



Do We Ever Stop Working? How Capitalism Compromises Our Work-Leisure Balance

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My critical reflection will be highlighting whether there is an increased blurring between work and leisure in our online activity, i.e. how has our personal leisure time online become a means for companies to exploit consumers. This has been made possible through the intensification of technology as technology has been the paramount of contemporary society. The following concepts will be discussed: 'The Information Society', 'The Risk Society' and 'Commodification'.

As years have passed, we have gradually entered a new phase of society termed 'the information society' as human beings we have become 'digital citizens'. Although the information society goes beyond just the internet and technology (Webster, 2006), I will be concentrating on specific elements most relevant for my reflection. We have been surrounded by new technologies since the late 1970s which indicated the birth of the information society, such as personal computers, cable and satellite television. (Webster, 2006). In today's era, we have developed increasingly as a society, as almost

everything evolves around technology and the internet, for example social media, gaming, communications, which shows how technology has growing prominence in everyday life. The information society has benefitted companies and advertisers more than anyone else. As technology continuously advances, corporations find more new ways to



increase profit. A contemporary example is the prediction that robots could in the future take over jobs of the workers. 'Workers at risk as robots set to replace 66m

jobs, warns OECD'. (Elliott, 2018). Therefore, additional businesses are investing in 'robots' to increase profits due to the growth of technology.

The 'McDonaldization thesis' devised by George Ritzer (2011) looked at how consumers did most of the work for profit-making businesses and companies. Companies such as McDonalds have constructed ways to exploit and control their customers. "McDonaldized systems have developed and honed a number

of methods for controlling customers” (Ritzer, 2011: 126). The introduction of technology has allowed them to reduce the number of employees they need, hence less wages handed out and more surplus value. The shift is then made from the ‘worker’ to the ‘customer’. For example, in the case of McDonalds, customers construct their own order through a computerised system, their order is made, they collect their own order from the counter, and, once finished, they dispose their residues (Ritzer, 2011: 127). Customers unconsciously work for the company for free, enhancing the company’s profit-making scheme.

The meaning of labour power has somewhat altered as years have passed by. As Karl Marx stated, “the labourer receives means of subsistence in exchange for his labour-power; but the capitalist receives, in exchange for his means of subsistence, labour, the productive activity of the labourer” (Marx, 2008: 31). This infers that the capitalists are not interested in the labour itself but the abilities of their workers and which attributes could be used to complete which task. For the worker, the labour power they sell to the capitalist provides them with necessities essential to live, such as food, shelter and much more. This is known as ‘manual labour’ (physical labour). In today’s era, another form of labour has emerged identified as ‘digital labour’. Digital Labour is linked to the online world, and how we have increasingly become digital workers, selling our labour power to companies and advertisers through the use of the internet.



Data is an essential part of the online world of capitalism today, as it is where the most money is made. Data has become a central resource for both tech and non-tech sectors in the market. It is one of their main sources to gaining surplus value. Companies are developing more and more innovative ways to gain as much information and data as possible from us. An example is how Facebook is selling data of their users to businesses. The Facebook scandal, where millions of users’ details were shared with other businesses (Tovey, 2018), shows that our data is very profitable and it is one of the reasons for Facebook’s success today. They sell our data

further to advertisers, so businesses are able to understand what customers are demanding.

“Products are user-generated data, personal data, and transaction data about their browsing behaviour and communication behaviour on corporate social media” (Fuchs, 2013: 218). It makes it easier for corporations to create products and services that consumers would want to purchase. The cyberspace has become a platform increasingly used to commodify consumers for profit.

Consumer society has endorsed advertisers to be able to track consumers’ data through types of purchases made on credit card statements, which enhances the advertiser’s ability to target their audience effectively (Hovland & Wolburg, 2010: 55-56). Data for the capitalist is one of the top techniques to encourage

upsurge profit making. In The Economist (2017) it is stated that the most valuable resource is now data rather than oil, which shows just how precious data is for corporations today within the information society. In contrast, oil is still very important to industrialists.

