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## **The Blogging Dialectic: A Marxian Critique of the New Media Phenomenon of Blogging**

When I wrote my first paper on blogs two years ago (2003), they were a relatively new phenomenon experiencing exponential growth in popularity attributable primarily to their medium, the internet. Today it is nearly impossible to watch television, pick up a newspaper, or walk down the street without encountering a reference to one blog or another. In the span of two years, blogs seem to have undergone the transformation from renegade citizen's media to legitimate media outlets, and in the process have changed the way people access, communicate, and understand information (MacKinnon 2005). Recent bestselling titles like *We've Got Blog: How Weblogs are Changing our Culture* (Rodzvilla 2002) and *Blog: Understanding the Information Reformation that's Changing your World* (Hewitt 2005) hint at the transformative power blogs hold in the public consciousness. They have been heralded by enthusiasts as lifesavers in the sea of information on the World Wide Web, the salvation of the masses from the oppressive oversights of mainstream corporate media. Wil Wheaton, of *Star Trek* fame and a blogger in his own right, colorfully describes the phenomenon in his foreword to *Who Let the Blogs Out: A Hyperconnected Peek at the World of Weblogs* by blogging pioneer, Biz Stone:

Blogs and bloggers are hitting what marketers call the "tipping point." In 2003, this guy named Howard Dean wanted to run for president. When nobody in the mainstream media would let his voice be heard, he did an end run around

them, and communicated directly with voters through his weblog. Within a few months, he was the Democratic front-runner! (Yearrgh!) In 2004, a Capitol Hill staffer blogged—in lurid detail—about her sexual misadventures with diplomats and congressmen. Her identity was uncovered, and she was fired, but her search for a new job didn't last long...she just inked a six-figure book deal. Blogs routinely pop up on blogspot.com, claiming to be “secret” celebrity blogs...until the massive armies of keyboard monkeys in the blogosphere use their detective skills to uncover the author's real identity.... It's amazing to see where we are now, when you consider where we were just a few years ago ...(2003).

Wheaton's paragraph characterizes the popular rhetoric that frames weblogs—and the bloggers who maintain them—as political innovators, pop-culture icons, and technological gurus; they seem to be the quintessential artifacts of the new millennium, their purpose feeding the very paradox that they theoretically exist to tame: the commodification of knowledge and its subsequent loss of authenticity (Lyotard 1984). With the help of the nearly limitless potential of digital reproduction and through the development of networks across which they communicate specialized, often personalized, information, bloggers attempt to distill the unique and the pertinent from the vastness of the internet. In doing so, it seems, bloggers create a viable alternative to late-capitalist corporate media.

On the surface, this all seems very promising. After all, according to a recent poll conducted by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, an American public generally dissatisfied with the performance of traditional media increasingly turns to the internet for its news and entertainment (2005, p. 60). However, a critical examination of the revolutionary rhetoric swirling around the phenomenon reveals that blogging emerges against the

backdrop of unrestrained social and economic forces in a global corporate capitalist economy organized around principles like the perpetuation of artificial scarcity, competition for profits, the marginalization of labor, and the implementation of technology for the benefit of capital alone (Wayne, 2003, p. 3). In this paper, I will consider how blogs function in a capitalist economy by asking: what is the value in blogging? To determine this, I will begin by exploring the brief history of blogging not as the “utopian...new virtual order” proponents claim (Pew Project, 2005, p. 59), but rather as a continuity in the development of technology historically within the capitalist system, bringing to light the material conditions that preceded blogging’s emergence. I will then examine blogging through the writings of others, from Marx to contemporary critics analyzing media as an industry through a marxian lens, to ascertain blogging’s position with regard to capital’s need for monopoly on knowledge. This perspective assumes that within the capitalist mode of production, the forces of production (the tools of capitalism) and relations of production (the human relationships in capitalism) operate in contradiction to one another to form the economic structure, or “base,” of a society. Grossly oversimplified, this base conditions and is reified by the consciousness, or superstructure of that society. In this instance, I will examine the relations and forces of production operating beneath blogging, including the capital, labor, and technology involved in the new media industry in general and blogging specifically before attempting to reveal the complex process of commodity fetishization that reifies these economic relations in the society it shapes and is shaped by. Throughout, to illustrate dialectically this relationship between the base and the superstructure, between the forces and relations of production on the one hand and their representations within the lived experiences of people in the capitalist system on the other, I will intersperse the narratives of various bloggers as gleaned from the content and structures of their blogs, trade journals,

and popular media as well as personal communications. Additionally, I will draw on my own experiences as a blogger on the blog that I built, authored, and maintained from 2002-4 which welcomed over 10,000 visitors (unique IP addresses) during its existence <<http://grammargirl.journalspace.com>> (now defunct, archives available online by request only).

