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Infinite Ways to Make Profit: Digital Labour and Surveillance on Social Networking Sites

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Abstract

Social Networking Sites involve users' exploitation as digital labourers whose online activities generate a huge amount of data that are sold to various advertisers. The paper discusses the various patterns of exploitation of digital labour in the system of digital capitalism and argues that digital surveillance, following the omnioptron model in SNSs sustains this new kind of capitalist economy, based on the creation and distribution of digital data.

[**Keywords:** digital labour, digital capitalism, informationalism, exploitation, panopticon, omnioptron, surveillance, prosumers, social networking sites, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn.]

Introduction: Prosumers and Digital Labour in Social Networking Sites

Social networking sites (SNSs) make enormous monetary profit, as seen in various news reports.¹ Sites like Facebook and Twitter have been churning billion dollar revenues. Dan Schiller claims that the Internet and its technology of easy global connectivity have broadened the scope of globally-spread capitalism, as “networks are directly generalizing the social and cultural range of the capitalist economy as never before”.² He calls this “digital capitalism”.³ Manuel Castells identifies this trait as a “new brand of capitalism”⁴ and ‘informationalism’⁵, which “depends on innovation as the source of productivity growth, on computer-networked global financial markets, whose criteria for valuation are influenced by information turbulences, on the networking of production and management, internally and externally, locally and globally, and on labor that is flexible

¹ Mark McSherry, ‘Facebook revenue up 63 per cent thanks to massive increase in mobile advertising’, *The Independent*, January 29, 2014 [Retrieved from <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/business/news/facebook-revenue-up-63-per-cent-thanks-to-massive-increase-in-mobile-advertising-9094704.html> on February 3, 2014 at 3:27 pm], and Hannah Kuchler, ‘Twitter still playing catch-up with Facebook’, *FT.com*, February 2, 2014 [Retrieved from <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/58d11c7c-8a91-11e3-9c29-00144feab7de.html#axzz2sFd3kQjn> on February 3, 2014 at 3:32 pm]

² Dan Schiller, ‘Introduction: The Enchanted Network’, *Digital Capitalism: Networking the Global Market System*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1999), p.1.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Manuel Castells, ‘Informationalism, Networks, and the Network Society: A Theoretical Blueprint’, *The Network Society: A Cross Cultural Perspective*, edited by Manuel Castells, (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2004), p.29.

⁵ Ibid.

and adaptable in all cases.”⁶ SNSs have particularly increased the impact of digital networks on economy as they have thrown the gates of digital access wide open to a large number of individual users.

Media researchers like Christian Fuchs find that SNS users have a particular role in the labour that sustains the new type of capitalist economy. They voluntarily put in ‘digital labour’, as they upload data—in the form of messages, images, videos, audio files; consume as well as circulate the data in SNSs.⁷ Without the data, the networks would merely have been empty structures. Following Raymond Williams’s concept, the means of digital communication thus become the means of production,⁸ as users double as producers, and use the networks of communication to produce data commodities. On the one hand, these users consume the facilities of communication that are provided by the SNSs; on the other hand, they generate data and produce “data commodities”⁹ required for targeted advertising. The “distinction between production and consumption” is blurred¹⁰ as users turn into “prosumers”.¹¹ Fuchs claims that users churn data that facilitate targeted advertising; but the users themselves, too, perhaps are sold to prospective advertisers for targeted advertising. The prosumers, thus, are also commodities themselves as the popularity of a site is determined by the online activities and the log-in time of the users.

Users’ tripartite role of users—as prosumers, website users, and as commodities—sold to capitalist sponsors of SNSs, minimises the temporal gap between production and consumption, by producing merchandise through the process of consumption of the same and thus unifying two different processes. This conflates two kinds of consumption—the consumption of consumers or Marx’s individual consumption, and what Marx identifies as the labourers’ consumption or productive consumption, which indicates the consumption of labour and material conditions of production through the process of production.¹²

⁶ Manuel Castells, ‘Informationalism, Networks, and the Network Society: A Theoretical Blueprint’, *The Network Society: A Cross Cultural Perspective*, edited by Manuel Castells, (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2004), p.29.

⁷ Christian Fuchs and Sebastian Sevignani, ‘What is Digital Labour? What is Digital Work? What’s their Difference? And why do these Questions Matter for Understanding Social Media?’, *Triple C*, 11(2), 2013. pp.237-293. [Retrieved from <http://www.triple-c.at/index.php/tripleC/article/view/461> on October 24, 2013 at 5 p.m.]

