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Attention capital as a result of the emergence of social media

Theoretical framework

The category of the “product of culture” functions, for the most part, in qualitative approaches, where it is conceptualised as a vehicle of certain values that provide receivers with aesthetic experience, consolidate cultural patterns, socialise or serve as an instrument of cultural hegemony on the one hand, or resistance against it on the other. This article, however, will not be concerned with such a definition. Rather, it aims to present culture mainly as a system of distribution of social rewards and to discuss the role of technology as a factor which has an impact on how this system is formed.

The following simplified model of culture involves a market/industry-based structure. The author/creator creates a certain product, which is subsequently distributed to receivers by means of a certain medium. Capital, in turn, is transferred in the opposite direction: consumers pay for the product to the distributor from whom they receive it, and the distributor remunerates the author. Although it would be difficult to imagine that there is no transfer of capital between the receiver and the author, the role of the medium/distributor remains unspecified: in view of a peculiar nature of broadly understood cultural goods,¹

¹ On the one hand, they are singular (the creator receives remuneration for creating a single artefact/product), on the other – easily copied or reproduced (the cost of a data storage device is usually far lower than remuneration due to the author).

the consumer–producer relation can be mediated in a number of different ways. Whatever they are, I take mediation to be an essential element of the model, since products of culture are culture-embedded by definition; and although the literature on the subject includes an array of definitions of culture, probably all of them acknowledge that it is a phenomenon that involves a community, hence – a form of institution, or, in other words, mediation.

As used here, the concept of capital is understood in broad terms, since a narrow definition (i.e. in terms of financial or material assets) would limit the explanatory value of the model. Free access to cultural goods is even more popular than a system based on financial or barter exchange. What is more, it can easily be noticed that different branches of art, such as theatre or painting, initially functioned outside the logic of market exchange, which in fact emerged later than some of them.² Consequently, it seems that the understanding of capital in this model should be broadened in two ways.

Firstly, what needs to be assumed is that there are other relatively autonomous forms of capital apart from economic capital. Following Pierre Bourdieu, what can be distinguished here is cultural capital and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986). The former can exist in three forms: the embodied state (the individual's habitus, i.e. long-lasting dispositions), the objectified state (i.e. cultural goods which require the use of skills associated with the habitus), and the institutionalised state (i.e. an objective confirmation of the embodied state provided by social institutions, e.g. a degree, a certificate, etc.). Social capital, in turn, is a network of contacts based on mutual acquaintance and recognition which can be mobilised for a particular purpose. Although, in certain conditions, each type of capital can be converted into another (e.g. it is possible to earn money by working in the acquired profession, get a loan, social benefits or handouts owing to one's social status, take private lessons or pay tuition fees to study at university, make business contacts to secure a contract, etc.), Bourdieu insists that all of them essentially derive from economic capital. Still, all these types of capital are relatively autonomous from one another. The key difference between financial capital and the other two forms is that while the former is measurable and easily transferable, in the case of the latter transmission is more difficult and, as it were, "concealed"; apart from this, it is difficult to estimate their value.

² It seems that the origins of the logic of market (or economic) exchange are closely connected with the emergence of the division of labour, which made it possible to conceive of some kind of remuneration for producing an artefact. Originally, art functioned outside the rules of such logic – within the sacred order, for example. Although Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* somewhat complicates the picture, it does not seem to contradict it: the accumulation of wealth by a Lutheran merchant is not an aim in itself, but rather an apparent sign of God's grace, bringing social esteem.

