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First Monday

[](http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/viewArticle/2141/1948#author)

Abstract  
In this article [[1](http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/viewArticle/2141/1948" \l "1)] some of the critical aspects of Web 2.0 are mapped in relation to labor and the production of user generated content. For many years the Internet was considered an apt technology for subversion of capitalism by the Italian post–Marxists. What we have witnessed, however, is that the Internet functions as a double–edged sword; the infrastructure does foster democracy, participation, joy, creativity and sometimes creates zones of piracy. But, at the same time, it has become evident how this same infrastructure also enables companies easily to piggyback on user generated content. Different historical and contemporary examples are provided to map how the architecture of participation sometimes turns into an architecture of exploitation.

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**Introduction**

This article ought to be written at least three times, each time with a different perspective, primarily out of respect for the topic it covers, user generated content, and the parties involved: users and corporations. There is something messy about the relationship between users and corporations. What causes this mess I will explain in the first part of the article, which points towards an ontology of Web 2.0. In the second and third part we look more closely at the culture of Web 2.0 from the perspective of labor. This is not sufficient, but, in order to flesh out some of the critical aspects that are often forgotten, I will allow myself to use this limited perspective [[2](http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/viewArticle/2141/1948" \l "2)]. The second part establishes a theoretical frame based on labor theory, to set the ground for untangling labor relations within the culture of Web 2.0. Thirdly, we will look at user generated content, by mapping different examples of the architecture of exploitation and the enclosure of content.

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**The productivity and negativity of messy relations**

The ground covered here is often described as Web 2.0, social media, participatory media, citizen journalism, user generated content, user driven innovation, and social software. The list is long. Sometimes there are important differences betweens these terms but not in this article. These terms have in common a certain positive sound to them, when uttered within a democratic discourse influenced by the Enlightenment. Another list of words could be added, which has a somewhat negative sound to it: exploitation, losers, free labor, and enclosure. These two sets of words are not dichotomous; they are part of what happens online and elsewhere these years, and for the sake of history, always have happened. Along with words such as joy, creativity, significance and pleasure, they are best described as a diagram that maps the design, production and use of the Internet. But how can a technology, or an ensemble of technologies, have such different characteristics? Produce such different effects? One way of explaining this would be to consider the basic principles behind the technologies in question.

One of the most interesting, inspiring and productive aspects of Web 2.0, and at the same time one of the problematic ones when considered critically, is the relational character of these technologies. Relational thinking entails viewing the world as relations instead of objects and subjects. Usually we would ascribe significance or value to objects and subjects as if it came from within. It is evident, when looking at how Web 2.0 creates significance for its users, that it is the relations between the different elements that create significance and value. Why is this important? Because it explains why a specific type of software and practices related to it can be participatory, exploitative and create pleasure for its users at the same time. Let me offer an example. When someone takes a picture with her or his camera phone and uploads it to Flickr.com, a lot of different relations are created and hereby also significance and value.

Initial relations include: the reasons for taking the picture. Was it something funny, pretty, important, unusual, mundane or perhaps all these things at once? Another set of relations are between the camera lens, the surroundings and the sun; *i.e.*, is it a good picture? Can you actually see what it was supposed to depict?

A second set of relations include: uploading it to Flickr. Do people see it? But more often: do the right people see it so comments, tags and notes are added? Does a funny or interesting conversation kick off in your stream? Did people have the time when seeing the picture to make a comment?

A third set of relations could include: using the open API of Flickr and one of the third party applications on Facebook to incorporate the photo into your Facebook profile. You might even be contacted by other parties who would like to include the photo in a magazine or a Web 2.0 tourist guide such as schmap.com (<http://www.schmap.com/>). The possibilities are manifold. These relations could carry traits of exploitation but also give new significance to the picture, if it becomes part of the participatory citizen media movement.

We witness here how a single photo can have many different significances and create different forms of value (economic, social and affective) due to the different relations which it is a part of. It also becomes evident that the design and programming languages used within Web 2.0 software enables a kind of use practice where content is moved across different platforms and Web sites. This is the main reason for always approaching Web 2.0 as a relational technology, so we do not blindfold ourselves from the positive and negative effects these technologies can have.

