

THE HYBRID WORK OF JOURNALISTS AND THE REIFICATIONS OF COMMUNICATIVE CAPITALISM¹

O TRABALHO HÍBRIDO DOS JORNALISTAS E AS REIFICAÇÕES DO CAPITALISMO COMUNICATIVO
EL TRABAJO HÍBRIDO DE LOS PERIODISTAS Y LAS COSIFICACIONES DEL CAPITALISMO COMUNICATIVO

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Received: 03.14.2023.
Accepted: 05.16.2023.
Published: 06.02.2023.

ABSTRACT:

Hybrid work emerges as a new modality for many journalists. This article seeks to reflect on how the digital gears of communicative capitalism invade the spheres of production and reproduction of journalists' lives on a global scale, demonstrating how forms of remote work, consolidated in the pandemic laboratory of technological experiments, intensify processes of reification in everyday life of the workers. The encounter between reified productive activity and fetishistic consumption seems to hold hands in the digital territory of capital metabolism. The hybrid work of journalists expresses the contradictions of this approach.

KEYWORDS: Journalists' Work; Everyday Life; Reification.

Introduction

This article is focused on theoretical and conceptual aspects and aims to explore how the digital mechanisms of capitalism penetrate the production and reproduction spheres of journalists' lives globally. It shows how remote work models, consolidated in the pandemic laboratory of technological experiments, intensify the process of objectification in the workers' daily lives – updated by the fusion of work life, home space, and leisure time. This study adopts a critical-dialectical perspective, as historical materialism² guides us to investigate the mediations of a social totality and, therefore, to gain a concrete understanding of the structural changes that journalists' work is undergoing. The methodology employed in this study follows the guidelines by Mészáros (2009, p. 261) since it aims to meet two conditions: to analyze the objective

¹ Paper presented in September 2022 at GI4 of the XVI Congress of the Latin American Association of Communication Researchers (ALAI) in Buenos Aires.

² According to Grespan (2021), the "emergence of huge financial and industrial conglomerates, reversing the logic of competition from the 19th century; the gradual process of replacing labor with increasingly sophisticated machines; the spread of the commodity form to almost all products and social relations; recurrent economic crises; the political sphere as a manifestation of distributive social conflicts over property and income; the predominance of financial speculation over the creation of real wealth, with the consequent projection of all prices and expectations towards an uncertain future: all these phenomena are perceived in embryo by Marx's interpretation in works such as *Capital*" (p. 10).

determinations of the existing structural framework in society, including its prevailing contradictions and antagonisms; and to indicate the general features of the hegemonic alternative of work that could challenge and replace the established order. In this context, the method aims to chart the contradictions, mediations, and processes that constitute a totality in constant transformation, thus nourishing the praxis of historical subjects, those who make history in circumstances that they did not choose (Marx, 2008).

Hybrid work will possibly be the prevailing modality for many journalists. A report from the Reuters Institute (Cherubini, Newman, and Nielsen, 2021) suggests that hybrid work, which combines remote and on-site forms, will be the dominant form of work in newsrooms for the coming years. The study surveyed 132 leaders in the news industry from 42 countries, and most of them (89%) expressed a favorable view towards flexible and hybrid work. Only 9% of news organizations plan to remove remote work and return to the production model prior to COVID-19 pandemic. Hybrid work is the modality that alternates between remote and on-site forms. It is emerging as the model for newsrooms of the future and has already been adopted by organizations such as the UK's largest media group, Reach.

Fígaro et al. (2021), in a study with 994 communication workers from 26 Brazilian states and from Distrito Federal, showed that remote work raises controversial issues. Despite the acceptance of this work modality, "numerous drawbacks are observed - among the most prominent, illness due to stress and mental fatigue, as well as an increase in the cost of work, since companies did not provide the necessary support to carry out tasks" (p. 85). Teleworking, hybrid, remote, and home-based work, mediated by information and communication technologies, are already a reality for a large number of workers. The Profile of Brazilian Journalists 2021 survey (Lima, Mick, et al., 2022) revealed that 45.7 % of workers agreed that they took work home frequently. The flexibility, informality, and the consequent explosion of forms of regulation, as well as the erosion of rights, place the precariousness of journalistic work at new levels of intensity.

