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CHAPTER 9

Contradictions in the Twitter Social Factory: Reflections on Kylie Jarrett's Chapter

Joanna Boehnert

On 2 November 2017 two of New York City's local digital news sites, The Gothamist and DNAinfo, were shut down by owner Joe Ricketts. All articles and information generated since 2009 vanished from the sites – to be archived elsewhere in less accessible format. 115 people lost their jobs. The destruction of the news companies along with the documentation of local history was instigated by Ricketts as an unsubtle response to an event just one week earlier: when reporters at DNAinfo and Gothamist had voted to unionise. Twitter exploded as another source of local news disappeared and union organising was dealt a symbolic blow.

On 3 November 2017 interdisciplinary artist Mary Boo Anderson posted a new version of the 'expanding brain' meme on Twitter (see <https://twitter.com/whoismaryboo/status/926469404199653376>, Figures 1 and 2). The sequential series of four images and text linked her experience as a Twitter user to the collapse of digital platforms after the unionisation of content creators. The text also references Anderson's own feelings of enjoying making content for Twitter

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Figures 1 and 2: Mary Boo Anderson @whoismaryboo Twitter post, 3 November 2017.

while simultaneously feeling exploited by Twitter profiting from her labour and even from her critique of this exploitation. In the last frame, she speculates about unionising content creators and having Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey shut down ‘this garbage site’.

Anderson’s artwork powerfully captures what Kylie Jarrett describes as contradictions of digital labour in the social factory of digital media. In *Feminism, Labour and Digital Media: The Digital Housewife* (2016) Jarrett argues that we can better understand the role of digital media users in the digital economy by using feminist analysis of social reproduction. Jarrett’s essay in this book, ‘Through the Reproductive Lens: Labour and Struggle at the Intersection of Culture and Economy’, expands ideas she developed in *The Digital Housewife* to reflect on the wider context of the politics of social reproduction, speculating on alternative digital media practices. In this short commentary, I use Anderson’s artwork to reflect on how Jarrett’s ideas can help us understand recent dramatic changes on Twitter.

In describing how ideas and even identities and subjectivities are generated by communicative labour in society (i.e. ‘the social factory’) Jarrett illustrates how unpaid labour in capitalism is beset by tensions, working simultaneously in oppressive and liberatory ways. I am interested in how these contradictions manifest on Twitter, and what can be done to encounter, break and possibly transform the most troubling tensions. My concern here is with the specific ways in which Twitter is designed to function, the strategies it uses to achieve its goals and the social consequences of these priorities. The social factory concept, an autonomist Marxist concept that describes how capitalism not only directs our economic lives but also expands its alienating, expropriating and commodifying logics into the social domain, is the foundation of this analysis.

The expanding brain meme (i.e. four sequential images of an embodied brain, accompanied by textual content on a variety of themes) had been used over the course of 2017 to imply the evolution of an individual’s intellectual capacities. It suggests progress from the reptilian brain to a state with expanded cognitive capacities and even cosmic spiritual insights. Normally, the meme is used in an ironic or semi-ironic manner. Anderson’s expanded brain meme is harnessed to highlight her conflicted feelings of liking Twitter but also feeling exploited by the platform, her ideas on disrupting this exploitation, and her vision of being ‘set free’ by Jack Dorsey’s abolition of Twitter.

Twitter occupies a strategic position in the digital media ecosystem. It has gained a massive user base (roughly 330 million active users) due to the platform’s facilitation of user interaction in ways that bring good ideas from the margins into prominence. This design amplifies good ideas (Anderson’s tweet got over 7000 likes and retweets in the first few days) and disrupts power hierarchies in communication channels and traditional news outlets. Unfortunately, however, things seem to be changing on Twitter in ways that could have a profound impact on the role it plays in facilitating marginalised opinions.

On the same day that Anderson made her artistic intervention, the BBC reported that Twitter has published new rules. Twitter user Tim Peterson noted a specific change: ‘Twitter removed its belief ‘in speaking truth to power’ from its rules’ (@petersontee, 3 November 2017). Peterson published screenshots of the new and old Twitter Rules. Twitter has removed ‘We believe in freedom of expression and in speaking truth to power’ and replaced it with ‘We believe in freedom of expression and open dialogue’. The implications of this shift in priorities will become evident over time, but the change inevitably signals an adjustment in priorities and allegiances. Many users have already noted that recent changes in the ways Twitter operates diminish its traditional value.

In November 2017, Twitter changed tweet length from 140 characters to 280 characters, and dramatically transformed the look and feel of the platform. A core distinguishing feature of Twitter has always been its requirement that users express themselves clearly and succinctly. The change in character length altered not only individual tweets but the experience of Twitter feeds, which are no longer easily scrollable. It now takes longer to engage with multiple tweets. This change comes on the back of other modifications. Recently the ‘like’ feature was changed to function in a similar way to a ‘retweet’. This reduces Twitter users’ options to use ‘likes’ and ‘retweets’ for different purposes. I am not the only user who is concerned that the platform I rely on to access news and analysis is no longer operating in ways that originally made it so attractive.

