The Existence of Social Media Users: Working or Playing? (Information Capitalism Analysis)

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ABSTRACT

Indonesian people spend an average of 3 H 18 M per day for using social media. The activities carried out are very diverse, such as keeping in touch with friends and family, finding spare time, reading news stories, watching live streaming, finding products to purchase, posting about self-activities, etc. In Fuchs' view, social media users are part of digital labour. They are exploited by social media corporations, such as Facebook, Google, and others. Exploitation occurs by commodifying and selling data from social media activity to advertising companies. This is not realized by the users. The aims of research are the first, to explore awareness and perceptions of IKBP students about their activities in social media. Second, to deconstruct user awareness regarding their existence when surfing social media. This research uses descriptive qualitative methods. The data in this research is accumulated through observation and FGD. This research took a sample of students from the The Christian Institute of Technology and Business of Bukit Pengharapan Tawangmangu, Karanganyar, Central Java. The results of this research indicate that users perceive that surfing in social media is part of playing, recreational activities and only to fill spare time. Meanwhile, if examined from Fuchs' theory of information capitalism, social media users are digital labour that be exploited by digital corporations. This research is important so that users can use social media constructively, such as accumulating capital and developing creativity. Don't waste time.

Keyword: user of social media; digital labour; digital capitalism; exploitation

INTRODUCTION

One time in June 2023, I observed some students playing on their cell phones in one of the hallways of the Christian Institute of Technology and Business of Bukit Pengharapan Tawangmangu, Karanganyar, Central Java (ITBK-BP). At the time, I approached and asked about the activity they were doing with his cell phone. Most of them answered "watching videos from the Tik-Tok app", and some were playing. For them, social media after class or during rest is part of recreational activity. Explicitly, social media becomes an instrument that can get rid of tiredness. At this point, the place of recreation no longer embodies inter-human social activity, and covers a certain space and time. Recreational activities can take place in the form of interpersonal relationships through digital devices and can be expressed anywhere.

On another occasion in January 2023, I and a friend were talking about social media. While drinking coffee and enjoying the atmosphere of a café in Yogyakarta, my friend says he is proud to use several social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, and Tik-Tok. For him, the social media he uses, like Facebook and Instagram, is very helpful in interacting with many of his schoolmates, colleagues as well as friends who are now scattered in several different places. Besides, social media is very helpful in finding important information (news) and can even be a source of entertainment or recreation (through entertainment content).

The two stories above show that social media succeeds not only as a means of communication and interaction, but also as a recreational means. Users could use social media to refresh and get rid of tiredness. The variety of content in it can be a source of entertainment. All the emotions and feelings of the user can be united and channeled on social media. In general, *we are social* (2023) notes that Indonesians spend an average of 3 hours and 18 minutes a day on social media. User activities are very diverse, such as keeping in contact with friends and family, finding spare time, finding inspirations to do and buy, finding content, reading news stories, watching live streaming, finding products to purchase, posting about self-life and activities, etc. The dominant social media platforms used are WhatsApp, Instagram, Tik-Tok, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube (we are social, 2023).

In the view of techno-determinists, digital development has become an instrument in advancing democracy and increasing participation. This deterministic view is embedded in the concepts of participatory culture Henry Jenkins and network society Manuel Castle. According to Jenkins, as described by Fuchs (2014), the internet is not only a communication and commercial space, but also a building space for online fascism. For him, the Web became a site of consumer participation and simultaneously gave meaning to the public space.

The same argument is also explained by Castle through his theory of communication power. For Castel, the social movement of contemporary society can be facilitated by the Internet. The Internet for him enabled a social movement, because it could raise or unite

online collective emotions. Communications that happen online can give rise to social movements in real space, outside the world of the Internet. According to Christian Fuchs (2014), the two views above are generally accepted views on the influence of social media. The existence of social media Twitter and Facebook as a medium of communication and simultaneous participatory space is confirmed through the views of Jenkins and Castel above.

For Fuchs (2014), the perspective of techno-determinism as above is not a critical approach. The view above explicitly hides the highly exploitative economic aspects of social media politics. According to Fuchs, social media, like Facebook and Google, are commercial platforms that focus on providing targeted advertising space. User[1] data is sold by Google, Facebook, and similar social media platforms to advertising companies. At this point, the digital activity of the user becomes a commodity that can generate exchange values. Fuchs describes;

> The time that users spend on commercial social media platforms for generating social, cultural and symbolic capital is in the process of prosumer commodification transformed into economic capital. Labour time on commercial social media is the conversion of Bourdieuian social, cultural and symbolic capital into Marxian value and economic capital (2014; 57).

