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# Digital Labour: A Comment on César Bolaño's tripleC-Reflection

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**Abstract:** This paper is a reflection on César Bolaño's tripleC article "Digitalisation and Labour: A Rejoinder to Christian Fuchs". It discusses aspects of digital labour that relate to the dialectic of production and consumption, the category of prosumption, productive labour, housework, the international division of digital labour, and Facebook use as a form of ideological transport labour.

**Keywords:** digital labour; commodity; critique of the political economy

## 1. Introduction

César Bolaño wrote together with Eloy Vieira an article that was published in the journal *Television & New Media*, in which the authors critically commented on my concept of digital labour. I responded to his article in the same issue of *Television & New Media*. Bolaño has written a reply to my reply, and this reflection is a further comment on César Bolaño's reply to my reply to the original article. We have decided based on César's suggestion to publish these two articles in *tripleC* because it is a non-commercial open access journal, which allows faster publication than in a traditional commercial mainstream journal and does not hide content behind pay walls, which makes articles better accessible. *tripleC* is a journal that focuses on the critical study of communication(s) and capitalism, which is why discussions about how to use Marx for understanding communications find a natural home in it.

Bolaño argues in his *tripleC* comment that the real important question is what is labour and what is not, which implies that the question of what is productive labour is of less relevance. I think both questions are crucial for a critique of the political economy of the Internet. I have dealt with the question what digital labour is in both the books *Digital Labour and Karl Marx* (Fuchs 2014) and *Culture and Economy in the Age of Social Media* (Fuchs 2015). I cover questions relating to productive labour in the context of digital media in *Culture and Economy in the Age of Social Media's* chapter 5, which on almost 100 pages gives a very detailed overview of how Marx defines this concept in various works and relates it to the discussion and analysis of digital labour. The two books inherently belong together: *Culture and Economy...* is the second volume of *Digital Labour and Karl Marx*. The two books should be read together. They together ground foundations of a theory and critique of the political economy of digital labour.

The question "What is labour?" is just as important as the question "What is productive labour?", although it is clear that it is more general because only something that is labour in the first instance can be productive or unproductive labour in the second instance. The category of productive labour is an attribute and subcategory of the concept of labour. There is an even more universal question that will not be covered in this short reflection, but that I discuss in more detail in my two books: What is work? Work, labour, and various forms of labour form a Hegelian triad of the universal, the particular, and the individual. The distinction between work and labour takes into account the dialectics of use-value and value and of the concrete and the abstract. It is also a distinction that reflects Marx's awareness of the different meanings of the two German terms *Werkätigkeit* and *Arbeit*.

Bolaño asks in his reflection the questions: What is digital labour? And what is not? He writes: "the central problem that I originally pointed out in the work of Smythe and Fuchs:

consumption is not labour” (81), Facebook usage is “a form of unproductive consumption” (81). The difference between our two positions is the following one: César Bolaño argues that Facebook use is a form of media consumption and that media consumption never creates value and surplus-value—it is according to this argumentation not a form of abstract labour and not a form of work at all, but the use of a commodity that was produced by workers. I do not in general disagree, but argue that we have to differentiate this view based on the kind of media commodity we deal with and that the advertising-based media commodity involves a peculiar kind of labour that produces it. I hold that audiences of advertising-financed media and users of advertising-based social media platforms such as Facebook in their usage are digital workers producing value, surplus-value, and commodities. Their media activities are on advertising-financed media a form of abstract labour.

Facebook usage has both a concrete and an abstract dimension: It creates data that enables communication and sociality. This is a use-value for the users. At the same time it however also creates a use-value for capital: meta-data that allows the targeting of advertising. This doubling of use-value creates the impression that there is only a use-value for users because the surveillance of meta-data and data remains largely invisible to the users. Facebook usage is not just concrete work, but also abstract labour expended in time. It results in a data commodity that the company that is one of the world’s largest advertising agencies sells to clients in order to accumulate capital.