Bourdieu's expanded concept of capital corresponds to the typology of social rewards based on Max Weber's theory of stratification (Weber, 1978). The understanding of "capital" as "objectified work" seems to be too narrow: while it can explain the transfer of goods at the structural level, the processes involved also need to be approached in terms of individual motivation. Indeed, very few people would motivate their actions by the "accumulation of capital" as such. Although Weber's theory is based on somewhat different assumptions (scalar rather than binary values explain the formation of his three proposed groups; a different mechanism of connections between particular systems) it appears that his threefold differentiation of class, status group and party provides a good basis for proposing corresponding types of social reward: money, prestige and power, which, to an extent, would match Bourdieu's forms of capital. Unlike those forms, however, the rewards are not explicitly characterised by "potentiality" typical of capital, and, in the subjective dimension, neither do they tend to accumulate; rather, they seem to be autotelic and achieved by individuals or groups.

The following part of this article applies the above presented categories in order to explain how the emergence of social media influenced the formation of a new form of capital – attention capital – and consequently changed the existing patterns of production, distribution and consumption of cultural goods.

Mass media: the case of television

What can serve as a point of departure for further discussion is a brief outline of the situation preceding the emergence of attention capital. Who pays attention to what has been important probably from times immemorial, as observed, for example, by Michel Foucault, who associates power with knowledge, embodied in the very possibility of paying attention to something (cf. e.g. Foucault, 1977). The history and sociology of art is largely devoted to the study of relations between the author and the receiver, as well as to the investigation of what enabled these relations (the distributor). It was not until the emergence of the mass media, however, that the products of culture gained universal access to potential audience. Television seems to provide a good model of a classic mass medium. Bourdieu noted its specific nature in his televised lectures delivered in 1996:

by agreeing to appear on television shows without worrying about whether you'll be able to say anything, you make it very clear that you're not there to say anything

at all but for altogether different reasons, chief among them the desire to be seen. (Bourdieu, 1998, pp. 13–14)

Making such an appearance is a form of reward itself, as people simply want to be seen. While this certainly entails some kind of prestige, Bourdieu strongly stresses that stakes in the journalistic field are different. As distinguished, two models of activity involved here have a distinct focus. The first of them is driven by commercial logic: the producers of news programmes or tabloid press features are only interested in reaching the maximum possible audience. In the second case, the representatives of the field want to preserve its autonomous nature and act in the name of what they perceive as “objectivity”. Even in the latter model, however, the creator of cultural content (e.g. a journalist or a commentator invited to the studio) is not in a position to freely transfer it to the receiver owing to the limitations of the medium, such as the amount of available airtime, the format of the programme, or even the required use of language than needs to be understandable to the audience. In this way, Bourdieu addresses the issue famously known as “the medium is the message” (although without making any references to McLuhan): technical requirements of television shape the rules of the media field, or, in other words, the ways of distribution of cultural content.

Moreover, the stakes in this field are measurable by means of audience ratings, “the hidden god of this universe who governs conduct and consciences. A one-point drop in audience ratings, can, in certain cases, mean instant death with no appeal” (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 25). Importantly, they can be approached as a measure of the viewers’ attention. Particularly in the case of the “opinion-making media” (i.e. those which are not driven by commercial logic), the importance of audience ratings involves not only quantitative criteria. What is also significant to the creators of cultural content and its distributors (journalists and owners of media companies), as well as to advertisers, is who watches a particular channel or a particular programme. Although media corporations are business entities aiming to make profit, the discourse on the media market as such (as distinct from business commentaries concerning the situation of particular companies) features audience ratings or, in the case of print media, circulation figures at least as often as financial details. In fact, it is the former that tend to have more impact on their position in the media field.

The television model can not only be treated as representative of other media (Bourdieu’s notion of the journalistic field can be expanded to talk about the media field

as such), but may also be extended to culture in general, with record companies, art gallery owners and their practices on the art market, etc. playing an analogical role to that of the mass media. In this way, we obtain a more general model of production, distribution and consumption of cultural content.³

Attention capital

The rise of mass media did not directly translate into growth of profit made by creators and distributors of cultural content. In the case of print media, the cost of printing itself accounted for a large share of the final price. As for the media which operate by means of distant communication, in turn, (the radio, television, the Internet), the broadcaster or sender simply has no instruments to execute payment for access to particular content. Importantly, however, the media began to focus the receivers' attention, which could be capitalised, for example by introducing commercial content.

