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Rethinking Marx and Engels' theory of intercourse in the era of digital capitalism

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Abstract. Digital capitalism is not merely an upgraded form of traditional capitalism; rather, it represents a reconfiguration of social relations arising from the deep integration of capitalist logic and digital technology. Under this new regime, users' everyday communicative activities are appropriated by capital and transformed into an implicit, non-waged form of data-producing labor, trapping digital interaction in the paradox of an appearance of freedom and an essence of domination. Digital communication exhibits four interrelated forms of alienation, while data fetishism obscures the exploitative nature of this process. Rooted in historical materialism, Marx and Engels' theory of intercourse begins with material social interaction, reveals the dialectical relationship between the development of productive forces and the forms of human intercourse, and, through its critique of alienated social relations, points toward the emancipation of humanity. As such, it provides an essential theoretical framework for analyzing the dilemmas of digital communication. Overcoming this alienation requires both the socialization of the means of communication and the democratization of communicative relations, thereby transcending the logic of capital through institutional transformation and human agency and reconstructing a digital communicative ecology grounded in universal human interaction.

Keywords: digital capitalism, Marx and Engels, digital communication, alienation of social intercourse

1. Introduction

The revolutionary advancement of digital technology has fundamentally reshaped the spatiotemporal dimensions of human interaction. Digital tools such as the Internet, social media, and algorithmic recommendation systems have broken down geographical and social barriers, making communication instantaneous, ubiquitous, and globalized. The communicative revolution that seeks to "annihilate space by time" has reached an unprecedented level in the digital age. Beneath this flourishing landscape of connectivity, however, lies a profound crisis. Platform capital has monopolized the channels of online communication, while users' communicative activities have been transformed into a form of data-producing labor. Algorithms are capable of deeply shaping both the content of communication and the structure of social networks, making data exploitation and privacy infringement increasingly pervasive phenomena. Consequently, digital communication exhibits a striking paradox: the more closely individuals are connected, the more deeply they become alienated. The theory of social intercourse developed by Marx and Engels in such works as *The*

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German Ideology, the *Economic Manuscripts of 1857–1858*, and *Capital* constitutes a fundamental component of historical materialism. Taking material intercourse as its point of departure, this theory elucidates the dialectical relationship between the forms of human interaction and the development of the productive forces, critiques the distortion of social intercourse under capitalist conditions, and ultimately points toward the emancipatory ideal of humanity founded upon "universal intercourse". In this article, "digital communication" refers primarily to users' spiritual and symbolic communicative activities on digital platforms, including information sharing, emotional expression, and social interaction. This definition highlights the new characteristics of spiritual communication in the digital era while remaining firmly situated within the broader theoretical framework of Marx and Engels' theory of social intercourse. Drawing upon the classical texts of Marx and Engels, this article employs the dialectical relationship between productive forces and forms of social intercourse as its analytical framework to examine both the continuities and the discontinuities of communication under digital capitalism. It seeks to uncover the underlying nature of communicative alienation and to explore practical pathways toward the emancipation of human communication in the digital age.

2. The core tenets of Marx and Engels' theory of social intercourse

Marx and Engels' theory of social intercourse is not an abstract philosophical speculation but a systematic body of thought rooted in material production and integral to historical materialism. Its essential principles can be elucidated from four interrelated dimensions.

2.1. The primacy of material intercourse: material interaction as the foundation of spiritual communication

In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels explicitly define "social intercourse" (Verkehr) as a comprehensive category encompassing both material and spiritual forms of human interaction, while assigning primacy to the former. As they observe, "The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life" [1]. Material intercourse refers to the practical activities of cooperation, exchange, and the division of labor that arise in the process of production and constitute the foundation of human survival and social reproduction. Spiritual intercourse, by contrast, is a derivative form of interaction that is invariably conditioned by the material circumstances of production. This proposition overturns the idealist conception of communication as a purely intellectual or spiritual phenomenon and establishes the historical-materialist foundation of Marx and Engels' theory of social intercourse.