⁸ Raymond Williams, ‘Means of Communication as Means of Production’, *Culture and Materialism: Selected Essays*, London: Verso, 2005 (Originally published in 1978). Also see William Henning James Hebblewhite, ‘“Means of Communication as Means of Production” Revisited’, *TripleC*, 10(2), 2012, pp.203-213 [Retrieved from <http://www.triple-c.at/index.php/tripleC/article/download/424/387> on December 26, 2014 at 7:50 am]

⁹ *Ibid*, p.259.

¹⁰ Tiziana Terranova, ‘Free Labor: Producing Culture for Digital Economy’ [Retrieved from <http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/technocapitalism/voluntary> on December 9, 2014 at 1:44pm]

¹¹ Jamie Skye Bianco, ‘Social Networking and Cloud Computing: Precarious Affordances for the “Prosumer”’, *WSQ: Women’s Studies Quarterly* Vol. 37: Issues 1 & 2. pp. 303-312, p.306 (Spring/Summer 2009). [Retrieved from <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/wsqr/v037/37.1-2.bianco.html> on April 23, 2011 at 1:27 pm.]

¹² “Labour uses up its material factors, its subject and its instruments, consumes them, and is therefore a process of consumption. Such productive consumption is distinguished from individual consumption by this, that the latter uses up products, as means of subsistence for the living individual; the former, as means whereby alone, labour, the labour-power of the living individual, is enabled to act. The product, therefore, of individual consumption, is the consumer himself; the result of productive consumption, is a

Individual users of networks, being labourers of the same, exercise this ‘productive consumption’. They consume labour and material conditions of production, as their networking activities depend on digital programmes, conditions of access and other infrastructural parameters of social networking websites and their labour of generating information while communicating with the peers. At the same time, they also consume products of this economy, which is information and knowledge. Hence, in individual users or members of virtual networks, or social networking websites, one can see a synthesis of roles—of a consumer and a labourer (and as seen before, of product), as well a synthesis of types of consumption. They consume the consumables of the labourer as well as that of the consumer.¹³

SNSs, meanwhile, put together the technology of online communication. However, SNSs like Facebook have even been providing users with even software development kits (SDKs) for them to design apps for the sites.¹⁴ In this scheme, what ensures financial profit for the digital capitalists is that this labour remains unpaid—there is no monetary reward for the users. This is recognized as a kind of exploitation.¹⁵ As a result of this exploitation, the cost of data production, and at times even that of maintenance and invention, remains a bare minimum, while the scope for profit, for the company concerned, remains high.

Users’ ‘digital labour’, thus, contributes to the fiscal profit of the organisation, as their unpaid yet voluntary involvement in data churning reduces the monetary cost of information production.¹⁶ While discussing the parameters of ‘digital labour’, Trebor Scholz refers to “playbour”¹⁷—the amalgamation of play and labour (originally used in

product distinct from the consumer.”—Karl Marx, ‘The Labour-Process and the Process of Producing Surplus-Value’, *Capital Vol.1: Part III: The Production of Absolute Surplus-Value*, 1867.[Retrieved from <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/cho7.htm> on 7 August, 2011 at 12:35 pm.]

¹³ However, Marx had already identified that the labourer is capable of exercising the dual consumption—individual and productive. He said, “The labourer consumes in a two-fold way. While producing he consumes by his labour the means of production, and converts them into products with a higher value than that of the capital advanced. This is his productive consumption. It is at the same time consumption of his labour-power by the capitalist who bought it. On the other hand, the labourer turns the money paid to him for his labour-power, into means of subsistence: this is his individual consumption. The labourer’s productive consumption, and his individual consumption, are therefore totally distinct. In the former, he acts as the motive power of capital, and belongs to the capitalist. In the latter, he belongs to himself, and performs his necessary vital functions outside the process of production. The result of the one is, that the capitalist lives; of the other, that the labourer lives.” – Karl Marx, *Capital Vol.1: Part VII: The Accumulation of Capital*, 1867.[Retrieved from <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch23.htm> on 7 August, 2011 at 12:45 pm.]

¹⁴ Facebook on its help page on apps writes, “Some apps on Facebook are created by Facebook, like Events and Photos. Other apps are created by outside developers who use Facebook’s Platform and comply with Facebook’s Developer Principles and Policies.” [Retrieved from <http://www.facebook.com/help/493707223977442/> on November 2, 2012 at 3:11 pm].

