

The Diffusion of Digital Corporate Hegemony: Addiction, Capital and Discourse Power

Shitong Zhang¹

¹ University of California, Davis

Correspondence: Shitong Zhang, University of California, Davis.

doi:10.56397/JLCS.2023.09.04

Abstract

People are caught in social media, which digests their desires, and addiction has become a prominent phenomenon among users, but the platforms care nothing about the protection of users' information and privacy, and their rights to express and choose. The collection and processing of user data by digital enterprises has undoubtedly become a new type of capital, which alienates individuals, affects the operation of social capital and political orientation, and how individuals defend their own boundaries has become an important issue.

Keywords: digital enterprises, social platforms, data, addiction, capital

It makes total sense that the ephemeral information of social platforms can be likened to a fountain device, as 92% of engagement occurring within the first hour of a tweet being posted, and tweets being updated so quickly that they are quickly buried without traffic attached to them. The system consisting of "follower" and "@" and tweet and symbol attempts to expose human connections to a collective context, but more importantly, the distribution of content leads to the generation of data, which is by far the most lucrative raw material.

People and their social activities are caught in social platforms, posting on Facebook, Instagram, and clicking on Twitter to browse constantly updated posts anytime, anywhere. The data generated from 2000 to 2003 alone has exceeded that generated in the entire history of mankind. (Paul Stephens, 2015) In 2017, people have left nearly over 500,000 comments on

Facebook, (Bernard Marr, n.d.) and in the same year Google processed a whopping 3.5 billion searches per day.

Social platforms capture users' personal information and usage habits, digest the individuals' desire for information and make users enjoy them through sophisticated algorithmic settings. Users' attention is translated into likes, comments and consumption, and the platforms seem to understand their unconscious desires better than the users do. Decades ago, limited research had examined the potential for Facebook use to become addictive. (Griffiths, M. D., Kuss, D. J. & Demetrovics, Z., 2014)

For these reasons, social platforms such as Facebook are attractive to advertisers. In 2007, Facebook already owned 58 million users, and by studying user profiles, a team of experts from Harvard University and the University of

California gathered information about how users' tastes, values, and the way they interact with each other are related. Facebook claims that the company doesn't sell user data, and in fact it doesn't have to; engineers are perfectly capable of using the data to quantify, manipulate, and sell user attention, and user data has enormous consumer potential. By now, it has become common practice for Internet companies to use user information to build platforms with more sophisticated algorithm, and users are giving up some of their time and rights in these "addictive" behaviors, though such transactions are not equal.

We trust the platforms almost unconditionally, exposing our personal information to their timelines. In a measurement study on Facebook addiction, majority respondents reported that "Facebook has become a part of my daily life", "I find that I spend more time on Facebook than I primarily expected", and "I feel isolated when I haven't logged on to Facebook for a long time", which leads to the result that people lose some control over their behavior due to habitual behavior, (Sofiah, S., Omar, S. Z., Bolong, J. & Osman, M. N., 2011) and addiction becomes irrefutable and even irreversible.

According to a recent survey in Australia, 58% of respondents admitted that they do not know what those companies will do with the data they collect, and 49% felt that their data cannot be protected due to a lack of knowledge or time to understand the process of corporate data collection and utilization. (Appel, G., Grewal, L., Hadi, R., & Stephen, A. T., 2020)

What is even more commonly is that users are not willing to invest energy and time in examining the platforms' terms on personal information processing, and they are in a state of indifference or negative response.

The platforms' processing of information is not intuitive, and users can only get a glimpse of it in the updated legal provisions and the privacy access policy of the platforms. Platforms can conduct data wrapping to realize facial recognition and medical alerts through customization and optimization practices (e.g., Apple watch), and companies can sell extended data wrapping and data to other entities. For example, Facebook sells analytics related to users based on their personal information data, and Twitter sells third-party subscriptions to its APIs that allow other firms to explore users'

behaviors. (Quach, S., Thaichon, P., Martin, K.D. et al, 2022)

The platforms are more likely to use "strategic rituals", i.e., formal manipulation techniques, to avoid professional consideration and judgment. (Liu Yong & Wang Liliang, 2014) In order to avoid legal risks and administrative penalties, they have actively constructed an information protection framework, and under the discourse of "exchanging information for service", they list the personal information required for each service separately, which can be regarded as being collected for specific, clear and legitimate purposes to a certain extent, and the above, as the governance behaviors of strategic rituals of social platforms such as Facebook, on the one hand, realized the legitimacy and legality of the platforms' personal information governance, and on the other hand, maintained the super platforms' attitude of safeguarding users' rights and interests.

Generally speaking, the platforms will collect and store user data for analysis and personalized recommendation, and on this basis optimize algorithms and product design by mining more information. Specifically, digital platforms will collect users' personal information, including but not limited to name, gender, age, address, phone number, email address, social media account, search history, browsing history, geographic location and so on. Then they store such personal information in servers and use algorithms to analyze the information to learn about users' preferences, behaviors, and interests. Next, according to these analysis results, the digital platforms will recommend relevant content, services and advertisements to users to improve user experience and viscosity, and at the same time, they can obtain more commercial benefits and gradually realize their own capital accumulation, which still follows the logic of expansion and proliferation of capital.