The conceptual framework for this study is a basic articulation of Marx's conception of the labor theory of value, which sees the value of a commodity expressing the amount of socially necessary labor time invested to produce it. Although Bottomore notes in *The Dictionary of Marxist Thought* that this theory is criticized by many Marxists and non-Marxists alike as illogical, redundant, overly generalized and therefore irrelevant, others argue that, in fact, this concept provides the foundation for any meaningful understanding of the dynamics of capitalism (p. 507). This discussion may be limited by my lack of knowledge of contradictory arguments, yet the labor theory of value nevertheless presents a valuable method for demystifying the complex interplay of social and economic conditions comprising the late capitalist economic system and exposing the inequalities manifest therein. In the words of Marxist scholar I.I. Rubin, "The labor theory of value is not based on an analysis of exchange transactions as such in their material form, but on the analysis of those social production relations expressed in the transactions" (1972). Marx and Engels put forth the broader implications of their method in *The German Ideology*:

[The] mode of production must not be considered simply as being the reproduction of the physical existence of the individuals. Rather it is a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite form of expressing their life, a definite *mode of life* on their part. As individuals express their life, so they are (1978 p. 150).

## The (Mainstream) History of Blogging

Bloggling could not exist anywhere but in cyberspace; the act is web-exclusive in form and function. In 1997, Jesse James Garrett, editor of Infosift (now defunct) compiled a list of “sites like his” that he found on the web. He sent the list to Cameron Barrett, editor of CamWorld < <http://www.camworld.com/> > and they began compiling lists of URLs of interest to them. In 1999, Peter Merholz < <http://peterme.com/> > pronounced the term “weblog” as “wee-blog” and the inevitable shortening to “blog” occurred shortly thereafter. Within a short time, the appeal of the new form of “personal journalism” had spread, and people around the world were publishing their own blogs. Brigitte Eaton created Eatonweb Portal < <http://portal.eatonweb.com/> > to sift this flood of newly created blogs and in doing so defined the blog according to one criterion: a site that consists of dated entries. New software, such as Pyra’s Blogger < <http://www.blogger.com> > (now owned by Google) or Moveable Type < <http://movabletype.org> > emerged to ensure that that the digital realm once reserved for HTML-savvy web designers would remain open to the public.

Blogs emerged as hubs where websurfers compiled links accompanied by commentary for discerning/interested audiences. Bloggers who “linked” considered themselves journalists of sorts as they disseminated the information for their audiences, which are frequently referred to as “communities” of readers (Rosen 2005). Rebecca Blood, editor of the weblog *What’s in Rebecca’s Pocket* and author of the first definitive book on blogs, *The Weblog Handbook*, characterizes the original blogs as providing “pre-surfed” content, where weblog editors culled the “most mind-boggling, the most stupid, the most compelling” from the web. More

significant, she notes, is the importance of these blogs in distinguishing the difference between public and audience, the participatory nature of the public versus the passivity of the audience. Blogging is a participatory act that questions the “vested interests of our sources of information and the expertise of individual reporters” while simultaneously questioning the validity of corporate control of the media (Blood, 2002, p.8).

