



The political economy of the podcast and the rise of the left entrepreneur

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It may seem like another world, but it was only a little over a decade ago that scholars were engaged in an energetic debate over the liberatory nature of the internet. Today, as millions of people spend hours a day on Zoom meetings, navigate their children through ‘online learning’, and write work emails late into the night, the notion that the internet was ever going to liberate us from capitalism seems naïve if not farcical. On the contrary, it has been the internet that has allowed, in the most troublesome sense, the world to go on amid ecological, epidemiological, economic, social, and political crises as we are told to wait out a pandemic by eradicating any remaining distance between work and home or public and private while wrecking our backs, necks, eyes, and sense of peace, autonomy, self-knowledge, and control.

There has been no shortage of leftist analyses of our ongoing transformations, but there has been less consideration of the ways in which these transformations have affected leftist analysis itself. Indeed, through the hegemonic expansion of the internet, leftist communication and more specifically critical publishing, which increasingly – and at times exclusively – occurs online, has significantly changed not only in its form but also in its content. Surveying key developments over the past 20 years and their effects on left (i.e. self-described anti-capitalist) online communication can allow

us to think about where much critical publishing has recently been, where it is now, and where it is going. This paper specifically addresses left media developments within the United States, although it argues that due to the global structural economic forces underlying these changes it is as likely as not that comparable developments will also emerge elsewhere.

The internet, of course, was never a so-called neutral technology, if only because, whether we are examining paintings, stained glass windows, books, radio, film, or television, form shapes content. The internet is distinct for its instantaneity, the propinquity involved in its use, and its intrinsic interactivity. Specifically, the internet reduces geographic space while its use is characterized by close physical proximity between users and machines, enabling postindustrial production based on the physical atomization of individuals who actively and intimately engage the medium via a distinctive ‘mechanism of reply’ (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002 [1944]: 96; Zwick et al., 2008).

In addition to its elimination of delay and this transformative ‘mechanism of reply’, the internet can foster a distinctive tunnel vision, as it eliminates users’ ‘lateral vision’ (2012: 36) and helps militate against users’ capacity for visual (and arguably intellectual) perspective. Virilio observed:

The faster we go, the more we look ahead in anticipation and lose our lateral vision. Screens are like windshields in a car: with increased speed, we lose the sense of lateralization, which is an infirmity in our being in the world, its richness, its relief, its depth of field. (2012: 36-37)

It was not an accident that numerous commenters who believed that they were posting the first response to an aughts-era Yahoo news article frequently confined themselves to submitting the single word ‘First!’. The speed of the encounter – along with the knowledge that one’s chances of having one’s comment read exponentially decline as other comments accumulate – led form to overwhelm content, as all that matters is one’s ability to beat others in a race to, if not be heard, post one’s screen name and writing, regardless of content, in a highly visible location. Posting ‘First!’ was an ironic joke within the still-early internet that acknowledged that,

within a context of exponentially expanding information, content was becoming increasingly irrelevant.

Irrespective of questions concerning the internet's form, the advent of collectively run websites, political listservs, and blogs – with their apparent ability to exponentially expand opportunities for communication, connection, and organization – was accompanied by much progressive optimism during the days of the early internet (Benkler, 2006; Tapscott and Williams, 2008; Rosen, 2009; Earl and Kimport, 2011). To be sure, the internet has been and in some cases is still beneficial. Perhaps most prominently, Wikipedia draws on volunteer contributors who, operating through consensus, work collectively to provide a free and valuable resource. Nevertheless, Wikipedia has proven to be not a harbinger of a free, dynamic, and collective internet but an exception, occupying a niche of its own making, proving the rule (Benkler, 2006; Tapscott and Williams, 2008). Indeed, by the teens it had become increasingly apparent that the internet's mediation of communication was doing as much harm as good, as breakneck monetization and the dominance of oligopolies had effectively made invisible or walled off the free and open internet promised by 'good internet' advocates and instead funneled users into a shrinking number of sites devoted above all to data extraction and personalized advertising while circumscribing and exploiting users' behavior in a number of ways (Terranova, 2000; Zwick, et al., 2008; Fuchs, 2012; McChesney, 2013; Scholz ed., 2013; Srnicek, 2017; Sperber, 2019). Aware of these sites' tremendous potential for surveillance as well as their obnoxious corporate personalities, many of us disconcertedly watched as a critical mass of our friends and acquaintances inexorably migrated to them.