2.2. The dialectical relationship between forms of intercourse and the productive forces: the fundamental driving force of historical development

Marx and Engels conceive the "forms of intercourse" as the historically specific social arrangements through which human interaction is organized, a concept that is essentially equivalent to the relations of production. The dialectical contradiction between these forms and the productive forces constitutes the fundamental driving force of historical development. As they argue, "The old form of intercourse, having become a fetter, is replaced by a new one corresponding to the more advanced productive forces and, consequently, to a more progressive mode of individual self-activity" [1]. Throughout history, forms of intercourse initially facilitate the development of the productive forces by expanding productive cooperation, reducing circulation time, and enlarging the scope of the market. As the productive forces continue to advance, however, existing forms of

intercourse gradually cease to function as vehicles of development and instead become constraints that impede further social and economic progress. This contradiction ultimately generates the conditions for social transformation and the emergence of new forms of intercourse better suited to the evolving productive forces. The dynamic interplay between productive forces and forms of intercourse thus provides a fundamental analytical framework for understanding the historical evolution of human communicative and social relations across different epochs.

2.3. The productive dimension of social intercourse: intercourse as a constitutive element of the productive forces

Marx and Engels consistently regarded social intercourse as an organic component of the productive forces. In *Capital*, *Volume II*, Marx provides a detailed analysis of the crucial role played by the means of communication and exchange—such as transportation, telecommunications, and commercial credit—in accelerating the circulation of capital and facilitating the expansion of value. Innovations in the means of intercourse reduce the circulation time of commodities, lower transaction costs, and extend the boundaries of the market, thereby directly enhancing productive efficiency and the development of the productive forces. From the advent of the steam locomotive to the invention of the telegraph and the laying of submarine cables, each major revolution in communication has driven a qualitative leap in productive capacity. The essence of such revolutions lies in the "annihilation of space by time", whereby advances in science and knowledge are transformed, through communicative technologies, into direct productive forces. Social intercourse is therefore not an activity external to production; rather, it is deeply embedded within the production process and constitutes a vital driving force behind the development of the productive forces themselves.

2.4. The normative orientation of alienation and emancipation: critiquing capitalist domination and pursuing universal intercourse

In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx identifies four dimensions of alienated labor: the worker's alienation from the product of labor, from the labor process, from humanity's species-being, and from other human beings [2]. Although this analysis is directed primarily at labor in the sphere of material production, its conceptual framework can also be employed to critique the alienation of social intercourse under capitalism. Under the regime of private ownership, social intercourse is likewise distorted by the logic of capital. Communication and social interaction are reduced to instruments for capital accumulation, while genuine human relations are obscured by relations between commodities and things. The alienation of social intercourse is thus an inherent tendency of capitalist social relations. The normative goal of Marx and Engels' theory of social intercourse is to overcome the monopoly of capital over human interaction and to realize "universal intercourse" [3]. In such a social order, individuals confined by narrow local conditions are replaced by genuinely universal, world-historical individuals, and social intercourse becomes a free and conscious form of creative activity, ultimately paving the way toward the "realm of freedom". This emancipatory dimension provides a fundamental theoretical foundation for analyzing the alienation of digital communication and for exploring pathways toward communicative emancipation in the digital age.

Although Marx and Engels' theory of social intercourse places greater emphasis on material forms of interaction—such as productive cooperation, commercial exchange, transportation, and communication—this article focuses on the sphere of digital spiritual communication, namely users' activities of information sharing, emotional expression, and social interaction on digital platforms. This focus does not represent a departure from, or a narrowing of, Marx and Engels' theoretical framework. On the contrary, one of the defining characteristics of the digital age is the increasingly blurred boundary between spiritual

communication and material production. Users' social activities, which appear to belong to the realm of symbolic and spiritual interaction, are appropriated by capital and transformed into processes of data production that function as a form of material production in practice. This phenomenon confirms Marx's fundamental proposition regarding the primacy of material intercourse. In the digital age, what appears to be purely spiritual communication is, in fact, governed by the logic of material production. Accordingly, the present analysis of digital spiritual communication remains firmly situated within the overall framework of Marx and Engels' theory of social intercourse. When this theoretical perspective is applied to the historical conditions of digital capitalism, it becomes evident that the capitalist logic of domination over social intercourse has not only persisted but has also assumed new and distinctive forms of rupture and alienation.