In this discussion, attention capital is understood as an unmeasurable ability to mobilise attention of individuals. As such, the concept derives from attention economy proposed by Herbert Simon. Observing the development of mass media and increasingly greater access to information, he concludes that

in an information-rich world, the wealth of information means a dearth of something else: a scarcity of whatever it is that information consumes. What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention (...). (Simon, 1971, p. 40)

Following the neo-Marxist critique offered by Christiana Marazzi, what can be noticed is the biopolitical process of commodification of leisure time by the media, which not so much engage us to perform physical or cultural work as consume our attention. Indeed, observing the proposed content involves performing work that consists in devoting our attention (Marazzi, 2008). Consequently, attention capital would be an objectified form of this work.

Bourdieu's essay *On Television* includes a description of an initial form of attention capital, which is merely a stake in a social field that is important, albeit one of many. The journalists

³ Although Bourdieu offers a sociological analysis of the field of cultural production, his focus is mainly the nineteenth century (see Bourdieu, 1993).

he describes are full-time employees, and the medium enjoys a hegemonic position vis-à-vis the author. One of the main problems addressed by Bourdieu is the question whether as an intellectual he should appear on television, and if so how he should do it. Taking into account other intellectuals – creators of cultural content – he decides that they can make such appearances only if the medium accepts their terms. Unfortunately, not every intellectual is as influential as Bourdieu, who was able to persuade the French television to broadcast two of his lectures without imposing any time constraints.

This situation, however, still involves a clear division between authors, distributors and consumers. Even though, as Bourdieu observes, newspapers are read mainly by journalists, the media field is clearly delimited and professionalised. In this way, attention capital does not exercise impact on the entire society, but is only a stake in a particular field. Consequently, its significance cannot be compared with that of economic, social or cultural capital.

The media field is characterised by considerable inequality. A small number of stars receive very high remuneration, which in extreme cases can reach even tens of millions of dollars.⁴ It seems that people with this level of income can make a qualitative difference: it is them who, as prominent attention industry workers, accumulate capital. Distributors compete to secure their cooperation and include the content they create in their portfolio of cultural goods. On the other hand, there is also a reverse pattern: people from outside of the media field want to acquire a certain position within it and – using other forms of capital they have at their disposal – compete against one another to become included in the distributors' portfolios. Bourdieu presents the heterogeneity of the media field, which uses the representatives of intellectual, artistic or political field as content creators, and at the same time is used by them to propagate their works, ideas or just themselves. In this way, the media field, although dependent on others, is also a factor at play in other fields.

However, the media field, particularly its part driven by commercial logic, does not require creators from other fields. Indeed, in many cases it is not particular individuals but the format which they are made to fit that generates the accumulation of capital. Although different types of game, reality and talent shows, tabloid news features about "ordinary people", and formats relying on amateurs enjoy a considerable popularity, most of their participants do not become more recognisable.⁵ Importantly, remuneration received by

⁴ Cf. "The world's highest-paid celebrities" (2017).

⁵ Such programmes and news features typically keep introducing new protagonists, often at frequent intervals. Reality and talent shows are based on the principle of selecting only several finalists from hundreds of candidates. The formats relying on amateurs (e.g. paradocumentary TV series) usually feature non-related medium-length episodes aired at least

this type of creators of cultural goods is relatively low. For example, an actor appearing in a Polish paradocumentary TV series earns about PLN 10–12 (£2–3) an hour; participants of reality shows receive even less, if anything at all (particularly considering that in the case of such productions their work, i.e. being (potentially) recorded on camera and broadcast live, is performed around the clock, like in Bentham's panopticon (Klonowska, 2014; Swoboda, 2014));⁶ rates quoted in advertisements for film extras in productions by leading Polish film directors are under PLN 100 (£20) per shooting day (as in 2017).