In retrospect, however, it has become only clearer that the 'good internet' of the aughts was never as promising as its boosters asserted, and that the more transparent problems of today's internet reflect less a deviation from than an evolution of what had always been implicit (Terranova, 2000; Galloway, 2004; Hindman, 2009; Comor, 2010; Fuchs, 2010; Fuchs, 2012; Fuchs, 2013). The notion that social media corrupted the left politics practiced in, say, aught-era listservs badly understates the shortcomings of the latter, which were in some cases elitist operations dominated by self-

serving and boorish personalities. It is more accurate to say that social media such as Facebook and Twitter compelled and exacerbated existing online left practices, enabling left entrepreneurs to expand and ultimately export audiences to external sites where continued access could be ultimately privatized and exchanged for rents via, for example, patron-only content. The emblematic site of this evolution toward left individualization and privatization, this article argues, is the podcast.

If the internet is primarily used to facilitate business, social media such as Facebook represent, well before Facebook's 2012 initial public offering, business itself. Facebook is designed to draw and keep users on its site, where it collects and sells users' data to advertisers who, in turn, target users via personalized ads (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010; Fuchs, 2012; Srnicek, 2017). Echoing casinos' use of mirrors and alcohol, Facebook engineers formulate ways to discourage users from exiting the site. The red notification alert in the upper righthand corner has specifically been likened to the functioning of a slot machine, as the suspense accompanying a notification – which can indicate anything from a banal birthday notice to the more thrilling announcement that an admired friend 'loved' your comment – stimulates a dopamine rush like that experienced by compulsive gamblers (Lewis, 2017). Such pressure is reinforced externally by family, friends, and prospective employers who coerce individuals—lest they appear 'suspicious' – to maintain Facebook accounts (White, 2012).

Left writing on Facebook – or, presupposing a primacy of content over form, the self-flattering 'Leftbook' – exists in a substantially altered arena from that of the left listservs and blogs of the earlier internet. A massive and impersonal corporation, Facebook engages in not only surveillance but also censorship, recently issuing warnings to users who may have encountered 'extremist' political content. Such warnings additionally encourage users to report on 'friends' who may be engaged in political 'extremism'. Notably, the algorithm Facebook uses to determine what constitutes extremism is opaque and could pertain to content ranging from the QAnon movement to gender critical left feminism to anti-capitalism. It goes without saying that for Facebook, no less than for Twitter, non-extremist politics largely correspond to the conventional politics of the day. In this regard, left users of Facebook

forfeit to an immensely powerful corporation the capacity to make political judgments determining the boundaries of acceptable speech and are accordingly required to engage in self-censorship so that they do not get reported and suspended themselves.

Rather than appearing on the moderator-regulated and nominally neutral turf of the listserv, left writing on Facebook additionally occurs on the pages of specific users as posts and comments directed to ‘friends’ or ‘followers’. These pages are often treated as virtual fiefdoms that users meticulously adorn with, under the banner of their name, autobiographies and other personal descriptions, photos, memes, and other images, as well as itemized accomplishments and lists of favored commodities. Indeed, when dealing with unruly guests or ‘trolls’, users frequently refer to and invoke the ostensible rights and privileges of ‘my page’ or ‘my wall’, likening rude guests to loutish visitors in one’s home who have raided the refrigerator. In a domestication of left tendencies’ historically fractious – sometimes ferocious – internal debates and self-consciously anti-bourgeois compartments, Facebook ‘guests’ must be wary of too aggressively challenging a page’s host lest they embarrass a host and are then – often performatively – banished. These rituals encourage some users to wait in anticipation for irascible hosts to humiliate and block visitors, some unsuspecting, who had provoked their ire. Alternatively, some hosts more discreetly simply omit comments they disapprove of. And, in some cases, hosts remove entire posts in which the comments thread did not develop to their liking, disappearing productive political debates and unduly shaping semi-public left discourse about topics of shared concern. Considering that Facebook owns the space and content that appear on its site, this invocation of ‘my wall’ expresses a seemingly uncritical embrace of the privileges of a corporate-allocated virtual micro-plot, which is only proffered insofar as Facebook can reasonably expect that its users will provide financial returns – specifically through generating personal data for themselves and their guests – on its investment.

While some ambitious and ego-driven personalities assuredly dominated some of the earlier listservs, the format did not to the same extent as social media encourage such individuals to formally accumulate discrete followers

or ‘entourages’ (Goldhaber, 1997) or to expand ‘their’ space in relation to and at the ultimate expense of that of others. Relatedly, users more rarely – certainly in the era of the pre- and early-aughts listservs – exploited the listservs to promote their so-called ‘brands’ or professional ambitions over and beyond the discussions of articles or other matters at hand. Professional left activists and writers over the past decade have, however, migrated to the corporate arenas of social media, primarily Facebook and Twitter, sites where the individual self – and its ongoing ‘projects’ – is visually and conceptually centered and promoted as such and in which ‘followers’ or ‘entourages’ can be collected and ultimately channeled to external sites – e.g., Substack, Patreon, GoFundMe, and Twitch – where revenue can be extracted via donations and subscriber or patron fees.

