BA SOCIOLOGY
FOURTH SEMESTER (REPEAT)
READING & WRITING FOR SOCIOLOGY
BSO – 404
(USE SEPARATE ANSWER SCRIPTS FOR OBJECTIVE & DESCRIPTIVE)

SET A

Duration: 1.30 hrs.   Full Marks: 30

[PART-A: Objective]

Read the article and answer the following questions: **30 Marks**

Article
Information Society and Social Media

This book presents contributions that analyze the societal dimension of the media critically. Although the contributions do not necessarily share the assumption that we live in an information society, they all express an interest in analyzing media and information in their societal context, i.e. in relationship to the interaction of economy, politics and culture, and the power structures and patterns of stratification and inequalities that shape contemporary capitalist societies. There are many labels that one can use to describe contemporary society and many of them, such as capitalism, describe today's society in a more critical manner than the notions of the information or knowledge society that have all too often been captured by dominant interests in order to advance neoliberal policies. Nonetheless it is true that media, knowledge work and information technologies play a certain role in many contemporary societies and that the notion of the information society should therefore not simply be rejected, but critically assessed. Information is one of several relevant dimensions of contemporary society. Just like we can say that we live in informational capitalism, we can also say that we live in finance capitalism, hyper industrial capitalism, crisis capitalism, etc (Fuchs 2012a). Informational capitalism signifies the extent to which the contemporary global economy and society are information and media-based. This degree varies and can be measured in various ways. To speak of this tendency as informational capitalism means to neither reject nor glorify the information society discourse and to acknowledge that the contemporary information economy is shaped by a contradiction between productive forces and relations of production: It is capitalist at the level of the relations of production and to a certain degree informational on the level of the productive forces (Fuchs 2012a). In 1968, six years before the publication of Daniel Bell's (1974) book *The coming of post-industrial society* that was path-breaking for the information society discourse (i.e. in a time before the high rise of the information society hypothesis), Theodor W. Adorno (1968/2003) gave an introductory keynote talk on the topic of "Late capitalism or industrial society?" at the "fundamental question of the present structure of society" is "about the alternatives: late capitalism or industrial society". It is about whether the capitalist system still predominates according to its model, however modified, or whether the development of industry has rendered

the concept of capitalism obsolete, together with the distinction between capitalist and non capitalist states and even the critique of capitalism. In other words, the question is whether it is true that Marx is out of date.

In terms of critical, dialectical theory, we would like to propose as an initial,

necessarily abstract answer that contemporary society is an information society according to the state of its *forces* of production. In contrast, however, contemporary society is capitalist in its *relations* of production. People are still what they were in Marx's analysis in the middle of the nineteenth century. Production takes place today, as then, for the sake of profit and for achieving this end it to a certain extent makes use of knowledge and information technology in production. Productive forces and relations of production are interlocking phenomena, they contain each other. The informational forces of production (knowledge labour, information technology, science, theoretical knowledge) and the capitalist class relations should not be seen as polar opposites and the discussion about the existence or non-existence of an information society should neither be reduced to the level of the productive forces nor to the level of the relations of production. The first reduction will result in the assumption that we live in a new society, the information society, the second reduction will result in the response that nothing has changed and we still live in a capitalist society. The informational forces of production (just like the non-informational ones) are mediated by class relations, which means that the establishment of information technologies (as part of the instruments of production) and knowledge work (which is characterized by a composition of labour, where mental and communicative features dominate over manual features) as features of economic production are strategies for advancing surplus value exploitation, the reduction of variable and constant capital. Capital thereby hopes to achieve higher profit rates. The idea that the notion of society can today solely be constructed by reference to the informational forces of production is an ideological illusion. The counterclaim that nothing has changed because we still live in a society dominated by capitalist class relations is an understandable reaction and a strategy of ideology critique. A dialectical analysis cannot leave out that there are certain changes taking place that are intended to support the deepening of the class structure, but also contain what Marx termed *Keimformen* (germ forms of an alternative society). That the development of the informational productive forces is itself contradictory and comes in conflict with the capitalist relations of production can be observed by phenomena such as file sharing on the Internet, the discussions about intellectual property rights, the emergence of pirate parties in the political landscape of advanced capitalist countries, or the popularity of free software (Fuchs 2008, 2009). Marx predicted the emergence of informational productive forces as the result of the development of fixed capital, i.e. the increasing technical and organic composition of capital that is characterized by an increase of the role of technology in production at the expense of living labour power. The development of fixed capital indicates to what degree general social knowledge has become a direct force of production, and to what degree, hence, the conditions of the process of social life itself have come under the control of the general intellect and been transformed in accordance with it. To what degree the powers of social production have been produced, not only in the form of knowledge, but also as immediate organs of social practice, of the real life process. (Marx 1857/1858, 706) Marx argued that by technological development "the entire production process" becomes "the technological application of science" (1857/1858, 699). The "transformation of the production process from the simple labour process into a scientific process [. . .] appears as a quality of fixed capital in contrast to living labour" (1857/1858, 700). So for Marx, the rise of informational productive forces was immanently connected to capital's need for finding technical ways that allow accumulating more profits. That society has to a certain degree become informational is just like the discourse about this circumstance a result of the development of capitalism.