Extension of the media field

The picture of changes in the media field will not be complete if it is confined only to the mass media. It is important to observe that they function on the basis of the principle of selection, which stems from limited available airtime, the costs of hiring authors and the creative process itself. Production costs are often paid for by distributors, who own or rent the means of production (a studio, production or print facilities, etc.). To cover them, they select such content that will secure maximum possible returns. However, even if the costs of production are reduced (by such means as outsourcing, purchase of ready-made content or TV format, etc.), the media broadcasting in real time (radio and television) are not able to offer their audience more than twenty-four hours of material. Although companies address this problem by creating additional channels of providing content, this does not change the fact that traditional media are essentially embedded in time.

The Web 2.0 revolution has solved both these problems and made attention capital become much more than just a stake in the media field. Unlike the interfaces of other media, those used in the case of the Internet enable the user not only to receive, but also

once a week with different "actors" appearing in each of them. TV game shows, in turn, combine both these models to a different extent. Consequently, it is rather difficult to expect that the viewers will remember most of the participants – particularly those who (in the case of reality or talent shows) do not make it to the final – for a longer period of time. What also needs to be considered is that several mutations of the same type of programme are broadcast at the same time, most of them have already had several editions, and each of them features multiple participants. Under the circumstances, the opportunity to acquire attention capital is dispersed to an extent that in most cases makes it entirely negligible (probably except the immediate social environment of those involved). As a result, it is not so much the participants that become recognisable as the formats themselves.

⁶ An anonymous participant of *Warsaw Shore* (the Polish version of American reality TV series *Jersey Shore*) talking about the money received for his appearance in this production used the words "pocket money" rather than "remuneration" or "salary", which suggests that participation in such programmes is not treated as activity that can or should be rewarded financially.

upload content. The emergence of social networking sites, free-of-charge blog platforms or even discussion forums made it possible for creators to provide cultural goods without incurring technical costs (such as the cost of the server and the domain) on their part. Apart from this, in modern Western societies the cost of uploading content on the Internet (and retrieving it) is almost negligible: charges for Internet connection, broadband access, and the cost of the server are all within reach of the average user. Consequently, economically motivated selection of content by the distributor is no longer required. Neither is there any selection imposed by the potential of the medium, as content published by users is usually not substantial in size and the servers of companies managing social networking sites have an immense capacity. For example, according to official data provided by YouTube, three hundred hours of content are uploaded on the service site every minute.⁷ This is certainly not possible in the case of the mass media. Thanks to this, as well as to a large base of users, the creator is nearly always able to reach a certain group of receivers whatever the proposed content. What also needs to be noted is that contact via this medium is almost transparent: apart from advertisements, limitations imposed by policies of particular services, and censorship practices in some non-democratic states, there is nothing that would distort or transform the message intended by the content creator.

As a result, the division between creators/producers, distributors and consumers has become blurred. Bourdieu's solution to the problem of mass media (i.e. its postulated independence from financial considerations and the world of politics, as well as a greater role of creators, i.e. intellectuals invited to television programmes) is no longer valid, as technological progress resulted in the extension of the media field to the entire society. In social media, everyone who publishes content is a creator/producer, everyone who shares it is a distributor, and everyone who uses it is a consumer.

Remuneration for creators and distributors is available only in the form of attention capital, which seems to be analogical to the case of TV reality shows. Under the conditions of limited capacity of a medium, the distributor aims to provide content that will draw the maximum possible attention, and is able to pay for it to the creator. However, in the case of a medium that has unlimited capacity, it is rather logical to assume that millions of authors who want to accumulate attention capital provide so much content that all receivers are able to find something attractive for them, which means that production of

⁷ Cf. "YouTube for press" (n.d.).

cultural goods does not require financial motivation. Of course, some cultural producers are able to capitalise the attention they receive from social media platform users. For example, YouTube shares profits from advertising with the authors of original content. However, Bourdieu observes that conversion of different forms of capital into one another is only possible in certain conditions and is not an immediate or obvious process. It is hardly possible to overlook that in the quantitative and decentralised model of content distribution free of charge the income from advertising generated by a single product is rather limited, particularly in comparison with the traditional media. Indeed, “professional” bloggers or YouTubers (i.e. those who are able to convert attention capital to economic capital and make a living out of their production) account for only a fraction of producers of cultural goods available on the Web.

