Reviews


As social media become de rigeur in undergraduate media and communication programs, a focus on instrumental use has tended to eclipse more rigorous analyses of the power relations digital platforms reify, disrupt, or reconfigure. Despite some notable alternatives, pedagogical approaches to social media have tended to focus on the more programmatic aspects of its use, often ignoring contextual perspectives that give meaning to practice. Despite a wealth of critical media and communication studies readers, those seeking to teach alternative approaches to social media have been left adrift without an anchoring text.

As a textbook, Christian Fuchs’ Social Media: A Critical Introduction seeks to fill this need, offering accessible language that introduces students to a rigorous critique of specific social media platforms rooted in Marxist political economy. While the term “social media” takes the dominant space in the title, this is more of a book about the project of critique, using social media to offer students a foothold into the more nuanced and historically rooted concerns of critical theory.

Fuchs begins by staking a claim around what constitutes critical theory, differentiating it from more generalized nods to “critical thinking.” The first chapter lays out a concise, yet thorough, conceptual accounting of Marx, critical political economy, and the Frankfurt School alongside more methodological concerns such as dialectical reasoning and ideological critique. This expansive and precise overview of the terms of a critical project not only contextualizes the approaches deployed in the following chapters, but is also the book’s strongest merit. Fuchs’ descriptions of critical theory, its ideals, conditions of emergence, and objects of inquiry are presented with language aimed at neophytes, yet nuanced enough to offer more experienced practitioners a thorough refresher.

From here, the book is split into nine chapters and divided into two parts—“foundations” and “applications”—and a concluding chapter that argues for an openly democratic and participatory Internet. The “foundations” chapters critique some of the more dominant discourses that construe social media platforms as benign extensions of the liberal democratic project. Manuel Castells’ work on communication power and network society receives a thorough rebutting throughout, as does Henry Jenkins’ work on convergence. At times, these thinkers become straw men deployed in service of a larger argument, as Fuchs complicates notions surrounding audience power and participatory culture. The text emphasizes the complications inherent in labeling any media “social,” turning often to Marx to argue that relationships of power and capital exploitation belie the arguments that posit social media as necessarily positive.

For Fuchs, the critique of social media does not begin and end with the commodification of individuals on these platforms. Instead, the text digs into the ideological regimes that abet this exploitation, looking at how historically rooted concepts and practices long associated with the expansion of capital manifest in the workings of particular platforms. Continued attention to the tenets of critical theory, along with a rigorous citation and contextualization
The deployment of critical political economy veers toward the dogmatic at times, and there are moments when the use of theory may become too turgid for a novice audience; however, the book makes for a useful tool for any instructor seeking to push students beyond the received common sense that social media platforms portend a general social good. In an academic environment where critical thinking has become less of an assumed activity and more of a selling point for embattled disciplines, this text at least follows up on its promise to offer students the formative tools to do so.

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