The dialectic of concrete work and abstract labour produces the commodity’s use-value and value. It is a production process. César Bolaño in a rather dualist manner argues that production and consumption are completely separate. I hold in contrast that there is a logical dialectic of production and consumption and a historically specific relationship between the two.

## 2. The Dialectic of Production and Consumption

Karl Marx (1857/1858) points out in the *Introduction to the Grundrisse* that there is a general dialectic of production, distribution, and consumption. As part of this dialectic, there are dialectics of production/distribution, distribution/consumption, and production/consumption. Production and consumption are identical and different at the same time, they are dialectically overgrasping into each other. They are not simply separate realms.

Marx (1857/1858, 90) speaks of productive consumption when describing production’s consumptive dimensions:

Production is also immediately consumption. Twofold consumption, subjective and objective: the individual not only develops his abilities in production, but also expends them, uses them up in the act of production, just as natural procreation is a consumption of life forces. Secondly: consumption of the means of production, which become worn out through use, and are partly (e.g. in combustion) dissolved into their elements again. Likewise, consumption of the raw material, which loses its natural form and composition by being used up. The act of production is therefore in all its moments also an act of consumption.

Facebook usage consumes the platform as infrastructure (without using it up) for communication and previously produced information that is on the platform forms the foundation of producing new information and communication.

Production also produces consumption:

Thus production produces consumption (1) by creating the material for it; (2) by determining the manner of consumption; and (3) by creating the products, initially posited by it as objects, in the form of a need felt by the consumer. It thus produces the object of consumption, the manner of consumption and the motive of consumption (92):

The production of information on Facebook (such as videos, images, postings) is an object that others can read and view in a specific manner determined by Facebook's affordances. It creates an incentive for others to sign up to and continuously use the platform.

Marx also uses the term consumptive production (91):

Consumption is also immediately production, just as in nature the consumption of the elements and chemical substances is the production of the plant" (90).

Consumption produces production in a double way, (1) because a product becomes a real product only by being consumed. For example, a garment becomes a real garment only in the act of being worn; a house where no one lives is in fact not a real house; thus the product, unlike a mere natural object, proves itself to be, becomes, a product only through consumption. Only by decomposing the product does consumption give the product the finishing touch; for the product is its production not as objectified activity, but rather only as object for the active subject; (2) because consumption creates the need for new production, that is it creates the ideal, internally impelling cause for production, which is its presupposition. Consumption creates the motive for production; it also creates the object which is active in production its determinant aim. If it is clear that production offers consumption its external object, it is therefore equally clear that consumption ideally posits the object of production as an internal image, as a need, as drive and as purpose. It creates the objects of production in a still subjective form. No production without a need. But consumption reproduces the need" (91–92).

(1): Facebook as platform is only alive in and through its human use. User-generated information is only social if others consume it, if they make comments, etc.

(2): Facebook use, i.e. the creation of information on it, creates and reproduces the need of users to further use the platform and produce further information with its help.

Marx summarises the dialectic of production and consumption the following way:

Production, then, is also immediately consumption, consumption is also immediately production. Each is immediately its opposite. But at the same time a mediating movement takes place between the two. Production mediates consumption; it creates the latter's material; without it, consumption would lack an object. But consumption also mediates production, in that it alone creates for the products the subject for whom they are products. The product only obtains its 'last finish' in consumption (91).

Marx also uses the term productive consumption in *Capital Volume 1*: He writes for example in chapter 7 that "productive consumption" means that work consumes "its objects and its instruments" in the work process so that they are "elements in the formation of new use-values, new products" (Marx 1867, 290).

