

Queering alienation in digital media

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Abstract

Marx's concept of alienation, particularly as articulated in Dallas Smythe's audience-commodity thesis, is central to critical studies of the political economy of digital media and its exploitation of user labour. However, in its application within critical studies of Internet economies, the concept often becomes limited to alienation from 'species-being' or autonomous self-actualisation. Drawing on mostly queer, but also some feminist, critiques this paper seeks to challenge this application of the alienation concept. It uses examples of the mediation of gay and queer sexualities through online hook-up apps to illustrate its position, concluding with some suggestions for how queering the subject of the alienation thesis may shape further analysis.

Contents

[Introduction](#)

[The alienation thesis in digital media](#)

[The subject of alienation](#)

[Hooking up as critique](#)

[Capitalism and queer subject-making](#)

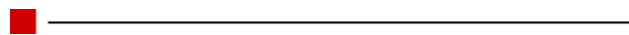
[Whither the alienation thesis?](#)

Introduction

Central to recent critical appraisal of Internet economies is Marx's concept of alienation. Of particular importance is the critique that the intensive and extensive mediation of our social interactions through commercial platforms means that users have been divorced from their 'species-being.' The concept is extensively drawn upon in studies of the conditions of consumer labour, where formal exploitation is often discussed in conjunction with the political critique that such conditions manifest the alienation of users from their capacity for self-realisation outside of capitalist norms. This emphasis is driven by the role of alienation in Dallas Smythe's (2014) concept of the audience commodity that is often used to underpin the economic critique of digital media users' labour. The alienation critique is also used, often implicitly, in studies that refute claims that users are exploited. These counter-arguments typically draw on empirical evidence that describes the persistence of non-alienated and socially meaningful exchanges. Indeed, the debate about whether digital media consumer activity is alienated has been a long-standing feature of Internet research.

This paper enters this debate but approaches it from feminist and queer perspectives that challenge precepts of the alienation thesis as the critique is commonly used in studies of Internet economies. It queries the assumed subject of this concept, arguing that it draws on very particular notions of a universal, self-possessed subject. For women, LGBTQI people, and all those mobilised as ‘other’ in order to maintain this myth of ‘the One,’ such a state of autonomy and singularity has never been attributed nor achieved. If the pre-lapsarian state of autonomous personhood assumed in the alienation thesis is not generally available, this calls into question its applicability to analysis of Internet economies.

To illustrate its critique, this paper will use examples from the blurring of private, public, intimate, and commercial interactions associated with the sociotechnical affordances of queer male hook-up apps, highlighting the problematic reliance of the alienation thesis on a personhood generated in contexts of heterosexual intimacy (Berlant and Warner, 1998). It will raise questions about how we may continue to use the critical insights of the alienation critique in our studies of Internet economies and consumer labour while reflecting the relational, contextualised subjectivities proposed by queer and feminist thought. The goal of this paper is not to discard Marx’s alienation thesis in its entirety, but to see the limitations of how it is commonly used in studies of digital media economics and then to suggest an alternative framework.



The alienation thesis in digital media

The concept of alienation is articulated most strongly in the early Hegel-influenced Marx. As Alan Swingewood summarises, using the sexist terminology of his day:

For the young Marx, man’s alienation from the world his own labour had created was bound up with the growth of private property and capital and the development of a market economy in which man and his human activity became a saleable object, a commodity to be bought and sold to the highest bidder. The world of man thus became increasingly thing-like with the products of human activity — labour — confronting the individual as objective, alien forms. [1]

In the *Economic and philosophic manuscripts* (Marx, 2013), Marx defines four key forms of alienation experienced under capitalism. Exploited workers are alienated from the products of their labour and so become reliant on purchasing commodities to survive. They are also alienated from their own working activity, no longer in control of their labour so that they cannot use it for their own ends. Workers are also distanced from other people, particularly other workers, as they enter into competitive rather than cooperative social relations. Finally, workers are alienated from the “species-being,” as work ceases to be the “free, conscious activity” that defines humanity [2]. This final form of alienation Marx describes as an effect of the regime of private property and wage relations that turn work from an expression of human creativity into merely a necessity for survival. The satisfaction of need thus becomes the goal of human activity, feeding a cycle of production and consumption that renders workers like animals and less than their ‘species-being.’ The emancipation of society, Marx

thus argues, requires the emancipation of workers from capitalist exploitation for “all human servitude is involved in the relation of the worker to production, and all the types of servitude are only modifications or consequences of this relation.” [3].