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Christian Fuchs and Sebastian Seignani, ‘What is Digital Labour? What is Digital Work? What’s their Difference? And why do these Questions Matter for Understanding Social Media?’, *tripleC: Creative Common Licence*, 2013, Vol11:2, pp.237-293, p.288

¹⁷ Trebor Scholz, ‘Introduction’, *Digital Labor: The Internet as Playground and Factory*, Edited by Trebor Scholz, New York:Routledge, 2013, pp.4-9. Also see: Julian Kücklich, ‘Precarious Playbour: Modders and the Digital Games Industry’, *The Fibreculture Journal Issue 5*, [Retrieved from <http://five.fibreculturejournal.org/fcj-025-precariou-playbour-modders-and-the-digital-games-industry/> on October 24, 2013 at 3:52 p.m.]

the context of video games). Like Scholz, Fuchs also claims that SNSs deliberately blur the distinction between labour and leisure for users, so that the latter remain unaware of their exploitation. In this context, Fuchs identifies an undertone of valorizing the labour that keeps users away from the knowledge of exploitation.¹⁸

However, digital capitalists of SNSs rely more on the projecting the networks as an empowering agent than on resolving the dichotomy of labour and leisure. Rather, with passing time, SNSs have increasingly outgrown the need for the labour-leisure discourse. Although earlier online communication witnessed the dominance of “playfulness”¹⁹, SNSs now project online social networking as a serious necessity for users, and even as a route to development, and something that apparently facilitates even political protests like the Arab Spring movement.²⁰ The discourse of users’ self-gratification-- that for their own benefit users generate data on the networks—is widely used.²¹ For instance, Facebook claims that the site has the “mission to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected”.²² Hence, perhaps it is more appropriate to claim that users are neither acknowledged as labourers, nor as playbourers; for the idea of labour underlies the amalgamation ‘playbour’. Users are, instead, portrayed as the beneficiaries of the sites. Fuchs refers to the aspect of playbour and benefits of using SNSs interchangeably; but the difference is stark. Digital labour in SNSs, rather, can be identified as the neoliberal concept of labour as a source of individual benefits, leisure being one of them.²³

The idea of benefit, thus, becomes a parameter of digital capitalism. While capitalist organizations behind SNSs make monetary profit for themselves, the users are made to acknowledge that the networks yield benefit to them, and even the targeted advertising is meant to be for the users’ convenience.²⁴ The dominance of such narratives circulated in the networks, tailored to cater to the capitalist organizations reinforces exploitation of digital labour, as the sites embody the profit-making mechanism. For instance, Facebook has an “overall aim” to gather as many users as possible and to keep them logged in for as much time, so that it can generate profit.²⁵

¹⁸ Christian Fuchs and Sebastian Seignani, ‘What is Digital Labour? What is Digital Work? What’s their Difference? And why do these Questions Matter for Understanding Social Media?’, *Triple C*, tripleC 11(2), 2013. pp.237-293. [Retrieved from <http://www.triple-c.at/index.php/tripleC/article/view/461> on October 24, 2013 at 5 p.m.]

¹⁹ Brenda Danet, ‘Introduction’, *Cyberplay: Communicating Online*, Berg: Oxford, 2001, pp.19-26.

²⁰ Catharine Smith, ‘Egypt’s Facebook Revolution: Wael Ghonim Thanks Facebook’, *The Huffington Post*, February 12, 2011. [Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/02/11/egypt-facebook-revolution-wael-ghonim_n_822078.html?ir=India on December 22, 2014 at 2:08 pm]

²¹ Andrew Ross, ‘In Search of the Lost Paycheck’, *Digital Labor: The Internet as Playground and Factory*, New York: Routledge, 2013, pp.23-24

²² ‘About’, Facebook.com [Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/facebook/info>, on October 24, 2013 at 5:19 p.m.]

²³ Renyi Hong, ‘Game Modding, Prosumerism and Neoliberal Labor Practices’, *International Journal of Communication* 7 (2013), pp.984-1002 [Retrieved from iojc.org on December 16, 2014 at 5:08 pm]

²⁴ The write-ups on Advertising, Facebook.com [Retrieved from <https://en-gb.facebook.com/business/products/ads> on December 25, 2014 at 1:05 pm]

²⁵ Christian Fuchs and Sebastian Seignani, ‘What is Digital Labour? What is Digital Work? What’s their Difference? And why do these Questions Matter for Understanding Social Media?’, *Triple C*, tripleC 11(2), 2013. pp.258. [Retrieved from <http://www.triple-c.at/index.php/tripleC/article/view/461> on October 24, 2013 at 5 p.m.]

