Estrangement 2.0

Mark Andrejevic

The critique of alienation is alive and well in some unexpected places in the digital era. Conservative columnists invoke Marx to tell us, for example, that blogs allow anyone with Internet access to "seize the means of production."[1] *Time* magazine might as well have been invoking Marx in its announcement that we—all of us—are the "person of the year," thanks to a digital revolution that is all "about the many wresting power from the few and helping one another for nothing."[2] This is a twofer: not only a promise to overcome the reader's exclusion from access to the means of publishing and distribution, but also to rehabilitate a sense of communal support. Over and over again, we encounter the "now-it-can-be-told" promotional strategy of the new media economy. It turns out that critical theorists were right about industrial capitalism all along: it is oppressive, top-down, and alienating after all. We can finally admit this because now that we have the technology to leave it all behind. In an almost step-by-step rejoinder to Karl Marx's account of alienation in the Paris manuscripts of 1844 we learn that the new culture of interactivity will allow the "increasingly empowered prosumer" to "win back her freedoms and sense of self"; rehabilitate community and sociality online; foster self-expression and thus self-knowledge; and even overcome the longstanding diremption of nature and technology.[3]

If, as Frederic Jameson has argued, ideological manipulation necessarily taps into "genuine social and historical content" for its effectiveness, it is perhaps worth taking seriously the way in which the promise of new media frames the problems it allegedly overcomes.[4] Jameson notes that even the falsest of resolutions offered by popular culture—if it is be compelling—targets a real problem and thereby invokes a Utopian moment: "we cannot fully do justice to the ideological function or works like these unless we are willing to concede the presence… of what I will call, following the Frankfurt School, their Utopian or transcendent potential—that dimension of even the most degraded type of mass culture which remains implicitly, and no matter how faintly, negative and critical of the social order from which, as a product and a commodity, it springs."[5] One way of interpreting superhero movies or advertisements for sports utility vehicles, for example, is to consider the nature of their Utopian promise by exploring the problems they offer to overcome: a sense of the injustice of contemporary society or anxieties about feeling out of control, oppressed, threatened by the environment. In their own way each of these snippets of popular culture presents an intimation of Utopia: a world in which, for example, those who believe that might makes right are definitively defeated, or one in which we seize control of our own world, evading the forces that hem us in or oppress us.

By the same token, the promotional hype of digital media incorporates its Utopian moment in the form of what Vincent Mosco has described as the rhetoric of the digital sublime.[6] More pointedly, though, the dimensions of this Utopia provide us with a negative image of the depredations it leaves behind—and these in turn outline a contemporary constellation of alienation from self, others, and our productive activity. To recall Marx's formulation in the 1844 *Manuscripts*, alienated labor "estranges from man his own body, as well as external nature and his spiritual aspect, his *human* aspect. An immediate consequence of the fact that man is estranged from the product of his labor, from his life activity, from his species-being, is the *estrangement of man* from *man*...What applies to a man's relation to his work, to the product of his labor and to himself, also holds of a man's relation to the other man, and to the other man's labor and object of labor."[7]

If it seems vaguely retro to invoke this industrial era indictment of the drudgery of the workshop, it is worth pointing out that the promotional promise of new media is doing the invoking—in partnership with assorted futurists and new media gurus. Futurist Derrick de Kerckhove, for example, let loose with the following in the midst of the heady Internet daze of the 1990s: "In a networked society, the real powershift is from the producer to the consumer, and there is a redistribution of controls and power. On the Web, Karl Marx's dream has been realized: the tools and the means of production are in the hands of the workers."[8] It turns out, at least according to the hype, that the very source of alienation—private control over and development of the means of production—can heal its own wounds. As Erick Heroux puts it, "In this view, it is as though the historical development of technology has finally negated its own earlier negation of humanity, a dialectical turn of disalienation that is now redrawing the human face on the new screens of digital interface. The old analysis of alienated labor under industrial capitalism is here transcended by a labor of free participation under postindustrial new media. The production of information is apparently open to all, a work that develops human capacities rather than exploits and oppresses them."[9]