It is possible to dismiss the alienation thesis and its emphasis on the ‘species-being’ and human essences as the musings of a young Marx, discarded in the later scientific materialism of *Capital*. On the other hand, it is also possible to argue that the alienation thesis forms the cornerstone of all his work even as he moves away from the philosophical and transcendent terms of the *Manuscripts* (Fromm, 2013; Wartenberg, 1982). Whatever the case, the alienation thesis remains a particularly influential concept in political economy critiques of media, even if this relationship remains only tacit or obscured. Critiques of media ownership, media homogeneity, and the importance of participatory culture all draw on the idea that we are alienated from our culture and the products of our own creative and interpersonal activity in capitalist media systems. As Mark Andrejevic (2009) critically documents, the re-enchantment of media production and consumption — the dis-alienation of cultural activity — has been core to the liberatory potential attributed to the Internet and thus central to its theorisation. The alienation thesis is also the core of Smythe’s (2014) audience-commodity argument, first articulated in 1977, which has been crucial to recent political economy analyses of digital media.

In his study of the economics of commercial broadcast media, Smythe concluded that the product of media was not messages, information, or images, but audiences and readerships. He argued that what advertisers buy when they purchase broadcast time for their products are

the services of audiences with predictable specifications who will pay attention in predictable numbers and at particular times to particular means of communication (TV, radio, newspapers, magazines, billboards, and third-class mail). As collectivities, these audiences are commodities. [4]

He describes ratings systems as mechanisms for capturing audience-viewing activity similar to the mechanisms for measuring labour-time in industrial workplaces.

This idea — that media organisations sell the ‘audience-ing’ time of their viewers/consumers/users — has become a key plank of the economic critique of digital media and is integral to understandings of user activity as formally exploited. While not uncontroversial (see McGuigan and Manzerolle, 2014, for examples of some debates), the economic framework Smythe espouses has been the grounding of many influential critiques of labour in digital media. Christian Fuchs (2014), for instance, devotes an entire chapter to its discussion in his *Digital labour and Karl Marx*; Trebor Scholz (2013) places Smythe’s thesis next to that of Marx as a foundational framework in the introduction to the *Digital labor* edited collection; Philip M. Napoli (2011) claims that contemporary technological developments in commercial media have foregrounded Smythe’s work again. For other recent applications of Smythe’s framework see, for example, Andrejevic, 2002; Artz, 2008; Cohen, 2008; Lee, 2011; Manzerolle, 2010; and Shimpach, 2005.

What is important to note for this analysis, though, is that Smythe’s argument is centrally about alienation. He argues that during their supposed leisure-time, audiences are doing the work of marketing, drawing meaning and value from advertising that assures the continued consumption of consumer goods; as we watch, we learn to consume. He famously notes that

under monopoly capitalism, the non-sleeping time of most of the population is actually spent in the work of consumption, with the largest single block of ‘off-the-clock’ time being that which is sold to broadcast advertisers. This means that time spent outside of work, and therefore supposedly outside of capitalist exchange-relations, is colonised by the requirement to continue adding value to commercial goods through the acts of watching and consuming. This is time that workers would otherwise use to produce and consume use-values important for the creation of individual and social identity. For Smythe, the commodification of non-work, reproductive viewing time was therefore an extension of the alienation of workers from the means of production and the articulation of their ‘species-being.’ As Sut Jhally and Bill Livant (1986; McGuigan, 2014) argue, despite its economic insight, Smythe’s argument functions mostly as an ideological critique based in the alienation thesis.