Exploitation and Alienation of Digital Labour

According to Fuchs, “alienation” of digital labour reinforces exploitation of users. In this process of alienation, labour power, the object of labour, the instruments of labour and the created products are beyond the control and possession of digital labourers. Users can’t control the digital platform, the pattern of communication is predetermined. The technology, the content, the company structure, its market value—nothing can be determined by users. Identifying this as a classic dichotomy of labour and capital, Fuchs even points out a hierarchical “class relationship” between users/non-owners and owners of SNSs.²⁶

The infinite communication possibilities that SNSs apparently endow users with also seem almost elusive. As capitalist bodies, organizations behind SNSs require absolute control over their resources—the networks, and the technology behind developing and sustaining the networks. They need to maintain the hegemony of access to ensure their profit, dispossessing users of control over digital resources and over the capitalist system.²⁷ However, these constraints are justified on various grounds. Sites like Facebook claim to have empowered²⁸ users to connect and share digital content worldwide. Technical limitations are enforced on users largely on the ground of maintaining their privacy.²⁹

Capitalist corporations behind SNSs maintain control over their technological resources, by claiming ownership of technology, and ensure users’ subordination to their hegemony. The data in the networks are monopolised by the sites. Users may have control over their data inputs, but SNSs can limit users’ access to manipulating, circulating and consuming the data.³⁰ Users have to comply with predetermined rules of the sites,³¹ and even abide by the norms of digital representation of their identities.

Facebook claims that “certain principles guide Facebook... Achieving these principles should be constrained only by limitations of law, technology, and evolving social norms.”³² In a recent post on his Facebook wall, Mark Zuckerberg states, “In an ideal world, we would all feel empowered to express everything we want, freely and safely. In reality, there are many obstacles in the way. Every country ... has laws preventing you from sharing certain things to protect public safety and intellectual

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Dan Schiller, ‘Introduction: The Enchanted Network’, *Digital Capitalism: Networking the Global Market System*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1999), p.3.

²⁸ “Facebook’s mission is to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected.” About, Facebook.com [Retrieved from November 21, 2013 at 3:45 pm at <https://www.facebook.com/facebook/info>]

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ For example see Data Use Policy, Facebook.com [Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/about/privacy/your-info> on February 3, 2014 at 3:13 pm] and Twitter Privacy Policy, Twitter.com [Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/privacy> on February 3, 2014 at 3:17 pm]

³¹ Facebook asks users to develop applications for the site, using its specific SDKs (software development kits).. See Facebook for web developers’. [Retrieved from <https://developers.facebook.com/docs/sdks> on November 25, 2013 at 3:09 pm]

³² Anonymous, ‘Facebook Principles’, June 8, 2012. [Retrieved from <http://www.facebook.com/principles.php> on December 11, 2012 at 3:34 pm] (Italics mine)

property. But even if they didn't, the perfect tools for expressing ourselves and reaching the people we want don't exist yet, so we'd still be limited. Even if the perfect tools did exist, most people couldn't access them anyway since the majority of the world's population doesn't have any internet access. Even if we all had the perfect tools, the internet and the legal rights to express anything, people might still censor themselves for fear of harassment, violence, terrorism or just uncomfortable social situations.”³³ He clearly indicates that the idea of infinite access, in fact, is utopic; for, in reality, online interaction, apparently, is bound to be constrained by various limitations. He naturalises the restrictions as well as causally relates the limitations imposed on Facebook users entirely to government directives. LinkedIn tells users, “On the condition that you comply with all your obligations... we grant you a limited, revocable, nonexclusive, nonassignable, nonsublicenseable license and right to access the Services, through a generally available web browser, mobile device or application..., view information and use the Services that we provide on LinkedIn webpages and in accordance with this Agreement.”³⁴ Twitter restricts each update to 140 Roman letters.³⁵ The elusive promise of endless possibilities in SNSs³⁶ actually betrays the various constraints on users' access.

This can, in fact, be read as an instance of Foucauldian governmentality³⁷ in which individuals are modelled in desired ways for websites to enforce an easier control on them. This process may also be interpreted as the Foucauldian bio-power in which the subjects' heterogeneous biological identities are eclipsed to reinforce the power of the authorities.³⁸ Homogenization has often been regarded as a prime characteristic of capitalism.³⁹ This, therefore, proves to be a potent tool for even digital capitalists to minimize possibilities of dissent among its subjects.

Status of Individual Users of SNS in Digital Labour

Castells is rather optimistic about the potential of individual power in the digital networks. He points out how, in informationalism, the open structure of networks enables users to mould and remould the networks through constant and individual use.⁴⁰ While consuming the available tools of communication, they produce and invent new material resources, new devices, new website patterns and new communication techniques. But what differentiates the preconfigured structure of the Internet and its

³³ Mark Zuckerberg, Post on March 16, 2015 on his Facebook Wall. Facebook.com [Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/zuck?fref=nf> on March 16, 2015 at 1:48 pm]

³⁴ Anonymous, 'Your Rights', *User Agreement*, June 16, 2011 [Retrieved from http://www.linkedin.com/static?key=user_agreement&trk=hb_ft_userag on December 11, 2012 at 3:43pm]

³⁵ Anonymous, 'About Twitter', *Twitter.com*, [Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/about> on November 2, 2012 at 2:13 pm.]