3. Digital capitalism: continuities and ruptures in Marx and Engels' theory of social intercourse

Digital capitalism represents a new stage in the development of capitalism, characterized by the centrality of data extraction and algorithmic processing. Its essential feature is the deep integration of capitalist logic with digital technology. Within this new historical configuration, the capitalist domination of social intercourse identified by Marx and Engels has not disappeared; rather, it has been reinforced while giving rise to novel phenomena, including the incorporation of communication into latent data-producing labor, the transformation of forms of intercourse into constraints on human development, and the intensification of communicative alienation. These developments constitute a historical rupture with the communicative forms of traditional capitalism.

3.1. Continuity: social intercourse subsumed under the logic of capital

The essence of capitalism lies in the continuous expansion of capital and its capacity to transform all spheres of social activity into instruments for the accumulation of value. In the era of digital capitalism, this logic not only persists but reaches an unprecedented level of sophistication. All forms of interaction on digital platforms —including chatting, posting, sharing, commenting, and engaging with others—appear to be free acts of spiritual and social communication, yet they are deeply appropriated by platform capital and incorporated into the process of capital accumulation.

Platform capital constructs a conversion chain linking communication, data, and value, through which every act of user interaction is integrated into the circuit of capital accumulation. Data generated through users' communicative activities are appropriated by platforms without compensation and subsequently processed by algorithms into commercially valuable data assets. Through targeted advertising, personalized marketing, and related business models, these assets are transformed into sources of profit and capital expansion. Under such conditions, communicative activity ceases to exist as an autonomous sphere independent of capital and instead becomes, in formal terms, subordinated to the imperatives of digital capital.

3.2. The first rupture: communicative activities are appropriated by capital as latent data-producing labor

In Marx's time, material forms of social intercourse—such as productive cooperation and commercial exchange—were directly embedded within the process of material production. By contrast, non-waged and non-productive forms of spiritual communication between individuals, such as private correspondence, generally remained outside the circulation of capital and were not regarded as productive labor directly generating surplus value. Labor, in the classical Marxian sense, referred to material productive activity that

created use values, was performed under capitalist employment relations, and generated surplus value. The distinction between labor and communication was therefore relatively clear. The emergence of digital communication platforms has blurred this boundary to a significant extent. As some scholars have observed, "communication platforms constructed through digital technology transform all forms of digital interaction into measurable, controllable, and profitable production processes… Communicating subjects unconsciously become both producers and carriers of data" [2]. Users' communicative activities are thus incorporated into the process of capital accumulation without their conscious awareness. Every action performed on a digital platform—including posting content, liking, commenting, sharing, and building social networks—generates vast quantities of data. These data constitute the principal means of production for digital platforms. Platforms acquire them without providing compensation to users and convert them into a primary source of value creation and capital accumulation. In this context, communicative activity and labor undergo a historically significant convergence in terms of their social function. Communication is no longer merely a form of spiritual or symbolic exchange; under the control of capital, it performs functions analogous to labor. Through their communicative activities, users produce data that serve as use values for the platform, while the platform appropriates these data to generate surplus value. In this sense, users become "producers of data commodities" [3]. Their activities on digital platforms are "transformed, in the form of data traces, into labor that produces data commodities", and users "participate in data production while the resulting data products enter subsequent processes of reproduction" [4]. This argument does not imply that communicative activity is identical in essence to the wage labor analyzed by Marx. Users are neither contractually employed by digital platforms nor consciously engaged in productive labor. Rather, the point is that communication itself has been appropriated by capital and transformed into a latent, non-waged form of data-producing labor, thereby extending the logic of capitalist accumulation into domains of social life that previously lay largely beyond its direct reach.