In the contemporary analysis of digital media economics, we see the continuation of Smythe’s position particularly in critiques of digital labour that draw upon autonomist Marxism. This is especially true of those that centralise Mario Tronti’s (1973) idea of the social factory, such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000). This position laments the extension of the working day and capitalist logics through those times, arenas, and practices that are associated with the inalienable, such as desire, passion, affect, interpersonal relations, and leisure. The critique of the extension of the working day to include all times for self-expression is key to Maurizio Lazzarato’s (1996) articulation of the concept of immaterial labour that has come to define how we understand consumer activity in digital media. Rather than subjects free to articulate themselves in and through their relationships in leisure-time outside of capital, in commercial digital media we find alienated subjects, channelling desire and self-articulation through capitalist norms. The long-running debate about whether this is empirically supported, and thus whether digital media participation can be considered alienated or agential, demonstrates the on going impact of the alienation thesis in the field.



The subject of alienation

The alienation thesis that is typically mobilised in studies of digital media, and in particular critiques of consumer labour, is of a particular kind, however. James Reveley (2013) argues that rather than focusing on objective alienation — the alienation of the worker from work processes and products — studies of Internet economics tend to focus on the subjective alienation of ‘species-being’ — the alienation of the worker from themselves. Reveley’s assessment of this tendency in the field is that it draws focus from the materialist aspects of alienation that he sees as the important aspects of Smythe’s argument, instead emphasising, or often assuming, the development of a capitalist identity as a necessary corollary of commercial media consumption. Reveley’s summary suggests that, as it is commonly used in digital media studies, the alienation critique assumes some falsity in the consciousnesses that develop through its commercial contexts. I will not rehearse the various arguments that challenge this supposition of false consciousness in consumption, but instead suggest a related critique. I propose that this focus on alienation as being the disavowal of ‘species-being’ is further flawed because it draws on a particular and exclusive subject position. It presupposes a subjectivity that exists prior to, outside of, or beyond capitalism and which is allowed agency to self-articulate in those contexts. This assumption needs to be reconsidered,

particularly when considered in relation to the experiences of subaltern groups and viewed through feminist and queer lenses.

Kathi Weeks explains that the concept of alienation evokes a “given self, our estrangement from which constitutes a compelling crisis” [5]. This “given self,” though, is a Humanist subject that therefore manifests a subjectivity “equated with consciousness, universal rationality, and self-regulating ethical behaviour” and who functions as the motor of history [6]. For this actor, an ideal state or, to return to Marx’s terms, a full articulation of ‘species-being,’ is defined in terms of “autonomy and self-determination” [7]. This self-possessed, singular individual is the subject about whom Marx draws his critical arguments and whose tragedy feminist critique tells us is the alienation generated by capitalism (Eisenstein, 1979).

What is also emphasised in this conceptualisation of the subject is the self-realisation of an autonomous self outside of the dictates of capitalism, in the sphere differentiated from the public sphere of commerce and politics, such as interpersonal relations and community. With the contemporary hegemony of white hetero-patriarchal contexts, though, this mostly implies the private space of the nuclear family (Berlant and Warner, 1998; England, 1993; Osucha, 2009). It is in such spaces that the Humanist subject assumes the ability to articulate the indivisible private self of ‘species-being’ so that domestic and private interactions are often posed as the solution to alienation and other vagaries of capitalism. The third aspect of this self-realisation is that it is not determined by instrumental objectives, but by socially meaningful exchanges and reciprocal obligation. This is the context of interpersonal and communal intimacy that is typically cast as distinct from the abstractions of commodity exchange: as Viviana Zelizer (2005) says, these two forms of interactions are typified as being in “hostile worlds.”

It is thus in spaces of private, interpersonal relations, including sexual activity, that we are argued to find our true personhood; to be able to articulate our ‘species-being.’ Intimate and typically domestic space is thus understood as “the home base of prepolitical humanity from which citizens are thought to come into political discourse and to which they are expected to return in the (always imaginary) future after political conflict” [8]. In effect, to be the unalienated, free subject of early Marxist theory, and importantly of the audience-commodity thesis, requires a mythic wholeness constituted in intimate areas of life outside of, and indeed prior to, interactions with economic and social structures (Cornwall, 1997).

