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Digital communicative capitalization in the age of platforms and communicative abundance

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Abstract. The authors deals with the model of digital communicative capitalization, which describes a crucial social-economical process of the age of communicative abundance. People and organizations are considered as investors operating within various digital attention markets. The main hypothesis is that these investors have different abilities to comprehend and take advantage of the opportunities, which attention markets propose to them in terms of accruing and increasing capital. The study was conducted relying on the established notions of different forms of capital coined by P. Bourdieu, as well as on related notions of immaterial capital developed in the wide range of scientific works on digitalization and critical theory of the Internet. Basing the model on them, the authors highlight the lack of transparency in the processes of conversion digital reflections of capitals to their real forms, and, therefore, propose such terms as “digital communicative capital” and “attention double exploitation”. The latter stresses the new layers of digital inequality, where the results of digital labor are being captured and monetized. The analysis of the potential elaboration of the whole model of digital communicative capitalization and outlined empirical prospects of applying its implications are the particular value of the study.

Keywords: information abundance, digital attention market, digital investor, digital labor, communicative capital, digital communicative capital

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Цифровая коммуникативная капитализация в эпоху платформ и коммуникационного изобилия

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Аннотация. Рассматривается модель цифровой коммуникативной капитализации как важнейший социально-экономический процесс эпохи коммуникационного изобилия. Люди и организации позиционируются как инвесторы, действующие на различных рынках цифрового внимания. Основная гипотеза: инвесторы обладают разными способностями к осознанию и использованию в своих интересах возможностей, которые предлагают им рынки внимания с точки зрения накопления и преумножения капитала. Исследование проведено с опорой на устоявшиеся представления о различных формах капитала, введенные П. Бурдье, а также на связанные с ними понятия нематериального капитала, разработанные в широком спектре научных работ по цифровизации и критической теории интернета. Основываясь на этих понятиях, подчеркивается отсутствие прозрачности в процессах преобразования цифровых отражений капиталов в их реальные формы и предлагаются новые термины – цифровой коммуникативный капитал и двойная эксплуатация внимания. Последний термин подчеркивает новые уровни цифрового неравенства, где результаты цифрового труда захватываются и монетизируются. Анализ потенциальной разработки всей модели цифровой коммуникативной капитализации и намеченные эмпирические перспективы ее применения составляют особую ценность исследования.

Ключевые слова: информационное изобилие, цифровой рынок внимания, цифровой инвестор, цифровой труд, цифровой коммуникативный капитал

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Introduction

The current state of the Internet has little to do with the early visions of it as a space of freedom and unfettered creativity. But it also has less in common with the 2000–2010s milieu dominated by few USA-based tech corporations which have been able to set rules and employ creative and communicative abilities of internet users to generate profits from investors and advertisers (Zuboff, 2019).

Digital technologies are still ubiquitous. American tech corporations are still powerful. But users become to acknowledge their potential power as well and defy established digital hierarchies. Local actors such as political parties, organizations,

governmental representatives, media celebrities, or academics question the right of global platforms to be the only sovereigns of the digital environment and the main beneficiaries of digital transformation.

We consider digital communicative capitalization as the cornerstone process of the hyper-connectivity era, where existing inequality is perpetuated via appropriation of users' attention by both global tech corporations and local power actors.

Theoretical framework

To analyze contradictions of communicative capitalization and attention exploitation in digital society the authors theoretically develop two main concepts: attention market and capital.

The authors' term of "digital attention markets" draws on works by attention economy's critics (Rushkoff, 2019; Williams, 2018; Wu, 2016), as well critical researchers of new modes of capitalism (Dean, 2010; Zuboff, 2019; Srnicek, 2017).

Originally drawing on the notion of capital by P. Bourdieu (1986), the authors supplement it with current works related to immaterial forms of capital (Faucher, 2018; Nixon, 2017; Park, 2017; Ragnedda, 2018).

Conceptual development: digital attention markets

The world of information scarcity has been supplanted by the world of information (Williams, 2018) or communicative (Kean, 2013) abundance. The abundance of communications renders human attention a new scarce resource (Dekalov, 2017). It means that an individual has got limited time and limited capacity to spend it on an almost infinite number of options. These options are defined, provided, and imposed via *digital attention markets* (social network sites, microblogging platforms, video hosting, etc.).

Attention markets have existed since the 19th century in the forms of penny papers, radio soap operas, or prime time television (Wu, 2016). But digital technologies are more ubiquitous. Permeating almost everything, they allow tech corporations to commodify internet communication, as "communication of one or more individuals via the Internet" (Shilina, 2012).

Pierre Bourdieu describes *capital* as "accumulated labor [...] which, when appropriated on a private, i.e., exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labor" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 241). In a broader sense, the term "capital" means a certain value ascribed to a certain set of material or immaterial entities, which a social actor possesses.

Social actors accumulate labor in different forms of capital. A social actor can employ different forms of capital in different sets and variations. There may be classical Bourdieusian forms of social, symbolic, economic, or cultural capital, but there may be new forms of it: communicative capital (Dean, 2010), social capital online (Faucher, 2018), digital capital (Park, 2017; Ragnedda, 2018), etc.

As noted earlier, attention is a resource. The process of attention spending is more like a digital labor in Fuchs' terms (Fuchs, 2016), or, as B. Nixon calls it, "audience labor" (Nixon, 2017). That labor plays a crucial role in the capital accumulation on individual's level.

Every individual has a constant attentional potential constraint by his physical ability to heed attention and concentrate. Roughly speaking, an individual has a renewable time budget, an analog of everyday UBI (universal basic income), to spend on work, family, everyday chores, entertainment, art, etc. And everyone has a history of their *attention investment*, which has been accumulated in different forms of capital, as well as the potential to convert and transform this combination mingling them with a renewable source of attention.