There is a logical dialectic of production and consumption. Given that capitalism is a dynamic and historical system, capitalism has as answer to crises and its inherent antagonisms to change its forms in order to maintain and reproduce the basic structures of accumulation and exploitation. Capitalism evolves based on dialectic of continuity and discontinuity. Therefore the form of the relationship between production and consumption can vary. Prosumption is a specific form of the dialectic of production and consumption, in which consumers are also producers or co-producers of commodities, value, and surplus-value. So for example at McDonalds, the customer is his own waiter/waitress and therefore not just spends money as consumer for eating a bad-tasting burger, but also creates part of the service's value. As a result, McDonalds can reduce its wage costs and maximise its profits. In prosumption, capitalists outsource value-creation to consumers in order to increase profitability. Something comparable is happening to Facebook: The company crowdsources value-production to users. Its wage costs are low, which is a strategy to make high profits. In the case of both Google and Facebook, this strategy has thus far worked: Google made profits of US\$14.4 billion US\$ (data source: Google SEC filings, form 10-K 2014) in 2014 and was the world's 52<sup>nd</sup> largest transnational corporation (data source: Forbes Global 2000, year 2014). Facebook in the same year had profits of US\$2.9 billion (data source: Facebook SEC filings, form

10-K 2014) and was the world's 510<sup>th</sup> largest TNC (data source: Forbes Global 2000, year 2014). Advertising and consumer culture and the Internet's shaping by this culture have increased the prevalence of capital's use of prosumption as strategy for maximising profits.

Social media users do not create content all of the time. A lot of the time they just watch videos on YouTube and do not create videos themselves. Or they just read postings on Facebook and Twitter, and do not post or comment themselves. They are audiences. But from time to time they create content and share it. Not all of the time, but sometimes. The point however is that both watching/reading and creating content on corporate, advertising-financed social media platforms such as Facebook is abstract labour that creates value and surplus-value.

I do not claim that all media consumption is productive and abstract labour. In the articles that Bolaño refers to, I am specifically interested in advertising-funded media. Smythe's categories of audience labour and the audience commodity apply to such media, not to others. If in contrast one consumes media that are non-advertising financed, such as a song that one downloads from iTunes and pays US\$0.99 for it, then one is predominantly a consumer and the worker creating value is the artist working for a record label that sells music via iTunes and other distribution channels. There are a variety of capital accumulation strategies in the media and culture industry that have different relationships between producers and consumers. There can e.g. be the commodification of media technologies, content, labour-power, access, users, or audiences. Advertising is one of these strategies, albeit a very important one. In 2013, the worldwide advertising revenues amounted to £302 billion (data source: Ofcom International Communications Market Report 2014). TV advertising made up 35%, Internet advertising 25%, and newspaper advertising 17% of these revenues (ibid.). Advertising is a huge industry that has been growing with the rise of mass production and mass consumption in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### 3. Productive Labour

César Bolaño writes in his comment: "In Marx's definition, there are no observations about ethics or morals, nor any references to gender or to ethnicity. Productive labour is not the same as useful labour, good labour, necessary labour, or labour essential to society. Productive labour is the one that directly produces value and surplus value. It is useful, good, or necessary to capital. It does not matter if it is conducted by a white man or by a black woman" (80). Productive labour is quite independent from the type of product or service (physical, informational, affectual, etc.). Capitalism can turn almost anything into a commodity and the production of many commodity types for the purpose of capital accumulation requires abstract labour. When speaking of productive labour, Marx asks first and foremost a political question: Who is the revolutionary subject? Who are the members of the revolutionary class? My argument is that users of advertising-funded social media are part of the revolutionary class because capital exploits them like other workers.

I disagree with Bolaño when he says that, "domestic labour is [...] unproductive" (80). Housework produces and reproduces a commodity, namely labour-power. It is reproductive labour. The point that many Marxist feminists have made since the 1970s is that housework produces value and surplus-value and is an unpaid form of labour that allows capital to increase its profits by not having to pay for the reproduction of labour power. Housework and Facebook user labour have in common that they are both unpaid forms of value-generating labour expended in labour time that is objectified in specific commodities (labour-power in the one case, data in the other case) and that they have social use-values, i.e. they produces and reproduces sociality in the world. Facebook user labour and housework can be seen as a two sub-types of reproductive labour.