This subject, though, and the spaces in which it is supposed to articulate itself are gendered, raced, and sexed. For instance, feminist critiques have long demonstrated that the supposedly unproductive spaces of domesticity are not outside of capitalism but, in fact, constitute sites of productive labour for (predominantly) women and girls (Dalla Costa and James, 1975; England, 1993; Federici, 2004; Folbre, 1991; Jarrett, 2016). The experience of private space as a refuge from exploitation, surveillance, and domination also does not accord with the experiences of women and people of colour. Furthermore, the autonomous unity assumed to emerge from such contexts is not a universal state of being. For women, and all other people constituted as ‘other,’ such a state has long been denied. The entrenchment of power relations beyond class has historically delimited the capacity for certain actors to articulate ‘species-being.’ For instance, as Zillah Eisenstein says, Marx did not see that the hierarchical sexual ordering of society “made species life unavailable to women” [9].

Consequently, the pre-lapsarian state of unity, self-determination and autonomy that exists outside of capitalist exploitation that allows articulation of ‘species-being’ has not really

existed in practice and certainly never conceived as a reality for people other than white, cis-, het- able- men (Chodorow, 1978; Hekman, 1992; Jarrett, 2016; Pateman, 1988). Viewed through this lens, it becomes difficult to see how claiming alienation from ‘species-being’ as an effect of the Internet’s commercialisation and exploitation of user labour has any meaningful critical insight.



Hooking up as critique

To explore this critique in more detail, and to venture towards a reconstitution of the alienation thesis, I want to draw on the challenges to the logics of ‘species-being’ that are posed by the practices of queer cultures, particularly when mediated through digital technologies. Because digital media is a context where you must write yourself into being (Sundén, 2003), online environments provide a space to self-define queer or gay identities. This is particularly enhanced in online spaces that overtly describe themselves as gay sites because they invert the presumption of heterosexuality inherent to most other public spaces [10]. By the logic of the alienation thesis, this has emancipatory potential by providing the conditions that enable public articulations of selfhood and agency.

This kind of publicising of subjectivity has a long history in gay politics where visibility — making the subaltern private self public — has a particular resonance and political force. But, as Eve Sedgwick points out, this is also an incoherent history [11]. For many gay and queer people, particularly if they are also involved in heterosexual relationships, the private has not been and cannot be a space of unfettered self-expression. The same can be said of the public where violence and/or secrecy has long prevailed. For queer people who refuse a singular gay identity, publicity is also not necessarily desirable. The “open secret” of homosexuality challenges the concept of the private self-making upon which ‘species-being’ relies (Sedgwick, 1990).

This complexity plays out in queer hook-up apps. As Sharif Mowlabocus (2008) says, implicit in the politics of gay identity is the assumption that queer individuals desire visibility and that this is the means for articulating agency. However, he says, this is not necessarily the case. He goes on to describe the particular moral economy of a cybercottage [12] hook-up site. Sites such as this are “characterized by their invisibility and instability” [13] in that they lack continuity and scope, drifting in and out of use. Consequently, users lack investment in either their profile or the site’s community. Rather, their key function is messaging designed to arrange spontaneous hook-ups in public spaces, enabling temporarily constituted sexual exchanges that also involve little or no emotional or ideological investment. Such sites and the practices associated with them, therefore, seem ill-equipped as sites for self-realisation. Rather, they seem sites for the experience of alienation.

Nevertheless, in the uses of such platforms, Mowlabocus finds queer subject-making that speaks of the autonomy ascribed to the subject of the alienation thesis. He describes tactical and temporary expressions of queer identities in which users avoid linking sexual desire to any particular politically identified sexual identity. In using such sites, he argue, the members of his case study are “playing with identities and activities that belong to a time before liberation, AIDS and civil partnerships and, as such, the cybercottage flies in the face of

political and social assimilation” [14]. It is the act of disavowing a singular identity that becomes a political statement and thus an act of self-realisation. In this instance then, the private self is clearly not the seat of political or personal agency, nor indeed is the public gay self. Rather, self-actualisation emerges in the gaps and flows between these contexts. This challenges both the assumption of the alienation thesis that it is in the retreat to uncommercialised private space that ‘true’ identity is formed.