³⁶ Manuel Castells, 'Networks of Mind and Power', *Communication Power*, New York: Oxford, 2009, pp.137-153

³⁷ Michel Foucault, 'Thirteen: 5 April, 1978', *Security, Territory, Population*, Volume 4, (London: Macmillan, 2007), p.451.

³⁸ Michel Foucault, 'Right of Death and Power over Life', *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, Translated by Robert Hurley, (New York: Pantheon, 1978), pp.140-141.

³⁹ Thomas Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, (New York: Anchor, 2000), p.279.

⁴⁰ Manuel Castells, 'Informationalism, Networks, and the Network Society: A Theoretical Blueprint', *The Network Society: A Cross Cultural Perspective*, edited by Manuel Castells, (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2004), p.23.

modified version through use is that—“New uses of the technology, as well as the actual modifications introduced in the technology, are communicated back to the whole world, in real time. Thus, the time span between the processes of learning by using and producing by using is extraordinarily shortened.”⁴¹

However, users are evidently not in control of the digital resources that determine the structure of the networks as well as their functions. They are alienated labourers, devoid of control over technological resources. Even the very structure of the networks allows users to be isolated as nodes, making each of them an object of targeted advertising.⁴² Geert Lovink even claims that users or exploited labourers are even denied the status of self-sufficient nodes in the networks.⁴³ Each user’s digital activities are used for pushing up the popularity index of SNSs. The online activities of every user generate digital data. Hence, rather ironically, individual identity of users is an important feature of digital labour. The networks are maintained by individual user profiles and unique username-password combinations. This apparently contradictory situation—that in spite of the significance of individual access, users’ digital labour remains unacknowledged—merely reinforces the exploitation of labour.

Even the subjugated status of individual users does not indicate that their collective efforts are acknowledged. There are eclectic selections of virtual communities, groups and pages in various SNSs; but these groups and communities have porous borders; these are ‘created’ on popular SNSs, and even disappear overnight, or reappear in some other name. For example, Facebook archived its dormant groups, when it launched a new group format in 2011,⁴⁴ the ‘communities’ in Orkut were often hijacked and then they resurfaced as different communities.⁴⁵

Overall, the idea of ‘community’, in its conventional sense of a cohesive group, is tenuous in SNSs. In fact, the act of communication is foregrounded in SNSs, but with a simultaneous emphasis on individual identities. Facebook states that “Millions of people use Facebook everyday to keep up with friends, upload an unlimited number of photos, share links and videos, and learn more about the people they meet.”⁴⁶ Twitter specifies that it “helps you (the user) create and share ideas and information instantly.”⁴⁷ Apparently community building is a task executed by users in SNSs as merely a part of their labour. Since the users/digital labourers have no control over the technical and non-

⁴¹ Manuel Castells, ‘Lessons from the History of the Internet’, *The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business, and Society*. New York: Oxford, 2001, p.28.

⁴² Christian Fuchs and Sebastian Seignani, ‘What is Digital Labour? What is Digital Work? What’s their Difference? And why do these Questions Matter for Understanding Social Media?’, *Triple C*, tripleC 11(2), 2013. pp.258. [Retrieved from <http://www.triple-c.at/index.php/tripleC/article/view/461> on October 24, 2013 at 5 p.m.]

⁴³ Geert Lovink, ‘Introduction: Capturing Web 2.0 before its Disappearance’, *Networks without a Cause: A Critique of Social Media*, (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), pp.2-3

⁴⁴ ‘Facebook Old Groups Migration to New Groups: What you Need to Know’, Facebook.com, May 10, 2011. [Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/notes/mari-smith/facebook-old-groups-migration-to-new-groups-what-you-need-to-know/10150249514781340> on December 20, 2014 at 2:19 pm]

⁴⁵ See the comment thread on <https://forums.digitalpoint.com/threads/orkut-community-owners-please-see-it.1246746/> [Retrieved from December 20, 2014 at 2:24 pm]

⁴⁶ ‘Short Description’, Facebook.com [Retrieved from https://www.facebook.com/FacebookIndia/info?tab=page_info on December 20, 2014 at 1:20 pm]

⁴⁷ About Twitter, Twitter.com [Retrieved from <https://about.twitter.com/> on December 20, 2014 at 1:20 pm], parenthesis mine.

technical resources of the sites, they cannot ensure the sustainability of the ‘real virtual’⁴⁸ communities on the networks.

With such a status of digital labour in which neither individual nor collective effort of users is recognized, individual and even communal authorship of digital content and their ownership have increasingly become disputable issues. Digital memes, for instance, often come without credit or acknowledgement of the creator. At times they come with watermark stamps of the author on them; but mostly it is the user, who ‘shares’ or ‘uploads’ that particular content, is granted the status of the author, as well as of the owner, while the sites too exercise certain rights on the content in terms of ownership.⁴⁹ Fuchs’s alienation of labour is perhaps a theoretical explanation of authorship and ownership being such tenuous concepts in the digital networks; but what makes these issues even more problematic is that SNSs consistently monitor the content and users activities.