### **Blogging in the Capitalist Mode of Production**

The technologically determinist history of blogging presented above, which unfortunately constitutes the bulk of literature on the topic, does little to illuminate the material conditions fostering blogging’s emergence in the late-capitalist economy.<sup>1</sup> Due to the dearth of critical research on blogging, a proper starting point for a critical analysis of blogging is the history of the development of “new media,” comprised of digital and computer-based communications technologies, and the rhetoric surrounding blogging that obfuscates it. In his political economy of new media, Philip Graham notes that because capitalism, in its earliest stages, concerned itself with the production of concrete commodities like linen and cotton, it depended almost exclusively on the control and deployment of physical labor power; consequently, capitalists developed technologies to “appropriate, commodify, and later replace” human labor power (p. 135). Throughout the history of capitalism, from Gutenberg to Bill Gates, it is a monopoly on knowledge and information that has fueled the innovation of these technologies. Knowledge is power, and those with power have historically attempted to secure their positions by restricting access emergent technologies, shaping through this control the character of knowledge of the age

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<sup>1</sup> There are many terms used to describe the phase of capitalism we are currently experiencing, including “fast capitalism,” “hypercapitalism,” and “late capitalism.” From this point forward, all references to “capitalism” will refer to the current state of economic and social relations unless otherwise noted.

(Innis in Graham, p. 144). Robins and Webster concur that “the appropriation of information and information resources have always been a constitutive aspect of capitalist societies” (p. 63). The later shift from physical to automated labor, accompanied by the Fordism and Taylorism of the early twentieth century, created an entire industry of information and technology management (Sussman, 1997, pp. 79; Adorno and Horkheimer, 1993). In an enlightened discussion on media in which he situates Marx’s ideas with regard to technology and the forces and relations of production within Castells’ “Mode of Development,” Wayne explains that none of these technologies occur outside the fundamental dynamics of capital but actually exist to reinforce the growth and concentration of capital by controlling the “flows of perpetual transformation of technological forces and social relations.” He sees the building of “knowledge upon knowledge,” that emerged as a by-product of industrialization as a process in which the forces of communication become pivotal to the forces of production (p. 45). Through this lens, the means by which a commodity is produced becomes more important than what is actually produced.

New media and its offspring, blogging, did not emerge organically as the dominant history portrays, but rather is predicated upon this complex series of technological innovations designed to increase productivity that facilitates the extraction of surplus value from labor by capitalists. Marx identified early on the dialectic of the potential embedded in these technologies when he noted in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* that the forces of production operating to extract surplus value, like ICTs, enslave labor while providing the material conditions for their emancipation (p. 481). According to the labor theory of value, the decreased labor time brought about by efficient technologies does little to decrease the amount of work people are doing yet continues to increase the surplus labor time dedicated to the production of value over and above what they receive in wages (Marx, 1972, p. 344).

Capital increasingly pervades even the “free-time” of the wage earner until productive activities constitute the entirety of people’s lives (Adorno in Graham, p. 136). This discrepancy between the length of the working day as necessary to produce an item as seen by the laborer and to produce profit as the capitalist sees fit provides the basis, according to Marx in *Capital Volume 1*, for the class struggle between the owners of capital and the laborers in the capitalist system (1972, p. 364).

This continuous exploitation of labor is obvious in the act of blogging. Take, for example, the case of Christopher (his screen name), a self-avowed technophile and blogging enthusiast, who works as a blogger for the Suicide Girls website <<http://suicidegirls.com/news/>>. Although his “official” job title is “Lead News Editor,” the work he describes sounds more like digital piecework than a profession: he works from home for hours at a time, interacting physically with software and hardware that he, not the company, has purchased. He is not represented by any union, is not entitled to minimum wage, and is paid by his employer for work completed only if he hits his monthly quota of 152 posts per month. Despite these deplorable conditions, he sees his work as “memory work rather than actual labor. We [bloggers] make connections and research past events.... I think that bloggers freely and openly resist any monopoly or restriction on access” (Ross, personal communication, 2005). Christopher’s perceptions of this work characterize what Marx describes as the socialization of production. Because he has purchased them, it is likely that Christopher sees the digital systems that enable him to reproduce/redirect information at increasing rates as belonging to him when in actuality they are fixed forms of capital that enable him to both produce and consume in the “blogosphere.” His machine is simultaneously the “property of capital” and the embodiment of “the general productive power of society’s intelligence” (*Marx’s Grundrisse* in Wayne, p. 48). This contradiction

between the commodification of his personal property and time and the revolutionary potential inherent in his actions expresses one of the fundamental conflicts in capitalism, the tension between the forces of production and the relations of production.

