12-23-2014

Book Review: Social Media: A Critical Introduction. By Christian Fuchs.

Brian Creech

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umass.edu/democratic-communique

Reviews

Social Media: A Critical Introduction. By Christian Fuchs. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2014, 304p. (paper) ISBN: 1446257319, U.S. List: $44.00 (hardback) ISBN: 144625730. U.S. List: $115.00

As social media become *de rigeur* in undergraduate media and communication programs, a focus on instrumental use has tended to eclipse more rigorous analyses of the power relations digital platforms reify, disrupt, or reconfigure. Despite some notable alternatives, pedagogical approaches to social media have tended to focus on the more programmatic aspects of its use, often ignoring contextual perspectives that give meaning to practice. Despite a wealth of critical media and communication studies readers, those seeking to teach alternative approaches to social media have been left adrift without an anchoring text.

As a textbook, Christian Fuchs' *Social Media: A Critical Introduction* seeks to fill this need, offering accessible language that introduces students to a rigorous critique of specific social media platforms rooted in Marxist political economy. While the term "social media" takes the dominant space in the title, this is more of a book about the project of critique, using social media to offer students a foothold into the more nuanced and historically rooted concerns of critical theory.

Fuchs begins by staking a claim around what constitutes critical theory, differentiating it from more generalized nods to "critical thinking." The first chapter lays out a concise, yet thorough, conceptual accounting of Marx, critical political economy, and the Frankfurt School alongside more methodological concerns such as dialectical reasoning and ideological critique. This expansive and precise overview of the terms of a critical project not only contextualizes the approaches deployed in the following chapters, but is also the book's strongest merit. Fuchs' descriptions of critical theory, its ideals, conditions of emergence, and objects of inquiry are presented with language aimed at neophytes, yet nuanced enough to offer more experienced practitioners a thorough refresher.

From here, the book is split into nine chapters and divided into two parts— "foundations" and "applications"—and a concluding chapter that argues for an openly democratic and participatory Internet. The "foundations" chapters critique some of the more dominant discourses that construe social media platforms as benign extensions of the liberal democratic project. Manuel Castells' work on communication power and network society receives a thorough rebutting throughout, as does Henry Jenkins' work on convergence. At times, these thinkers become straw men deployed in service of a larger argument, as Fuchs complicates notions surrounding audience power and participatory culture. The text emphasizes the complications inherent in labeling any media "social," turning often to Marx to argue that relationships of power and capital exploitation belie the arguments that posit social media as necessarily positive.

For Fuchs, the critique of social media does not begin and end with the commodification of individuals on these platforms. Instead, the text digs into the ideological regimes that abet this exploitation, looking at how historically rooted concepts and practices long associated with the expansion of capital manifest in the workings of particular platforms. Continued attention to the tenets of critical theory, along with a rigorous citation and contextualization

of the thinkers and texts that Fuchs uses to substantiate his exegesis, make the first half of the book particularly valuable to those looking for a course text that not only deconstructs social media as a concept, but also explains how the practices of contemporary social media embody the relations identified by Dallas Smythe and Herbert Marcuse, among others. This attention to theoretical context portrays social media as an expression of the ongoing conflict between individualist liberalism and democratic collectivism.

The book begins to lose its rhetorical force when it moves from explaining foundational concepts to applying them via chapter-length critiques of Google, Facebook, Twitter, Wikileaks, and Wikipedia. Dedicated to a schema of capital accumulation and exploitation, these chapters deal with the nuances of each platform's operation with varying degrees of conceptual felicity. For instance, a rigorous discourse analysis of Facebook's privacy policy reveals a dynamic relationship between law, advertising, privacy, and individualism, but comes to the almost obvious conclusion that "Facebook's privacy policy is the living proof that the platform is primarily about profit-generation by advertising" (172). Such conclusions seem necessary when considering the book's probable audience of undergraduates interested in media careers, but they also ignore the chapter's preceding, careful analysis of privacy as a concept, the individual as an expression of liberal philosophy, and the legal regimes that fuse the two in the service of private property. As a textbook, such shortcomings can be blamed on the conventions of the genre, as digestible language wrestles with subtlety.

The chapters dealing with Google, Facebook, and Twitter rightfully revisit conventional critiques of commodification, surveillance, privacy, and each platform's possible existence as a public sphere; however, the chapters dealing with Wikileaks and Wikipedia put forth analyses little seen elsewhere. Fuchs commends the watchdog ethos of Wikileaks and explains how it operates as an alternative medium and mode of journalism; however, he also argues that, despite an overtly critical stance, the organization coheres within a genealogy of "good governance" projects that retain the relations and conditions of liberalism. On the other hand, Wikipedia, with its labor practices rooted in cooperation and shared ownership of intellectual products, portends "communist potentials antagonistically entangled into class relations" (247). Despite licensing arrangements that allow Wikipedia content to be repurposed as part of a commodity, it offers a site of resistance, Fuchs argues, as a form of information communism not yet completely exploited by the mechanisms of capital. Preserving Wikipedia's democratic potential, therefore, rests on the backs of citizens to ensure that the site and the practices it engenders are not fully subsumed into an overdetermining capitalist logic.

Because many of the books dealing with social media, especially those aimed at undergraduate audiences, tacitly reify many exploitive and neoliberal assumptions, *Social Media: A Critical Introduction* is a welcome addition to field. The deployment of critical political economy veers toward the dogmatic at times, and there are moments when the use of theory may become too turgid for a novice audience; however, the book makes for a useful tool for any instructor seeking to push students beyond the received common sense that social media platforms portend a general social good. In an academic environment where critical thinking has become less of an assumed activity and more of a selling point for embattled disciplines, this text at least follows up on its promise to offer students the formative tools to do so.

Brian Creech
Temple University