Another reason is more closely related to this article. It is important to acknowledge the unstable character of Web 2.0 technologies compared to other technologies; the way content is both moving and moved across platforms, creating different forms of value. We should also acknowledge history; always be alert when seeing patterns of exploitation taking on new forms. This new form is not disguised as participation, in most instances we are witnessing genuine participation (within certain constraints though, questioning how democratic these technologies really are). It is not a question of capitalism luring users into spending time on their sites, as a more classical hegemonic orientated 1970s Marxism would frame it. It is much more complicated, which has to do with both the technologies in question but also how society and the means of production have changed during the last century. Some of these changes are outlined briefly in the next section, before moving onto the examples.

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**General intellect and mass intellectuality**

User driven innovation and user generated content are two phenomena related to the liberating and democratic participatory aspects of current Internet culture. People’s creative potential is fostered by technological platforms enabling them to be a part of the design of software and share their own content. This practice is not similar but bears a resemblance to Marx’s “fragments of the machine” from *Grundrisse* (Marx, 1993). This particular text from Marx has become well–known through its adoption by the Italian Autonomia post–Marxist movement since the 1960s and onwards. In *Fragments* Marx outlines the future of capitalism in a way so it ultimately undermines itself leading to communism. As so often before this has been proven wrong; capitalism has, as Deleuze and Guattari (1987) have pointed out, an inherent capacity to reterritorialize and reinvent itself. In Marx’s futurology, manual labor time, or work, will no longer be the prime factor in creating surplus value. Usually the value of a commodity was measured by the labor time incorporated in it. As work becomes more automated through machines, the creation of wealth will come to depend on two interrelated factors: knowledge and technological expertise objectified in machines combined with the organization of the ‘general intellect’:

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| “In this transformation, it is neither the direct human labor he himself [sic] performs, nor the time during which he works, but rather the appropriation of his own general productive power, his understanding of nature and his mastery over it bye virtue of his presence as a social body – it is, in a word, the development of the social individual which appears as the great foundation — stone of production and of wealth.” [[3](http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/viewArticle/2141/1948#3)] |

The increasing automation and hereby the mobilization of the general intellect are primarily fostered by machinery, infrastructure and communication technologies. This creates the capitalistic vision of a world market but at the same time, according to Marx, also creates a capitalistic nightmare. Crisis originates because of capitalism’s continuing growth through automation and general intellect, while still dependent on a measure of wealth based on the surplus value of labor time incorporated into commodities [[4](http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/viewArticle/2141/1948" \l "4)]. The most important aspect of the new production mode for the Autonomia theorists was the variable and more uncontrollable form of human or subjective capital. When the workers are freed from spending all their time at the assembly line, new forms of subjectivity and knowledge arises – the general intellect – creating what they dubbed ‘mass intellectuality’, a “*repository of knowledges indivisible from living subjects and from their linguistic co–operation*” [[5](http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/viewArticle/2141/1948" \l "5)]. With the advent of the Internet these forces have become even more widespread, and therefore hold new means of subversion when:

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| “The actual time spent in labor and exertion has become a marginal productive factor. Science, information, linguistic communication, and knowledge in general – rather than labor time – are now the central pillars on which production and wealth rest.” [[6](http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/viewArticle/2141/1948#6)] |

In general a decentralized system of communication as the Internet, with the low cost of publishing and the ease of violating copyright, creates a situation where subversive thought and creativity can prosper, and especially the system of wealth within the entertainment industry can be broken, by violating copyright. The thought of the Italian Autonomia theorists, especially the work of Antonio Negri, struck a chord online within communities such as Nettime, Telepolis, Rhizome and C–Theory where we witnessed that:

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| “Today, the faltering vectors of e–capital tangle with a molecular proliferation of hacktivists, net–artists, cypherpunks and pirate autonomous zones, all of whom can be seen as manifesting the uncontrollable, self–valorizing powers of general intellect.” [[7](http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/viewArticle/2141/1948#7)] |

Although there are zones of autonomy and piracy online, it is important to acknowledge that the Internet, always and already, operates within the confinement of capitalism (Terranova, 2004).