Rather than belabor the by-now familiar litany of promised forms of empowerment that have come to characterize the promotion of digital media technologies, this essay attempts to make the case for the continued usefulness of the notion of alienation by first exploring some examples and symptoms of alienation and then considering what is wrong with alienation—that is to say, how it might help ground a critical approach to the actual deployment of interactive media (and not simply to its promotional promise). In a sense, then, this article attempts to outline not just what is wrong with the rhetoric of technological empowerment, but also to make a case for what is wrong about alienation—and all the errors to which it leads. At the same time, it suggests that the promise of empowerment highlights what is wrong with the society it addresses. As I write, much of the globe remains in the throes of an economic crisis triggered by an increasingly unaccountable finance sector, in addition to a global environmental threat that the industrial nations of the world remain incapable of acting on despite widespread popular support for stricter environmental controls, and, in the United States, as elsewhere, a systematic assault on the ability of workers to organize in the face of increasing economic inequality. No wonder the promise of citizen and consumer empowerment is perceived to be a strong selling point. The danger is that the promise of digital revolution becomes an alibi for the depredations of increasingly aggressive forms of neo-liberal globalization.

To foreground this danger is not to downplay the significant ways in which digital media are fostering the development of independent media outlets, new forms of social activism and organization, and alternatives to entrenched forms of state and commercial propaganda. Rather, it is to highlight the way in which these progressive features of new media culture often eclipse some of the social changes that run counter to the Utopian promise. New media technologies are being deployed in many contexts according to priorities that reproduce the very forms of alienation they promise to overcome—albeit in updated guises that have been quite successful in gaining the approbation of the gullible, the uninformed, and the otherwise uncritical or co-opted. Left to deploy their own devices, the danger is that the media industries will assemble a cultural environment in which "The spectacle of information continues to perform the alienating effects of technocratic capitalism—to monopolize, technicize, commodify, and sell human potentials, thereby coopting and mystifying the production of human values."[10]

A Quaint and Obsolete Notion?
The reports of the death of alienation have been recurring, relatively frequent, and perhaps strategically premature. Heroux notes the disfavor visited upon the term by authoritarian versions of "really existing socialism" because of the potential threat it posed to the Party's

attempt "to install the principle of authority over every aspect of life, thereby reinstating the function of a power external to and above the people, that is, the State."[11] That is, the erasure of alienation as a critical category first takes place within Communist dogma—which enforces an interpretation of Marx that posits a discontinuity between the early writings and the "scientific" arguments of *Capital*: "The critique of alienation had to be buried so that an alienating mode of production could continue."[12]

In the contemporary theoretical climate, the more familiar critique of alienation is that it introduces an outdated form of humanism/essentialism. According to this critique, as Heroux puts it, "The reason 'alienation' remains untenable is that it always depends upon the ground of a 'true' self, of a primal unalienated nature beneath the artifices of power . . . Thus the whole theory of alienation becomes an embarrassing anachronism, a regression to the romantic juvenilia of a vaguely conceived 19th Century Humanism."[13] Such a critique can function only in the context of the kind of willed amnesia that has characterized the contemporary reception of Marx's dialectical approach (perhaps another contemporary instance of alienation). The version of essentialism that posits, say, the primacy of the individual subject and its ahistorical attributes is antithetical to Marx's historical and social understanding of what might count as human "essence." It was precisely this type of abstraction that he sets out to critique as an instance of alienation itself. After all, as Heroux points out, "it was Marx who also wrote that the 'human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of social relations.'"[14] The primacy of the individual that underwrites, for example, resurgent forms of neo-liberalism, is reliant upon the logic of abstraction that Marx critiques. By contrast, Marx's formulation of human essence in terms of social relations starts to sound somewhat closer to a contemporary understanding of essence as a discursive construction (broadly construed). Marx, following Hegel, offered up a critique of presence long before it became fashionable.

The critique of alienation, then, becomes an immanent rather than a transcendent one—a concern with the way in which social relations thrive on thwarting the very freedoms and capacities they invoke. Such a critique bears a certain affinity to more recent post-humanist formulations like the Deleuze-inflected elaboration of ethics outlined by Daniel W. Smith, who writes, "[A]n ethics of immanence will criticize . . . anything that separates a mode of existence from its power of acting."[15] Separation is conserved in this updated approach as a defining characteristic of alienation. In both instances, alienation is understood not in terms of a betrayed, abstract, individual, ahistorical essence, but rather in terms of domination and the social relations that reproduce it. The consequence for a critical approach, as Heroux observes, is that, "Disalienation would not somehow be more 'true to nature' but it would change the balance of power relations."[16] These are the stakes of the critique—not simply an attempt to address sentiments of disaffection or discontent (although these are surely also important), but also an invitation to examine the way in which existing social relations reproduce conditions that separate modes of existence from their power of acting—relations that thwart, channel, and otherwise redirect creative, productive activity.