Surveillance and Digital Labour in Digital Capitalism

Surveillance is a necessary tool to sustain the exploitation of digital labour and also to uphold the principles of digital capitalism, and it is not simply a form of alienation of labour, as Fuchs has identified.⁵⁰ In the “network society”⁵¹ in which all socioeconomic constituents are working as networked nodes, the composite role of SNS users as user identities remain fragmented into mutually-exclusive nodes. The structure of a network allows the nodes to easily break away from the centre.⁵² SNSs resolve this by enforcing a unifying structure of surveillance. Surveillance is crucial for the sites to keep their users/digital labourers on a leash, and thereby, to keep the process of data production, consumption, circulation, and business in their hegemonic control, in the pattern of governmentality.

Digital surveillance in SNSs is said to be following the Foucauldian panopticon model in which the centre monitors all,⁵³ but it is often being placed in the omnipticon model in which all participants monitor each other.⁵⁴ While discussing urban governance,

⁴⁸ Castells claims that the digital networks embody the principle of real virtuality, and not virtual reality. Manuel Castells, ‘The Culture of Real Virtuality: the Integration of Electronic Communication, the End of the Mass Audience, and the Rise of Interactive Networks’, *The Rise of the Network Society, The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture, Volume 1*, (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), p. 406.

⁴⁹ For example see ‘Data Use Policy’, Facebook.com [Retrieved from http://m.facebook.com/policy.php?_rdr#!/policy?page=info on December 26, 2014 at 8:08 am]

⁵⁰ Christian Fuchs and Sebastian Sevignani, ‘What is Digital Labour? What is Digital Work? What’s their Difference? And why do these Questions Matter for Understanding Social Media?’, *Triple C*, tripleC 11(2), 2013. pp.258. [Retrieved from <http://www.triple-c.at/index.php/tripleC/article/view/461> on October 24, 2013 at 5 p.m.]

⁵¹ Manuel Castells, ‘Informationalism, Networks, and the Network Society: A Theoretical Blueprint’, *The Network Society: A Cross-cultural Perspective*, edited by Manuel Castells, Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2004, p. 3.

⁵² *Ibid*, pp.2-3.

⁵³ James Boyle, ‘Privatised Panopticons and Legalised Enclosures’, *Foucault in Cyberspace: Surveillance, Sovereignty and Hard-Wired Censors*, 1997. [Retrieved from <http://www.law.duke.edu/boylesite/foucault.htm>] Boyle on 10 August, 2011 at 8:10 am.]

⁵⁴ Patrick Joyce, ‘Introduction’, *The Rule of Freedom: Liberalism and the Modern City*, London: Verso, 2003. p.16. and Emanuel de melo Pimenta, ‘The City of Sun: Panopticon, Synopticon and Omnipticon – Big

Patrick Joyce contradicts the Foucauldian model of the panopticon with an all-watching eye at the centre, and refers to the persistence of an omnipticon model in which many monitor many, without the dominance of a central eye.⁵⁵ De melo Pimenta applies this model on cyber networks, and finds that in the omnipticon process all members monitor each other on behalf of the master monitoring enterprises— which, in this case, are the digital capitalist organisations.⁵⁶ He further claims that “the emergence of a(sic) omnipticon is not only the incorporation of a panopticon process– through multiple systems of espionage on people in general– and of a synopticon phenomenon, with a generalized voyeurism that is responsible,... but the intensive crossing of voyeurism, control and narcissism among masses of self proclaimed common people.”⁵⁷

The voyeurism of looking into other users’ lives, and tracking their online activities; narcissistic actions like writing status updates and posting pictures; along with the constant monitoring of each other with tools of surveillance like the ‘report abuse’ option on Facebook form the omnipticon in SNSs. In fact, the three functions combined in the omnipticon increase the possibility of maximizing users’ log-in time and the volume of digital labour. In digital capitalism, surveillance in SNSs, therefore, is imbued with commercial interest.⁵⁸

Surveillance, in its omnipticon mode, apart from being a tool for maximizing monetary profit for SNSs, becomes an instrument of control for digital capitalists in three ways.

Firstly, it allows network authorities to keep an eye on aberrations on a micro level: users, being agents of surveillance, monitor each other. This too is an instance of unpaid digital labour, as the networks can be monitored by the users themselves, who endorse or report abuse against digital content of their likes and dislikes.