This latent form of data-producing labor exhibits three key characteristics that distinguish it from traditional wage labor. First, it is structured through invisible design. Digital platforms do not passively wait for users to engage in communication. Rather, through algorithmic recommendation systems, interface architecture, instant feedback mechanisms, and gamified features, they actively guide, incentivize, and shape users' communicative behavior, often without users' conscious awareness. Users may believe that they are freely choosing content and autonomously deciding whom to interact with, yet their behavioral trajectories have already been anticipated and disciplined by the platform's underlying architecture. The very invisibility of this design constitutes the source of its effectiveness: the less users perceive themselves as being guided, the less likely they are to develop a critical awareness of or resistance to the mechanisms directing their behavior. Second, participation is ostensibly voluntary. Users are not compelled to join digital platforms by direct coercion; rather, they participate willingly to satisfy genuine social, emotional, expressive, and informational needs. This apparent voluntariness is precisely what renders digital exploitation particularly concealed. Exploitation no longer manifests itself through overt forms of compulsion, such as the extension of working hours or the suppression of wages. Instead, it presents itself through the language of free choice, enjoyable social interaction, and opportunities for self-expression. The more users perceive their engagement as an expression of personal autonomy, the less likely they are to recognize that their activities are being appropriated for economic gain.

Third, the products of users' communicative activities are owned primarily by the platform. Through their interactions, users generate texts, images, videos, comments, social network data, and behavioral traces, all of which possess significant economic value. Yet this value is largely appropriated by the platform without compensation. Although users receive access to platform services—including social connectivity, information acquisition, and entertainment—these benefits are not commensurate with the substantial profits platforms

derive from the commercialization of user-generated data. By monopolizing data assets, digital platforms transform the products of users' communicative activities into a principal source of capital accumulation, while users themselves possess neither ownership rights over these products nor meaningful bargaining power regarding their economic use.

Taken together, these three characteristics illuminate the distinctive nature of alienation in digital communication. Users participate, under conditions of apparent freedom and voluntariness, in a carefully engineered process of data production, while the products of their activities are monopolized by platform capital. This mechanism enables exploitation to operate in a subtler and more humanized form than under traditional industrial capitalism. Immersed in the pleasures of communication and social interaction, users often fail to recognize that they are simultaneously functioning within a highly sophisticated apparatus for the extraction and commodification of data. Consequently, although data-producing labor differs formally from wage labor, its exploitative logic remains consistent with Marx's critique of capital's uncompensated appropriation of the products of others' labor.

When an activity is organized under the control of capital, creates value for others, and is performed without remuneration, it exhibits the fundamental characteristics of exploitative value appropriation. Through their communicative activities, users generate use values in the form of data, while digital platforms appropriate these data without compensation and transform them into a source of capital accumulation and profit. Although this process does not fully correspond to Marx's classical conception of surplus-value production under wage labor—since it lacks a formal employment relationship and the payment of wages—its underlying logic is fundamentally analogous. In both cases, capital appropriates the value generated by the activities of others without equivalent compensation, thereby reproducing the essential exploitative dynamic at the heart of capitalist accumulation.

3.3. The second rupture: the form of social intercourse has become a fetter on development

Marx argued that the dialectical relationship between the forms of social intercourse and the productive forces constitutes the fundamental driving force of historical development. When the forms of intercourse correspond to the level of productive development, they facilitate the growth of the productive forces; once productive forces have advanced beyond the constraints of existing social arrangements, however, the old forms of intercourse cease to be vehicles of development and instead become fetters upon further progress. In the era of digital capitalism, the platform-centered form of social intercourse, initially a catalyst for the development of digital productive forces, has gradually evolved into a constraint on their further realization.

Digital technologies possess the potential to promote global connectivity, the free circulation of information, and the establishment of a barrier-free system of universal social intercourse. Yet the monopolistic and profit-driven nature of privately owned digital platforms has generated an acute contradiction between the forms of social intercourse and the productive forces. Private platform ownership has created "data silos", with competing platforms restricting interoperability and deliberately preventing the free exchange of data, thereby erecting artificial barriers to communication. Algorithmic monopolies further homogenize communicative content and solidify patterns of social interaction, limiting both the diversity and the autonomy of human communication. Through rule-making authority and algorithmic governance, platforms exercise control over communicative channels and the distribution of discursive power, allowing a small number of corporations to monopolize the principal means of digital interaction and impede the broader socialization of communication. This contradiction reflects the same structural logic underlying Marx's critique of institutions such as the medieval guild system and feudal landownership. In both cases, the

concentration of control over the principal means of social intercourse in the hands of a minority obstructs the free development of society's productive and communicative capacities.