Wild Beasts and Market Whisperers
In her exploration of Marx's account of alienation, Amy Wendling notes that the concept ranges across "at least five overlapping dimensions: theological, political, psychological, economic, and technological. For each dimension, there is a corresponding metaphysical object into which the human essence is alienated. For Marx, these objects are produced by human beings themselves, yet come to dominate humans as alien powers over which they have no control."[17] Starting out with the premise that the hallmark of alienation is that which is often (mis-)read as its opposite (the presumed primacy—and thus abstraction—of the autonomous, free, self-determining

individual), we might consider some contemporary manifestations of alienation across different realms of social practice.

Alienation in the macro-economic realm typically manifests itself in the form of the autonomization and naturalization of the market or the economy as an entity with an uncanny agency of its own. Consider, for example, the Australian foreign affairs minister's assessment of the so-called Global Financial Crisis (which had, at the time, begun to make its impact upon the Australian share market): "We must remain absolutely vigilant…This is a wild beast—the global economy."[18] The accompanying news article helpfully featured a large photo of two bears fighting (presumably to represent not just the wildness of the crisis, but the *bearness* of the market). This type of rhetoric marks more than a simple recognition of the fact that when many

The volatility of global markets has seen Kevin Rudd describe the international economy as a "wild beast". Picture: Pedro Armestre

FEARS of another global recession have prompted Foreign Affairs Minister Kevin Rudd to dub the international economy a "wild beast".

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individuals and groups come together in a market the outcome may be something different than the sum of their individual intentions. It pushes even further—positing an autonomous entity that at times smiles benignly upon us, but that can also set itself against us as an external threat. The market takes on a life of its own, following its own laws, deciphered for us by the oracular "market whisperers" who claim to know what it wants. Unfortunately, the market can be a cruel and bloodthirsty taskmaster. Consider, for example, the banker who told participants in a seminar in February 2003 (just before the US invasion of Iraq) that, "The market wants us to go to war, and the sooner the better."[19]

Fluctuations in the marketplace—usually measured by rising and falling stocks—come to be treated as insights about everything from presidential candidates to treaty agreements and health care reform. They are offered not as a proxy measurement of public opinion, but rather as clues about the mindset of a force that operates over and against public opinion. For example, when Turks refused to let the US use their nation as a launch pad for part of its invasion of Iraq and its stock market plummeted, this was taken as a sign of a policy mistake. On Fox News, Geraldo Rivera observed—after noting the market drop—that the only one happy about the decision was Saddam Hussein (overlooking the fact that 90% of the Turkish population reportedly opposed

the proposed US invasion).[20] The fact that the market is itself the result of aggregate human activity fades into the background as it develops a will and character of its own—one that thwarts and resists the efforts of humans to tame it, and all too often seems to take a perverse pleasure in their tribulations, as when it desires bloodshed, or rejoices about increasing unemployment.

We might recall, in this context, Marx's description in the 1844 *Manuscripts* of the wages of estrangement, in which the worker's own activity becomes, "an activity directed against himself, which is independent and does not belong to him."[21] The "market whisperers" who interpret the plaints and pleasures of the market are certainly commodity fetishists, and this fetishism is another symptom of the logic of alienation. As Wendling puts it, "Fetishism is a kind of idolatry of the human essence, implanted by human objectification . . . In alienation and capitalist production, this objectification is misunderstood. Human essence is seen as a property belonging to the commodity rather than to the creator."[22] We live in a world where we listen to markets, but are unable to hear the echoes of our own activity therein—and thus find ourselves subject to the caprices of a willful and at times inscrutable taskmaster.

All of this is familiar terrain for anyone thinking critically about contemporary capitalism. What this essay seeks to emphasize, then, is the shared logic across a range of spheres of social practice—a logic that can be described in terms of the ostensibly surpassed and debunked category of alienation. The impetus for re-excavating this logic is provided by its recent resuscitation by the cyber-hype surrounding the development and implementation of new media technologies in the era of capitalist globalization. Moreover, its invocation provides a key to one critical interpretation of the forms of exploitation that characterize the emergence of the online economy.