On higher levels, part of everyone's attention is mediated by various organizations and institutions and then redistributed (fairly or unfairly) to reinforce existing social structures. Digital attention markets and various actors operating within them (attention merchants) are such redistributors as well.

But these actors don't simply mediate attention and redistribute it to generate profit. Those markets have become so compelling that individuals change their attentional budgets to spend more time on their platforms. That has been partly made possible by the digital transformation of society where online analogs of offline services are cheaper (if not free of charge) and more available.

There is a multitude of people investing their attention and capitals to one or, what's more often, several digital attention markets such as Twitter, TikTok, Telegram, etc. Each market has a particular environment in which a particular set of activities is possible and therefore a limited set of capital conversions is allowed. If actors are active enough, they get a chance to use their attentional budget effectively and not miss the opportunities offered by the market and by other actors whose digital products are considered worthy.

So, every individual can spend their attentional budget on digital consumption, online business, art, etc. But the potential benefit in every case is not certain. Hence, what is worth dissecting is that the digital attention markets are *incomprehensible* to many. Publicly available metrics (views, likes, followers, etc.) can't be directly linked with success and be sufficient to consider them as some components of capital. Business metrics and their derivatives (e.g., reach or engagement rate) aren't sufficient as well, so they can't give an exhaustive answer to how the attention investment in digital activities may impact individual's or organization's set of capitals. The lack of transparency makes the possible impact inconsistent and unpredictable.

Conceptual development: digital communicative capital

The mechanisms of capital conversion within a given digital attention market are opaque. At best, individuals and organizations operating there comprehend *digital reflections of real capitals*: symbolic, social, cultural, etc. Their measurement would be approximate, and the formulas be arbitrary. Hence, for many, digital capital is not another form of capital, but the *approximate measurement of value* an actor can get from online activities. The more precise a measurement, the less real value in form of unsuccessfully invested capital an actor loses.

In turn, attention market owners have almost comprehensive information about tools and mechanisms of capital conversion. Some actors operating within these markets and with support of them (PR agencies, media, government officials, etc.) may have sufficient information to concentrate their audiences' attention as well.

In this paper, we develop the notion of communicative capital from our previous works (Gavra et al., 2020) and suggest a more precise term of digital communicative capital. It is important to delineate them because communicative capital relates to capitalization of captured audience's attention in attention markets in general, not only digital ones (reselling audiences to advertisers by traditional media is a vivid example).

In turn, *digital communicative capital* is a result of the audience's communication within a given platform as a digital attention market. The result (as with communicative capital) has an elusive value that can be evinced via its conversion into other forms of capital. Here it's important to highlight, that that capital can be extracted by platform owners similarly to extracting communicative capital by cable networks or printed media, i.e., media owners. But can we call the communicative capital accrued by actors operating within a given platform a digital one? Say, established media outlet promoting its YouTube channel? Strictly speaking, we can't, because it is just the digital reflection of communicative capital these actors may accumulate in the digital attention market. Or, if not well informed, may not.

That notion doesn't underestimate digital reflections of communicative capital over digital communicative capital. Moreover, so-called digital attention merchants get more possibilities in digital attention markets than average internet users. Allowing for the ubiquity of those markets, the structures of inequality become more sophisticated. The attention economy acquires a new digital dimension.

Both owners of digital platforms and communicative capitalists thriving within them aspire to make their business models more sustainable and resilient. To gain exhaustive information about attention being captured, attention merchants need to make the audience comprehensible and therefore scalable, predictable, and measurable.

This engenders a situation of commanded creativity, the exploitation of the audience's attention deliberately narrowing the potential for self-realization of many on behalf of the growth of a few. That *attention double exploitation* entails a major part of internet users not knowing how much they actually get and lose while the results of their digitally mediated communication activities are appropriated by few beneficiaries.

Digital content is free or cheap enough to spend a significant part of the attention budget on it. But to consume the content or to do a business one has to acquiesce with their attention selling to the third side both by platforms and various attention merchants within them. Even if a user uses adblockers or VPN services, she or he invests attention to learn how to use it, let alone the price to pay for it, or pays another part of the attention budget to skip annoying commercials, which cannot be easily blocked, or gain access to a banned internet source.

On large scales, an average internet user's budgets are not distributed effectively on behalf of those user's self-realization because the most predictable communicative activities are those that can be reduced to a limited set of reactions. The more reactions are gained, the more gratified advertisers and investors are. There's a huge risk that attention being spent on these reactions wouldn't be sufficient to invest for generating forms of capitals more essential for an individual's life.

Discussion

The forms of digital capital described above are difficult to separate from each other. Investing attention within a particular platform not only brings a measurable income but also, of course, increases social symbolic and cultural capital. The question is how exactly? The obvious problem with the Bourdieusian paradigm is that it points to different registers in the relations of power between social agents but is unable to evaluate these relations because there can be many potential manifestations of power in the form of different types of capital.

The arbitrary nature of communicative capital, including its digital dimension, is obvious, therefore it is difficult to choose the correct measure tool. The captured attention of users is mediatized at different levels with disparate metrics. In this regard, we highlight three questions that we will try to answer in our future research. The first question is whether it is possible to find a formula to calculate the digital communication capital or the digital reflection of it. The second question is whether that formula can be universal. Finally, is it possible to use digital communicative capital as a useful tool for business, political practice, and public administration?

Conclusion

Humanity is on the verge of serious crises that require important decisions. These decisions will largely depend on reaching a consensus on the role of the individual in the digital attention markets. Will a person agree to have their attention sold even for the sake of free content? Will a person agree to be “exploited” by corporations? And should a person know how much their attention is worth and what they could get by knowing where that attention is most effectively invested? To answer these questions is a daunting challenge for media and communications researchers.

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