### 4. The International Division of Digital Labour

César Bolaño asks sceptically: "What relation could exist between the exploitation of labour in the colonies (which was passing through a decolonization process after World War II) and the TV audience in the USA?" (81). In terms of digital labour, we can reformulate this ques-

tion: What do Facebook users in the West, Foxconn workers in China, and miners who extract minerals in the Congo that form the physical foundation of digital media technologies have in common? They are all exploited by the same kind of transnational communications companies within an international division of digital labour (IDDL) that these corporations use in order to outsource and crowdsource labour so that labour costs can be reduced and profits maximised (Fuchs 2015, chapter 6). Through the IDDL, capital creates an objective relation between different types of digital labour that can however not be consciously experienced by these workers because they are physically and socially separated from each other. Figure 1 shows a model of the international division of digital labour (for detailed explanations see Fuchs 2015, chapter 6). Class struggles can in global capitalism only truly question the power of capital if it is networked and international, if workers of all lands unite. Pressure on specific companies can only be put if many of their globally distributed workers engage in struggles together, make demands together, exchange information, provide mutual solidarity, etc. There are political reasons why it matters that we identify and analyse different forms of digital labour and relate them to each other. They form a dialectical unity in diversity.

Why is it important to have such a unified concept of digital labour? Nick Dyer-Witford (2014, 175) provides an answer: "To name the global worker is to make a map; and a map is also a weapon." The concept of the global digital worker can be one of the many steps that are required for turning the objective relation of digital workers constituted by the international division of digital labour into a conscious relation so that the global digital worker in-itself turns into a global digital worker for-itself that struggles against digital capitalism.