What we see in this anonymous sex mediated by hook-up apps may also be characterised as instrumental and, as such, a debased version of sexual interaction, particularly when compared with the socially embedded cruising cultures of the pre-digital age (Dean, 2009) but especially when these sexual activities are opposed to “the utopia of social belonging” [15] that, in classic Marxian logic, facilitates the ‘species-being.’ However, as Kane Race (2015b) points out, the distinction between instrumental exchanges and gifts or ‘play’ can be fuzzy in queer hook-up culture. Drawing on Callon’s discussion of commodification and decommodification, Race argues that the particular social relationship being enacted in each sexual exchange is not pre-determined and instead must be created by participant interactions. Either implicitly or explicitly, participants must frame each transaction in the particular economic terms with which they are comfortable. Race describes how the affordances of hook-up sites facilitate the framing of these exchanges, allowing for the negotiation of an acceptable “commodification of intimacy” (Zelizer, 2005).

What Race (2015a; 2015b) also notes is that contemporary hook-up apps can enable extended anonymous sexual activity in the home, such as Party and Play (PnP) [16] activities, breaking the assumed link between intimacy, domestic space, sexual activity, and uncommodified interactions that is articulated in the alienation critique. Race also says that, even though the intimate exchanges of PnP may mimic commodity logic, they “can nevertheless produce a reconfigured experience of heteronormative social space, thus conjuring a specific sense of collective belonging” [17]. With these complex economics, it is difficult, therefore, to place hooking up and its mediation through digital apps on either side of the commodity/gift divide. Consequently, it is also difficult to determine whether the subjectivities articulated in these exchanges are emerging from alienated and alienating private property relations. It is unclear, then, whether the desires and practices emerging from these interactions are articulations of ‘species-being.’

Race (2015b) also describes how the use of hook-up app technologies may generate desires, discourses and social norms that do not pre-exist the exchanges that they mediate. Ben Light (in press) similarly underscores the role of technological affordances in shaping sexual activity and politics in his analysis of the hook-up app Squirt. He describes a site where the variety of functions available to the user facilitate the development of community and sustained affective commitment of greater depth than on the apps explored by both Mowlabocus and Race. Notably though, he also describes abstractions like score cards and ratings operating within the site’s economy so that, although meaningful community is generated, intimate exchanges also become abstracted and valorised, yet again demonstrating the intermixing of commodity and gift logics in these contexts. Light’s analysis concludes, however, that the sociotechnical affordances of Squirt emphasise communities of play that enable a spectrum of positions in relation to the public articulation of gay or queer identities. As such, he sees Squirt as having non-normative potential for self-realisation outside hegemonic social agendas: it functions, he says, as a pseudonymous subaltern counterpublic despite its alienating features.

Moreover, by highlighting the role of technological actors in the constitution of these queer activities, subjectivities, and communities, both Light and Race argue that agency is not “a matter of individual sovereignty over circumstances, but as something that emerges from provisional relations and attachments” [18]. Sexual activity is ultimately about the inalienable and the ineffable, but here it is profoundly entwined with the logics of abstract machines and the particular ways in which app affordances shape the possibilities of social interactions. The identities associated with these apps cannot be singularities as they are part machine and therefore always hybrid (Haraway, 1991). Consequently, the self-articulation documented in these studies does not articulate the self-possession or the relationship to private, uncommodified spaces articulated in the alienation critique. Rather, what we see in all these examples are identities and valorisation practices that are inherently relational. They emerge from particular historic and political contexts (the history of queer visibility, for instance) and draw their political and psychological valence from those contexts. These are also expressions of self-realisation and desire that are bound to the specific sociotechnical contexts of their emergence. These subjects and the expressions of agency are thus not singular, nor autonomous, and they certainly are not transcendent as evidenced by the sometimes contradictory specificity of the ideological, social, cultural, and psychological role of hooking up in these studies.

Consequently, it is difficult to see what constitutes an alienated practice of self-articulation in these contexts. This complexity suggests, then, that economic models of Internet economics and consumer labour that unthinkingly place the figure of the un/alienated subject at the centre of their calculations merely figure a particular experience and not one that is universal. The relationships between self-realisation and socioeconomic systems are not simple and are differentially experienced by different classes of people. It is not enough to assume alienation as an effect of the location of user practice within commercial media contexts. More attention to those differences, and the specific ways in which selfhood is given and takes meaning in different contexts, allows for more nuanced analysis.