### **Commodity Fetish and Reification in the Blogosphere**

If the immediacy and simultaneity with which production, exchange and consumption occur in cyberspace render it difficult to examine, in economic terms, the value of the bloggers who labor for a wage, then this blurring makes it even more difficult to assess accurately the value of the labor exerted by the millions of bloggers who spend hours of their “free-time” per week surfing the web, gathering information, and formulating the narrative in which they communicate this information to their readers (Harmon, 2005). Let’s return to the framework of Marx’s labor theory of value for a moment, which describes the product of labor as belonging to the capitalist who profits when the value of the product exceeds the investment of capital (including wages paid) in that product (Bottomore, p. 472). If the labor of representation bloggers engage in is, as Bourdieu claims, like any other labor: “a socio-historically conditioned process, the value of which is also established through and within socially and historically conditioned contexts, through the institutionally contextualized process by which ‘symbolic power’ is enacted, realized and recognized as such,” then the objective bearers of knowledge are more valued the more legitimate their knowledge is perceived to be (in Graham, p. 144). The more reputable the blog, the more esteem it maintains in the sphere in which it operates, and therefore the more value it maintains in the capitalist economic system. Consider Christopher’s explanation of how bloggers perceive their own value:

Since bloggers share consumption, we usually do memory work instead of actual labor. We make connections and research past events. We also value wit. "Value" comes in getting people to come to your site. In order to generate revenue, you either have to charge for access or sell ad space, in which case, you can approach a corporate net ad agency or an independent agency (like indieclick.com). There really is no such thing as a "knowledge monopoly" because we cross link, rely on respected names, and fine writing.

Underlying his explanation is the process by which social and economic relations determine the collective consciousness and its modes of representation, in other words "the psychology of lived experience under capitalism" (Wayne, p. 184). Another Marxist critic, Georg Lukàs, characterized this process as the socio-economic dynamics of commodity production affecting "the total inner and outer life of society," or what Marx calls the superstructure (1923).

It is in this sphere that the logics of capitalism are internalized, where the exchange-value of a commodity is alienated from its use-value through the process of fetishization. In addition to valuing any given commodity according to the labor time invested in the production of that commodity, its "value," this commodity may also be valued for its utility, "its use-value," or expressed in the amount other producers of commodities are willing to exchange for it, its "exchange-value." Commodities are thus potentially both use-values and exchange-values. Fetishization is the process by which producers are alienated from the product of their labor: they begin to see the commodities they produce existing outside themselves (Marx, 1972, p. 304). In his analysis, Graham, a linguist, suggests one manifestation of this process in new media:

The point at which language, thought and technology converge in their mass and immediacy, at the same time being collectively deployed in controlling technological, physical and social systems, is also the point at which knowledge about these systems becomes the most valuable knowledge of all. In such conditions, an individual's mind takes on the qualities of the commodity-fetish (p. 150).

In blogging, these use-values are assigned according to the perceived credibility of the blog, *the quality of the mind of the blogger*, as determined not only by the number of visitors (or sets of eyeballs, in contemporary media terms) to the site, but by the number of links to that site from other blogs (Rosen, 2005). It is not what a blogger knows, but how they know it and with whom they share it: in this case, the means of the production of the commodity produced determines the value of that commodity in exchange. At a conference held recently at Harvard on the relationship between blogging and journalism, Judith Donath of MIT Media Lab presented an interpretation of blogging through social theory, investigating what motivated people to be honest on the internet. She concluded that, the more “costly the signal” the more credible or “honest” the sender is perceived to be (2005). She continues that the implications are that bloggers need to reveal more about their personal lives to build credibility than traditional media who “can afford to give off costly signals.” The blogger's personal identity is commodified to reinforce the exchange-value of her product; in addition to producing the content of the blog, she must also produce that which constitutes her identity.

Rather than subverting traditional media, I would suggest, bloggers, in fact, support the dominant ideas of the neoliberal economics espoused currently by capital. From Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology*:

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production.... The division of labor...manifests itself as the division of mental and material labor, so that inside this class one part appears as the thinkers of the class...while the others' attitude to these ideas and illusions is more passive and receptive, because they are in reality the active members of this class and have less time to make up illusions and ideas about themselves (p. 172).