Major platforms generally adopt data encryption algorithms to prevent information leakage and attacks, and invite third-party organizations to intervene in data desensitization to protect data security. However, the platforms' background processing of exposing personal information is limited, making it difficult for users to have a further understanding of the platforms' data reserves, accuracy and privacy, and vulnerabilities often exist. This is also a long-standing "algorithmic

black-box problem". Ordinary users are often afraid of and at a loss about the leakage of personal information, but it is almost impossible to isolate themselves in the world without the network, and it is also far exceeding their power to face the complex operation of the platforms and the high cost of the judicial path, so accepting the life of "Panorama Prison" seems to become the norm.

The hegemony of the digital enterprises not only penetrates into the daily life of users, but also, more and more significantly, inevitably affects the capital operation and political orientation of society. Facebook secretly carried out an experiment on "emotion contagion" in the early years, whereby it manipulated users' mood to create a specific emotional effect on the network, (Richard Seymour, 2019) which led to an exponential emotional agitation and information explosion as the information spread so quickly, then dispersed in an uproar, leaving behind a nothingness. The users couldn't see the real world through the smoke, and instead there were accumulated emotions and shouts.

Led by the logic of capital and technology, digital enterprises connect the process of capital exploitation with big data technology, and they formulate complete digital credit rules, which seem to be fair to everyone, but the capitalists themselves are at the top of the rules, dominating the "rules of the game" and the process of information flow and transformation.

The relationship between digital enterprise and Leviathan seems to be in a dynamic conflict and reconciliation. The ideal state of many countries is to have a monopoly on information management, but the tech giants do not agree with this and they are trying to build their own private property data systems that are profitable for themselves. Washington realized that it could manipulate the information and functionality of social media platforms for its own political purposes and embarked on cyberwarfare programs against its enemies, such as planting malware, which drew the ire of Facebook. However, in the face of such a large volume of information and data monitoring scope, the government and capital will spare no effort to compete for the scope of information control, so as to enhance their own discourse power and control.

In the first half of 2022, the open source software provider Github began sanctioning software

developer accounts in Russia, and laboratories, enterprises, and even relevant government departments in Russia using the system suffered huge losses, with their code-hosting services disabled and deleted, and no appeals allowed. (Li Qiuqi, 2023) This seems to confirm that there is no such thing as a so-called neutral digital platform in the world, and that the vision of the future of cosmopolitanism and democracy is like an illusion, with people recognizing in shock that what the Internet has brought about may be more of a new type of hegemony. The fact seems to be that all over the world, capital is attached to digital platforms, and politics and capital are either attached to each other or are mutually exclusive, both trying to extend their spheres of influence and thus realize benefits on a larger scale.

In addition, most platforms adopt the form of real name in the background and anonymity in the foreground. In the case that users are unknown to the algorithm, technology and operation in the background, the platforms and the government occupy a dominant position in dealing with violations by blocking or banning, and fail to provide substantive protection for users' personality rights and interests. There is no lack of examples in various platforms of users choosing to file an appeal or even resorting to legal action because their accounts were suddenly blocked and all content was deleted. The platforms have a great decisive role in content publishing, account processing, etc., with limited freedom of expression and vertical management relationship permeating the platform relationship pattern, and people are silently clamped down. Digital alienation and digital monopoly often surge forward in the stage of capital and political collusion, the discourse of power groups envelops individual discourse, cyberspace becomes a huge information cocoon, and digital hegemony completes the invasion and exploitation from the material to the spiritual level.

The reality that users seem to face is that in the process of individual addiction, platforms become more and more skillful in mastering the growth mechanism of traffic, and the discourse power also flows to more powerful capital and political groups. As the wave of information surges, the individual's happiness or emptiness, protest or obedience, are all included under a larger framework of domination, and the question facing the individual may be how to

defend the boundaries of the self in the “pseudo society” where there are “traps” everywhere.

References

- Appel, G., Grewal, L., Hadi, R., & Stephen, A. T. (2020). The Future of Social Media in Marketing. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 48(1), 79-95.
- Bernard Marr. (n.d.). How Much Data Do We Create Every Day? The Mind-Blowing Stats Everyone Should Read. <https://bernardmarr.com/how-much-data-do-we-create-every-day-the-mind-blowing-stats-everyone-should-read/>.2018-5-21/2023-4-28.
- Griffiths, M. D., Kuss, D. J. & Demetrovics, Z. (2014). Social Networking Addiction: An Overview of Preliminary Findings. In K. P. Rosenberg & L. C. Feder (Eds.), *Behavioral Addictions: Criteria, Evidence, and Treatment* (pp. 119-141). London: Academic Press.
- Li Qiuqi. (2023). Can Digital Technology Promote Cosmopolitanism — New Paths and Reflections on Resistance to Digital Hegemony. *Exploration And Free Views*, No.400(02), 65-74+178+182. (in Chinese)
- Liu Yong, Wang Liliang. (2014). Sources as a “Strategic Ritual” — Based on an Examination of China Newsweek’s Social Security Report. *Journalism Review*, (06), 43-47. (in Chinese)
- Paul Stephens. (2015). *The Poetics of Information Overload: From Gertrude Stein to Conceptual Writing*, University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, MN, Kindle loc.83.
- Quach, S., Thaichon, P., Martin, K.D. et al. (2022). Digital Technologies: Tensions in Privacy and Data. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 50, 1299-1323. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-022-00845-y>.
- Richard Seymour. (2019). *The Twittering Machine*. United Kingdom London: The Indigo Press.
- Sofiah, S., Omar, S. Z., Bolong, J. & Osman, M. N. (2011). Facebook Addiction among Female University Students. *Revista de Administrație Publică și Politici Sociale*, 2, 95-109.