

# Doing It for the Vine: A Critical Analysis of the Video Sharing Service's Political Economy and Public Sphere Ideology

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## Inception

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## Abstract

This paper uses Jürgen Habermas' concept of the public sphere to critically analyze the political economy and public sphere ideology of Vine, a now-defunct video-sharing service and social media platform. Because Vine was so intensely popular for several years, its sudden demise came as a surprise to many of its users. However, it is precisely this contradiction that highlights the flaws in Web 2.0 ideologies of social media as public sphere. While the site provided a medium for communication, Vine was ultimately a project driven by profitability and business interests, and not by any interest in creating a democratic space for users to communicate within. This paper examines the exploitation of prosumer labour, the theorization of value and unwaged user labour, and the immanent power dynamics of the digital archive to expose some of the flaws in the conceptualization of Vine as a new manifestation of the public sphere.

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When Twitter purchased “Vine” in October 2012, the video-sharing start-up had yet to even launch. The acquisition was a result of a push from Twitter co-founder, Jack Dorsey, who reportedly “thought he had found the next big thing in social media—an Instagram with video” (Isaac). Vine, which allowed users to create videos up to six seconds long and upload them to the site, saw success for nearly four years as not only a medium for communication through videos, but also as a thriving online community. Users often turned to Vine to share firsthand videos of major events, including to document protests (like in Ferguson, MO, after the fatal shooting of unarmed black teenager, Michael Brown, by a police officer in August 2014) from points of view not included in mainstream news coverage (Giorgis) and to provide accounts of major events (like the Boston Marathon bombing in April 2013) as they happened (Honan). However, a more common use of the site was users sharing thoughts or jokes with other users through videos, a practice that, while ostensibly fleeting and inconsequential, often resulted in viral videos and popular Internet trends<sup>1</sup> and largely created the sense of online community that existed within the site.

Six months after its initial launch in January 2013, Vine had 13 million regular users. By October 2013, the app’s total users had tripled (Isaac), an impressive feat for a service that had been essentially nonexistent a year earlier. However, despite Vine’s rapid ascent to popularity and its few subsequent successful years as a top social media platform, in October 2016 Twitter announced its plans to shut down its video service completely. As competition from

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<sup>1</sup> One example of this phenomenon is the Internet video trend “do it for the Vine,” from which this essay takes its title. This particular trend involved one person uttering the phrase while recording a Vine to encourage another person to do something bizarre, humorous, or otherwise entertaining in pursuit of creating a popular Vine. Remnants of this trend are also visible on Vine’s website, in the site’s almost elegiac copyright tagline: “Did it for the Vine. © 2017 Vine Labs, Inc.”

other social media corporations became increasingly aggressive, Vine became too expensive to continue to be viable for the company, at “about \$10 million a month for infrastructure and employees” (Isaac). Many people viewed the site as a space for young creative people to have their voices heard, and the fact that many of Vine’s most popular users were people of colour, particularly black teenagers, added to feelings of frustration surrounding the site shutting down without any regard for the unique value it held for many of its users (Hughes; St. Félix). Perhaps partially in response to users’ expressions of disappointment at the decision to completely shut down the service, Twitter soon amended its plans to simply scale the site back to an archive of existing video content, while redirecting any new video posts to Twitter.

Social media sites have become increasingly popular avenues for communication, and as a result, public discussions regarding the potential implications of these sites for the political realm have ensued. As Christian Fuchs (2014) writes, these types of discussions draw largely on Jürgen Habermas’s concept of the public sphere, a notion rooted in Marxian political theory (181) used to describe an area of society where individuals can discuss societal problems and effect political change. Fuchs also notes two particular aspects of Habermas’s concept as being constitutive of the public sphere: political communication and political economy (183). In this way, Habermas’s concept becomes particularly useful when applied to a critical analysis of Vine’s short-lived success as a social medium, also lending itself to an analysis of the political economy underlying the site. As Fuchs writes, political economy concerns the “structural features” of capitalism (97), making it a useful area of analysis for examining power within social media sites. However, examining political economy alone does not provide an adequate analysis of power. As Fuchs argues, “[i]f one wants to understand power, then one needs to analyze both ideology and political economy” (97). As such, to analyze critically the experience of Vine and understand the power dynamics existing therein, the political

economy of Vine and the ideologies of democracy and the public sphere's permeating discourses surrounding the site must both be considered. In this way, the experience of Vine provides a useful case study to examine the tangible effects of the political economy underlying social media sites, particularly as it demonstrates the flaws in Web 2.0 ideologies of social media as a new manifestation of the public sphere.

First established in 2005 by Tim O'Reilly (Fuchs 32), the concept of Web 2.0 is used to describe a variety of changes in Internet use in recent years, including the shift toward user-generated content. Web 2.0 as a concept focuses largely on the centrality of the user, and as an ideology often tends towards technologically deterministic notions of user agency, democratic potential, and public good. User-generated content as a characteristic of Web 2.0 also provides a starting point for a discussion of the notion of "produsage" on social media. As S. Elizabeth Bird (2011) writes, the role of the "produser"—the individual user as simultaneously producer and consumer—cannot be understated. As digital media landscapes have evolved, so too has the role of the formerly passive audience, into a now engaged, active user base. In the case of social media, users now seem to wield more power than ever before, as Bird writes, "to define the terms of their engagement" (506). However, Bird argues that this ideological focus on the social media user is too narrow, and ultimately downplays the role of media producers and owners, "who while they certainly respond to fan demands, have also learned quickly to co-opt fan activities and viral media" (507), further illuminating the capitalist nature of social media sites in their adaptability to remain viable.