3.4. The third rupture: the comprehensive intensification of communicative alienation—the four digital forms of alienation

The four dimensions of alienated labor identified by Marx in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, although originally developed to analyze material production, provide a valuable theoretical framework for understanding the alienation of communication under digital capitalism.

The first dimension is alienation from the products of communication, namely data. The data generated through users' communicative activities—including posts, comments, social relationships, and behavioral traces—should, in principle, remain under the control of those who produce them. Under the regime of platform ownership, however, these data are appropriated and monopolized by digital platforms without compensation [5]. Users are unable to exercise effective control over the data they create, and the products of their activities "cease to belong to themselves and instead confront them as an alien power" [6]. Data become an external force standing in opposition to their producers, while platforms exploit users through their monopoly over these informational resources. This phenomenon represents a digital extension of Marx's concept of the worker's alienation from the product of labor.

The second dimension is alienation from the activity of communication itself. Communication ought to be a free, conscious, and creative form of human activity. Yet with the deep integration of algorithmic systems into digital platforms, communicative practices are increasingly organized and regulated according to the imperatives of capital accumulation. The content users encounter, the individuals with whom they interact, and even the rhythm of their social engagement are shaped by algorithmic processes designed to maximize platform profitability. Users are thereby reduced to "communicative machines" operating under algorithmic governance. Communication loses its autonomous and creative character and becomes a passive process of data production, reflecting, in the digital sphere, Marx's notion of the worker's alienation from the labor process.

The third dimension is alienation from humanity's species-being. Marx regarded free and conscious activity as the defining characteristic of human nature. As one of the most fundamental forms of human activity, communication should express human creativity, subjectivity, and sociability. Under conditions of digital capitalism, however, creative and autonomous communication is transformed into passive data production. Human emotions, thoughts, preferences, and patterns of behavior are translated into algorithmic categories and data labels, reducing human beings to commodifiable informational units. As one scholar observes, "the individual no longer exists as an integral subject but is incorporated into the circuit of capital accumulation as a calculable and replaceable unit of data" [7]. Communication thus ceases to function as a free and conscious activity, and human subjectivity is profoundly diminished. The alienation of humanity from its species-being consequently assumes a distinctly digital form.

The fourth dimension is alienation from other human beings. Human communication ought to consist of direct, authentic, and egalitarian social relationships. In the digital age, however, platform corporations have become the dominant intermediaries of interpersonal interaction. Human relationships are filtered and reconstructed through platform regulations and algorithmic logic, while genuine social bonds are obscured by the underlying capitalist relationship between platforms and users. Communication increasingly takes the form of connections between data profiles rather than direct relationships between individuals. Trust, mutual understanding, and empathy are weakened, giving rise to a paradoxical condition in which greater connectivity

is accompanied by deeper social estrangement. This phenomenon constitutes a characteristic expression of Marx's concept of alienation between human beings in the context of digital capitalism.

These four dimensions of alienation are closely interconnected and unfold in a progressive sequence. Alienation begins with the separation of users from the data they produce, extends to the alienation of communicative activity itself, develops into the alienation of humanity's species-being, and ultimately culminates in the alienation of social relations among individuals. Together, they provide a comprehensive picture of the structure and dynamics of communicative alienation in the era of digital capitalism.

3.5. The fourth rupture: a new form of commodity fetishism—data fetishism

If the four dimensions of communicative alienation constitute the objective reality of exploitation under digital capitalism, then data fetishism represents the ideological mechanism through which this exploitation is concealed and mystified. In *Capital*, *Volume I*, Marx identifies the essence of commodity fetishism as the process by which social relations between people assume the appearance of relations between things. Commodities are endowed with an apparently autonomous and mysterious power, ultimately confronting human beings as alien forces that dominate them [8]. In the age of digital capitalism, commodity fetishism has evolved into what may be termed data fetishism [9]. Although this phenomenon follows the same fundamental logic identified by Marx, it assumes new forms under contemporary technological conditions.