Capitalism and queer subject-making

It is important to recognise that it is not only that a variety of moral or libidinal economies exist in hook-up apps that tests the concept of alienation. It is also that these emergent economies and the self-valorisation practices associated with them are already shaped by capitalist logics. This is not only because, particularly in the instance of Squirt, they are mediated by commercial online tools and/or devices, but because the identities, desires, and social norms that are articulated there are already intimately connected to capitalism. For John D’Emilio (2008), the existence of gay men and women is dependent on capitalism and its reliance on free workers accorded possession of their own labour power. As capitalism developed, he argues, the autonomy of these free workers also shifted the central dynamic of the heteropatriarchal household from that of production to one of affect, releasing sexuality from the imperative to reproduce the labour force. He says:

In divesting the household of its economic independence and fostering the separation of sexuality from procreation, capitalism has created the conditions that allow some men and women to

organize a personal life around their erotic/emotional attraction to their own sex. [19]

It is also from this shift that communities and, importantly, politics based in sexual identity can emerge. Julie Matthaei (2008) similarly explores how the gendered division of labour in early capitalism, and its negative consequences for women's economic autonomy, was a generator and/or enforcer of heterosexual desire, as well as shaping particular forms of lesbianism. For instance, she documents the lives of women passing as men in order to take advantage of the higher wages given to men and masculinised labour. She also contends that the increasing economic independence of women in the twentieth century due to changes in the mode of production has enabled homosexuality and lives constructed outside of heteropatriarchal norms for increasing numbers of women. These studies suggest the fundamental interrelationship of gay self-realisation and capitalist infrastructure, further implying the always already alienated quality of such identity practices.

Moreover, it is not only the metropolitan gay identity that can be connected to capitalism. Queer (non-) subjectivity, as polymorphously perverse articulations of embodied desire, may be a concept that is only sensible within late capitalism. The link is clear in the studies of hook-up apps documented here, where queer desires are seen emerging from and being shaped by interactions with "technologies that are the consequences of changes in the mode of production under late capitalism" [20]. More generally, as Donald Morton suggests, the attribution of unencumbered, indeterminate desires to the queer subjects who emerged as theoretical and political actors in the 1990s aligns them with "the self-interested individualism of the bourgeois subject" [21]. This locates queerness and queer pleasures in capitalist materiality either as lived experience or as theoretical construct. That sexual desire may be linked to social structures in this way is also foundational to queer theory. This is the position of Foucault (1978) and Butler (1990) who both attest that sexuality is not an essential given, unproblematically expressed in culture, but which emerges from problematisations specific to particular epochs and material/economic conditions. This includes the particular formations of sexuality and sexual desire associated with heteropatriarchal capitalism as a socially saturating mode of accumulation.

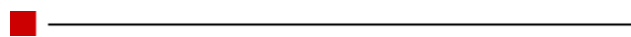
Such a relationship between capitalism and the form of desire is explored in Gary Dowsett's (2015) description of assembling his sexual identity from science fiction and other commercially produced cultural products. It is not, as he says, that mediated texts amplify an existing natural sexual core, but that "they 'construct' it as product or endpoint, as culturally local, historically specific and socially comprehensible. Instead, they comprise it" [22]. In the contemporary context, the form and content of capitalist media, such as hook-up apps, dating sites, and pornography, are part of the making of libidinal economies and subjects. The entwining of capitalist infrastructure, sexuality and desire raises the question: if contemporary queer (non-) identity emerges from contexts of alienation, how can we continue to valorise a mythic dis-alienated 'species-being' in our studies of digital media without genocidal implications for such identities?

An obvious challenge to this argument that links queer identities to capitalism is that the (partly) alienated subjectivities described in studies of online hooking up are actually products of capitalism — effectively examples of false consciousness or false needs shaped by the possessive individualism that is an effect of the hegemony of private property relations. Critiques of "pink dollar" marketing such as that by Gluckman and Reed (1997) would support this critique. This position, though, tacitly depends on the capacity to articulate

autonomous queer subjectivities in the contemporary moment that are free from all ties to capitalism's alienating logics, including the policing of boundaries between sexes and sexualities. It demands a space outside of capitalism. Even if such a state were achieved today, that position denies the existence of the repressive apparatus of heteropatriarchy before and after capitalism's hegemony. It denies the ways in which engrained power relations other than class disallow self-determination for select groups, perpetuating the contradiction between essence and existence that is Marx's concept of alienation (Eisenstein, 1979). This means that outside of capitalist class relations, subaltern groups are still potentially alienated from the capacity to make their own subjectivities. Consequently, self-making for certain groups, and I would suggest for all (see also Garnham, 2011), is always relational and never independent of context, even from economic infrastructure.