If not directly recognized as related to capitalism, online practices can quickly be reterritorialized by capitalism. The subversive potential online is fostered by the same technical infrastructure and standards that make capitalism so easily piggyback on user generated content. The ease of copying and relocating content online as well as its network structure are both what enable distributing music and other digitalized culture products for free, hereby undermining the chain of value for entertainment and software corporations. However, it is also what makes it easy for capitalism to copy and reuse content produced by users into the sphere of a corporate site (reterritorialization).

Let us look at some examples of how user generated content becomes reterritorialized by capitalism, in order to outline some of the different methods of enclosing user generated content.

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**Usenet & Google**

The case of Google buying Deja News’ archive of Usenet is a subtle example of participation turning into exploitation. Usenet started in 1981 and functions as a distributed system of loosely connected servers so there is no general server that hosts postings, thus differing from a BBS or a list hosted by a company. In 1995 Deja News started archiving old and new posts to Usenet and made an interface with search options. Deja was purchased by Google in 2001 and Google have incorporated Usenet into its own groups.

Google’s appropriation of all the free labor that is stored in Usenet postings and discussions is an example of how a distributed network of participation turns into a closed architecture of exploitation. Although Google does not own the postings, they own the interface which is just as valuable. The strategy Google used when buying Deja is equivalent to the method of enclosure used within Web 2.0, to which we will return. This strategy can be characterized as a reterritorialization of free labor into a capitalistic structure of profit–making.

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**AOL**

Another common strategy within Web 2.0 that was also widespread within “1.0” is downright exploitation, which became evident with the case from AOL. In 1999 seven of the 13,000 volunteers of AOL, working to keep AOL’s community vibrant and living, started questioning whether they should get paid for their work. Two of the seven filed a complaint against AOL in a federal court in New York (Margonelli, 1999). The U.S. Department of Labor investigated the case but came to no conclusions and closed their investigation in 2001.

AOL is a typical example of how the architecture of participation was in “Web 1.0”. The basic design principle was to create Internet portals mixed with search engines and discussion lists. Posts and articles posted to discussions lists hosted by a company such as Yahoo or AOL are owned by the company providing the servers and the interface. This manner of claiming ownership over content produced by users is a very explicit form of exploitation that we do not see as often within Web 2.0, although there are exceptions, such as Facebook (Scholz, 2007).

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**User generated content 2.0**

Usenet was a good example of the Internet being the quintessential technology fostering the general intellect with its open architecture of participation, and its liberating and democratic potentials [[8](http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/viewArticle/2141/1948" \l "8)]. These aspects have been one of the driving forces behind the ideological promotion of the Internet, especially in relation to the notion of collective intelligence which is equivalent to the Autonomia theorist’s concept of a mass intellectuality. Within the Web 2.0 discourse and blogosphere this is what has come to be known as wisdom of the crowds, exemplified by technologies such as wikis and tagging. Design principles based on the architecture of participation have always been part of the technological innovation of the Internet but has become more widespread and certainly improved with light programming languages such as Ajax and features as RSS. One of the most popular forms of participatory media has been blogging. The technological infrastructure of blogging is much like Usenet, in the sense that it is based on a distributed architecture.

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**Blogging**

Instead of centralizing all the free labor under one domain, it is now decentralized on personal blogs supported by free unhosted blogging software, or supported by hosted blogging software, creating advertising revenue for big media corporations hosting blogs on their sites, such as Myspace. One difference between “1.0” and 2.0 is Google’s AdSense which can be implemented on blogs, creating a little revenue for the blogger. This system, based on personal advertising and therefore very efficient on personal blogs, puts a little balance into the architecture of exploitation in relation to user generated content. In the third quarter of 2006, one billion dollars went into Google’s AdSense program, out of which 780 million was shared with those implementing AdSense on their blog. The majority of this shared revenue goes to a minority of large sites, and the majority of bloggers earns close to nothing, especially compared to all the hours that go into running a blog (Arnoldy, 2007). From Google’s perspective AdSense is a goldmine because they can share little and still promote their tagline of “don’t be evil”, while at the same time maintaining an impressive system of surveillance gathering information that can be used in their huge range of other products.