The changes in work modalities that affect news production workers are part of the changes resulting from the expansion of platformization of labor (Grohmann, 2020), which intensifies the subsumption of work on bases that have been forming for decades and materializes in the digital economy, in a model with traits of Uberization (Abílio, 2017), whose crossings also intersect the spheres of circulation and distribution of products. With the blurring of the boundaries between productive and reproductive spheres, hybridization of work and leisure time, and the fusion of leisure, consumption, and production, daily life and social relations are increasingly shaped by Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). Hybrid work is configured as an epiphenomenon of

the *modus operandi* of the social metabolism of capitalism, which colonizes human communication in its technological mechanism. It is adapted to a new era of work exploitation, in which journalists are transformed into self-nano-entrepreneurs, “permanently available for work” (Abílio, 2017, p. 2).

Communicative capitalism

Jodi Dean’s (2021) notion of communicative capitalism provides us with a broad scope to consider how the platforms present in the digital realm establish communicational relationships of production and consumption, redefining forms of work and designing and extracting value from the complexification of devices in daily life, blurring the practices of production and reproduction of life. Capital has subsumed communicational forms, exploiting, and expropriating every connectivity, activity, and human relationship developed within information technologies. “Communicative capitalism subsumes everything we do. It transforms not only our mediated interactions, but all our interactions, into raw material for capital” (Dean, 2021, p. 122; our translation).

Instead of adhering to various adjectives of capitalism, such as pandemic, communicative, digital, catastrophic, or other terminology that attempts to highlight a predominant moment in its socially dominant and complex process, we believe that the communicational issue highlighted does not negate the dynamics of class struggle, which are sometimes invisible in the general perception of common sense about its mechanisms.

At the same time, given the changes in workplace associated with expanded use of technology, flexibilization, precarization, and, consequently, decline of trade unions, we cannot expect class struggle in communicative capitalism to take place exclusively or even primarily in clearly defined workplaces. Communicative production itself occurs across the social field. That a struggle does not take the form of a classic workplace struggle, in other words, does not mean it is not a class struggle (Dean, 2021, p. 5).

The widespread automation of production processes of products and services causes profound dissonances in the world order, and capitalism reinforces forms of precariousness and the production of an expanded reserve army (Marx, 2017) that already signals a structural problem, referred to as chronic unemployment by Mészáros (2002). The platformization of social relations builds datification as an accounting logic that leads to the unique offer, not only of products and services, but also preferences, favorite profiles, affections... The uncontrollability of capital (Mészáros, 2002) finds, in the ideological irrationalism of networks, an ally for its continuous and expanded production

and reproduction. Thus, there is no escaping this vicious circle "... without understanding the very nature of the objective circularity of the system of capital and, as capital personified, confronts and dominates living labor, as objectified and alienated labor, becomes capital and, as capital personified, confronts and dominates labor (...)" (Mészáros, 2009, p. 227; our translation)

This tendency is not new, since the technical base of the capitalist system has been developed in recent decades and has been articulated with movements towards the globalization of capital, new forms of labor management, and the unstoppable financialization of the economy (Harvey, 2018). The rotation of capital, which goes from production and circulation to the consumption of goods, is accelerated, compressing temporalities, and expanding territorial spaces (Bensaid, 2008). "Agglomeration economies and efficient transportation and communication networks play key roles in reducing circulation times and retaining a greater amount of surplus value for capital" (Harvey, 2018, p. 133; our translation).

The capital designs the physical territory and spatial relationships, adapting them to its imperative, seeking to meet its impulses and needs both in production and consumption. However, unlike productive destruction, its uncontrollable *causa sui* becomes - in the contemporary landscape - a destructive production (Mészáros, 2002). As Antunes (2012) states, transformations in the sociotechnical organization have led to the reterritorialization and deterritorialization of production, modifying the international division of labor and capital. Thus, we believe that the technological and organizational transformation that drives the digitized global economy is "endogenous and inherent to capital, and not exogenous and accidental" (Harvey, 2018, p. 126; our translation).

Marx's (2017) analysis of machinery remains relevant today, as the digital territory encompasses and engenders a vast system of complex cooperation, in which the collective worker figure gains expanded expressiveness. "The machinery (...) only works based on immediately socialized or collective work. The cooperative character of the work process becomes, therefore, a technical necessity dictated by the nature of the work environment itself" (p. 459). The activity fragmentation has become the hallmark of capitalist productivity in the 21st century, shaking up the various possibilities for division of labor and extracting surplus value from a complex and heterogeneous morphology of the available workforce in communication information highways. It is living labor that is exploited and 'sucked' by the dead labor concentrated in constant capital, as Marx (2017) so aptly summarized in *Capital*.