When applied to a case study of Vine, Bird's findings demonstrate the highly ideological nature of Web 2.0 discourses in their claims of the democratic potential of social media. On social media sites like Vine, users are responsible for both the creation and dissemination of original content. While the site was still running, users (called

“Viners”) on Vine had the option to create videos (called “Vines”) and upload them to the site, where they could then be viewed and shared (or “Revined”) by other users. This dynamic between Vine and its users created the appearance of a social media site that was authentically social, at once cognitive, communicative, and collaborative (Fuchs 38-42). However, through critical analysis this appearance proves to be largely, if not entirely, illusory. During its run, Vine relied on user labour to remain a viable social media site, while its users remained alienated from the profits of their labour. While creating popular videos or spawning Internet trends on Vine may have resulted in a certain amount of social capital accumulation for users, the financial capital created out of users’ investment in the site remained out of reach for Viners. In this way, the exploitation of prosumer labour controlling the digital landscape ultimately outweighs what Bird refers to as social media’s “liberatory potential” (508), rendering interpretations of Vine as a new type of public sphere highly ideological and its democratic potential ultimately unrealized.

Further, theorizing the notion of value within this kind of user-generated content allows for a more comprehensive examination of Vine’s political economy. Fuchs (2014), drawing on Marx, discusses the objective concept of value as a notion distinct from any subjective definitions. Specifically, he locates the value of a commodity within the “quantity of the ‘value-forming substance,’ the labour, contained in the article,” and “the amount of labour socially necessary” for its production (Marx qtd. in Fuchs 112). In this way, the value of a commodity, usually expressed in the number of hours required for its production, is also distinct from its price, expressed in quantities of money (112).

In an article theorizing value on social media, Brett Caraway (2016) likens users on social media sites to unwaged workers, or more specifically, unwaged content producers, which he defines as “individuals or organizations that utilize new media platforms for

purposes other than the accumulation of money,” (69) a definition that includes users on Vine. While Caraway notes that unwaged workers on social media are similar to waged workers insofar as they contribute to the reproduction of labour power and thus the accumulation of capital, he also makes the critical distinction between the type of exploitation each category of worker is subjected to. This distinction, Caraway argues, lies within “the relationship between the work of the *waged* and that of the *unwaged*” (70, emphasis original). While unwaged content producers do not create value in a strictly Marxian sense, he notes that user-generated content still contributes to the accumulation of capital for media and market research firms (76-77). Specifically, Caraway argues that user-generated content, and thus unwaged content producers, are connected to value-creation only insofar as they decrease the costs of new media, raising the rate of profit (77). This theorization of value creates a link between waged workers and unwaged workers in a way that illuminates the source of value of Vine’s users. As a social media site that relied on user-generated content, Vine positioned its contributing users as unwaged content producers. However, that is not to say that the site’s users were exploited through a lack of compensation. Rather, Viners contributed to the site’s overall profit not necessarily by contributing to the company’s revenue, but by decreasing its costs incurred, through the creation of unwaged, user-generated content. It was thus this form of unwaged labour performed by Vine users that was exploited by the company, illuminating the power dynamics existing within the site’s underlying political economy.

The user-generated content on Vine that maintained the site’s popularity, and thus its profitability, also highlights the immanent, asymmetrical power dynamics within Web 2.0 sites. While user agency is often touted as a liberatory aspect of the Internet within Web 2.0 discourses, Robert Gehl (2011) defines Web 2.0 as a “new media capitalist technique” of relying on user-generated content to attract attention for advertisements (1229). In this way, the

theorization of Web 2.0 as a democratic space in fact depends on the exploitation of unwaged user labour in order to maintain profitability. While Web 2.0 social media sites like Vine present the opportunity for users to maintain a certain amount of control of the site through content creation, Gehl notes that these sites are also “devices designed to capture the affective labour of users and create archives of the digital material they produce” (1230). In this way, the immediate, ephemeral nature of the content created by users on Vine is at odds with the site’s archival capacity, a contradiction Gehl views as “the motor that drives Web 2.0” (1229). Drawing on Tim O’Reilly, Gehl argues that user generation of content on social media not only adds value to the site, but also accelerates the cycle of media production as the site becomes a constant source of new material (1232). While users on Vine have power insofar as they can create video content and theoretically dictate trends on the site, Gehl notes that site owners maintain control over the other half of this power dynamic, the archive.

This dynamic is also further connected to the exploitation of user labour. As Gehl argues, labour on Web 2.0 sites is “often highly casualized and even presented as entertainment,” effectively making leisure time productive for globalized capitalism (1239). Further, he notes that user labour is the process that grows the digital archive (1239). In this way, the archive is inherently linked with both asymmetrical power relations and their obfuscation. As Gehl writes, while Web 2.0 sites have created unprecedented opportunities for user involvement in the creation of content, “the archival capacity of Web 2.0 allows for new centralizations of power, hidden away beneath the abstractions of the smooth Web 2.0 interface” (1240). While Vine provided an opportunity for user agency through content creation and curation, this sense of agency was largely illusory, as it relied heavily on the exploitation of user labour.

Because Vine was such an intensely popular social media site for several years, its sudden demise came as a surprise to many of its users. However, it is precisely this contradiction that highlights the flaws in Web 2.0 ideologies of social media as public sphere. While the site provided a unique medium for communication, Vine was a project driven by profitability and business interests, and not by any interest in creating a democratic space for users to communicate. Through an analysis of both political economy and ideology, as well as an examination of the exploitation of prosumer labour, the theorization of value and unwaged user labour, and the immanent power dynamics of the digital archive, some of the flaws in the ideology of the public sphere become apparent. In this way, a critical analysis of Vine's underlying political economy and ideology demonstrate that because of the social media site's defining corporate interests, the conceptualization of Vine as a new manifestation of the public sphere is not only flawed, but fundamentally deceptive.

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