

# Biopolitical Marketing and the Ideology of Social Media Brand Communities

Detlev Zwick, York University\*

Alan Bradshaw, Royal Holloway, University of London

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## Abstract:

This article offers an analysis of marketing as an ideological set of practices that makes cultural interventions designed to infuse social relations with biopolitical injunctions. We examine a contemporary site of heightened attention within marketing; the rise of online communities and the attendant profession of social media marketing managers. We argue that social media marketers disavow a core problem; namely that the object at stake, the customer community, barely exist. The community therefore functions ideologically. We describe the ideological gymnastics necessary for maintaining momentum behind a practice that barely exists and we ponder why such ideologies are necessary, and what they allow the marketer to do. Working with such concepts as 'the wild', 'communicative capitalism', and 'biopolitical marketing', we explore a genre of popular business literature that proselytizes for online customer communities and we reflect on the broader implications.

**Keywords:** Social Media Marketing, Brand Communities, Consumers, Biopolitics, Ideology, Communicative Capitalism

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\*corresponding author



The introduction of the term Web 2.0 by 'meme hustler' Tim O'Reilly (Morozov, 2013) came to signify the evolution of the internet from an aggregation of webpages to an 'architecture of participation' (O'Reilly, 2007). Marketing scholars and consultants have since tried to understand the implications of participatory media for theory and practice (e.g. Li and Bernoff, 2008; Solis, 2010; Tapscott and Williams, 2007). From its inception, Web 2.0 was a notoriously vague vision of participatory and collaborative media in which people meet and create. Its value to marketing managers was not immediately clear. Unlike Web 1.0, which maintained characteristics of the old broadcasting model, Web 2.0 appeared disorganised and wild (Fertik and Thompson, 2010); an innovative and exciting place but also anarchic and potentially unfit for marketing intervention.

Quickly, however, marketing thinkers reconceptualised the participatory web and coined popular terms like 'crowdsourcing', 'prosumption', 'mass collaboration', 'peer production' and 'user generation'. These terms emphasise the social nature of the web. The message to marketers is generally consistent: the internet has evolved into a participatory medium instituted by self-directed autonomous actors that use their tremendous creative intellect to communicate in new ways, develop new ideas, and generally make and do interesting and innovative things (for analytical synopses of the recent streams of research into 'working consumers' and co-creators see Cova and Dalli, 2009; Hong and Chen, 2013; Ritzer and Juergenson, 2010). And, as critically reviewed by Arvidsson (2006) and Cova and Dalli (2009), marketing professionals recognised that much could be gained from stimulating and channeling these resources. For a profession that fears nothing more than reiteration and re-permutation, the *wildness* of Web 2.0, with its endless supply of surprises and novelty, presents the possibility that the future has not been exhausted and perhaps never will. Yet, as several marketing disasters demonstrated (Nike id, Molsen Canada, Chevy Tahoe, etc.) to the emerging class of 'social media marketers', this was also a world of risk and unpredictability. Indeed, the recent birth of social media marketing as a profession can be interpreted as recognition that traditional marketing approaches are unsuitable for this new wild world of the Web 2.0 and that new marketing techniques are needed (see e.g. Cova and Dalli, 2009; Humphreys and Grayson, 2008).

In this essay, we investigate one such phenomenon that has received heightened marketing attention - the online customer community. We claim that the concept of the customer community represents a possibility for biopolitical interventions in a world of frenzied markets and autonomous consumer activities. Interestingly, online customer and brand communities rarely exist in substantial or meaningful ways and there is little evidence of their practical functionality for marketing management. Yet, as evidenced by the flourishing popular literature on the topic, online communities occupy a central place in the imagination of contemporary marketers.

We therefore suggest that community fulfills an ideological function in contemporary social media marketing practice. Exploring the online customer community as an ideological figure means asking what this figure allows contemporary marketers to do. We thus understand ideology functionally, and not in the Marxian sense of ideology as cognitive distortions that conceal contradictions and present an illusory picture of the social world (Larrain, 1983; Eagleton, 1991). We rely on Žižek's (1989) concept of ideology as unconscious fantasies or desire that structure reality. With Žižek's concept of ideology we avoid unproductive debates over whether online customer communities may or may not *be* real, instead focusing on why the social media marketer *desires* the customer community to be real.