Following the line of reasoning proposed by Marazzi (2008), what can be observed is the phenomenon of the commodification of leisure time. Although many creators of materials uploaded onto the Internet treat their activity as a way of pursuing their interests, supporting certain values or using an ordinary means of communication, the fact is that they produce content and accumulate attention capital – which means they perform work – not only for themselves but also for the distributor, who, unlike most producers, is able to convert it to financial profit. This seems to disturb the division of labour, with professional activity visibly encroaching on the sphere of leisure time. In turn, this involves exploitation of professional producers of cultural content and the diminishing role of other forms of its distribution: almost every such product has a copy available on the Internet free of charge, and the overproduction of a given type of cultural goods leads to the depreciation of its value (there is no point in paying a stylist if a fashion blogger friend may provide expert advice, and no need to pay a professional for taking photos if a photographer friend is ready to take them in return for the possibility of adding them to her portfolio on a social networking site, for example).

Interestingly, social networking sites are not direct distributors of content to their users but only suggest the choice of materials by means of algorithms developed for the purpose. The excess of cultural goods on offer can disorientate the user; this situation is connected with the notion of data smog, i.e. excess of options which disturbs our mechanisms of selecting information – also concerning cultural goods (Shenk, 2007). Consequently, even if at the meta-level the owner of a website still remains the distributor, separate mechanisms of distribution of cultural content develop on the media platforms themselves, where many

users attempt to take the position of distributor by means of using their private profiles or creating dedicated profiles selecting content according to certain criteria.

This activity is significant at a number of different levels. Although such distributors are usually fans of particular artists and have a great esteem for their achievement, sometimes they use their work to gain attention capital for themselves. This is particularly the case of niche cultural goods, which are largely unknown to a wider audience. In the circumstances of a constant flow of such content, it is the distributor who remains present while particular artefacts fade into oblivion, and it is the distributor who accumulates attention capital. To an extent, this involves the re-emergence of the domination of the distributor over the producer, albeit at a different level. However, attention capital acquired in this way is not easily convertible, as potential financial profit goes to the “meta-distributor”, i.e. the owner of the medium. For example, although YouTube does not ban the use of copyrighted material by content creators and places advertisements in such videos, it does not share advertising revenue with those who upload them.

In the context of cultural goods, it is interesting to note two particular cases of distribution of attention capital: Internet memes and software cracking. Apart from “Internet archaeologists”, who are few and far between, the vast majority of users are not aware of the actual origin of particular memes.⁸ Although their authors do not receive proper recognition reflecting the level of popularity of their works, this does not change the fact that memes keep being created and function both as a form of communication and an element focusing the receivers’ attention. In the absence of the author, anyone who uses, shares or transforms the original version becomes a distributor, who, in a sense, is a co-creator and has exclusive rights, particularly when we consider the contextual use of memes. Software crackers can serve as another example, if not directly related to social media. They engage in activity that carries the risk of serious criminal charges, yet many of them decide to sign the versions of modified software which they make freely available with their own or their group nickname, thus jeopardising their economic and cultural capital. This case seems to be the best proof of the autonomous nature of attention capital.

⁸ Very few people who view or share a meme are aware of who its author is, what the image actually presents or who added the caption. Naturally there are exceptions to this rule, such as the Grumpy Cat, whose owner, Tabatha Bundesen developed a line of gadgets featuring the image of her pet. This does not change the fact that in most cases in order to discover the origins or history of a meme, one needs to consult such services as knowyourmeme.com (accessed 29 September 2017).