In queer practices then, there is, a profound challenge to the orthodoxy of the autonomous self assumed in the alienation thesis when the concept of 'species-being' is privileged over more material concerns. If there is no self before commercialisation or spaces of autonomous self-determination, then to offer the critique that digital media use is alienating becomes dubious. Rather, the practices documented in these studies of hooking up, and in queer culture generally, demonstrate the complexities of self-realisation in already commercial contexts, a complexity that it would be valuable to include in critical appraisals of commercial digital media's impact on our lives. To argue that liking a friend's Facebook post or tweeting an emotional response to a personal tragedy is alienating by virtue of its location within commercial networks should be suspect. This position draws its critical valence from the assumption of a subject capable of autonomous self-making prior to the commercialisation of the Internet, or the emergence of market capitalism more broadly. It also implies an *a priori* authentic subjectivity that is subverted from its purpose in such activity.

However, as queer hook-up apps and the politics of gay and queer identities demonstrate, the spaces and practices of self-actualisation do not neatly fit private/public divides, nor those between intimate and commercial contexts. When it becomes impossible to unravel expressions of self and community from commerce, as is the case in uses of digital media, we need to look elsewhere than the alienation of 'species-being' for our critical force.



Whither the alienation thesis?

Queer sexual identity practices are not used here to exhaust the material experiences that challenge the foundational tenets of the alienation thesis and thus its application to digital labour. Women, people of colour, disabled individuals, and trans- people all have their own narratives of subjection that decentre the private sphere, and particularly domestic space, as a location outside of capital and/or alienating power relations. People in subaltern groups are also too keenly aware of how their capacity to be autonomous subjects is always contingent upon the particular intersections of power in which they find themselves: the autonomy granted me as a white person is challenged, often at the same time, by my status as woman. We can also argue that white, cis-, het-, able masculinity never actually possessed the autonomy and singularity ascribed to it, dependent as it is on the articulation of 'others' (Haraway, 1991) for its singularity. There are, therefore, many more examples that could be

drawn upon to challenge the assumptions upon which the alienation thesis is based, particularly as it is articulated in digital media political economy critique.


Furthermore, the example of gay hook-up apps is not used to offer an alternative model for how publicity, privacy, autonomy, commodifiable relationships, and affect cohere into a state of alienation or disalienation. Rather it has been used to illustrate that there is a messy complexity in how real humans experience self-making. What we find in these moral economies of hook-up apps is not simple cases of self-realisation within socially emergent contexts, nor the cruel disenfranchisement of capitalist alienation. Instead, we find complex oscillations between those positions and the articulation of always-already attenuated agency and relational subjectivities. What we certainly don't find, though, is the non-alienated, autonomous, self-possessed subject of Marx's reckoning. This brings us to the key question asked by this critique: If the subject does not have or demand a coherent identity; or if the processes of realising that subjectivity bear both commodity and inalienable logics; or if the identity that manifests is not autonomous of other social and technical actors, how can we identify a context of dis-alienation? I am not sure we can.

I would be loathe, however, to discard the alienation thesis in its entirety; to throw out the critical baby with the theoretical bathwater, so to speak. The concept of alienation as an effect of the dynamics of capitalist private property relations has significant utility for understanding the ways in which users' online activity is made strange and comes to act upon them, for instance in the form of personalisation algorithms or as an object of state policing (Jarrett, 2014). Alienation also has critical force when it is used to trace the more material consequences of reproducing consumer behaviour (Reveley, 2013). What is required though is to mobilise the concept without assuming the *a priori* and universal existence of an autonomous subject who articulates self in private spaces; without drawing on 'species-being.'

