protect humans from harm, not to overcome those conditions and structures that cause harms. Slavoj Žižek (2001, 256) suggests in this context not to “retreat into islands of privacy, but an ever stronger socialization of cyberspace” (256). Privacy is a contradictory value: it is proclaimed in liberal ideology, but at the same time constantly undermined by corporate and state surveillance. Privacy as a liberal value protects the rich and powerful from public accountability, which can help to increase and legitimize inequality. The socialist philosopher Torbjörn Tännström (2010) stresses that liberal privacy concepts imply “that one can not only own oneself and personal things, but also the means of production” and that the consequence is “a very closed society, clogged because of the idea of business secret, bank privacy, etc.” (186).

The questions in discussions about privacy should therefore be: Who should be protected through privacy rights in order to be safe from harm? Whose privacy rights should be limited in order not to damage the public good? Privacy contradictions can never be resolved in capitalism (see Sevignani 2016). Tännström (2010) calls for the establishment of an “open society” that is based on equality and democracy instead of the strengthening of privacy rights. Tännström’s use of the term “open society” is unfortunate because Karl Popper (1962a, 1962b) employed the same notion for defending the liberal ideology that Tännström criticizes. What Tännström actually means by an open society is a participatory democracy.

3 Translation from Swedish by the author.
Facebook and Google are only the two best-known examples of a more general contemporary economy that appropriates, expropriates and exploits the common goods (communication, education, knowledge, care, welfare, nature, culture, technology, public transport, housing, etc.) that humans create and need in order to survive. In the area of the Internet, a socialist strategy can try to resist the commodification of the Internet and the exploitation of users by trying to claim the common and participatory character of the Internet with the help of protests, legal measures, alternative projects based on the ideas of free access/content/software and creative commons, wage campaigns, unionization of social media prosumers, boycotts, hacktivism, the creation of public service- and commons-based social media, and so on.

The exploitation of digital labour on the Internet is, however, a topic that is connected to the broader political economy of capitalism, which means that those who are critical of what social media companies like Facebook do with their data ought to be also critical of what contemporary capitalism is doing to humans throughout the world in different forms. If we manage to establish a participatory democracy, then a truly open society (Tännsjö 2010) might become possible that requires no surveillance, no protection from surveillance and no exploitation. A commons-based Internet requires commons-based design principles and a commons-oriented society (Fuchs 2011b, Chapters 8 and 9). It can give a new meaning to the sociality of society and the media. Humans are essentially social and societal beings. They need to collaborate in order to exist. A collaborative society requires participatory democracy and collective ownership and control of the means of production. Collaboration and co-operation are the fundamental meanings of the terms “social” and “society”. Discussions about social media remind us of the need to think and act in respect of the question about what sociality, what society and what kind of media we want to have.

Truly public, social and common media require as one of their preconditions not only alternative design principles, but also a society that realizes the meaning of the terms “public”, “social” and “common” – the public sphere and participatory democracy. Another Internet is possible. Social media are possible.