The critical point here is not that a number of popular and sometimes astute left political observers have ‘sold out’ or behaved unethically by operating in effect as private entrepreneurs. Instead, it is to emphasize the fact that, within an environment in which existing digital infrastructure is integrated into a work-or-starve economy, previously voluntary political analysis and agitation have become increasingly marketized and incorporated into the reproduction of capital. Indeed, this is less an indictment of these writers than of the unending penetration of the market system. Just the same, it is instructive to observe the specific manner in which such market coercion rewards and punishes writers and thereby affects critical publishing in general and left political discourse in particular.

The left-star

In their ultimate form, social media left entrepreneurs, or left-stars, become commodities unto themselves, even as maintaining and expanding market-share paradoxically entail the periodic repackaging required to sustain interest or ‘stay relevant’ amid shifting political terrains. If the left project historically included the use of debate over history, principles, and strategies, left-stars are structurally discouraged from forming consensus with competitors lest they endanger the uniqueness of their brand – a concern that notably does not undermine the comparatively anonymous

contributors doing consensus-based work on, say, Wikipedia. Resembling academia's prioritization of originality for originality's sake irrespective of political relevance, such uniqueness is generated through the formation of mutually exclusive political arguments – and a corresponding discouragement of nuance and subtlety – as well as unending self-personalization and promotion. This can be seen in the rise of prominent unaffiliated or independent left political writers whose political arguments are in fact, when viewed over the long-term, incoherent and inconsistent. Salient among these writers is their continuous attention to their own personalities, which function as stand-ins for and become inseparable from their political projects.

Concerned with maintaining and ideally expanding their position in the hypercompetitive and hyper-ephemeral attention economy's space, left-stars personalize themselves to their followers through a formulaic set of techniques: periodically disclosing intimate and frequently nostalgic personal histories or suspenseful and surprising real-time accounts; self-appropriated personal histories and 'mood's such as ennui, excitement, and melancholy; and personal developments including career accomplishments (and less frequently setbacks notwithstanding those now overcome, which are examples of the left-star's teleological success), breakdowns, epiphanies, hardships such as the loss of pets, break-ups, and politically correct crushes. In this regard, left-stars are remarkably obedient in answering Facebook's ever-present question: 'What's on your mind?'. Instructed by book agents and other professional promoters that they need to 'tell a story about themselves' in order to be successful, left-stars present an individualized 'package' including a (ideally challenging) personal history, a contemporary mission, and an accessible, vulnerable, and intriguing persona that says without saying that their success is the success of a – and ideally and ultimately *the* – cause. Confessional writing in particular reinforces the emotional connection between left-stars and their followers and is complemented by selfies or glamour shots conveying the complexities and intellectual or physical beauty of the stars. Reflecting existing sexist stereotypes, male left-stars typically post a wide array of pictures of themselves, while female left-stars are far likelier to share photos, whether

on Facebook or Instagram, showcasing/constructing the stars' mystery, beauty, or sexiness via 'mommy porn' and other activities enabling tasteful or 'accidental sexiness'.

Of course, leftism has always had its icons, and one only needs to see a Che T-shirt to understand that such icons have long been commodified. Today, however, we are seeing not simply the commodification of icons but the strategically marketized iconification of self-produced left entrepreneurs. One prominent left journalist recently demonstrated a particularly overt version of this process when, after repeatedly warning his 180,000 Twitter followers about the dire threat of big-tech political censorship (which at the time was targeting then-president Donald Trump), he announced that those concerned about such dangers can fight back by donating to his Patreon, PayPal, Bitcoin, Cashapp, or Venmo accounts. Although it is tempting to celebrate left commentators' ability to earn a living through their politics, doing politics for money is a double-edged sword. Those who rely on supporters' donations – in effect, charity – invariably tend to the proclivities and desires of their audience lest they alienate them. Whereas left stars seek attention through provoking outraged reactions and shares, they would not continue to stay in business without also maintaining a foundation of 'likes' among their loyal supporters. In this regard, left stars will test new ideas, which they will then reiterate, revise, or withdraw depending on their core supporters' responses. The market and the career, not a – or *the* – truth, become the imperatives of the left star's political development and thereby the development of dominant left discourse.