We can take a cue once again from Mowlabocus (2010) whose analysis of the commodification of male bodies in the 'cybercarnality' of the Gaydar dating app does not draw its critical insight from the difference of gay identities articulated on these sites to some mythic state of pre-capitalist unity and autonomy. Rather, he interrogates the socioeconomic relations that underpin the legibility of such performances at the moment of their articulation and consumption, tracing the contradictory qualities of such positioning and, in doing so, allowing for nuanced analysis of flows of power (see also Cover, 2004). Such an approach draws attention to the specificity of the social and economic relationships and self-making practices enacted in and through our digitally mediated activities, refusing an essentialism that allows us to explore how these dynamics may change in different contexts and for different actors. More pointedly, this analytical framework identifies alienation, not as the end point of the analysis in the way of Smythe's approach to the audience-commodity, but as integral to the constitution of the practices, subjectivities, and communities we are examining, including their resistant or transgressive capacities. This perspective can be readily combined with other, more material aspects of the alienation critique that draw attention to how these practices may have negative impacts on other workers or citizens, reproduce cycles of waste and obsolescence, or perpetuate other inequalities typical of the capitalist system. Such an approach would manifest a more nuanced and holistic critique.

To conclude, it must be recognised that what I am advocating in this paper is not new. Arguably, it merely restates key concepts from queer theory and replicates foundational arguments from the field of cultural studies that critique the attribution of false consciousness

to various kinds of consumer activity. Garnham (2011), for instance, has long argued that alienation is, in fact, an integral aspect of our ‘species-being.’ However, with the dominance of critiques drawing on Smythe and relatively orthodox Marxism that equate formally exploitative conditions with alienation, it has become imperative that these positions be restated within the field of Internet research. But in keeping with its queer theory origins, this critique also calls for hybridity in response; for the combination of materialist and cultural approaches to alienation in order to enhance the breadth of analytical insight into Internet economies. This is not necessarily an easy task. To use a queered version of the alienation concept requires ambivalence about the nature of inalienable products and experiences and their role in the production and reproduction of capitalism via digital media. It demands viewing any online exchange as always both alienating and disalienating so that the analysis becomes a question of determining in what ways and to what effect is this alienation occurring.

It also demands examination of the factors that intersect with, but are not reducible to, class relations that influence the distribution of power in particular mediated contexts and which influence the experiences of alienation. In particular, it draws our critical attention to when dis-alienated contexts of digital media use lack coherence in the terms demanded by capitalist frameworks, rather than when they manifest a mythic authenticity (Cover, 2004). Queering the alienation thesis in this way certainly complicates the analysis, making ambiguous any conclusions about the nature of online economies. However, if we are to understand the political economy of digital media in ways that capture the experience of a variety of subjects, and of subjects who are already immersed in capitalism, such abstruseness is essential. 

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Notes

- [1.](#) Swingewood, 1975, p. 87.
- [2.](#) Marx, 2013, p. 87.
- [3.](#) Marx, 2013, p. 91.
- [4.](#) Smythe, 2014, p. 32.
- [5.](#) Weeks, 2007, p. 244.
- [6.](#) Braidotti, 2013, p. 15.

- [7.](#) Braidotti, 2013, p. 23.
- [8.](#) Berlant and Warner, 1998, p. 553.
- [9.](#) Eisenstein, 1979, p. 9.
- [10.](#) Campbell, 2014; Mowlabocus, 2010, pp. 93–94.
- [11.](#) Sedgwick, 1990, p. 70.
- [12.](#) ‘Cottaging’ is a U.K. term for anonymous sexual activity in public toilets. ‘Cybercottaging’ is a contemporary equivalent where online resources are used to facilitate these sexual relations.
- [13.](#) Mowlabocus, 2008, p. 421.
- [14.](#) Mowlabocus, 2008, p. 435.
- [15.](#) Berlant and Warner, 1998, p. 555.
- [16.](#) ‘Party and Play,’ also known as ‘chemsex,’ refers to an emerging set of practices combining recreational drug use and sexual activity, typically involving men who have sex with other men. It is often associated with high-risk sexual behaviour, including barebacking and subsequent risk of STI transmission.
- [17.](#) Race, 2015b, p. 506.
- [18.](#) Race, 2015b, p. 269.
- [19.](#) D’Emilio, 2008, p. 185.
- [20.](#) Morton, 1995, p. 377.
- [21.](#) Morton, 1995, p. 375; see also Hennessy, 1994–1995.
- [22.](#) Dowsett, 2015, p. 530.

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