

- whether technological and/or social changes are required in order to bring about real social media and human liberation.

Critical theory and social media examines both academic discourse on, and users' responses to, new media, making it a valuable tool for international scholars and students of sociology, media and communication studies, social theory, new media, and information society studies. It is clear and interesting insights into corporate practices of the global new media sector will mean that it appeals to critical social media users around the world.

List of chapters and appendices

Part I. Theoretical Foundations

- *Chapter 1. Critical Theory and Dialectics*
- *Chapter 2. Critical Internet and Social Media Studies*
- *Chapter 3. Critical (Internet) Privacy Studies: Ideology Critique*
- *Chapter 4. Critical (Internet) Surveillance Studies: Commodity Critique*

Part II. Case Study

- *Chapter 5. Traditional and Critical Research of Privacy and Surveillance on Social Media*
- *Chapter 6. Empirical Results: (Dis)Advantages of Social Media*

Part III. Techno-Social Revolution

- *Chapter 7. Critical Theory, Dialectics, and the (Dis)Advantages of Social Media*
- *Chapter 8. Conclusion*

Chapter contents

In the Introductory chapter of the book the author presents his main research questions, the themes that will be discussed and analysed. Namely

- the interrelation between the advancement of media and technology in a clearly capitalistic environment linked to class relations and to forces and relations of production
- their potential and their limitations with regards to the concept of commons.

Part I entitled "Theoretical Foundations" refers to the theoretical foundations of the relationship between technology and society, productive forces and relations of production, and privacy and surveillance.

In Chapter 1, "Critical Theory and Dialectics" Allmer makes a presentation of the different theoretical approaches with regard to the definition of technologies (instrumental versus substantive theories) and concludes that in practical real life terms technology has become a whole way of life and is substantive to modern society.

Chapter 2 entitled “Critical Internet and Social Media Studies” showcases the different steps of the evolution of the web over the years and highlights its essence since the beginning of its creation as a collaborative space where people can interact.

Chapter 3. Critical (Internet) Privacy Studies: Ideology Critique.

In Chapter 4, “Critical (Internet) Surveillance Studies: Commodity Critique” he uses Foucault’s understanding of surveillance and the Panopticon to discuss the existing surveillance literature and models.

In Part II entitled ‘Case Study’ he presents and analyses users’ (i.e., Austrian Students) knowledge, attitudes, and practices towards the antagonistic character and the potentials and risks of social media based on the empirical study he performed.

Chapter 5, “Traditional and Critical Research of Privacy and Surveillance on Social Media” Allmer distinguishes between traditional and critical research of privacy and surveillance on social media. He gives his own insight on the existing empirical research of privacy on Web 2.0 and argues in favor of a more critical approach.

In Chapter 6, “Empirical Results: (Dis)Advantages of Social Media” he discusses the major advantages and disadvantages of social networking platforms that Austrian students see in terms of role of surveillance for users in the context of social networking sites.

Part III entitled “Techno-Social Revolution”, he analyses the need of a technosocial revolution in terms of achieving a commons-based information society arguing that digital and social media strengthen the idea of the communication and network commons.

Chapter 7, “Critical Theory, Dialectics, and the (Dis)Advantages of Social Media” presents an evaluation of the prospects and limitations of the commons and commodification of the commons in the realm of digital media.

The final concluding Chapter 8, summarises all the ideas, critics and proposal of the author highlighting that the Internet and social media are fields of conflict in a power struggle and are able to support both the expansion and the commodification of the commons.

Significance for the state of research and practice

According to Fuchs (2016) communications phenomena such as social media are creations of the contemporary society which he characterises as a specific societal formation and historical organisation of capitalism and class society.

Under this angle the Frankfurt School Critical Theory scientists having as starting point the work of Karl Marx analyse “social relations of communication (...) primarily in terms of the structural forms of disrespect they generate”. They focus on “the damage and distortion of social relations of recognition” offering a critical perspective therefore of our society as a whole based on the criticism of capitalism and domination (Honneth, 2007).

Having as a starting point this critical theory Allmer presents a totally different approach from what we generally publicly read and hear about social media, their value, current trends and future perspective.

For Allmer, the whole positioning that social media are facilitating democratic practices is not valid. They are just manipulated by social media owners to strengthen their ideological agenda while their transformative social and democratic potential remains unexplored.

In his book the presents a theoretical analysis of the corporate character of social media and its consequences and also a relevant large-scale empirical case study, of users' knowledge, attitudes, and behaviour towards surveillance and privacy of social media.

Insisting on the multifaced character of what influences the advancement of social media in our lives and the relationship between technology and social transformation (Dumitrica and Wyatt, 2015), he both directly and indirectly underlines that the ability of states and corporations to process so much information about people and their practices provides them with the potential for control, surveillance, and exploitation (Jordan, 2015).

Allmer thus enlightens the debate on why and how and digital technologies and more specifically social media act as a catalyst in constraining and empowering individuals and collectivities while positioning himself in favour of a bottom up participatory and commonly owned internet society.

Significance for managers and instructors

Social media are shaped and activated in a context of digital capitalism as defined by D. Schiller in the 1990s.¹ Allmer explores if and how critical theory thinking can be used for critically understand social media under this context.

He offers a new insight on how social media operate and why we need to bypass technological and/or social status quo in order to innovate and strengthen the idea of the communication and network commons and a commons-based information society. He considers that critical theory represents an epistemological departure point for engaging with social reality in order to bring forth its underlying power dynamics.

His position is to arrive to what Fuchs a few years after Allmers book is written will define as alternative internet, with alternative design principles and alternative societal setting: a solidary, co-operative information society- a participatory democracy.

Critical Theory and Social Media is addressed to public officials, civil society actors, community leaders, community developers and is a very useful volume from both a theoretical but also practical perspective that analyses the essence of social media, positioning them in the heart of the way our societies are shaped and are functioning.

Digital capitalism is one of the ambiguous concepts in current media theory (Pace, 2018) touches different sectors, i.e., technology, politics, labour, economy. The book can be a useful manual for researchers and academics working in defining and analysing therefore the relation between digital media and capitalism. Allmers proposition to strengthen the idea of the communication and network commons grounded in the theoretical foundations of media, technology, and society can be of real use for them.

As strategic aspects of collective decision making on social networks are still largely unexplored (Grandi, 2017) the book can be the basis for future research in the areas of policy design for efficient public participation from a bottom-up perspective.

References

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Note

¹According to Schiller cyberspace amongst other networks was initially created by public authorities, military agencies and academic institutions. Progressively it began to serve primarily corporate users getting to function into market logic. It therefore began a political-economic transition toward what he calls 'digital capitalism'.