Mary Boo Anderson’s expanding brain meme links Twitter users/content producers to the journalists from the two recently deleted digital news sites (DNAinfo and The Gothamist). Ricketts wrote a blog in September 2017 titled ‘Why I’m Against Unions at Businesses I Create’, where he said: ‘I believe unions promote a corrosive us-against-them dynamic that destroys the esprit de corps businesses need to succeed’. In describing how the value of his company comes from his own entrepreneurial skills and the capital that he personally generated on Wall Street, Ricketts is articulating a mainstream ideological position. In stark contrast to this view, Jarrett’s Marxist feminist analysis describes how a wide variety of work enables capitalist profits to take place.

Capitalism depends on many different types of labour, including a vast amount of unpaid labour and reproductive labour. Jarrett’s digital housewife metaphor links feminist theory on women’s reproductive work to digital work. Both Twitter users and the journalists who lost their jobs can be understood as digital workers who share information and contribute precarious or unpaid cognitive and communicative labour that adds value to digital platforms. The issue of the boundary of valuation is at the crux of the ideological divide in capitalism and in digital capitalism. This has been the case since Marx described the collective labourer or *Gesamtarbeiter* (Fuchs 2017, 4). Christian Fuchs explains that ‘in a software company, not just the software engineers who produce the software commodity, are productive workers, but also the secretaries, cleaners, janitors, accountants, marketers, etc. Productive labour produces

surplus-value' (2017, 4). Where Ricketts sees value as narrowly created by a stock broker and entrepreneur, the feminist Marxist argument describes all the other labour that sustains communities of people but is exploited in capitalist structures.

In her new text, Jarrett considers Morgane Merteuil's (2017) argument that the digital whole metaphor more accurately describes the extent of capture of the subjective domain in platform economies subject to capitalist logics. If the social emerges from the result of human activities that are the result of relationships largely structured by capitalism, then subjectivities under capitalism are all in profoundly conflicted space. The structures that dominate our lives encourage specific identification and ideological affiliations. The whole metaphor captures how capitalism envelops the intimate spaces of so many people – but especially the most oppressed constituencies.

Jarrett argues that while some media theorists consider the exploitation of labour in digital media as a new feature of the digital economy, 'for anyone who is not a white, cis-, het- man, it is difficult to see precisely what is novel about the conditions in which all of life is subsumed into capital' (2018, 104). Since people in persecuted groups have had to struggle the hardest against various types of oppression, their vantage points can more clearly reveal contradictions in capitalism and digital capitalism. These struggles highlight the tensions in digital media as users experience both agency and pleasure – in having access to more critically engaged news sources; in forming global communities with like-minded people; in having marginalised voices amplified; in the humour (lols) shared, and so on – and exploitation and anxiety – from the increasingly precarious nature of various types of labour; from fake news; from the 'alt-right' and other reactionary movements on social media; from online harassment, and so on. Just as unpaid domestic work has enabled the reproduction of capitalist relations from the start of capitalism, so unpaid digital work enables digital capitalism. But there are serious problems, not just with the injustices inherent in this dynamic, but with the robustness of the structures we depend on for the reliable news that is fundamental to democratic processes.

Like many digital news platforms, DNAinfo and the Gothamist were struggling financially. Digital media platforms are driven by the value of user data and advertising. Twitter has never managed to leverage these in the ways Facebook has done. Platform capitalism has created data-based social relations that have 'fundamentally altered the landscape of capital accumulation and property relations' (Cole 2017). Matthew Cole references Nick Srnicek's (2017) definition of one of the core attributes of platforms, i.e. 'proprietary architecture that mediates interaction possibilities' (2017) and claims that 'the most important asset for platforms is their intellectual property – company software, algorithms, and user data' (2017). It is this intellectual property that enables platforms to mediate exchanges between their users. The problem is that it is not evident that these platforms and the social relations that they establish can

support reliable news and the basic information necessary to enable democratic decision-making in ways that do not lean towards authoritarian and reactionary political positions. Jarrett describes digital platforms within capitalism's modes of accumulation as having an antagonistic relationship to the social domain (2016, 3, 33). Troubling digital capitalism by focusing on these antagonisms and the dialectical relationships between the alienating and actualising tendencies of digital labour creates space for deeper interventions.

Straddling these tensions, Twitter can be understood as the embodiment of the acceleration of polarised positions. My personal experience of Twitter is often educational and liberatory. Other Twitter users have expanded my understanding of race, gender, class, economics and other issues that have impacted my IRL activism, research and friendships. Twitter offers a means to interpret and respond to political events, and participate in debates and conversations on a global scale. Yet these experiences, and any associated tenuous feelings of agency, are precarious. Twitter has facilitated access to news, analysis, commentary and humour from sources that were not easily accessible in the pre-digital era. And yet even though Twitter users make these features possible and add value to the platform, the important decisions about how Twitter functions are not made by its users and content creators. The platform that users contribute to and rely on is not ours. A platform that is collectively owned by the users would be a genuine emancipatory technology. A more immediate goal is to keep Jack Dorsey from destroying Twitter.

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