Within digital communication, human relationships, emotional expressions, ideas, preferences, and patterns of behavior are systematically transformed into quantifiable and tradable data. Data thereby become a new kind of "thing", while individuals themselves are increasingly reduced to "aggregates of data" [10]. Like commodities, data are assigned economic value, bought and sold, monopolized, and incorporated into the circuits of capital accumulation, becoming one of the principal instruments through which platform capital generates profit. Contemporary discourse is saturated with concepts such as "data assets", "traffic value", and "data monetization", yet these expressions obscure the fact that data originate in the concrete communicative activities and social relationships of living human beings. Detached from their social origins, data acquire an apparently autonomous economic existence and are endowed with a quasi-mystical character. They emerge as alien forces capable of governing, evaluating, and exploiting the very individuals who produce them. Consequently, genuine social relations between people are obscured and reappear as abstract relationships between data sets and algorithmic representations. Data fetishism thus constitutes both an extension and an intensification of commodity fetishism under the historical conditions of digital capitalism. Whereas commodity fetishism concealed the social character of labor behind the exchange of commodities, data fetishism conceals the social character of human communication behind the production and circulation of data. The communicative activities through which individuals create meaning, establish relationships, and express their subjectivity are transformed into seemingly objective and self-sufficient data objects whose social origins become invisible. In this sense, data fetishism further substantiates Marx's insight that fetishism is not an accidental feature of capitalism but an inherent characteristic of a social order in which human activities and relationships are mediated and dominated by the products they themselves create.

4. Transcending the logic of capital: pathways toward the emancipation of digital communication

The communicative dilemmas of digital capitalism arise fundamentally from the contradiction between the private ownership of the means of communication and the increasingly socialized character of communicative activity. This contradiction represents the digital-age manifestation of the tension between the forms of social

intercourse and the productive forces, as well as a concrete expression of the comprehensive domination of communication by the logic of capital. Importantly, these dilemmas are not an inevitable consequence of digital technology itself but rather a concentrated manifestation of the capitalist mode of production under contemporary historical conditions. Marx and Engels' theory of social intercourse not only provides a powerful critique of the alienation of digital communication but also offers a fundamental theoretical orientation for transcending capitalist logic and advancing the emancipation of human communication.

4.1. The logical premise of emancipation: from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom

In *Capital*, *Volume III*, Marx argues that "the associated producers rationally regulate their interchange with nature, bringing it under their common control instead of being dominated by it as by a blind power" [11]. Extending the concept of the "associated producers" to the sphere of digital communication suggests the possibility of what may be called the associated communicators: users who become conscious of their exploitation and alienation and who, through organized collective action, seek to reclaim control over the means of communication. Such an association should not be dismissed as a purely utopian aspiration. From an objective standpoint, although users of digital platforms appear as isolated and atomized individuals, they already possess the material conditions for collective organization. They face common challenges, including data exploitation, algorithmic governance, and the erosion of privacy, which generate shared interests and common demands. At the same time, their participation within the same digital infrastructures provides the technological means for communication, coordination, and collective action. Existing practices offer tangible evidence of these possibilities. The community-based governance model of Wikipedia, the decentralized architecture of federated social networks such as Mastodon, and emerging experiments with "data unions" all suggest that forms of collective user organization are both conceivable and practically achievable.

The realm of freedom in digital communication may thus be understood as a community in which associated communicators exercise democratic control over the means, forms, and content of communication. At the same time, it is important to recognize that communicative activity can never be entirely removed from the realm of necessity, even under ideal social conditions. Communication inevitably requires finite resources such as time, energy, and attention. The processing, storage, and transmission of information remain dependent upon technological infrastructures and material energy costs. Moreover, human beings must continue to communicate in order to coordinate social life, acquire knowledge, and sustain cooperative relationships. These are functional and instrumental requirements rather than activities pursued solely as ends in themselves. As Marx observed, the genuine realm of freedom begins with "the development of human powers as an end in itself" [11]. Applied to the sphere of communication, this implies forms of interaction undertaken not merely to coordinate labor, acquire information, or maintain social status, but to express oneself, create, play, explore, and cultivate genuinely human relationships. The collective effort of users to reclaim control over the means of communication should therefore be understood not as the abolition of the realm of necessity but as its transformation. By making the necessary conditions of digital communication more rational, equitable, and humane, associated communicators can create the material and institutional foundations upon which a richer realm of communicative freedom may flourish.