Secondly, it doles out sense of power to the digital labourers, or, the latter are made to feel empowered; and, thus, it helps digital capitalists to naturalize their control over users and also their exploitation. Users’ access to the excess of information reinforces this scheme. The information overload does not seem to suffice to keep users attached to online networks. The additional largesse of the illusion of power over fellow users, through surveillance, ensures that individuals are granted an elusive oneness with the capitalist authorities since it is imperative for a capitalist body to naturalise its control over digital labourers and their exploitation.

Brother and the Giant with Thousand Eyes’, *Low Power Society*, 2008, pp.260-303. [Retrieved from <http://www.emanuelpimenta.net/ebooks/archives/lowpower/US%20chapters/PIMENTA%20Low%20Power%20US%20chapter%208.pdf> on 26.09.2012 at 2:01 p.m.]

⁵⁵ Patrick Joyce, ‘Introduction’, *The Rule of Freedom: Liberalism and the Modern City*, London: Verso, 2003. p.16.

⁵⁶ Emanuel de melo Pimenta, ‘The City of Sun: Panopticon, Synopticon and Omnipticon – Big Brother and the Giant with Thousand Eyes’, *Low Power Society*, 2008, pp.260-303. [Retrieved from <http://www.emanuelpimenta.net/ebooks/archives/lowpower/US%20chapters/PIMENTA%20Low%20Power%20US%20chapter%208.pdf> on 26.09.2012 at 2:01 p.m.]

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Thomas Allmer, ‘Critical Internet Surveillance Studies and Economic Surveillance’, *Internet and Surveillance: The Challenges of Web 2.0 and Social Media*, edited by Christian Fuchs, Kees Boersma, Anders Albrechtslund and Marisol Sandoval, (New York: Routledge, 2012), p.133.

Thirdly, in their rigid system of surveillance, SNSs encourage disunity among users, encouraging them to use tools like ‘report a violation/abuse’⁵⁹ against each other. The agents of surveillance or users thus are pitted against each other. Users, much like the nodes in a network, end up as isolated entities—creating a “network society”⁶⁰ in online social networks. This isolation perhaps minimizes the chances of labourers’ unity in “informationalism”⁶¹—unlike the way it would have been in industrialism.⁶² All these are made possible by the technology of networking and digital connectivity, or of networks, in which each node, each user, each point of access is in a state of isolation; each remains individually under the control of the network authority.

The hegemony of digital capitalists in SNSs is established by the fact that the tools of monitoring as well as the method of surveillance are devised, controlled and provided by SNS authorities, perpetuating the alienation of labour. Therefore, in spite of their power of monitoring fellow users, SNS members are merely agents of surveillance, or in other words, digital labourers, working for SNS authorities.

SNSs justify the practice of surveillance on the ground of protecting users’ security. Users’ privacy and security emerge as opposing concerns. Users are expected to compromise their privacy and share some personal data with the site administration in order to access the sites.⁶³ This is apparently necessary to ensure the security of the SNSs, and by extension, that of users. For instance, in its ‘Data Use Policy’, Facebook declares that the site keeps track of the metadata of each user’s online activities, even if the action is intended to be private, so that users are protected from possible misuse of data.⁶⁴ Facebook is also forthright about its use of cookies as a facilitator of authentication, security and site integrity, advertising, localization, site features and services, performance; and analytics and research.⁶⁵ However, from all seven uses of cookies, it surfaces how cookies facilitate the convenience of the website itself to manage and control users’ access.

The pattern of surveillance is also quite arbitrary. For instance, Facebook blocked users like Emma Kwasnica (who has a page to her name in the site now) because they

⁵⁹ Anonymous, Help Center: Report Something’, *Facebook.com*. [Retrieved from <http://www.facebook.com/help/263149623790594> on October 24, 2013 at 5:38 p.m.]

⁶⁰ “A network society is a society whose social structure is made of networks powered by microelectronics-based information and communication technologies. By social structure, I understand the organizational arrangements of humans in relations of production, consumption, reproduction, experience, and power expressed in meaningful communication coded by culture.” Manuel Castells, ‘Informationalism, Networks, and the Network Society: A Theoretical Blueprint’, *The Network Society: A Cross-cultural Perspective*, Edited by Manuel Castells, Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2004, p.3.

⁶¹ Manuel Castells, ‘Informationalism, Networks, and the Network Society: A Theoretical Blueprint’, *The Network Society: A Cross-cultural Perspective*, Edited by Manuel Castells, Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2004, p.9.

⁶² Peter J. Turnbull, ‘The Economic theory of Trade Union Behaviour’, *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, Volume 26:1, March 1988, pp.99–118, at Wiley Online Library [Retrieved from <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-8543.1988.tb00740.x/pdf> on November 4, 2011 at 3:49 pm.]