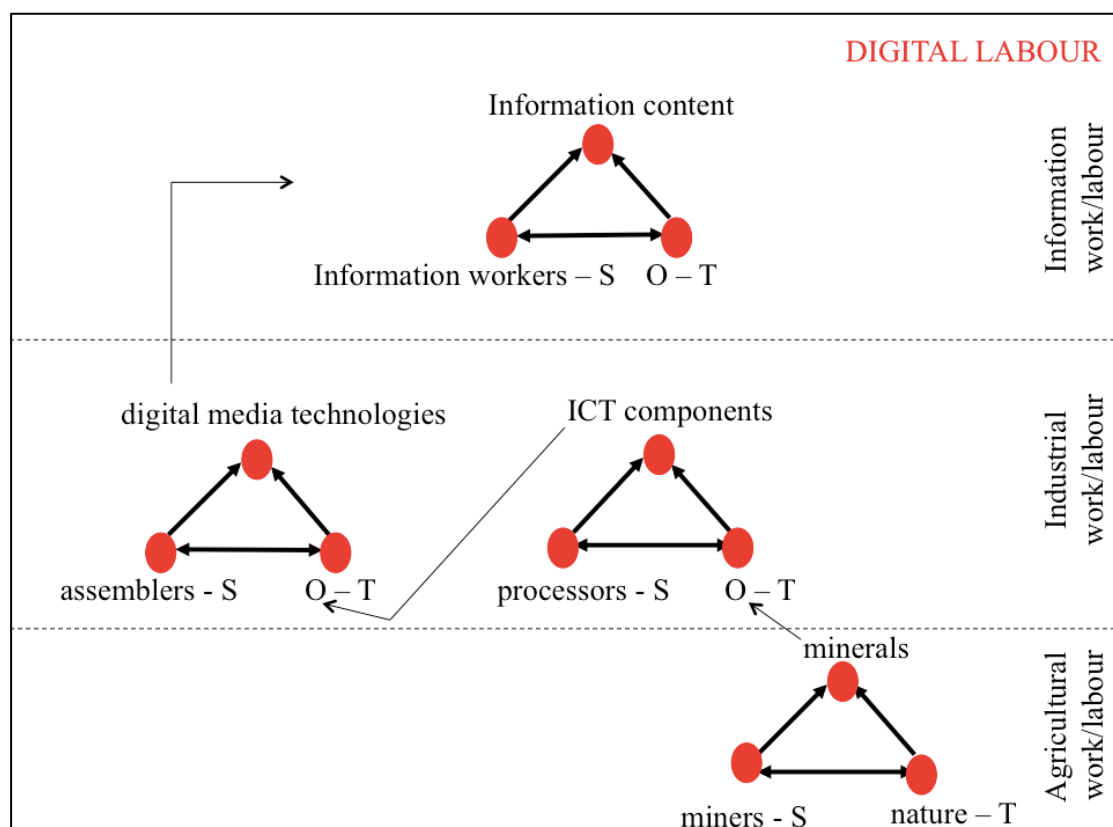


Figure 1: Cycles constituting the international division of digital labour

## 5. Facebook Use as a Form of Ideological Transport Labour

In *Culture and Economy in the Age of Social Media* (Fuchs 2015, chapter 5), I have suggested to consider the work of paid advertising workers and unpaid audience workers as a specific cultural form of transport labour. In *Capital Volume 2*, Marx (1885, chapter 6.3) describes transport costs as a form of circulation costs constituted by productive circulation

labour. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx argues that transport is not part of circulation, but part of the production process:

Transport to market (spatial condition of circulation) belongs in the production process. [...] Circulation proceeds in space and time. Economically considered, the spatial condition, the bringing of the product to the market, belongs to the production process itself. The product is really finished only when it is on the market. The movement through which it gets there belongs still with the cost of making it. It does not form a necessary moment of circulation, regarded as a particular value process, since a product may be bought and even consumed at the point of its production. But this spatial moment is important in so far as the expansion of the market and the exchangeability of the product are connected with it (Marx 1857/1858, 533-534).

Transport “gives the product a new use value (and this holds right down to and including the retail grocer, who weighs, measures, wraps the product and thus gives it a form for consumption), and this new use value costs labour time, is therefore at the same time exchange value. Bringing to market is part of the production process itself. The product is a commodity, is in circulation only when it is on the market (Marx 1857/1858, 635).

Figure 2 visualises the economic relationships of Facebook (and other advertising-based social media platforms) and its advertising clients.