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**Social networking sites**

Social networking sites use a typical infrastructure of hosting all the content produced by their users. Whether it is sharing music playlists on Last.fm (<http://www.last.fm/>), pictures on Flickr.com or different types of content on Myspace.com, these types of sites have some commonalities when offering different platforms for users to share content. In addition to the content you upload and the comments you make on other users’ sites, they all offer the ability to create a personal profile. These three aspects together constitute your identity on those sites. Along with this you have your friends and contacts list. All in all this creates a rather rich representation of the users on these sites. To keep this identity, you need to constantly update your site with content, be an active member of the community in making comments and adding new friends and contacts. These things together with the fact that the content which people upload to these sites often is of a personal nature, create a strong bond with the site and the community you are a part of. Time is an important factor here, because the longer time you have used a site for, the more personal and valuable your biography becomes, making it harder to migrate to a new site.

Marx and Virno both talk about the changes in creating value brought about by technological infrastructures and the rise of the general intellect. This is without a doubt true if we define work as paid labor and something you do outside your home, but this is not the case anymore. Besides the fact that people tend to work more and more at home, their use of different types of software, such as Flickr, Myspace, Facebook and blogging carries relations with it that often resemble work. This even more true if you look at the amount of hours that goes into these sites. So time is not a declining factor in the creation of value, it is exactly the opposite, both in relation to social and affective value, but also economic value. The more time people spend on particular sites, the more the chance of them migrating diminishes, hereby making way for more stable revenue plans for the corporation who owns the site. The users of Flickr that I interviewed [[9](http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/viewArticle/2141/1948" \l "9)] all say they would not dream of moving to another site, unless they could take their network with them as well as all their pictures with comments, tags and notes.

It is when the technological infrastructure and design of these sites is combined with capitalism that the architecture begins to oscillate between exploitation and participation. Significance, on a site such as Flickr, is created both individually and collectively through the use of different features. The people I interviewed all spent some time giving context to their pictures through tags, titles and descriptions. They primarily do this because they find it important to give some information to the people looking at their photo album. The collective aspects of creating significance is often done through comments and occasionally through adding tags and notes to other people’s pictures. All these different features and the practices surrounding them are a primary factor in the creation of significance and affective bonds on Flickr. Without this, it simply would not be as fun, as my informants tell me. But at the same time, this is also what makes migration to another site impossible.

At some point there were discussions in the Copenhagen Flickr community whether they should migrate to 23hq.com (<http://23hq.com/>). One reason for migrating was that it would make the community larger, but the primary reason was the difference of design. On 23hq there is the possibility of lurking on your contacts’ discussions because you can see where they have left comments. This is a very powerful design feature strengthening the networking aspects. Eventually it was decided not to migrate because it would not be possible to take your data with you, you can only delete it. That is, you can only delete yourself, movement is not allowed in this supposedly decentralized free space.

Flickr is very active in promoting themselves by opening up their API so people will code small applications that improve the design and usability of Flickr, while at the same time helping Flickr in promoting it as the cool site to be at. There are limitations though as to how open the API is; the openness stops short of enabling migration. It could be an option to migrate if you could take the entirety of the context data with you.

The communities that emerge, the integration of social networking in everyday life, and the personal biography you create through your content, comments etc. create an impressively strong tie to a particular site. The demography of the people I interviewed places them on the left side of the political spectrum; they are at times directly anti–corporate/capitalist in the pictures they upload and their comments. Nonetheless, most of them do not see a problem in having such close ties with a particular company. This can only be explained with reference to the immense joy and pleasure they get out of sharing photos online. The huge amount of work that goes into each personal site is paid back in an affective currency: the joy and significance these sites bring to their users.

There is also an economic currency floating around within this culture. It is difficult though to get an overview of what kind of revenue these sites make, but we can get an idea of the money they generate or hopefully will generate in the future by looking at their price tags. MySpace was sold for US$580 million in July 2005, Last.fm was acquired by CBS Interactive in June 2007 for US$280 million, and Flickr was bought by Yahoo in March 2005 without revealing the price tag.

The reason for buying a social networking site is seldom the content, because you cannot claim propriety over users’ content, with the exception of what Facebook tries to do. But it does not matter whether you can claim ownership or not, because of the way ownership and content is defined in End User License Agreement’s (EULA). The legal language of EULAs is based on a subject–object ontology instead of a relational way of thinking. Content is defined as the content people upload as if the significance of that content is inherent within it, but, as I have shown, it is not. What you buy, when acquiring a social networking site, is not content but context data produced by users and communities. In this way the architecture of participation turns into an architecture of exploitation and enclosure, transforming users into commodities that can be sold on the market.

