

Anastasia Yakouba

Theories of Communication

Dr. Tarik Sabry

15 Oct 2019

Think of contemporary digital culture and digital politics. Give at least two examples of digital commodities and/or digital authoritarianism. Discuss how Adorno and Horkheimer, who are no longer alive, would analyse these examples from the realm of digital communication.

The original writings and theorizing of Adorno and Horkheimer regarding culture as a commodity and means of production still remains poignant to this day. Although the cultural landscape since has altered drastically, it is important to apply their methods to the media that now surrounds us. Not only has there been development in the way culture is consumed, but in addition, the type of culture has shifted into digital formats. When Adorno and Horkheimer coined the term “Cultural Industry,” they felt a sense of skepticism and deception from the media to act more as a commodity with hidden intentions to benefit individuals and businesses for profit rather than to act as culture (Negus, 2006). Two of today’s main points for media consumption are found in the form of the digital with video sharing platform YouTube and photo sharing application Instagram. Both have the structure and frameworks to offer an alternative to an industrial form of culture, however the major issues with YouTube and Instagram cause an intervention in regard to Adorno and Horkheimer.

The consumption of entertainment is closely aligned with recreation or a time for one to be at complete ease, separate from the means of production and capitalism one is engulfed in during the majority of a week (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997). Adorno and Horkheimer believe that the commercial entertainment for masses still works within the system of a production and exhibits all the characteristics of an assembly line.

Whereas Adorno and Horkheimer mentioned the cultural industry surrounding entertainment such as cinema, it can be considered that in present day this notion that film continues to be reproduced is a given. Often times cinema studios produce remakes of films that already exist or use the same narrative formulas that have proven to be successful in the past. Adorno and Horkheimer describe that “in a film, the outcome can invariably be predicted at the start – who will be rewarded, punished, forgotten –” and compare the systematic similarities to

that of motor vehicles (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997, p. 97). There is no individuality or room for proper spectatorship from the audience when story structures are meant to be mass reproductions of one another. Hence a passive audience member is constructed where the viewer is placed merely to absorb the commodity that is meant to prepare them for laboring.

The innovation of YouTube has transformed the way one can consume culture and be exposed to new forms of stylization. YouTube has created a landscape and opportunity for a rise in what Adorno would consider to be an “alternative” to the commercially produced media that acts as industry. During YouTube’s debut when the platform was still in its infancy this can be considered accurate. Much of what was offered on the site was a counter and opposition to the commodified culture Adorno and Horkheimer were referring to in their essay “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997). Recently with YouTube’s decision to alter the way creators earn compensation for their content through advertisements, it seems the original alternative and diverse voices present on the platform have become commodified.

Many videos now posted to YouTube work in a formulaic way where the main goal is to obtain attention from users to gain high viewership. An increased amount of views on a specific video means an increased number of individuals who view the advertisements associated with that video. The views of those advertisements can lead to clicks which has economic value for the respected content creator (Burgess & Green, 2018). Thus, the new motivation is no longer culture for the sake of creating culture and countering commercialized entertainment, but instead results as falling into the form of Adorno and Horkheimer’s cultural industry. Titles are then created and based on the anticipation to draw in viewers although they may not specifically have anything to do with the content. An example of this can be a vlog entitled “RUSHED TO THE EMERGENCY ROOM,” by family YouTubers “SomersInAlaska,” in which the viewer is led to believe a medical emergency take place although this is not the case (SomersInAlaska, 2016). The video drew in over one million views and the creators did not hesitate to include advertisements before, during and after the video concluded.

The focus on spectacle and exploitation of one’s morbid curiosity is what continues to be a trend in content created on YouTube. What began as an individualized process and alternative voice has now shifted into repetition and the reproduction of a style made for economic purpose and commercialism. In his book “Critical Theory of Communication,” Christian Fuchs uses

YouTube as a modern example of digital culture that Adorno would enjoy and consider to be a radical opposition, but once the inclusion of advertisements is involved it separates itself from that radical quality (2016). While there might be content on YouTube that does not cater to the capitalistic system of creating culture that will have a monetary return, certainly it's visibility on the platform is not emphasized by YouTube's platform. Adorno and Horkheimer's views of YouTube would have found them at a bit of a crossroads in terms of not directly faulting the content creators as the issue of creating and catering to be a commodity (Negus, 2006). Instead they would feel more inclined to blame it on the inherent pressures of society and capitalism that creates artists and cultural makers who begin to fall into reproduction and repetition.