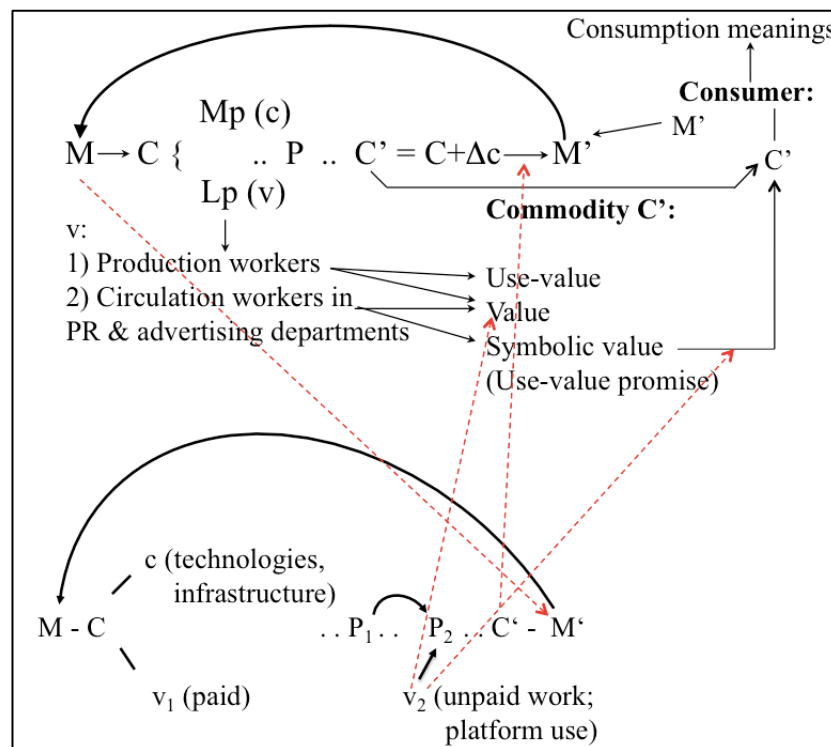


Figure 2: The economic relationship of Facebook and its advertising clients

A commodity has a use-value, value, and symbolic value. A company’s production workers create the basic use-value that satisfies human needs. These activities take an average combined number of labour hours. Labour is the substance of value, labour time its measure and magnitude. In order to sell its commodity, a company tries to give positive meanings to it and to communicate these meanings to the public’s members whom it tries to convince that this good or service can enhance their lives and that they should therefore buy this commodity and not a comparable one offered by another company. Most commodities have independent from their physical or informational nature a cultural component that is created by

cultural labour. The cultural dimension of a commodity is necessary ideological: it appeals to consumers' imagination and wants to make them connote positive images and feelings with the idea of consuming this commodity.

The creation of a commodity's symbolic ideology is a value-creating activity. The use-value of a commodity can be physical and/or informational: we have cars for satisfying the need of driving from A to B, we listen to music for satisfying our aesthetic desires, etc. The exchange-value of a commodity is the relationship in which it is exchanged with another commodity, normally money:  $x$  commodity A =  $y$  commodity B (money). Symbolic value establishes a link and mediates between use-value and exchange-value, it helps accomplishing the exchange, in which consumers obtain use-values and capitalists money.

Wolfgang Fritz Haug (1986) speaks in this context of the commodity's use-value promise: The sales and advertising ideology associated with a commodity promises specific positive life enhancement functions that the commodity brings with it and thereby conceals the commodity's exchange-value behind promises. The symbolic commodity ideology promises a use-value beyond actual consumption, an imaginary surplus and surplus enjoyment. These promises are detached from the actual use-value and are therefore a fictitious form of use-value. Capitalism's antagonism between use-value and exchange-value takes in the commodity aesthetic the form of a contradiction between use-value and appearances of use-value: as long as the consumer has not purchased a commodity, s/he can only imagine how using it actually is. Advertising makes use-values appear in specific forms and promises specific qualities—it communicates the commodity aesthetic. The commodity's appearance becomes more important than its being and is an instrument for capital accumulation. "The aesthetics of the commodity in its widest meaning – the sensual appearance and the conception of its use value—becomes detached from the object itself" (Haug 1986, 16–17).

David Harvie (2005, 153) argues that advertising "provides an individual capital with the use-value of easing the realisation of its commodities' values as money and profit". He adds that branding and advertising also "provide workers (as consumers) with use-values". Advertising and branding provide use-values for capital, i.e. an ideological service that bestows specific meanings to commodities that try to make them better saleable. For the consumer, these ideological and symbolic values are however not use-values itself, but only use-value promises—they promise specific positive qualities that consumers can attain by purchasing specific commodities.

Saying that the cultural labour of branding, public relations and creating commodity advertisements creates symbolic value is not detached from the notion of economic value. Rather value here precisely means that for the creation of this symbolic dimension of the commodity labour time is invested. It is therefore no wonder that almost all larger companies have their own public relations departments or outsource public relations and advertising to other companies. Paying the circulation workers employed in such departments or companies needs to be planned and calculated into the price of commodities.

Consumers give specific meanings to the commodities they buy and consume. They thereby construct consumption meaning and in doing so can react to use-value promises in different ways:

- 1) They can share these ideologies and buy the commodities because they hope the promise is an actual use value;
- 2) They can deconstruct the use-value promise as ideology and refuse buying the commodity;
- 3) They can deconstruct the use-value, but nonetheless buy the commodity for other reasons.