⁶³ For example see ‘Data Use Policy’, *Facebook.com* [Retrieved from http://m.facebook.com/policy.php?_rdr#!/policy?page=info on December 26, 2014 at 8:08 am]

⁶⁴ Anonymous, ‘Information we receive about you’, ‘Data Use Policy’, *Facebook.com* [Retrieved from <http://www.facebook.com/about/privacy/your-info> on March 18, 2013 at 5:23 pm]

⁶⁵ Anonymous, ‘Cookies, Pixels & Similar Technologies’, *Facebook.com* [Retrieved from <http://www.facebook.com/help/cookies> on March 18, 2013 at 5:40 pm].

put up pictures of breastfeeding on the site, while the pictures were meant to raise breastfeeding awareness⁶⁶, but the persistent circulation of pornographic content in the site and the existence of such groups⁶⁷ shows the inconsistency of the surveillance mechanism on digital content. This happens because in the surveillance machinery of digital capitalism, the digital labourers are the subjects. Any kind of digital content perhaps can be allowed in the site as long as it does not hurt the majority of users,⁶⁸ risking, perhaps, the profit chain of the SNSs. Given the technological sophistication that these digital capitalists can afford to use in their SNSs, it is difficult to justify that they would not be able to monitor and completely stop the circulation of some offensive content in the network. Instead they penalize only the particular user whom other users in his/her group find offensive and have reported abuse against.

Conclusion: Individual Freedom and Digital Labour in SNS

In this system of governmentality in digital capitalism, SNS users are also granted a space in which they can exercise their choices. They can fill in blank spaces in user profiles and comment sections, with words and expressions of their choice. While challenging the notion of globalisation producing uniform cultures, John Tomlinson talks of the persistence of cultural diversity through deterritorialization, as a form of resistance to homogenisation.⁶⁹ Similarly, the diversity of user identities in the networks may act as a resistance to the sweeping force of digital capitalism. Users' affiliations to various groups and online communities in SNSs, their conscious decision of not reporting abuse against fellow users circulating so-called objectionable content may also be an indication of the failure of digital capitalists in completely isolating the users, and turning them into their agents.

Yet, it is possible that this so-called failure of digital capitalists may simply be a construct. Overtly strict environments in SNSs may repel users who may eventually migrate to other SNSs, leading a decline in the popularity of the SNS. For instance, strict user authentication processes in Friendster, had caused what danah boyd calls "a rupture of trust between the users and the site"⁷⁰ and it led to users' exodus from the site.⁷¹

⁶⁶ Anonymous, 'Mothers protest at Facebook ban on "offensive" breastfeeding photos', *Daily Mail: Mail Online*, December 31, 2008 [Retrieved from <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-1102950/Mothers-protest-Facebook-ban-offensive-breastfeeding-photos.html> on February 27, 2014 at 3:55 pm]

⁶⁷ See groups like 'Wife Beating Association (NKT)' and 'Sometimes you just gotta hit a bitch' Group named 'Wife Beating Association (NKT)' on Facebook.com [Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/groups/misfits2/> on March 4, 2014 at 2:22 pm]; Group named 'Sometimes you just gotta hit a bitch' on Facebook.com [Retrieved from https://www.facebook.com/groups/146945961993605/?ref=br_rs on March 4, 2014 at 2:22 pm]

⁶⁸ For example, see 'Facebook Community Standards', Facebook.com [Retrieved from <https://m.facebook.com/communitystandards/> on December 26, 2014 at 8:15 am]

⁶⁹ John Tomlinson, 'Globalisation and Cultural Identity', *The Global Transformations Reader*, Edited by David Held, and Anthony McGrew, Second edition, (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), pp.273-275.

⁷⁰ danah m. boyd, and Nicole B. Ellison, 'Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, vol. 13:1, article 11, 2007. [Retrieved from <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol13/issue1/boyd.ellison.html> on 7 August, 2011 at 4:13 am.]

⁷¹ . David Kirkpatrick, 'Social Networking and the Internet', *The Facebook Effect: The Inside Story of the Company that is Connecting the World*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), p. 70.

Hence, users' freedom is perhaps a trade tactic used by digital capitalist organizations. It sustains the illusion of users' oneness with the capitalist body in charge of the networks. It makes users overlook the hegemonic control they are under. This freedom is perhaps a part of the governmentality scheme. It is "an element that has become indispensable to governmentality itself".⁷² It is partial. It is granted to users, and not something that users achieve. It is necessary for it sustains the illusion of freedom and authority of users by concealing their exploitation as digital labourers.

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⁷² Michel Foucault, 'Thirteen: 5 April, 1978', *Security, Territory, Population*, Volume 4, (London: Macmillan, 2007), p.451.

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