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### **Christian Fuchs**

*Social Media. A Critical Introduction.*

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Over the last few years there has been a slow but relevant reconciliation of two different approaches interested in media and technology: STS and media studies. Both approaches ask similar questions concerning media and Information Technologies; however, they are rarely discussed together. Even though they can involve different empirical and conceptu-

al approaches, media studies and STS should be considered together in order to achieve a deeper understanding of the issues around media and technologies. If the two studies were not maintained as distinctly heterogeneous intellectual spaces, a fruitful exchange could be started, with digital media as its base. The two traditions of study have coexisted for a “long” time, and new media could be their ideal meeting point.

For STS scholars, Fuchs’ book is a good starting point in approaching media studies, and new media studies in particular. Even though it mainly focuses on a critical perspective, this book accompanies the reader in interpreting media theories and contemporary media studies. Unlike other textbooks, “social media: a critical introduction” is not limited to compiling a list of definitions of digital media, but it is a good overview of the field, explaining the different ways in which scholars can approach new media.

Starting from the title, Fuchs’ critical perspective is immediately clear to the reader, referring explicitly to marxism and neo-marxism (the author distances the discourse from other critical approaches, for example in the introduction on p.7). This perspective places the distribution of power and resources in the centre of the discussion. In relation to social media, this approach (especially in the second part of the book, entitled “application”) looks at exploitation and domination by studying the “political economy” of social media, and its “political communication”. Fuchs’ perspective studies the political economy at work by looking at the use of social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Google. The author shows that in the case of these examples, they both reflect the power structures of society (the capitalistic structure) and exploit the data that is provided to them for free by users.

Fuchs touches on many of the most debated questions in social media studies, such as the meaning of social media, the reality of participatory culture and participatory democracy, the role of power and counter-power, exploitation and surveillance on social network sites, the costs and benefits of what is usually considered free services, and potentials for alternative media. To chart this course, Fuchs divides “social media: a critical introduction” into three sections. The first is on the foundation of critical approach and concepts in media (social media, participation and power) needed for “critically understanding the world of social media” (p.1). In the second part, the author discusses social media platforms in the context of specific topics. In the last section he attempts to describe alternatives for the future, that he calls “truly social media”. Every chapter starts from a specific key question that Fuchs attempts to answer through the field of social theory, critical approach and media studies. Fuchs starts with the fundamental question “what is social media?”, and moves from a description and in-depth criticism to a basic concept debated in the context of social media theory. The first chapter is an important work in connecting social theory and media theory. In attempting to respond to the principal questions, Fuchs cites important sociologists, con-

necting what is today considered to be classical sociological thought to the analysis of what is the quintessence of modernity: social media, since “analysing continuities and discontinuities of the web requires social theory foundation.” (p. 48). In order to achieve this, the author cites various concepts: Emile Durkheim’s social facts, Max Weber’s social action and social relations, Ferdinand Tönnies’ concept of community, and Karl Marx’s idea of co-operative work. Using these sociological key concept (that STS frequently contributed to rearticulate) Fuchs explains different understanding of sociality. Emile Durkheim’s notion of social facts, for example, is useful to explain that “all software applications and media are social because social structure are fixed and objectified in them. These structure [...] have an existence of their own, independent of individual manifestation” (p. 38). Then Fuchs remembers that according to Max Weber, social behaviour is a reciprocal symbolic interaction. In the Internet it means that only platforms that enable communication over spatio-temporal distance are social. Using Marx’s approach, instead, web platform that enable the collaborative production of digital knowledge are social. In sum, by using different classical sociological theory Fuchs shows to the reader the different way to understand the meaning of sociality on the WWW.

Another concept analysed by the author is the so-called participatory culture, that he explains using and questioning Henry Jenkins’s well-known notions of participatory culture and spreadable media. Fuchs also examines the concept of power, deconstructing Castell’s approach and criticizing his position with the support of empirical research and theoretical speculation.

After a detailed introduction to the concept of social media and critical theory, Fuchs proficiently uses basic concepts he cites in the first part of the book to analyse specific social media platforms, and provides case studies on Google (chapter 6), Facebook (chapter 7), Twitter (chapter 8), Wikileaks (chapter 9) and Wikipedia (chapter 10). He writes: “we live in turbulent times that are shaped by worldwide inequality, global ecological crisis, war and terrorism, high unemployment, precarious living and working conditions, rising poverty levels etc. Can all benefit in this situation from social media? Or is it likely that only some benefit at the expense of others?”.

Even though Fuchs writes through the specific “lenses” of critical theory in this second part of the book, the large amount of concepts and questions that he provides gives the reader a good idea of digital media and culture. Digital labour, privacy, surveillance, ideology, alternative social media, visibility, and the public sphere, are only a small group of key concepts that the author cleverly uses to achieve a closer analysis of social media.

In summary, this book gives the reader a good understanding of the main debates concerning digital media. The book is a good resource enabling those in the media studies field (including those studying a related

topic, as in the case of STS scholars) to have an idea of the principal debates concerning social media.

I would recommend that readers of this journal take a look at this book, as it is an opportunity to shed some light on the gaps that exist between media studies and STS. Even if there are no explicit references to the background of STS, those interested in science and technology studies will not struggle to find common ground with complementary reading in a field that, in my opinion, requires the encounter of such important conceptual approaches. Indeed Fuchs provides to underline the social aspects connected to digital media. STS scholars could find useful some of the author's indication to feed one of the fundamental tenet of STS: that material aspect of media and technology must be situated and studied within cultural, social and economic aspect. This book could give to the readers important tools that could be useful to bring back the social into discussion on media and technology. Finally, some of Fuchs' concept could be functional to a broader view that joins STS and new media studies because permit to say more about technology's largest social effect, without fall into technological determinism.

To conclude, it is important to note that the structure of the book allows the reader to navigate it easily. This is probably a greater advantage for students, especially as both the questions and the key concepts at the beginning of each chapter, and the recommended readings and exercises at the end of the chapter, transform the text from a simple book to a good starting point in approaching digital media studies.