Critically, left-stars reinforce followers' loyalty and expand market share through conducting rivalries in which followers are deployed to support their stars or 'knights' (Rao, 2020) against hostile outsiders. Here one's collection of followers signifies more than the quantitative competition vis-à-vis other left-stars. Rather, one's number of followers demonstrates the *capacity* to secure and expand one's power within what Rao has called 'an unflattened Hobbesian honor-society conflict with a feudal structure, at the heart of which is an involuntarily anonymous, fungible, angry figure desperate to be seen as significant: the mook' (Rao, 2020). Left-stars can at times be seen as writing and performing *for* their followers and not – unless

conspicuously unfriendly – for those outside of their entourage. Lavished with this intimate, if ultimately anonymous, attention, the entourage understand that the latest selfie, confession, or special subscriber-only promotion code is a gift *to them* and that the left-star’s successes – including and especially the expansion of his or her platform – are their own. Indeed, followers are not merely engaged in vicarious existence but in some instances strive to become left-stars themselves, competing in an intense struggle in which there will always be more followers than left-stars. The career trajectory of Virgil Texas, former co-host of the *Chapo Trap House* podcast and current co-host of the *Bad Faith* podcast, helps illustrate the dialectic between follower and left-star. Texas was at one time a largely unknown commenter on Twitter but attracted attention in part through fervently defending left-stars such as Glenn Greenwald. Now a left-star himself, Texas has recently faced accusations of inappropriate sexual conduct toward a minor and has benefited from the fervent defenses of his own followers, some of whom surely aspire through such displays of fealty to one day become left-stars themselves.

The political-economy of the podcast

While the task of the aspiring left-star is to attract attention and fill as much digital space as possible, there are inevitably obstacles to doing so. On logocentric blogs and websites, excessive length is an intrusive demand on the time and patience of the site visitor. Even the most prolific political observers can struggle to continually update their blogs without resorting to transparent filler, facile content shared not for its originality or relevance but for the mere propinquity of its composition. Websites have notably become unapologetic in raking the dregs of analysis – in which an article’s substantiveness often negatively correlates to the click-baiting provocations of its title – in order to sustain newness for newness’s sake and to not miss out on opining on recent fads, which is one reason why *Jacobin* feels compelled to comment on subjects including the popularity of Popeye’s new chicken sandwich (Kampf-Lassin, 2019).

Online media have struggled with reconciling the contradiction between their reliance on filler and their need to maintain not only reader awareness of their product in general – i.e. their space in the media universe – but also reader receptivity to advertisers. This contradiction is particularly apparent in online corporate news sites' increasing substitution of videos for articles. Videos enable companies to extend user engagement with a page and thereby charge higher advertising rates. Yet, the use of videos that deliberately slow the conveyance of information simultaneously frustrates and repels impatient site visitors who prefer their previous autonomy over the pace of their online news consumption.

The podcast has resolved the contradiction of filler as podcasts are less based on utilitarian data conveyance than on cultivating a satisfying feeling based on the development of emotional relationships between listeners and hosts. The distinction between substantive content and filler disappears in a medium in which enjoyment is based on the sounds as much as the meaning of the words uttered by the host. It is misleading, then, to attribute the popularity of podcasts primarily to the convenience with which they can be listened to in the shower, the car, or the kitchen. Rather, mic checks, throat clearing, and mumbling convey an 'in my room with me' intimacy that can be nurturing in itself. Commiserating on the night of the 2016 US presidential election, in which Donald Trump stunningly defeated Hillary Clinton, the hosts of *Chapo Trap House* (one of the most popular – and profitable – left US podcasts) combined their analysis of the election with exchanges including:

I'm proud of all the boys for holding it together on stage even as we ate shit.

I had diarrhea; I was just feeling so so, I gotta go...

Virgil's a diarrhea boy. I know it from working with him. He will always be a diarrhea boy. That's what I like about him.

I promise you that for these next four years I will have IBS. (*Chapo Trap House*, Episode #58).

In an experience that Yasha Levine has described as ‘virtual friendship’,¹ we do not impatiently wait for the hosts to get to the point because ‘being together’ among ‘friends’ is the point. Although speaking in jest, it is telling that *Chapo Trap House* producer Brendan James accounted for why listeners spent the night of the 2016 presidential election listening to his show instead of being with loved ones, noting.

We are their loved ones now. They are spending it with their loved ones, because they've grown to develop personal relationships with us, and they will do whatever we tell them to do. (Borenstein and Honor, 2017)

Accordingly, podcasters banter, deploy quips and inside jokes, and engage in all manner of, often confessional and self-deprecating, personal anecdotes to lengthen their time with listeners irrespective of content, a process that has reached its apotheosis with some podcasters encouraging listeners to follow them to Twitch, where podcasters can make an attraction of and monetize their mundane routines and very being.