Social media platforms are examples in which the capitalists (corporations) are able to extract data from us. "There is an increasing trend on social media platforms of users trying to market themselves as brands to gain attention and cultural and monetary value" (Liu & Suh, 2017: 12). Sometimes we are uninformed of the fact that we are working online for companies and advertisers, which is supposed to be our private leisure time. However, in some cases we are aware of this. A crucial example is social media. YouTube and other related platforms encourage the idea of selling oneself as a commodity.

YouTubers monetise themselves to gain profit (wages). Therefore, both the company and the YouTuber benefit from this. Instagram is another example, as the more followers a user has the more profit for the company and rewards for that user. One of the reasons for the success of such social media platforms is the strategy of advertising. Companies contact those with high fan followings to advertise products and services. For example, if a user with 1 million followers recommends a product or service, it is likely that the followers will then be interested, hence make a purchase. This is a tactic used by companies to



increase sales and profit. In return the user may receive rewards or a percentage share. However, it can be argued that the user is still exploited as the company earns more than the user despite all the effort and labour power the user puts in to convince and sell the product or services to their followers, which is unfair.

Ulrich Beck's 'risk society' involves the idea of 'reflexive modernization' in which for Beck 'the consequences of scientific and industrial developments are a set of risks and hazards' (Beck, 1992: 2). One of the risks in society today is job loss through the introduction of robotics. 'Up to 800 million global workers will lose their jobs by 2030 and be replaced by robotic automation' (BBC News, 2017). Unemployment could become a major risk factor in the future as robots could potentially take over jobs. This can be seen as a risk as we

are not only exploited and mistreated as consumers for our contribution in unpaid labour online, but now as offline workers too which is not a new thing. As customers we will be required to take part in work when in actual fact we are not

workers. A recent example which clearly shows the termination of the worker is supermarkets becoming till-free (Fox, 2018). We are taking part in unpaid labour without being paid for the labour power utilized in controlling the robots (machines). 'Customers can scan goods with a smartphone and put them straight into a bag. When they have finished shopping, their payment is processed by the phone' (Fox, 2018: n.p.). We are hence

working and purchasing at the same time. Corporations benefit from this in two ways: (1) less need to employ workers and (2) their products are being purchased. Therefore, we are being exploited and taken advantage of as customers as they are able to gain free labour from us without actually paying us. The purpose of investing in robots for most of the businesses is that it increases profit. 'Robots offer a number of advantages - lower cost, increased efficiency, fewer workers' (Ritzer, 2011: 120). Consumers have to direct and control these robots, which can be classified as 'work'.

The notion of 'free labour' can be seen as a risk factor due to the increased risk of further exploitation of consumers. There are three main features of free labour. These features are unpaid labour which means it is free in terms of liberty. Therefore, it is more of a playground rather than a factory. Also, it can be enjoyed and at the same time it is exploited by the capitalist system (Wittel, 2015: 83). Social media sites such as Facebook can be a form of unpaid work, there is no income given for their involvement with the site other than it being free to use. Other websites also extract data from consumers. The capitalists are exploiting the internet users, as their free time and leisure is taken advantage of, therefore it can be seen as free labour. We are being abused as our every single activity as an internet user, customer and employee is profit for the capitalist system. 'Play and labour are today indistinguishable' (Fuchs, 2014: 268). When we are online chatting to our friends, playing games or browsing, we are actually producing data and profit for companies. Our leisure time in reality is commodified. "Play is largely commodified, there is no longer free time or spaces that are not exploited by

capital" (Fuchs, 2014: 268). We are constantly being exploited as a commodity for the benefit of companies/advertisers. We are mistreated, are never resting workers and are exhausting labour power every minute of the day.

In conclusion, I have discussed the idea that human beings are working 24/7. The capitalist system therefore has the best of both worlds. Technology, although it has benefitted our society, it also has its downfalls. Our leisure time and data has become a means of commodification for companies and corporations. Will there ever be a distinction between work and leisure or will we continue to be commodified as internet users, consumers and employees?

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