SOCIAL MEDIA

What is social about social media? The discussions about these terms started when Tim O'Reilly (2005) introduced the term "web 2.0" in 2005. Although O'Reilly surely thinks that "web 2.0" denotes actual changes and says that the crucial fact about it is that users, as a collective intelligence, co-create the value of platforms like Google, Amazon, Wikipedia, or Craigslist in a "community of connected users" (O'Reilly and Battelle 2009, 1), he later admitted that the term was mainly created for identifying the need of new economic strategies of Internet companies after the "dot.com" crisis, in which the bursting of financial bubbles caused the collapse of many Internet companies. In a paper published five years after the creation of the term "web 2.0", O'Reilly stated that this category was "a statement about the second coming of the Web after the dotcom bust" and that it was used at a conference that was "designed to restore confidence in an industry that had lost its way" (O'Reilly and Battelle 2009, 1). This is just another formulation for saying that "web 2.0" is a capitalist marketing ideology aimed at attracting venture capital investments for newly founded Internet companies. Michael Mandiberg argues that the notion of "social media" has been associated with multiple concepts: "the corporate media favorite 'usergenerated content', Henry Jenkin's media-industries-focused 'convergence culture', Jay Rosen's 'the people formerly known as the audience', the politically infused 'participatory media', Yochai Benkler's process-oriented 'peer-production', and Tim O'Reilly's computer-programming-oriented 'Web 2.0'" (Mandiberg 2012, 2). The question of if and how social the web is or has become, depends on a profoundly social theoretical question: What does it mean to be social? Are human beings always social or only if they interact with others? In sociological theory, there are di! erent concepts of the social, such as Émile Durkheim's social facts, Max Weber's social action, Karl Marx's notion of collaborative work (as also employed in the concept of computer-supported collaborative work—CSCW), or Ferdinand Tönnies's notion of community (Fuchs 2010). Depending on which concept of sociality one employs, one gets di! Erent answers to the questions regarding if the web is social or not and if sociality is a new quality of the web or not. Community aspects of the web have certainly not started with Facebook, which was founded in 2004, but was already described as characteristic of 1980s bulletin board systems like The WELL. Collaborative work (e.g. the co-operative editing of articles performed on Wikipedia) is rather new as a dominant phenomenon on the World Wide Web (WWW), but not new in computing. The concept of CSCW became the subject of a conference series that identifies multiple dimensions of sociality (such as cognition, communication, and co-operation), based on which the continuities and discontinuities of the development of the Internet can be empirically studied. The fi rst ACM Conference on CSCW was held in Austin, Texas, in December 1986. Neither is the wiki-concept new itself—the Wiki Wiki Web was introduced by Ward Cunningham in 1984. All computing systems, and therefore all web applications and also all forms of media, can be considered as social because they store and transmit human knowledge that originates in social relations in society. They are objectifications of society and human social relations. Whenever a human uses a computing system or a medium (also if s/he is alone in a room), then s/he cognizes based on objectified knowledge that is the outcome of social relations. But not all computing systems and web applications support direct communication between humans, in which at least two humans mutually exchange symbols that are interpreted as being meaningful. Because Amazon mainly provides information about books and other goods one can buy, it is not primarily a tool of communication, but rather a tool of information, whereas Facebook has in-built communication features that are frequently used (mail system, walls for comments, forums, etc.). The discussion shows that

it is not a simple question to decide if and how social the WWW actually is. Therefore a social theory approach of clarifying the notion of "social media" can be advanced by identifying three social information processes that constitute three forms of sociality (Hofkirchner 2013): Cognition, Communication & Co-operation

According to this view, individuals have certain cognitive features that they use to interact with others so that shared spaces of interaction are created. In some cases, these spaces are used not just for communication, but for the co-production of novel qualities of overall social systems and for community building. The three notions relate to di! erent forms of sociality (Fuchs 2010): The notion of cognition is related to Emile Durkheim's concept of social facts, the communication concept to Max Weber's notions of social actions and social relations, the co-operation concept to the notions of communities and collaborative work. According to this model, media and online platforms (1) that primarily support cognition (e.g. the websites of newspapers) are social media, (2) that primarily support communication (e.g. e-mail) are social media, and (3) that primarily support community-building and collaborative work (e.g. Wikipedia, Facebook) are social media. This means that social media is a complex term and that there are different types of social media. Empirical studies show that the most recent development is that there is a certain increase of the importance of social media on the Internet (Fuchs 2010), which is especially due to the rise of social networking sites such as Facebook, wikis like Wikipedia, and micro blogs such as Twitter and Weibo. If one compares lists of the most accessed websites from 1995–2000 to 2006–present for certain countries or the world, the rise of Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Tumblr, Blogspot, Word press, and LinkedIn among the most accessed platforms will be evident. These platforms are especially focused on communication, collaboration, community-building and community- maintenance. There is a special focus on the critical study of such platforms in this book, i.e. the analysis of how they stand in the context of power, exploitation, domination, oppression, class, digital labour and ideology, as well as protest and struggles.

[Answer the following questions]

1. What is informational Capitalism?   2

2. What is late capitalism?   2

3. Why advanced industrial society is called as information society?   2

4. What is web 2.0?   2

5. What are the various forms of social media?   2

6. Discuss various features of information society.   10

7. How social media emerged as modern social communication and social networking? Discuss   10

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