Left-star podcasters’ cultivation of intimate virtual friendships with listeners ideally forms an emotional dependence that can be leveraged by the podcaster in order to exploit listeners’ ‘fear of missing out’. This is done through offering premium subscriber-only episodes including ‘Ask me anything’ shows, which enable hosts to share their uncertainty, vulnerability, and continuing search for truth and meaning – or to merely playfully interact – with their followers. ‘Ask me anything’ shows simultaneously provide listeners with a sense of control over podcasters, resembling broader trends which can be seen, for example, on the NewNew ‘Control my life’ app, in which stars seek to maintain attention by allowing viewers to control stars’ very behavior (Jennings, 2021). Podcasts’ amelioration of listeners’ alienation is, notably, highly contingent given the fact that the star-follower basis of the ‘virtual friendship’ is unequal and podcasts can potentially be discontinued (Sperber, 2019). Listeners’ corresponding anxiety concerning the possibility of losing their ‘friends’ can then be leveraged to secure further donations in the name of political activism and solidarity. The left podcast *Dead Pundits Society*, for instance,

¹ Email to author.

offers listeners a ‘Working class hero’ subscription package in exchange for monthly donations of one hour’s worth of the subscriber’s wages.

‘Virtual friendship’ provides the podcaster with a level and form of credibility that advertisers have sought for nearly a century to develop and exploit. While Howard Stern’s radio program, for instance, charged its highest rates for ads that Stern himself would narrate and provide testimony for, fans saw Stern – or, in prior eras, TV show hosts – as trusted icons but not accessible confidants on equal footing. Podcasts, by contrast, establish a shared space in which listeners’ ‘mechanism of reply’ consists of direct messages and on-screen chats where listeners ‘talk back to’ and about their hosts: ‘Will sounds sick, drunk, or on a relaxer – anyone else hear it?’ (*Chapo Trap House*, Episode #478). Such ‘talking back’ transforms the listener from a recipient of unilaterally disseminated information to an active if unequal partner who, through his or her own expression, is likelier to further internalize the ultimately asymmetrical emotional and ideological content of favored programs, connecting listener to star in an ever-tighter bond. Comments in chat can also, among other things, be provided to advertisers to demonstrate listener engagement and proclivity, illustrating the manner in which listeners’ relationships with shows are inseparable from active participation in their own objectification as sources of revenue. Indeed, notwithstanding these podcasts’ anti-capitalist language, hosts engage in product plugging through, among other things, issuing ‘shout outs’ to supportive businesses that listeners ought to patronize as matters of political activism and solidarity. Beyond this encouragement of ‘left’ consumption, the *Red Scare* podcast recently devoted half an episode to discussing the Disney film *Cruella*, calling into question (even as one of the hosts criticized the movie) whether the Disney corporation paid the show for such sustained attention. In either event, the podcast, which has approximately 8,000 paying subscribers on Patreon, powerfully instructed their ‘virtual friends’, if not what to think, what to think about (*Red Scare*, 2 June 2021).

As noted above, the point of this discussion has not been to condemn individual left-stars, which would be ill-considered. First, left-stars are not monolithic and some of them undoubtedly perform valuable functions,

publicizing critiques of institutional power and the works of important thinkers whom many listeners would be otherwise unfamiliar with. Second, our current problems do not result from the opportunism or narcissism of ambitious media personalities. Even if every left-star were magically sent away, new ones would quickly take their places. Similarly, even if every left-star were conscientious and altruistic, as some surely are, we would still be witnessing the same shifts in political communication. The current media universe is such that anyone who seeks to affect political discourse will struggle to find an audience without conforming to processes designed by state and market forces for state and market interests.

Nevertheless, the rise of the left-star suggests several dubious developments within left culture and practice in general and left online critical publishing in particular. Those who are interested in left politics find themselves in the position of the fan, rooting for a series of competing micro-celebrities who are structurally discouraged from both building consensus among likeminded thinkers and offending the sensibilities of their own followers by pursuing the ‘ruthless criticism of all that exists’ in the tradition of Marx. It is fair to assume that numerous people who might otherwise concern themselves with left causes are being repulsed by left stars’ self-serving conduct and intellectual compromises. It is indeed unsurprising that many rightwing podcasters, who do not confront the same contradictions between their political content and its expression within the current media structure, increasingly attract massive and growing audiences. By contrast, left political discourse – which within prominent historic tendencies is in its ideal form ontologically and epistemologically collective – is a priori compromised in this hyper-competitive and marketized arena, reflecting and reinforcing the very social and economic relations that are ostensibly being challenged.

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