4.2. Practical pathways: transcending private monopoly and restoring intersubjectivity

First, the socialization of the means of communication. As one scholar has argued, "the only way to overcome the alienation of digital communication is to fundamentally transform the private ownership of the means of production under digital capitalism" [12]. As long as the essential means of digital communication—platforms, data, and algorithms—remain under the control of private capital, communicative activity will inevitably be

subordinated to the logic of capital accumulation, and users' freedom of communication will exist only within the limits permitted by capital. It is therefore necessary to transform the platform-centered model of digital communication by shifting the ownership and governance of these key communicative resources from private monopoly to forms of social ownership. Public-oriented digital platforms should be designed to serve human communicative needs and promote universal social interaction rather than the expansion of capital. Data should be collectively governed by their users, while algorithms should be designed and supervised by the associated communicators themselves, thereby addressing, at a structural level, the problems of data exploitation, algorithmic manipulation, and platform monopoly. It should be recognized, however, that the transition from the current regime of privately owned platforms to a fully socialized system of communicative infrastructure cannot be accomplished overnight. Rather, it is likely to proceed through a gradual process involving a range of intermediate institutional arrangements. The first of these is the establishment of data trusts, under which individuals entrust the management of their personal data to independent fiduciary institutions that negotiate with digital platforms on behalf of users and facilitate the collective exercise of data rights. A second possibility is the development of platform cooperatives, digital platforms owned and democratically governed by their users. Certain examples within federated social networking systems, such as Mastodon, already exhibit governance practices that partially embody the principle of associated communicators exercising collective control over the means of communication. A third approach involves the creation of public digital infrastructures financed and maintained by states or social communities for public benefit rather than commercial profit. Such platforms would be dedicated to serving the communicative needs of society instead of maximizing economic returns. Although these transitional arrangements do not fully realize the socialization of the means of communication, they begin to weaken the exclusive control of private capital over digital communicative infrastructures and create favorable conditions for more comprehensive structural transformation.

Within the context of China's digital governance, a number of policy initiatives may be viewed as broadly consistent with this orientation. Antitrust regulation of the platform economy has sought to curb the unchecked expansion of corporate control over digital infrastructures. Regulatory oversight of algorithmic recommendation systems has required platforms to provide users with the option of disabling personalized recommendations, thereby partially restoring users' autonomy over information selection. Legislative measures protecting personal data rights have granted individuals rights such as access to information and the deletion of personal data. Although these initiatives represent forms of regulatory governance rather than the socialization of communicative infrastructures in a strict sense, they contribute to the development of institutional experience and governance capacity that may support more far-reaching reforms in the future. More broadly, China's people-centered approach to digital development, which emphasizes that digital technologies should serve society rather than capital alone, shares an important normative affinity with the objective of placing the means of communication under broader social stewardship.

Second, the restoration of communicative autonomy. The socialization of the means of communication provides the material foundation for the autonomy of communicative relations. Building upon this foundation requires overcoming the domination of communication by capital and restoring communicative activity as a free and conscious form of human practice. As associated communicators, users should be able to determine autonomously the content, participants, and modes of their interactions, while algorithmic systems should function as tools that serve diverse human communicative needs rather than mechanisms for capital accumulation. At the same time, it is necessary to reconstruct authentic interpersonal relationships by overcoming the ideological distortions of data fetishism and restoring communication to its intrinsic purposes of emotional exchange, intellectual dialogue, and social connection. In this way, human subjectivity and

humanity's species-being may be reaffirmed, opening the possibility of realizing universal social intercourse and the realm of freedom in the digital age.

The realization of communicative autonomy depends not only upon macro-level institutional transformation but also upon changes in the everyday practices of digital users. Several practical dimensions deserve particular attention.