Untidy Freedoms

One of the more disturbing incidents in recent US politics provided a dramatic example of contemporary levels of alienation. During a CNN-hosted debate amongst candidates seeking the Republican Party's nomination to run against President Barack Obama, an especially outspokenly libertarian candidate was queried about his opposition to public health care. The moderator asked the candidate (Ron Paul) whether someone who has opted not to buy private health insurance and finds himself facing a terminal illness should be allowed to die. Before Paul had a chance to answer, several people in the audience yelled out, "Yeah!" to much applause. Paul had a somewhat more qualified response, suggesting that charities might come to the dying man's assistance, but along the way, he noted that, "That's what freedom is all about—taking your own risks."[23]

What was striking about the incident—helping to make it a topic of much online commentary and video-clip sharing—was the animosity and hostility evinced by the audience, which had a large contingent of supporters of the right-wing Tea Party movement. Ron Paul played the role of the right-wing knave described by Jacques Lacan: the politician who dispenses with sweet talk and spin to "tell it like it is" —someone who takes pleasure in the brutality of the "truth," as if resignation to it merely confirmed its irrevocable character.[24] These are, in many ways, knavish times, characterized by the demise of the "rose-tinted–glasses" version of ideology. The depredations of capitalism are more-or-less freely admitted by its proponents, who take its triumph as a sign of its naturalness in the sense of saying "nature is brutal—deal with it." Ron Paul's message about freedom runs along these same lines: a free society is not just "untidy" (as another recent right-wing "knave" put it), it is brutal—and if you make the wrong choice about health insurance, be prepared to die. The enthusiastic reception of this disturbing "wisdom" marks a similar turn: from a surpassed "naïvete" that we might do better (a sentiment repeatedly

mocked in contemporary portrayals of the "do-gooder" aspirations of '60s counterculture) to an angry embrace of resignation.

The philosopher J.M. Bernstein has characterized the vicious anger of the Tea Party (of the type manifested during the CNN debate) as an impassioned defense against the recognition of social interdependence. We might describe it as the ideological resistance to dis-alienation. As Bernstein put it, "what all the events precipitating the Tea Party movement share is that they demonstrated, emphatically and unconditionally, the depths of the absolute *dependence* of us all on government action, and in so doing they undermined the deeply held fiction of individual autonomy and self-sufficiency that are intrinsic parts of Americans' collective self-understanding."[25] In the instance of national health care, we might describe the government's role as managing a certain kind of interdependence: the "risk sharing" process whereby healthy people pay into a system that benefits those who are ill, knowing that should they need medical care at some point, the same system will apply it to them. The ideology of individualism invoked by Bernstein posits this type of interdependence as threatening—it is not the market that becomes a threat over and against oneself, but other people. I remember seeing a reality show not long ago in which a very angry Tea Party type vented his outrage at someone who supported a government administered national health care program: "It's MY money" screamed the Tea Party type, apoplectically, teetering on the very edge of losing control. It was the type of anger that very easily could have underwritten the response at the CNN debate: "should society let him die? . . . YEAH!"

There is something in this blend of spite, anxiety, and greed that recalls one of the more brutal recent spectacles of postmodern capitalism revealed during the well-publicized economic meltdown of Enron. One of the widely circulated tapes of Enron traders discussing California's attempts to recoup money extorted from the state by the company's deliberate creation of power shortages features the disdainful mockery of the traders for their client-victims: "They're fucking taking all the money back from you guys? . . . All the money you guys stole from those poor grandmothers in California?" says one trader, to which the other responds laughingly, "Yeah, grandma Millie, man . . ." The first continues: "Yeah, now she wants her fucking money back for all the power you've charged right up, jammed right up her ass for fucking $250 a megawatt hour."[26]

How else to construe these examples of anti-social behavior than as a profound form of alienation? This is not mere disregard, but active animosity directed toward the other who looms as a burdensome threat to the illusion of autonomy underwritten by the exchange relations that obscure underlying forms of social interdependence. As Bernstein, who argues from the perspective of an Adorno-inflected Hegelianism, observes, "Tea Party anger is, at bottom, metaphysical, not political: what has been undone by the economic crisis is the belief that each individual is metaphysically self-sufficient, that one's very standing and being as a rational agent *owes* nothing to other individuals or institutions."[27]

The Tea Party version of individualism relies upon the ongoing suppression of the collective character of social life—the fact that the day-to-day functioning of society at all levels relies overwhelmingly upon practical if tacit forms of agreement and sociality, and upon the institutional structures that support them. Elizabeth Warren, whom Barack Obama had hoped would head up a new Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, appealed to this truth during her campaign for the US Senate. She responded to criticism of Obama's plan to increase taxes on the wealthy by noting that, "there is nobody in this country who got rich on his own. Nobody . . . You built a factory out there? Good for you . . . But I want to be clear: you moved your goods to market on the roads the rest of us paid for; you hired workers the rest of us paid to educate; you

were safe in your factory because of police forces and fire forces that the rest of us paid for."[28] This is, on its face, a seemingly straightforward statement of affairs; the fact that it was taken up on the right as evidence of Warren's alleged extremism helps drive home Bernstein's point—the fetishization of social relations in the form of commodity exchange obscures and backgrounds relations of mutual dependence and constitution that characterize humans as social beings.