User activity to generate social, cultural and symbolic capital through social media platforms is an integral part of the process of commodifying prosumer into economic capital. This means that all user activities on commercial social media platforms will be converted into commodities by the media platform companies concerned. Therefore, as Fuchs explained, free time and working time have no clear limits. Users work all the time in generating exchange rates for social media companies. At this point, social media and the mobile Internet make the audience a commodity. Factories are no longer limited to your living room and workplace, but are also everywhere, including in the social media interface space (Fuchs, 2014).

Based on the above explanation, the substation to be explored in this study is first, how do social media users perceive when consuming and producing content on social media? Do they feel like they're working or playing? Second, how is the existence of social media users? These two big questions lead us to discover the awareness and perception of social media users when using social media and to reconstruct the reader's consciousness regarding the existence of critical social media user.

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[1] Christian Fuchs does not explicitly describe social media users. This explanation is important to give a clear boundary between highly exploited and less exploited users. In this study, there are two types of users, paid users and unpaid users. This group consists of influencer, content creator or users who make income from social media, whereas unpaid users are ordinary users who do not get the economic benefit of social media. They just spend time watching creator content or just consuming and producing content, without making a profit. Unpaid users actually work for social media corporations and paid users. In media corporations, their data and activities are modified to target targeted advertisements, while on user platforms they work to enhance views and viewers. The user being the subject of this research is an unpaid user group.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical basis in this research is Christian Fuchs' theory of information capitalism. This theory is based on Marxism. For Fuchs (2016), Marxist theories of exploitation, surplus value and classes are still very relevant today. In the study of the Internet, digital media and communications, it is important to explore specifically the capitalism that is formed by the development of the internet.

In the development of information capitalism, the production of surplus value and the accumulation of capital are manifested in the commodities of symbolic information, immaterial. The intangible commodity exploited in information capitalism is user data. User data is obtained through the algorithm system by automatically recording user activity in the digital media platform. User activity such as searching, upload, click, like, and so on will be recorded algorithmically. The data was then sold to the targeted advertising companies.

In the perspective of information capitalism, the existence of users and paid employees is equally important in accumulating capital for social media companies, such as Facebook. Without users, Facebook would soon stop making profits and producing commodities. Facebook's primary commodity is not its platform that can be used free of charge. For Fuchs (2014), a Facebook commodity is an advertising space of a user's screen/profile filled with the advertising client's commodities ideology. It is displayed to users and sold to advertising clients, both when an advertisement is shown (paid per display) and when an ad is clicked (paid per click). Users pay attention to their profiles, walls, and profiles as well as walls of other users. For a certain period of time, part of the screen is filled with advertising ideologies that use the help of targeted algorithms for their interests. The online activity of the user is required to run the targeting algorithm and to generate the possibility of viewing and attention to the ads. In this context, advertising space can only exist based on user activity that is the workforce that creates the social media prosumer commodity (Fuchs, 2014).

Users in this context become digital labour. Digital labour and digital work are broad categories that involve all activities in the production of technology and digital media content. In the capitalist media industry, various forms of alienation and exploitation can be found. Examples are slave workers in mineral extraction, hardware assemblies, software technicians, professional online content makers (e.g. online journalists), call center agents, and social media prosumers." Social media users fall into the category of content producers and consumers (prosumer). In this prosumer activity, users generate data used by social media platform companies as commodities sold to companies or advertising clients (Fuchs, 2014).

METHOD

This research uses descriptive qualitative methods. Creswell (2016) states that qualitative research seeks to find the meaning of a social phenomenon of a community. These social phenomena are accumulated through observation and focus group discussion (FGD). In

the context of this research, the data accumulated is the perspective and way of life of the IKBP student community in relation to the use of social media. The data accumulated is analyzed and interpreted throughout data collection and the writing of research reports (Creswell, 2016). The theoretical basis used in analyzing the accumulated data is Christian Fuchs' theory of information capitalism.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Between Working and Playing

In FGD with a student of IKBP, last July 2023, I got a dominant answer related to the use of social media. "For me, social media is really [a part of] play, not work," said one of the FGD participants. "As is often said, playing social media; so social media play is [part of the activity] play and entertainment," said another. "So social media like recreation. There's no burden. There's only entertainment," said another also. Generally, not all FGD participants feel that there is work activity on social media.

This awareness must be highly accepted. The fact is, the concept of work, as Marx put it, does not fall into the category of social media. For Marx and Engels (1845/1846), work was a conscious productive activity that changed and regulated nature, so that man "produced his means of living" to fulfill his needs, which were the production of material life itself (in Fuchs, 2014a). In line with that, for Fuchs work is a productive activity that produces "profits" for corporate media. Without user "work", social media doesn't get input or even does not exist (Fuchs, 2014; 2016).