For communicating commodity ideologies to consumers, companies need to buy advertisement spaces in commercial media. Commercial media link commodity ideologies to consumers, they are media "transporting" ideologies to consumers, although it is unclear and not determined how the latter react and if the confrontation with commodity ideologies results in actual purchases. Facebook and other corporate social media are advertising companies that sell advertising space and user data as commodities to clients who want to present commodity ideologies to users and hope that the latter buy their commodities.



Marx sees transport labour that moves a commodity in space-time from location A to location B, which takes a certain labour time  $x$ , as productive labour. The value generated by transporting a commodity from A to B is therefore  $x$  hours. The symbolic ideology of a commodity first needs to be produced by special ad and public relations employees and is in a second step communicated to potential buyers. *Advertising therefore involves informational production and informational transport labour.* Advertising production does not create a physical commodity, but an ideological dimension of a commodity—a use-value promise that is attached to a commodity as meaning. Advertising transport workers do not transport a commodity in physical space from A to B, they rather organise a communication space that allows advertisers to communicate their use-value promises to potential customers. Facebook's paid employees and users are therefore 21<sup>st</sup> century equivalents of what Marx considered as transport workers in classical industry. They are productive workers whose activities are necessary for “transporting” use-value promises from companies to potential customers. Marx associated transport with communication as comparable forms of work. On Facebook and other social media platforms, transportation labour is communication labour.

Dallas W. Smythe argued that it is a specific feature of audience labour that audiences “work to market [...] things to themselves” (Smythe 1981, 4). Facebook users constantly work and constantly market things to themselves—they transport advertising ideologies (use-value promises): Their usage behaviour constantly generates data that is used for targeting ads. All Facebook usage is productive labour, with the exception of those cases, where users block advertising with the help of ad block software, which probably only a minority does. Facebook usage labour adds value to the commodity that is sold by Facebook's ad clients. Practically this means that a lot of companies want to advertise on Facebook and calculate social media advertising costs into their commodity prices.

The production workers of Facebook's clients produce use-value and value. Their PR & advertising employees (or the workers in the companies to which this labour is outsourced) produce value and a use-value promise as symbolic value. Facebook's users produce a data commodity that allows targeting use-value promises. That they create value means that their labour time objectifies itself in commodities: the ad clients' employees objectify their labour in the commodity that is marketed to Facebook users, whereas Facebook users objectify their labour in a data commodity that is sold to Facebook's clients. User labour is thereby also objectified in the commodity that is marketed and potentially sold to users themselves.

The production of commodity ideologies in the form of advertising requires two forms of labour:

- 1) The production of the ideological content of advertising that praises the commodity and invents positive reasons why consumers should buy it. Advertising labour in PR, marketing, branding, and advertising departments, companies and agencies conducts such production.

- 2) The transport of advertising messages to potential consumers, which is achieved by audience and user labour. On Facebook, user labour enables constant surveillance that in turn enables the targeting of advertisement messages. Facebook users are contemporary online and cultural equivalents of what Marx termed transport workers—their labour helps transporting use-value promises to themselves. Transport workers are productive workers who create surplus-value and are exploited.

## 6. Conclusion

César Bolaño and I have different interpretations of Marx. There is not one single “correct” interpretation of Marx, but there are rather different readings. The important point in discussions between Marxists is, however, that they all share the interest in criticising and overcoming capitalism and class. The series of four articles constituting a discussion between César Bolaño and me has shown that our disagreement is on how to conceptualise and assess Facebook with the help of Marx's theory and on what the role of users can and should be in the struggle for a society without and beyond class, value, capital, and labour. These differences are reflected in differing conceptual approaches and readings of Marx. We agree

that a world without capitalism and capitalist media is urgently needed. The difficult and crucial question is how a left strategy towards such a world should look like.

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