Communicative capitalism captures, privatizes, and attempts to monetize social substance without waiting for its crystallization into labor products. It does not depend on the commodity-thing. It directly explores social relation at the heart of value. Social relations do not have to take the fantastic form of a commodity to generate value for capitalism. Via personalized networked information and communication technologies, capitalism has found a more direct way to appropriate value (Dean, 2021, p. 121).

Information workers (Neveau, 2010) such as journalists were degraded during the pandemic period by a large-scale experiment aimed at evaluating the effectiveness of teleworking, remote work, within the home space. The forms of networked media and informational circulation in global communications are fundamental to the order of production, circulation, and consumption of goods, because '(...) communication provides the resource for accumulation, acts as the means of accumulation, and works as a tool for accumulation (for mining and processing communicative data)' (Dean, 2021, s.p.; our translation). Capital accumulation absorbs clots of living labor in its materiality, "... inserting them into the average social time of an increasingly complex work process" (Antunes, 2018, p. 92; our translation).

Dean (2022) points out that smartphones articulate mechanisms of precarious work, with proletarianized people producing information for communicative capitalism. While some share data, big tech oligopolies accumulate fortunes. These are forms of toil, whether unpaid or paid, that constitute, regardless of their immediate appearance, a circuit of exploitation.

The concept of "circuits of exploitation" allows us to recognize communication networks as networks of exploitation that connect the communicative work conducted from end to end in the social field. Under the regime of communicative capitalism, most of us cannot help but produce for capitalism. Our basic communicative activities are embedded in circuits as raw materials for capital accumulation (Dean, p. 31, 2022).

The dominance and primacy of the digital machinery over work tends to isolate and fragment the production chains, increasingly under the wrapping of a neoliberal individuality, producing in subjects the perception of being productive and reproductive units. This process catalyzes an implosion of the territories where journalistic production traditionally takes place (newsrooms) and transforms home-based work, making it a central location for hybrid work in contemporary times.

As Harvey (2018) notes, some work practices in the digital economy do not differ much from the domestic subcontracting system of early textile manufacturing in late 19th century England, with small workshops within home space. Nothing too distant from the

seamstresses in the Eastern Zone of the city of São Paulo, from Bolivian immigrants who perform piecework for clothing production, generally led by Korean owners of means of production... It is the 21st century technology combined with the 19th century working conditions.

Daily life and reproduction: reifications

The explosion of the workspace places the residence as an atom of the digital “factory” of production, circulation, and consumption of content, repositioning productive and reproductive life as hostages of accelerated capitalist accumulation. “Communicative capitalism subsumes everything we do. It transforms not only our mediated interactions, but all our interactions, into raw material for capital” (Dean, 2014, p. 6; our translation).

The digital territory expresses a technological complex hegemonized by the big techs of Silicon Valley that aggregates social production and reproduction, operated by algorithmic control – which forges flows for the circulation and management of the vital expressions of capitalist society. It is a contradictory space that structurally shapes the centrifugal perspective of capital, gathering the heterogeneity of forms of life and work in its physical and virtual structures. The digital territory designs not only the circulation of goods and informational exchanges, but also social and spatial relationships, as it strongly influences the physical materiality of mediations between humanity, nature, and territorial space. In the digital territory’s interior, it is perceived that in this new field of class struggle, there is the dominance of financial capitalism, neoliberal ideology, irrationalism, and the social and affective barbarism of humanity, which leads the actions of dominant classes to new levels. It is the turbulence of “manipulative capitalism” (Lukács, 2013) taking place within a technologically delimited field, which brings together control, surveillance, capture, and induction of behaviors, solely aimed at the expanded reproduction of capital.

Since the substance of the social being only exists in function of its uninterrupted reproduction, this means that the mutations and transformations triggered by the digital realm amplify both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of this essence. With the advance of communicative capitalism in the reproductive sphere, everyday life becomes permeated by its articulations. “The sphere of social reproduction has become, in almost every place, a field of highly intrusive capitalist activities” (Harvey, 2016, p. 178; our translation). The hybrid work mediated by digital platforms reschedules and exploits the living energy of everyday life. According to Heller (2008), the organization of work and private life takes place in the sphere of everyday life, which also includes leisure activities, reproductive tasks, and the repetition of necessary actions for the maintenance of social

life. The most trivial chores of existence populate this space. But in the capitalist system, irrationalism affects the singular acts of humans and permeates their everyday lives. In it, “reification clearly emerges as a socio-ideological power, unconsciously created by man and that, nevertheless, has a practical-objective domination over him” (Lukács, 2013, p. 729; our translation). Spontaneity is the tendency of everyday life and favors behaviors motivated by immediacy, pointing to ephemeral solutions to the challenges posed by the continuity of processes required for reproduction maintenance.