The essentialization of an abstract individualistic subject thus undergirds not the *critique* of alienation, but its modern guise. Wendling notes that "the very naturalness of this subject was carefully scripted by bourgeois philosophers . . . But regarding the laboring subject as natural precludes the move Marx wants to make of seeing this subject itself as scripted and of grasping the rules and values of the society that has produced it."[29] Relations of mutual dependence are transformed by the alchemy of alienation into their opposite; likewise with the forms of freedom promised by naturalized individualism. The Tea Party version of individualism exhibits the very same symptoms of alienation that George Markus finds in the reputedly outdated writings of Marx and Lukács, including above all the recurring theme of antagonism toward others: "The individual is freed from the bondage of pre-given, ready-found and immutable social ties…but only insofar as all his social contacts become established and realized through the mediation of commodities and their universal incarnation, money . . . The historical process of individuation takes on the antagonistic form of the depersonalization of the individual."[30] Thus, the Tea Party supporters find themselves willing to applaud the death of an uninsured individual who would otherwise seem to be making claims on *their* money—even if it means living in a world where they might find themselves in the same position. The freedom from others winds up being the final liberation from freedom itself: a pure subservience to the imperatives of the market and the autonomization of profit for its own sake.

Smart Machines
 As the logic of alienation replicates itself across the societal landscape, the realm of digital media is far from exempt. Rather, the development of digital technology lends itself to what Wendling calls, "machine fetishism": "As they are progressively introduced to all aspects of productive labor, machines increase the scope of technological alienation . . . Technological alienation comes to be an increasingly dominant description of capitalist society as a whole."[31] In a sense, Vincent Mosco's exploration of the myths of the digital sublime, which promise that technology will bring about dramatic transformations in society, including the end of history, distance, and politics, is a chronicle of technological alienation, one in which the notion of human agency migrates into the machine.[32] The claims are familiar ones and can be grouped together under the label of technological determinism. Nicholas Negroponte's description of the impact of digitization as a force for democratization and empowerment typifies this kind of determinism, "Like a force of nature, the digital age cannot be denied or stopped."[33] The hallmark of such claims is not just that they describe inevitable change, but that these changes have political and social content—the politics drains out of the context in which the technologies are deployed and comes to inhabit the machines.

Thus, for example, digital artist Celia Pearce claims in her handbook on interactive media that "The digital age introduces a new form of international socialism, a new kind of democracy that Marx never even imagined."[34] The very premise of interactivity, she insists, "is one of intellectual, creative and social empowerment. It is anti-industrial . . ."[35] Pearce thus concludes, "No matter which way you look at it, interactivity is inherently subversive."[36] In other words, the ongoing attempt to equate new media technologies with the promise of empowerment, individuation, and creative control remains alive and well even in the post-bubble tech economy. Technological politics comes to function, in an era of generalized skepticism toward the political realm, as a form of *anti*-politics. We are told that we can avoid the messy work of collective deliberation and

attendant struggles over power through an invocation of what Armand Mattelart has described as "the ideology of redemption through networks."[37] The end of politics, in this regard, is one of the wages of alienation—perhaps not surprisingly, given the challenges posed to politics by the forms of estrangement described in the previous section. As Mosco notes, the rhetoric of the digital sublime, "means an end to politics, the demise of political relations as we know them, to be replaced by a new cyberspace-based technological orientation."[38]

To the extent that politics and agency, according to this account of alienation, migrate into technology itself, human activity comes to be dominated by that of the machines. That is to say, the technology takes on a certain autonomy that comes to influence and shape human society. Writers like Pearce and De Kerckhove are describing the Utopian version of a familiar science fiction narrative: the machines take on a life of their own—but it is one that saves them by facilitating human productive and social life. Along the same lines, we might consider the tendency to name recent political revolutions according to the technologies that allegedly enabled them, such as the so-called Twitter or Facebook revolutions of the Arab spring. Ulises Mejias has pointed out the historic specificity of this type of attribution by sarcastically suggesting that the Mexican Revolution be renamed the "Leica Revolution": "why shouldn't we re-name the revolution not after a nation or its people, but after the 'social media' that had such a great impact in making the struggle known all over the world: the photographic camera? Even better, let's name the revolution not after the medium itself, but after the manufacturer of the cameras that were carried by people like Hugo Brehme to document the atrocities of war."[39]

