

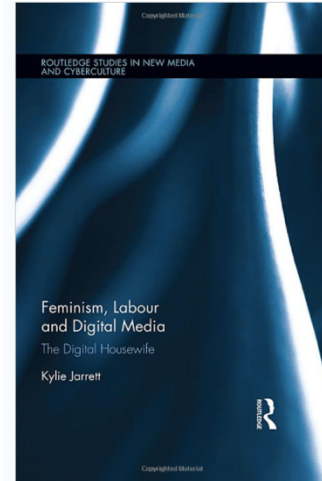
Kylie Jarrett, **Feminism, Labor and Digital Media: The Digital Housewife**, New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2016, 180 pp., \$48.87 (paperback), \$133.26 (hardcover).

Reviewed by

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In the digital era, social media has become a regular habit for many of us in our daily lives. Throughout the day, we browse Facebook updates, click on Twitter hyperlinks, and “like” Instagram images. Some radical feminists argue that many of our interactions and expression of opinions stem from affection and the need for socialization. Yet other critical scholars, particularly autonomist Marxists, see our production of user-generated content as being embedded in exploitative relationships rather than simple acts of free will. Operating within the capitalist logic of social media platforms, we have become consumer labor. Specifically, our activities in cyberspace, such as our likes and retweets, produce data that are valorized in the market for corporations. But we are not compensated for what we contribute.



In ***Feminism, Labor and Digital Media: The Digital Housewife***, Kylie Jarrett points out problems with interpretations of the two camps—radical feminist and autonomist Marxist—and transcends both by integrating Marxist feminist thinking into the study of consumer labor. As a “brokering project,” this book constructs a dialogue between autonomist Marxism and Marxist feminism. Jarrett points out a parallel between consumer labor and domestic labor in her introduction: Users’ pleasurable but exploited activities on commercial websites are similar to domestic labor’s emotional but uncompensated work in the private sphere. Her metaphor of the *digital housewife* refers to non-gender-specific actors who “express themselves . . . and generate social solidarity with others in commercial digital media while . . . adding economic value to those sites” (p. 3). Her innovative intervention allows us to discern a dialectic rather than zero-sum relationship between exploitation and agency, which lies at the heart of consumer labor in digital media capitalism.

Jarrett first combs through the theoretical concepts from the autonomist Marxist tradition that have been most frequently cited. Among them, she particularly stresses Hardt and Negri’s (2000) idea of cognitive capitalism that centers on immaterial labor and the social factory, as well as Terranova’s (2000) argument concerning the important role of “free labor” within the economic circuits of digital media. These predominant frameworks reconceptualize labor and further inspire Marxist critics to reconsider consumer activity as labor. Such critical thinking emphasizes continuity between digital media and broadcast media in terms of their shared business model driven by advertising. Both types of media companies exchange their audience as commodity for advertising revenues, although advanced digital technologies enable social media companies to extract more user data and thereby more profits.

Jarrett doubts the novelty of Marxist thought from a feminist perspective, the latter being marginalized in contemporary Marxism. The notion of the social factory is the main target of her criticism.

Autonomist Marxists use the social factory to identify a new phase in the history of capitalism. However, Jarrett refers to Federici's (2004, 2011) historical work to argue that the intertwining of production and reproduction—what autonomist Marxists see as a hallmark of the social factory—had existed long before late capitalism. The entanglement between production and reproduction had emerged during colonialism. Meanwhile, Jarrett draws upon Marxist feminist interpretations of domestic work to stress the centrality of immaterial processes and objects in capitalism, which opposes the social factory argument claiming immaterial labor as post-Fordist. As she contends, the Autonomia movement's theorizations are merely "re-statement of the capital relations already understood by feminists and experienced in the everyday life of women" (p. 65).

Both chapters 3 and 4 make outstanding contributions. Jarrett does more than provide us with critical readings of previous studies; she suggests original approaches to transcend existing literature on consumer labor. Chapter 3, "Who Says Facebook Friends Are Not Your Real Friends? Alienation and Exploitation in Digital Media," outlines two ongoing debates about whether consumer labor in digital media is productive or unproductive and whether such labor is alienated or agential. Confronting the first binary, Jarrett discloses the productive and exploited character of consumer labor, while criticizing those who only see labor as "wage-able" and "contract-able." With respect to the conflict between alienation and agency, Jarrett gains inspiration from Donna Haraway's (1991) hybridity thesis and proposes a framework "in which attention is paid to both the alienating and agential aspects of user practice and how they intertwine" (p. 103).

Jarrett elaborates a new model derived from such a hybrid approach. She complicates the aforementioned dichotomies by drawing on Fortunati's (1995) economic model of domestic work. Jarrett's working hypothesis is that gifts (use-values) and commodities (exchange-values), exploitation and self-actualization, and production and reproduction coexist in digital media environments. For instance, when a user clicks the "like" button on Facebook as a result of his or her emotions, this may be a simple act of use value. However, the workings of the platform mean this activity is immediately transformed into user data with exchange value, to be captured, stored, commodified, and subsumed into the capitalist valorization processes. Jarrett notes that "the site (Facebook) can only convert the labor-power of user experience into the commodified form of user data (labor-time) after its experience as inalienable use-value by the user" (p. 135). In chapter 5, to validate this model Jarrett applies it to a particular example involving her exchanges with a friend on Facebook. In her analysis, she claims that "ineffable, inalienable and very real" (p. 156) affection took place and activated the production and reproduction of social relations through Facebook. It is through affective social ties that social media exploits users as labor. Furthermore, the re/production of affective intensity online also generates subjects suitable for capitalism and neoliberal governance, hence perpetuating structural inequalities through the technological system.

In the conclusion, Jarrett briefly discusses the implications of the digital housewife framework for various domains of inquiry. For example, this hybrid approach would bring subjective dimensions of work back into the study of creative labor in art. Likewise, the intersection of economy and culture provided by the multiphasic model would reclaim the significance of identity politics in researching late capitalism.

Jarrett has made important scholarly contributions. However, *The Digital Housewife* remains a theoretical volume that does not reach beyond academia. She emphasizes the importance of producing noncapitalist subjects and the necessity of change in all aspects of life, but there is still insufficient attention paid to micropolitics in everyday life, without which change can hardly materialize. As a critical scholar, Jarrett succeeds in problematizing the digital media circumstances that encircle most of us, while disclosing the core logics of consumer labor. However, exactly how can we liberate ourselves from such exploitation by Facebook, Twitter, and so on? It may be unfair to criticize Jarrett for not speaking to nonacademic readers. However, such exclusion is likely to weaken her charge against gigantic commercial Web companies, if not reifying the status quo.

It may be worthwhile to revisit Gramsci's (1971) philosophy of praxis, which sees the organic intellectual as a key to linking theory with practice. According to Gramsci, working-class intellectuals are responsible for questioning the established order of capitalism, generating counter-hegemony while educating and unifying the public. The new mode of organic intellectuals calls for "active participation in practical life, as constructor, organizer, 'permanent persuader' and not just a simple orator" (Gramsci, 1971, p. 10).

In spite of these limitations, Jarrett's theoretical inventions, especially her hybrid approach and multiphasic model, insert new blood into the veins of research on labor in digital media. Colleagues sharing interests in labor will find this book useful in guiding their future studies. Her insightful propositions also bridge long-standing schisms in feminism and Marxism, political economy, and cultural studies. Her conceptual frameworks are comprehensive and dynamic, allowing readers to better appreciate and refocus on the complexity and diversity of labor in digital economy.

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