From the Fuchs concept of work, the value of work or the activity of work performed by the user does not directly change the material. Their job is to generate data that is algorithmically recorded by a social media company, to then be sold to advertising companies. Productivity generated by the user is data that is the activity and tendencies of the digital user. The data contains exchange rates, which then brings economic benefits to social media companies. So, generally users don't realize that playing social media is part of working. But actually, watching YouTube videos, like, comment, and uploading photos or status on social media is part of a job that benefits only social media companies.

The media corporate participatory campaign for Fuchs is just a way to fool consumers. Duez (2008) as quoted by Fuchs, in his research affirms, that "corporations take advantage of a culture of participation" (2014a: 98). According to Fuchs, corporate media never revealed capitalist activity behind social media. They don't raise the point of profit orientation, but rather just emphasize the value of participatory utility. Facebook, for example, says that "it helps you connect and share with other people in your life." Or Twitter argues, that "It allows you to connect with friends and other interesting people." (Fuchs, 2016a: 1). There, there's no talk of profit or capital.

For Fuchs, social media is an exploitative field. The concept of participation in social media, according to him, is merely a capitalist ideology of labour. Therefore, he

emphasized, "...the web 2.0 is not a participatory system, but using more negative and critical terms such as class exploitation and surplus values" (Fuchs, 2014a: 102).

Social Media Users: Unpaid Digital Labour

Regarding digital capitalism or information based on the Internet, Fuchs (2014) explains that "the relatively highly paid wage work of software engineers and low-paid proletarianized workers in Internet companies, the unpaid labour of users, the highly exploited bloody work and slave work in developing countries producing hardware and extracting conflict minerals". Some of these groups are being exploited at a certain level and situation. Social media users are exploited differently from slave workers in mining in developing countries, as are other paid workers.

The debate about the existence of social media users is inevitable. Marx's theory of labour value was the basis of this debate. For Marx, the creator of commodity value is the productive worker (in Fuchs, 2015). The value of a commodity that Marx meant would be greater, if the time used to produce more. Marx (1867) said, "the greater the labour time necessary to produce an article, the greater its value." (Fuchs, 2014: 58). From this understanding is just exploited wage jobs. Thus, in the context of digital labour, only hardware and software engineers, as well as mining workers (digital technology base materials) in mining centres in developing countries are exploited.

The user for the majority of scientists is not a productive worker who produces commodity value. It's seen as the benefit of the labor of the paid workers. In this view, Facebook users, for example, are seen as consumers of value created by paid workers, both hardware engineers and software engineers (Fuchs, 2016). For Fuchs, by still from Marx's theory of commodity value and productive labor, user is unpaid productive labour.

In the development of information capitalism, the commodity produced by the user is not material, but immaterial and symbolic form. The commodity is the information used by social media platform companies. The information is data recorded through an algorithmic system. The data contains user tendencies and preferences when using social media platforms. Through paid workers, the data is then sold to targeted companies. Therefore, about this Fuchs (2022) argued;

> Facebook's and Google's server farms are [digital] technology structures that store a massive amount of big personal data. Google and Facebook are only meaningful and [value] social through the search practices, clicks, likes, comments, uploads made by users. This practice produces and reproduces data structures that condition – enable and limit – further digital practices. Facebook and Google's profits are based on the velarization of these digital structures and practices, so they exploit the digital work of their users.

Users spend time (using free time) to produce commodity value. Digital activities such as searching, clicking, liking, and so on are productive activities that generate

commodities that are then exploited by digital platform companies. At this point they are unpaid productive workers. The results of their production are converted into exchange rates by the Facebook corporation. Value produced by users is utilized by media corporations. The exchange value generated by users flows into corporate pockets.

CONCLUSION

The emergence of multiple digital platforms simultaneously brings us to the information age. Information touches almost every virtual space. Every day, social media users consume a variety of information and content. The existence of social media is easily accessible and used at no cost, allowing users to then become not only consumers, but also producers. The user or consumer is free and has the space to produce information or content. The absence of a clear boundary between consumer and producer in social media is called prosumer.

This excretion of consumption seems to bring the user into a state of unconsciousness. Users do not realize that they are being exploited and exploited by media corporations. Freedom in the practice of consumption simultaneously leads to users' awareness of the participatory and recreational side of social media use. Users do not realize, that their personal data and their online activities are continuously recorded and then sold to social media advertising clients.

Users must be aware that they are being exploited. Their work in producing content is unpaid. Their free time is blocked by the corporate media indirectly. Their existence as consumers is accommodated. Awareness of the work of media capitalization is urgent, so that users do not spend their free time or get stuck too far in social media. Thus, users can use social media as a tool for urgent needs; like using it to accumulate capital. Capital is, as Bourdieu affirmed (1986), not only economic capital, but also social capital (relationships, networks), cultural capital (sources of knowledge) and symbolic capital (*self-identity development* or personal branding).

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