The paradoxical character of this promise of liberation via technology is that the power with which it endows the machines takes on an aura of threatening autonomy. Perhaps this helps explain the proliferation of familiar dystopian cultural portrayals of *The Terminator* or *The Matrix* variety, which, of course, serve as allegories of alienation in which the fetishized machine takes on a will of its own and turns against its creators. It is a compelling narrative in an era in which technology seems to become increasingly autonomous. The relation between the autonomy of the machine and that of the market is highlighted in Bill Gates's version of "friction free" capitalism, in which networked computers promise (or threaten) to automate not just the process of production, but also that of consumption, inadvertently providing an uncanny image of the perfected technological fetish: an economy that can run on its own without the hindrance of humans. To take just one example, the specter of this autonomy haunts the so-called "flash crash" of the Dow Jones industrial average—a crash triggered by automated trading systems.[40] What is more, the implication that humans are, in a sense, the "problem," insofar as they gum-up the works with their vacillations and inconstant desires carries overtones of the scorn toward humanity evinced by the (intelligent) Agent of *The Matrix*. Having captured one of the leaders of the human resistance—a nagging source of ongoing friction—the Agent vents its frustration toward its human creators and the world they inhabit, declaring, "I hate this place. This zoo. This prison . . . It's the smell, if there is such a thing. I feel saturated by it. I can taste your stink and every time I do, I fear that I've somehow been infected by it."[41] The Agent gives voice here to alienation itself—highlighting the equation between estrangement and hostility, and the way in which the product of human activity appears as a force turned against humanity itself.

It is suggestive that this high-tech, digitally driven portrayal of alienation—not in the industrial machine but in the interface, as it were—invokes perhaps even more effectively than the contemporaneous examples adduced by Marx, the concerns raised by his concept of alienation. For Marx, technological alienation takes the form of the separation that underwrites the increasing split between mental and material labor in production: the migration of the productive knowledge from the worker, to the overseer, and eventually into the machine. Following this logic Braverman explores the process of de-skilling in the manufacturing sector where

increasingly sophisticated machines make it possible to hire unskilled and hence cheap labor.[42] It is a process anticipated by Marx when he writes that, "It is no more the labourer who makes use of the means of production, but it is the means of production which make use of the labourer."[43] The more sophisticated the technology becomes, the more mechanical become the activities of the worker: "The science, which compels the inanimate limbs of machinery, by their construction to act purposefully, as an automaton, does not exist in the labourer's consciousness, but acts upon him through the machine as an alien power, as the power of the machine itself . . . The accumulation of knowledge and skill, of the general productive forces of social brain, is thus absorbed into capital as opposed to labour, and appears therefore as a property of capital."[44]

It is, of course, precisely the logic of de-skilling and its attendant forms of alienation that the digital technology of the interactive revolution promises to address. On the one hand the boundary between audience/mass consumer and producer is allegedly eroded, while on the other, the flexible, "flat" workplace becomes a site of re-skilling (and ongoing retraining). According to this account, the informated workplace requires greater participation, initiative, and worker feedback than ever before, in contrast to the deadening de-skilling of the shop floor. As the futurist Alvin Toffler puts it in his paean to the post-Fordist economy, "The old Second Wave factories needed essentially interchangeable workers. By contrast, Third Wave operations require diverse and continually evolving skills."[45] The era of de-skilling is, he argues, "the wave of the lowbrow past, not the highbrow future."[46] The world of the cyber-Utopian futurists is premised on the promise of dis-alienation, in which re-skilling corresponds with greater individual (not collective) control on the part of the worker and thus with better wages, benefits, and working conditions. It is, perhaps, the dream-image of the workplace conjured up by successful Silicon Valley firms with videogame nooks, gyms, masseuses, and so on.