The commodification of every aspect of social life is a characteristic of the social metabolism of capitalism. However, with the convergence of digital technologies that blend and hybridize production and reproduction, leisure and work, entertainment, and obligation, blurring these heterogeneities, we observe an expansion of capital into the constitution of the domestic microcosm. Lukács notes a “(...) tendency that permeates all social expressions by tying man to his particularity, definitively fixing him in it, and glorifying this level of being as the only one that truly exists and, simultaneously, the only one that is desirable as a great social achievement” (2013, p. 716; our translation).

The expansion of hybrid work has turned the home into a productive space that competes with reproductive activities for free time, created in the digital territory of communicative capitalism – a meta-universe controlled by big tech companies that crystallizes social life in the chains of capital’s uncontrollability. Communicative capitalism absorbs and potentializes everyday reification, altering the perception of the worker, who is increasingly degraded by subordinated self-management (Abílio, 2017) and by the individualistic ideology of the ‘man as a business.’ “The digital life is articulated, disseminated, and naturalized as a full-time market, in which individual-commodities are self-entrepreneurs and, at the same time, the main commodity to be traded” (Lira, 2022, p. 113; our translation). It is worth noting that the fetishism of commodities, an unquestionable taboo, positions estrangement as an “apparently impregnable system of ideas and feelings that presents this condition as definitive for men, as capable of improvement only through immanent development” (Lukács, 2013, p. 727; our translation).

The informational machinery seems to get tangled up in the typical strangeness of everyday life. This includes behaviors such as ultrageneralization, pragmatism, economism, precarious analogy, and provisional judgments (Heller, 2008). These behaviors are now expanding in geometric progression in supervised information highways. While algorithms pursue the possible profits of live labor, they also potentiate the estrangements that manifest themselves in everyday life, expanding a capital offensive against possible forms of resistance. In addition, the prevailing metabolism in digital

networks colonizes free time and turns it into a commodity. The estrangements appear as “(...) a socially conditioned process with its reflections in the minds of people that, as a result of reification itself, prevent access to the possibilities of true knowledge” (p. 728; our translation). The estranged everyday life in communicative capitalism centralizes the hybrid work of journalists and will be a major obstacle to a meaningful life.

The consequences of this acceleration of everyday life structure in the sphere of work (increasingly developed within it) seem to further open the flank of subjectivity to ideologically guided reifications by irrationalism. Lukács (2013) deals with the widespread diffusion in space and time and the profound effects of reification as “(...) a mediating category of estrangement, especially because the connections that come to the surface in this process are appropriate for continuing to concretize the essence and action of the sphere that we have defined as the ontology of everyday life” (p. 688).

The interactions between humans and nature, as well as among themselves, are led by what Mészáros (2002) refers to as the second-order mediations of capital, which are structurally opposed to labor and always alienate human potential. These mediations:

(...) form a system that is perversely interlocked by material and institutional reifications – the uncontrolled transformation of social relations into things and of alienated/objectified things into covertly oppressive social relations – which ultimately implies the destruction of nature (and obviously of human individuals along with it) in favor of the fetishistic domination of expansionist quantity over quality that could meaningfully arise from genuine human need (Mészáros, 2009, p. 298; our translation).

The encounter between reified productive activity and fetishistic consumption seems to come together in the digital territory of communicational capitalism. The hybrid work of journalists expresses the contradictions of this association, which does not mean an inexorable fate.

(...) estrangements, on one hand, are products of the objective economic laws of each specific formation and can therefore only be eliminated through objective activities – either spontaneous or conscious – of social forces. On the other hand, the struggle of individual persons to overcome their personal estrangements does not have to remain a socially irrelevant personal activity but can become an activity whose potential influence on the movement of society as a whole, under certain conditions, can gain considerable objective weight. (Lukács, 2013, p. 777).

The cult of autonomy by capitalist ideology is clearly not aligned with a transformative perspective. The cult of the neoliberal individual signifies a retreat from

necessary struggles and instead, emphasizes the mystification of “individual autonomy” and singular privacy. This irrational idealization of individual autonomy is opposed to “universal freedom” (Mészáros, p. 241, 2006). The problems humanity faces do not arise from a lack of autonomy, but rather from the productive structure that propagates the cult of individuality with the intrinsic purpose of isolating individuals from each other. The perception that individuality, produced by social fragmentation – engendered by the new morphology of work – can overcome estrangement, ignores that the transformative process requires more than just private protagonism in the networks of reification (since they sterilize praxis). Rather, it requires the social reciprocity from a new form of social exchange.