Corporate media, and by extension the capitalist system it reifies, is not threatened by blogging. Blogging is part of the Culture Industry Horkheimer and Adorno describe, but with a twist: rather than acting as passive receptors for a capitalist media product, like movies and television, bloggers (keeping company with reality show “participants”) actively engage in the production of the product they consume, thereby reducing production costs invested by capitalists and increasing the surplus value they are able to extract from labor. Through their resistance to “infotainment,” which bloggers attempt to circumvent by linking around the messages mainstream media sends out (Weinberger in Rosen, 2005), bloggers actually provide an essential service of that was once the purview of the media: disseminating information that ensures the masses internalize the hegemonic ideology of capitalism. The abstract valuations of blogs according to their perceived credibility is a product of the capitalist system, but also a concrete reification of it: the symbolic weight these blogs demonstrate through in-links and “hits” (both of which theoretically represent audience size) directly correlates to the advertising rates these blogs may charge. Bloggers, for the most

part, operate within the boundaries of corporate competition and exchange value (Wayne, p. 49).

This “for the most part” is the crux, though, of the dialectic of the blogging. Although blogging, like most dissent in contemporary culture, has been commodified and co-opted by corporations—the most potent producers among whom no longer appear to be GM and Westinghouse but Google and Microsoft—the seeds of revolution remain within it. Eben Moglen, a professor at Columbia and intellectual property rights activist describes in his “dotCommunist Manifesto,” the most poignant aspect of the marxian dialectic in which the instruments of capital are turned against itself. He sees the infinite possibilities of digital reproduction serving the class struggle by uniting the knowledge workers, the new proletariats, with communication tools necessary to organize and revolt (2002, p.3). He self-published the manifesto on his blog *Freedom Now*. <<http://emoglen.law.columbia.edu/blog>>.

For every Moglen, there are in infinite number of entities capitalizing on blogging’s digital spin-doctoring potentials as PR tools that are inexpensive to build and maintain (as the blogger-for-hire’s experiences above suggest). Rodrigo A. Sepulveda Schultz is a European venture capitalist who blogs in order to “test ideas, get feedback, ask for advice, ask for information.” He uses his blog to network, advertise, and conduct research on products and influence public opinion about his company and the service he provides (Allchorne, 2005, p. 4). Both he and Moglen utilize open source software available for free download from the internet <<http://www.sepulveda.net/>>. Access to knowledge, then, is not limited by software, which digital reproduction makes readily available and difficult to control, but by access to hardware, the computers that power and host the blogs.

The Pew Internet & American Life Project's report which identifies the "mainstreaming of online life," claims that on a typical day, 70 million American adults log onto the internet each day, up 37% from 2000 when the study began. They also suggest that the "for the most part, the online world mirrors the offline world" (p. 58), yet their demographic data suggests that although three-quarters of the American population aged 18-49 use the internet, only 25% of those over 65 do. Likewise, internet users are primarily white, upper-middle class (\$50-75,000 annual household income) men with at least some college education (p. 63). The study states that 32 million Americans have read blogs, yet 62% of American internet users are not sure what a blog is (p. 65). The online world, then does not mirror the world as it is, but as capital would have the working classes believe it is. This is exactly the situation a marxian critic would expect to see resulting from emergent communications technologies like the internet and blogging: despite the revolutionary potential embedded within them—the ability to transcend class and geographic boundaries, the free-exchange of information, the possibility of identification among a class of information workers, the participation of the subject in her own cultural education—there is the monopoly of information, freely traded among those in power but highly restricted for all others, and the exploitation of labor—both through the objectification of their products as commodities and the extension of productive work into all aspects of their life—all in the name of limitless capital accumulation. Bloggers are simply one of the many groups exploited through the extraction of surplus value from labor and placated through the mechanisms capitalism ingeniously conceives to offset the class struggle implicit within this exploitation. In this case, it is "employtainment," that Christopher, the blogger for Suicide Girls, embodies:

[T]he closest thing that I would see to exploitation is that I'm on the computer all the freaking time, I have three of them (as back ups and mobility), and that I keep late hours.... I want to make it clear, though, that I enjoy blogging. There's no other job I'd rather do. I mean, Wil Wheaton from *Star Trek*, the lead singer for the Mr. T Experience, and a sex writer all work for me.

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