Conclusion

The above discussion clearly indicates that technological development of the media field produces new forms and mechanisms of social exchange. In the social media environment the historical model of production and distribution of cultural goods based on the author–distributor–consumer relationship is transformed into a more complex pattern (reciprocal relations, decentralised model), which disturbs the division of labour and pushes cultural production into the sphere of leisure time. Owing to the wide availability of opportunities to present one’s creative output to the public and the ease of distribution of such content, it seems that attention capital, once significant only in the media sphere, is becoming a mechanism which has an impact on almost the entire society. It is not just a derivative of social, economic or cultural capital – the number of likes, comments, thumbs-up, views (or lack of them) provides the majority of regular social media users with a behavioural stimulus. The social change described here demonstrates how the notion of attention capital may become a useful tool in the analysis of contemporary society, and how new technological opportunities influence our lives.

Translated by Piotr Styk

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Attention capital as a result of the emergence of social media

The article presents a theoretical model based on Pierre Bourdieu's forms of capital and applies it to analyse the mechanisms of production, distribution and consumption of cultural content. It assumes that on the cultural market there is always a social entity mediating between the sender and the receiver – on the one hand as a medium, on the other as an institution providing the author with remuneration. Having outlined the historical background, the article presents how attention capital, a new type of capital, has emerged as a result of the development of the technical mass media and how its functioning is being profoundly transformed by social media.

Although attention capital (measured by e.g. the number of likes or comments) is often translatable into other forms of capital, it remains rather autonomous. While the development of the Internet results in a greater choice of content, which can be selected according to individual preferences, gratification in the form of views is gained not so much by the author of content, but rather by the person who has shared it. This process is even more noticeable in the case of memes, whose authorship often cannot even be ascertained. In this way, changes on the Internet lead to the emergence of a new form of sociocultural economy.

Keywords:

attention capital, authorship, social media, meme

Kapitał uwagi jako skutek powstania mediów społecznościowych

W niniejszym artykule przedstawiony zostaje model teoretyczny oparty na formach kapitału Pierre'a Bourdieu. Zostaje on zaaplikowany do analizy mechanizmów produkcji, dystrybucji i konsumpcji treści kulturowych. Obserwując rynek kultury, należy bowiem zauważyć, że pomiędzy nadawcą a odbiorcą każdorazowo istnieje byt społeczny zapośredniczający odbiór treści kulturowych – z jednej strony jako medium, z drugiej strony jako instytucja wynagradzająca autora. Po krótkim rysie historycznym następuje prezentacja, w jaki sposób poprzez powstanie technicznych mediów masowych wyłania się nowy typ kapitału – kapitał uwagi. Jego funkcjonowanie zostaje w jeszcze większym stopniu przekształcone przez powstanie mediów społecznościowych.

Choć kapitał uwagi (mierzony w wymiernej liczbie wyświetleń, odwiedzin strony, lajków itd.) jest często przekładalny na inne formy kapitału, to sam w sobie jest autonomiczny. Wprawdzie rozwój internetu pozwala nam na szerszy wybór treści, zgodny z naszymi preferencjami, ale nagrody w postaci wyświetleń (czy komentarzy lub ocen) trafiają nie tyle do autora materiału, co do osoby, która go udostępniła. Proces ten jest jeszcze wyraźniejszy w przypadku memów, których autorstwa często nawet nie sposób ustalić. Obserwując wyłaniające się w internecie zjawiska, możemy w rezultacie mówić o nowej formie społecznej ekonomii kulturowej.

Słowa kluczowe:

kapitał uwagi, autorstwo, social media, memy

Note:

This is the translation of the original article entitled "Kapitał uwagi jako skutek powstania mediów społecznościowych", which was published in *Adeptus*, issue 10, 2017.

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