First, the restoration of autonomy over information selection. Users can consciously diversify their digital environments by making greater use of decentralized or open-source social platforms where appropriate, disabling algorithmic recommendation systems, and actively constructing their own information networks through searching, subscribing, and filtering rather than passively consuming platform-curated content.

Second, the recovery of autonomy over the rhythm of communication. Contemporary digital platforms cultivate expectations of constant availability and immediate response. A more autonomous communicative practice requires resisting these temporal pressures, embracing a more deliberate and asynchronous pace of interaction, and avoiding excessive dependence on notification systems and the logic of instant communication.

Third, the restoration of authenticity in communicative content. Digital interaction is often shaped by the pursuit of online personas and the accumulation of attention and influence. A more emancipated form of communication would involve moving beyond the instrumental logic of self-branding and social capital accumulation, placing greater emphasis on interactions grounded in shared interests, genuine emotional exchange, and meaningful intellectual engagement. In this sense, communication would recover its intrinsic significance as a medium for mutual understanding and creative dialogue.

Fourth, the organic integration of online and offline interaction. Digital communication should complement and enrich embodied social relationships rather than replace them. Users can strengthen the authenticity and depth of interpersonal connections by transforming valuable online interactions into face-to-face encounters whenever possible, thereby restoring the embodied and contextual dimensions of human communication.

The two strategic directions outlined above—the socialization of the means of communication and the restoration of communicative autonomy—are mutually dependent and mutually reinforcing. Without the socialization of communicative infrastructures, communicative autonomy lacks a stable material foundation, as the means of communication remain subject to the imperatives of capital accumulation. Conversely, without the autonomy of communicative relations, the socialization of communicative infrastructures could itself degenerate into new forms of bureaucratic domination. Only through the coordinated advancement of both dimensions can the emancipatory potential of digital communication be realized and the digital realm of freedom move from a normative aspiration toward a concrete social reality.

5. Conclusion

The communicative dilemmas of digital capitalism represent a concentrated manifestation of the inherent contradictions of capitalism in the digital age. At their core lies the comprehensive subordination of human communication to the logic of capital accumulation. The principal argument advanced in this article is that users' social activities have been appropriated by capital and transformed into a latent form of data-producing labor. The alienation generated by this process unfolds through four interconnected dimensions: alienation from the products of communication, from communicative activity itself, from humanity's species-being, and from other human beings. At the ideological level, data fetishism obscures and legitimizes this exploitative relationship by concealing the social origins of data and presenting them as autonomous objects of economic value. Rather than undermining the explanatory power of Marx and Engels' theory of social intercourse, digital

capitalism provides a new historical context in which its critical insights are further confirmed and extended. Moving from critique to constructive reflection, this article has proposed several theoretical directions for the emancipation of digital communication, including the concepts of the associated communicators, the socialization of the means of communication, and the restoration of communicative autonomy. These proposals should be understood as theoretical extrapolations derived from the analytical framework of Marx and Engels' theory of social intercourse. Their practical realization remains an open question that calls for further institutional innovation and empirical investigation.

Digital technology itself is not the fundamental source of the contemporary crisis of communication; rather, the crisis stems from the monopolistic domination of communication by capital. The theory of social intercourse developed by Marx and Engels should therefore be understood not as a rigid historical doctrine but as a dynamic critical framework possessing enduring explanatory and normative significance. To revisit this theory is not to search for ready-made solutions to contemporary problems but to appropriate its methodological insights as intellectual tools for diagnosing the evolving contradictions of changing historical conditions. As digital technologies continue to develop and new forms of communication emerge, the tension between the logic of capital accumulation and the pursuit of human emancipation is likely to remain a persistent feature of social life. By preserving the critical spirit and emancipatory orientation of Marx and Engels' theory of social intercourse while grounding analysis in the concrete realities of the digital age, it is possible to continue exploring new pathways toward the liberation of human communication. Only through such efforts can digital technologies genuinely contribute to the free and all-round development of individuals and promote the realization of a universal communicative order that underpins the building of a community with a shared future for humankind.

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