Capitalism seeks to separate and individualize us, instilling within us the conviction that self-interest is paramount, and that freedom arises from individual choices made with individual goals in mind. It conceals the systemic determinants behind choices and outcomes, while also hiding the power that collectives possess to break away from these systems. (Dean, 2022, p. 316)

Final Considerations

The question that arises is whether the individuals “create their own lives and personalities, or whether they attribute transcendent powers to the decision-making process about this vital complex” (Lukács, 2013, p. 744; our translation). The communicative capitalism that is manifested in the digital realm and permeates the everyday life of journalists in hybrid work appears to have vast resources at its disposal to manipulate and confine social subjects into a reified particularity. On the other hand, the fetishism of libertarian technology spreads to the left, believing that it is possible to humanize capitalism without modifying the organic and constitutive bases of the capitalist system of production. As Dean (2022) says, “(...) fluid, hybrid, and mobile subjectivities appear as loci of freedom, as if their singularity were a natural attribute and not, themselves, imposed elements, inscribed and technologically generated in the service of capitalism.”

Rather than promoting a new stage of labor exploitation by expansion of working hours, erosion of rights, loss of professional status, transfer of risks and costs, and attack on physical and mental health, the digital economy creates a digital territory that connects (advancing over free time and domestic space) production and consumption activities. Hybrid labor integrates the sphere of everyday life into the axis of production in communicative capitalism, merging social reproduction with labor tasks. Flexible and fluctuating free time is colonized by the neoliberal agenda, resulting in unprecedented

forms of reification in daily life. Workers are compelled to take responsibility for their own productivity, viewing themselves as independent “partners” who exchange their labor power for income. The result is the weakening of journalists’ power to confront the consequent loss of their transformative potential.

The reification that organizes the experience of the working class normalizes the loss of meaning and consolidates the disbelief towards necessary social transformations. The estrangement not only hinders the understanding of labor’s historical role in emancipation, but also generates forms of sociability and even rebellion that are far from the struggle against capital. Fascist and militarized movements, as well as violent religious fundamentalism, gain momentum and spread rapidly through the irrational information highways of networks.

The synthesis that Harvey (2018) brings about the seven moments of the totality of capitalism, whose engine is the circulation of capital, highlights important aspects for a humanist strategy to combat second-order mediations, such as technologies, the relationship with nature, social relations, modes of material production, daily life, spiritual beliefs, and institutional structures. In this article, there was an articulated reference to some of them. Further development in these axes can lead the totality in another direction. After all, “(...) revolution is a continuous process of movement that goes through each of the different moments” (p. 117; our translation).

Considering the widespread adoption of remote work, journalists should aim to restructure daily life through moral and political action. The goal is to establish a political subjectivity at the level of social reproduction (where labor activities are integrated into everyday life) that is capable of collectively organizing an alternative economic engine. This alternative, as Mészáros (2002) aptly describes it, is the hegemonic alternative of labor against the social metabolism of capitalism.

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RESUMO:

O trabalho híbrido surge como nova modalidade para muitos jornalistas. Este artigo busca refletir sobre como as engrenagens digitais do capitalismo comunicativo invadem as esferas de produção e reprodução da vida dos jornalistas em escala global, demonstrando como formas de trabalho à distância, consolidados no laboratório pandêmico de experimentos tecnológicos, intensificam processos de reificação na vida cotidiana dos trabalhadores. O encontro entre a atividade produtiva reificada e o consumo fetichista parecem dar-se as mãos no território digital do metabolismo do capital. O trabalho híbrido dos jornalistas expressa as contradições desse consórcio.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Trabalho dos Jornalistas; Cotidiano; Reificação.

RESUMEN:

El trabajo híbrido surge como una nueva modalidad para muchos periodistas. Este artículo busca reflexionar sobre cómo los engranajes digitales del capitalismo comunicativo invaden las esferas de producción y reproducción de la vida de los periodistas a escala global, demostrando cómo formas de trabajo a distancia, consolidadas en el laboratorio pandémico de experimentos tecnológicos, intensifican procesos de cosificación en vida cotidiana de los trabajadores. El encuentro entre la actividad productiva cosificada y el consumo fetichista parece ir de la mano en el territorio digital del metabolismo del capital. El trabajo híbrido de los periodistas expresa las contradicciones de este consorcio.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Trabajo híbrido; La vida cotidiana; Cosificación.