YouTube has been a great driving force in creating a model surrounding culture and advertisements in the digital age that many other platforms have replicated. Instagram does not stray from this and has even orchestrated a new kind of content creator and cultural style. Anyone with a smartphone had the opportunity to create an Instagram profile and contribute to the platform with their photographs and captions. One could show others the way that they see the world, however with users following hundreds of accounts and being shown hundreds of different photos at any given time, there has been a pressure to be different and "build a brand." Simply posting a photo of what you want is not enough any longer and many users now are goal oriented to show that they have the "better" life compared to others. This may include users posting commodities such as purses, cars, shoes, and clothing to make other users feel as though that they should be working harder to match the lifestyle of those they follow (Waddell, 2017). Or the most apparent form of commodification and advertisement on Instagram are sponsored posts directly from popular influencers.

Instagram user Anastasia Karanikolaou, otherwise known as @stassiebaby has nearly six million followers, clearly gaining the trust of her followers and creating a personal relationship. Most of her photos that she shares on the platform are of herself and her friends, but many of the posts are advertisement oriented. For example, on July 10th, 2018 she posted an ad promoting a weight loss supplement drink telling her followers just how good she felt after using it (Karanikolaou, 2018). In a space that was originally meant for self-expression and hearing the individual voices of those who want to be a part of participatory media, it instead becomes a marketplace. Advertisements of products from individuals that users come to "know" and "trust," attempts to not only sell the consumer a material object but promises an improvement of

life (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997). “The consumer submits to the ‘appeal’ of commodities, to the effects they can work upon him as a de-sociated body, but lacks power over them; lacks the power, that is, to express or realize his life-process in them” (Witkin, 2003, p. 4). This is very apparent in the example of Karanikoalaou selling weight loss supplements – with those users constantly being surrounded by this kind of commodification they have no choice to consume.

On Instagram there are economic returns based on the amount of people purchase and use their significant code on whatever it is they are sponsoring. As well as that there is a new form of social returns in the form of “likes,” “comments,” and “follows” from other users. If Adorno and Horkheimer were present to see this kind of development, they would perhaps believe this to be a new form of cultural industry.

What must be considered is that all of the current digital platforms that exist have begun with intentions to be authentic culture that strays away from industrial production. Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are all spaces where the content is user driven. This gives individual users from different backgrounds and ideologies the power to tell and construct oppositions of what is socially accepted by the bourgeois. However, with the platforms drive to make money through advertisements and all of their content being user based, this has encouraged users directly to be a part of the mechanics of the cultural industry by creating around and for the advertisements. Adorno and Horkheimer would agree with the alternative style and culture these digital platforms strive to create but would critique the way they “incorporate producer and consumer, artist and audience into this process,” the process of a capitalistic industry (Curran 199).

Works Cited

- Adorno, Th. & Horkheimer, M. (1997). "The Cultural Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception", in: *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*. London: Verso, pp. 120-167.
- Burgess, J. & Green, J. (2018) *YouTube*. Cambridge, Polity Press.
- Fuchs, C. (2016). "Theodor W. Adorno and the Critical Theory of Knowledge". In Christian Fuchs: *Critical Theory of Communication. New Readings of Lukás, Adorno, Marcuse, Honneth and Habermas in the Age of the Internet*. London: University of Westminster Press. Pp. 75-109. Open access book:
<https://www.uwestminsterpress.co.uk/site/books/10.16997/book1/>
- Karanikolaou, A. (2018). *on my last day of @boombod ! feeling so good after this 7 day challenge #ad* [Instagram Photo] Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BIEYMM-lcz/> [Accessed 12 October 2019].
- Negus, K. (2006) Rethinking creative production away from the cultural industries. In: Curran, J., Morley, D. (eds). *Media and Cultural Theory*. Oxon, Routledge. Available from:
https://books.google.co.uk/books?hl=en&lr=&id=ON82ks7j40IC&oi=fnd&pg=PA197&dq=adorno+cultural+industry&ots=SI8boFckV4&sig=aV-iCIKewOaTTFTY3bnUf-lZALs&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=adorno%20cultural%20industry&f=false [Accessed 9th October 2019].
- SomersInAlaska, 2016. *RUSHED TO THE EMERGENCY ROOM | VLOGMAS DAY 21 | SOMERS IN ALASKA VLOGS* [video online] Available at:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=67NhrxleH3Y&t=348s> [Accessed 9 October 2019].
- Waddell, L. (2017) Digital Currency. In: Barekat, H., Barry, R., & Winters, D. (eds). *The Digital Critic: Literary Culture Online*. London, OR Books.
- Witkin, R. (2003) *Adorno On Popular Culture*. London, Routledge.