For many workers in and beyond Silicon Valley, however, this image of dis-alienation remains largely a mirage. The promise of dis-alienation, it turns out, can be used as an alibi for hyper-exploitation: the extraction of long unpaid overtime hours and the encroachment of work via networked technology into times and spaces formerly devoted to leisure or domesticity.[47] Smart phones, laptops and wireless broadband permit not just constant connectivity but the emergence of the ubiquitous workspace. If the convenience of wired work is the carrot for hyper-exploitation, the fallout of the financial crisis caused by the deregulation of finance capital is its stick. Even as the cyber-Utopians promise the "overthrow of matter," material concerns stubbornly persist. As of this writing, the US and Europe (along with much of the rest of the globe) are reportedly on the verge of sliding into recession and real salaries for much of the working population are in decline. Claims alleging the empowering character of the interactive revolution thus need to be situated within the context of an economy in which take-home pay has been falling along with median household income, reportedly at its lowest level in more than a decade.[48] Poverty rates, by contrast, are at a 17-year high, even as conservative legislators continue to push for cuts to programs to support the unemployed and impoverished. To put matters simply, if these policies are actually the result of a newly empowered populace, then it must surely be a profoundly alienated one.[49]

Compensatory Consumption
The promise of dis-alienation thrives on the reproduction of what it claims to surpass. Thus the appeal of the equation of interactivity with participation, empowerment, and recognition retains its Utopian appeal not least because its realization has been thwarted. It is above all in that hybrid realm between the workplace proper and productive forms of consumption and expression that the promise retains its purchase. The de-differentiated character of this realm is marked by the various neologisms that have been used to describe it, including "prosumption" and "produsage."[50] It is a realm that includes various forms of customized consumption in which

consumers are invited to participate in the design and creation of the products and services they consume—and thereby to recognize their own contribution in the products they consume. It also includes the range of activities associated with the rise of the so-called "social Web" — including blogging, Tweeting, and social networking.

After arguing for the enduring salience of the critique of alienation in an era in which both the technology and the economy may have changed dramatically (but not the fundamentals of private ownership and wage labor that undergird capitalism), this essay concludes with a consideration of how such a critique might apply even to a realm of seemingly free productive activity: "Web 2.0." In part, the goal of the preceding analysis has been to situate Web 2.0 within its larger social and economic context; in part it has been to highlight the persistent symptoms of alienation that underwrite the appeal of its promise. What unites these various accounts is the shared logic whereby the forms of separation specific to capital—private control over productive resources exploited for profit—result in the symptoms of fetishization associated with Marx's account of alienation. Perhaps this is why, despite the attempts by theorists to relegate the notion of alienation along with its metaphysical, "essentializing" baggage to the dustbin of history, it retains its salience in popular accounts hyping the promise of digital media. In this regard, the popular response has something to tell us about what the theoretical accounts have missed. The wages of contemporary exploitation include the misrecognition of the social character of production and its products. The obverse of this misrecognition is the return of a suppressed sociality that takes the form of fetishized forces that appear to pose an external threat, whether in the form of the demands of others, the untamed marketplace, or an uncannily autonomous technology.

Against this background, the realm of user-generated content promises to realize the promise of dis-alienation by facilitating collaborative forms of production in which users can recognize the character of their own contributions in the content they produce. Much can be said in favor of this description—particularly in the realm of collaborative and open-source production facilitated by digital media technology. However, there is a commercial side to the story—one that is often overlooked—and it is on this side that the critique of alienation has something to tell us about emerging models for exploiting Web 2.0, and the implications these have for relations of power and control over information in the interactive economy. Piece by piece we are building a commercial culture based on an unprecedented level of monitoring, data collection, and information manipulation.

Namely, the development of increasingly customized and personalized interactive technologies and applications has enabled an unprecedented level of commercial monitoring—one that only accelerates with the uptake of portable mobile devices. Smart phones can gather information about usage, time-space paths of users throughout the course of the day and so on, while the applications that run on them gather detailed information about which locations users visit, about their reading and viewing habits, their recreational and business interests, and so on. The range of information collected is as broad as the hundreds of thousands of available applications. As one marketer observed, "In the world of mobile, there is no anonymity," since a cell phone is "always with us. It's always on."[51] Suffice it to say that we are moving rapidly toward what Bill Gates once described as the "fully documented life."[52] He was imagining this as a reflexive phenomenon: people keeping information about themselves. However, the world we are assembling is one in which lives are fully monitored, but individuals have little control over the documentation process or the archive.