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**Conclusion**

The Internet has often been promoted as countercultural and inherently democratic. Theorists such as Antonio Negri and Richard Barbrook have ridiculed capitalism for its missing ability to capitalize general intellect and piggyback on immaterial products, produced by informational structures organized around mass intellectuality [[10](http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/viewArticle/2141/1948" \l "10)]. The ease of violating copyrighted material has created changes in the economic chain of owning intellectual property to certain types of commodities. This in no way, however, supports subversion and piracy online; commodities have just changed from material/immaterial artifacts to people and their data. Commodification of users and their content have proved itself as the answer to the problems that capitalism supposedly faced when online communication sparked off. The examples in this paper outline two different strategies within the architecture of exploitation that capitalism can benefit from:

1. Through a distributed architecture of participation, companies can piggyback on user generated content by archiving it and making interfaces, or using other strategies such as Google’s AdSense program.
2. Designing platforms for user generated content, such as Youtube, Flickr, Myspace and Facebook.

Web 2.0 emerged primarily after the dotcom crisis. In its early commercial stage, the Internet proved bad at selling commodities but really good at creating hype and economic bubbles. Something else was needed though, and subtler forms of creating surplus evolved in Web 2.0. The discourses surrounding Web 2.0 often seem very seductive in highlighting concepts such as democracy, participation and users. There are very good reasons for this. Web 2.0 technologies are extremely useful and they create desire, joy and pleasure, through their affective integration into everyday life. They are without a doubt the perfect technology for Marx’s ‘social individual’ understood as “a point of synthesis for a network of relations between forces, of nature, of intelligence, emotion, and skill, a node also in the network of social, cultural, and productive consumption” [[11](http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/viewArticle/2141/1948" \l "11)]. Relations are the key here. We need to acknowledge that relations of subjectivity, everyday life, technology, media and publics also are related to dimensions of capitalism. This relation reconfigures patterns of use into practices which caries a resemblance of work relations, transforming users into losers.

What is seriously needed is a theory of labor that is able to map both exploitation and free labor, along with considering the value using these sites creates for their users. Yochai Benkler’s (2006) utopian project of a commons based peer production and the development of a non–market and non–proprietary mode of production is a way forward. I still think, as I have argued in this article, that we need to keep an eye on capitalism’s ability to piggyback. An additional strategy would be more openness. It seems almost ironic that one has to argue for this within Web 2.0 where data flows easily between different sites. Unfortunately, as I have shown, not all kinds of data flow, which is problematic when value is dependent on relations. End of article

**About the author**

Søren Mørk Petersen holds a Master of Arts in Culture and Communication from the University of Southern Denmark. He is currently a PhD candidate at the IT University of Copenhagen. His PhD project is about social software as a cultural formation with specific focus on moblogging.  
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**Notes**

[1.](http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/viewArticle/2141/1948" \l "1a) I owe homage to Anders Pollas (<http://pollas.dk/>) for coining the phrase “loser driven innovation” that inspired me for the title of this article.

[2.](http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/viewArticle/2141/1948" \l "2a) In my forthcoming dissertation on social software and photo blogging, there will be many other perspectives.

[3.](http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/viewArticle/2141/1948" \l "3a) Marx, 1993, p. 705.

[4.](http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/viewArticle/2141/1948" \l "4a) Virno, 1996, p. 266.

[5.](http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/viewArticle/2141/1948" \l "5a) Virno, quoted from Dyer–Witheford, 2005, p. 142.

[6.](http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/viewArticle/2141/1948" \l "6a) Virno, 1996, p. 267.

[7.](http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/viewArticle/2141/1948" \l "7a) Dyer–Witheford, 2005, pp. 143–144.

[8.](http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/viewArticle/2141/1948" \l "8a) Dyer–Witheford, 1999, p. 498.

[9.](http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/viewArticle/2141/1948" \l "9a) I have made 14 individual interviews and five group interviews with two–three participants in each during 2007.

[10.](http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/viewArticle/2141/1948" \l "10a) Dyer–Witheford, 2005, p. 145.

[11.](http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/viewArticle/2141/1948" \l "11a) Fuller, 2005, p. 199.

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