The primary collector of this information is the commercial sector (at times in collaboration with or in the service of the state), and one of its main objectives is customized marketing. This

entails much more than simply targeting messages; it means conducting large-scale controlled experiments that shape the information environments to which users are exposed. It entails developing models to determine when consumers are most vulnerable to particular types of marketing appeals. The goal is not just to determine what information might be useful to consumers, but how best to trigger the anxieties and concerns that might motivate them to buy; how best to use information about their hopes, dreams, and desires, their moods and their health, as well as their romantic and family histories to figure out how to bend consumer behavior to the priorities of marketers. We will find, in short, that all of our activities, to the extent that they can be redoubled in the form of data harvested by interactive networks, return to us in unrecognizable, perhaps even unremarked form.

When data-driven, customized marketing algorithms are clumsy, we might recognize them as a form of intrusion or manipulation. More likely, though, the targeting will come in less detectable form. We might be targeted at times when we're more likely to purchase, based on past behavior. We might be exposed to design elements that have been shown to subconsciously influence our behavior, trigger our anxieties, or otherwise lower our resistance. We will be sorted and selected for exposure to particular types of information and appeals and excluded from others. There is no guarantee that the commercial digital environment will be a standardized, equitable one. On the contrary, we may find that our online experiences vary greatly and that the variance can be explained solely in terms of marketing imperatives. We may come to learn that we are provided with only particular types of news and information because these are more conducive to our responding to advertising appeals.

It is tempting to dismiss the promise of monitoring-based marketing as largely overblown: one more instance of techno-hype. To do so, interestingly, would be to suggest that the economic model supporting the commercial development of digital media is, ultimately, a fatally flawed one. This may turn out to be the case, but it will mean fundamentally rethinking the economic model we are developing for access to interactive services and digital content. Facebook, Google, Twitter, and other cornerstones of the Web 2.0 world will have to find alternative economic models, as will the burgeoning data collection and mining industries.

For the present, however, the commercialization of digital media and platforms relies upon the value generated by the private ownership and control of the interactive infrastructure. Privatization is a form of separation, insofar as it strips control over the infrastructure from users, who must then submit to the terms of access dictated by commercial entities, including submission to increasingly comprehensive forms of monitoring. To the extent that our social and professional lives move onto commercially controlled, digital, interactive platforms, they move into a space that is explicitly being built to manipulate us. Admittedly, this is increasingly true of the physical environments that surround us, but without a digital overlay, these spaces were limited in their ability to monitor, track, and customize marketing appeals. Interactive applications add this overlay and may turn both our physical and virtual environments into interfaces that capture information about us in order to turn it back upon us. These spaces will be both more participatory and interactive and, in the sense described here, more alienated. The task, then, is to think these two developments together.

On the one hand, there is a certain appeal to the Tofflerian claim of the "overthrow of matter"—at least insofar as it suggests that we turn our glance away from questions of physical infrastructure and ownership of the means of communication and interaction.[53] What does it matter who owns the internet backbone or YouTube or Google, as long as these facilitate original, unique, and unfettered forms of individual and collaborative creativity?[54] On the other hand—the one that has grown a bit too invisible—the critique of exploitation directs us back to

these questions. It urges us to consider the ways in which the commercialization of the platform turns our own activity back upon ourselves in the service of priorities that are not our own, and it reminds us of the double duty done by the privately controlled interactive infrastructure. This infrastructure might serve as a platform for new forms of creativity, deliberation, communication, interaction, and consumption. At the same time, though, it works to assemble the most comprehensive system for mass monitoring in human history. The accusation associated with the critique of exploitation reminds us of the ways in which new forms of marketing driven surveillance help turn our own productive activity back upon ourselves in the service of ends that are not our own. In so doing, to borrow Smith's formulation, it "separates a mode of existence from its power of acting."[55] Countering alienation, then, would not be the same thing as restoring value by compensating users. It would entail rethinking and transforming relations of control over and access to the communicative infrastructure. Such transformations would, in turn, mean radically altering the economic strategies we have adopted for supporting this interactive infrastructure. The profound difficulty we have in even imaging possible alternatives to these strategies is perhaps one more symptom of the system they would replace. In an era of digitization and emergent data clouds, it would mean recognizing that matter still matters, and the ostensibly outdated concerns regarding relations of private ownership and the imperatives these reinforce stubbornly persist.

Mark Andrejevic is a Research Fellow at The Centre for Critical and Cultural Studies at the University of Queensland. He is the author of Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched *(2004) and* iSpy: Surveillance and Power in the Interactive Era (2007) *as well as numerous articles and book chapters on surveillance, popular culture, and digital media.*

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