Working with such concepts as 'the wild' and 'communicative capitalism', we explore popular business literature that proselytises for online customer communities as marketing opportunity. We propose that marketing's fantasy of the customer community as a wild and communal space of radically creative social production is conjured in opposition to disciplinary and manipulative corporate marketing. The online community functions ideologically because it allows marketers to symbolically resolve marketing's contradictions that arise with participatory media. We interpret the ideological mobilisation of the customer community as an expression of a larger transformation of marketing in communicative capitalism; from a social technology of discipline to what we term *biopolitical marketing*. Biopolitical marketing aims to mobilise and extract value from the production of consumer communication, lifestyles and subjectivities. It is a vision of marketing that wants to replace the conventional ethos of consumer discipline and control with an ethos of the network, emphasising openness and non-hierarchical collaboration, autonomy, and harmonious social production. Biopolitical marketing rejects any clear distinction between marketer and consumer; and sees marketing as deeply inserted into, and increasingly indistinguishable from, the fabric of everyday life. Our goal in providing this account of biopolitical marketing is to explain why everything we do, even our acts of resistance, appears to always end up in the great vortex of promotional culture (Aronczyk and Powers, 2010; Wernick, 1991).

## **Biopolitical Marketing and Web 2.0**

Social media marketing is charged with the biopolitical management of autonomous and 'anarchic' consumer life, where the very chaos of life is precisely the source of innovative and productive communicative 'work' valued by marketers (for scholarly analyses, see e.g., Arvidsson, 2007; Fisher and Smith, 2011; Zwick, Bonsu, and Darmody, 2008). The task of marketing in the age of participatory media, therefore, is to monitor and nurture what Halberstam (2013b) might call 'wild' social production. Being wild is about "shifting, changing and morphing extemporising political positions quickly and effectively to keep up with the multimedia environment in which we all live to stay apace" (Halberstam, 2013b: 29). The wild,

therefore, is a conceptual space where subjects erect political projects in opposition to normative and disciplinary demands and enables creative, innovative and anarchic projects.

Wildness as radical fluidity intersects with analyses of Post-Fordism's dependency on creative agency (see Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007). Accordingly the multitude which, following Hardt and Negri (2004), is a plural network of unmediated, self-determined and potentially radical collective subjects, produces the creative activities that drive cultural change. Therefore capital must remain profitable and hegemonic by capturing and commodifying the outputs of creative relations and do so in dynamic, dislocatory, deterritorialising and creative-destructive conditions (Gilbert, 2014: 16). On the one hand, we see Halberstam's concept of the wild offering a blueprint for a radically creative and innovative anarcho-revolutionary transformation. On the other hand, we see marketers engaged in the task of extracting value from the wild, which represents, perhaps, the final frontier of continuing cultural, technical, and social novelty. We call this combination *biopolitical marketing* because marketing becomes biopolitical precisely at the moment that it attempts to valorise and subsume the productive value of life itself (cf. Rose, 2001; see also Arvidsson, 2005; Virno, 2004). Wild, anarchic, and counter-cultural forms of life are valued most within this paradigm because these forms hold the greatest promise to produce the kind of cultural innovation that marketers seek to turn into economic value.<sup>i</sup>

It is in this context that we see marketing scholars re-popularise the idea of customer communities as where, in theory if not in practice, unmanaged groups can be motivated to gather online and perform potentially valuable, marketing-related activities (see e.g. Fournier and Lee, 2009; Schau, Muniz Jr., and Arnould, 2009; Weinberg, 2009). Meanwhile, there is a growing business press literature on online customer communities written by proselytising social media consultants and entrepreneurs (see e.g. Kerpen, 2011; Solis, 2010; Weinberg, 2009; Qualman, 2009). In these texts, customer communities become an effective social media marketing 'tool' and, with usual hyperbole, there seems to be very little that these communities cannot do for corporations.

This marketing vision of a virtual commune, grounded in leveraging communicative capacities, supporting non-hierarchical cooperation and enabling the circulation of non-proprietary content is a curious vision. For O'Dwyer, this perspective imagines the web as a "virtual communism"; an "immaterial space that trades in knowledge and culture, at once free from commercial subjugation and conversely capable of exerting influence on the material substrate of capital" (O'Dwyer, 2013: 498). For its loud and enthusiastic apologists, from John Perry Barlow and Kevin Kelly to Bill Gates and Al Gore, cyberspace holds a kind of spiritual power that suspends normal rules of markets and social power relations.

At stake is a corporate embracement of communistic traits, albeit a communism that, as noted by Beverungen, Murtola and Schwartz (2013: 484) is “contradictory, sometimes promissory, typically incomplete, elusive and complex, but also often hypocritical.” We see numerous communist traits celebrated in narratives of Web 2.0: a harmonious, equal, and mutually rewarding relationship between producers and consumers, a promise of non-alienated labor, a culture of sharing according to the principle of ‘from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs’, an anti-corporate and anti-private property ethos, and a general preference for a withering away of the state (as Barlow put it in his famous *Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace*, ‘you have no sovereignty where we gather’). But this communism short-circuits because, though there may be commons-based peer production, the apparatuses that leverage value extraction are never communally held (Fuchs, 2010; O’Dwyer, 2013).

Hence the communism of Web 2.0, as described by Kleiner and Wyrick (2007), is one where companies retain ownership of content, while opening up a method of content creation. The popular narrative of Web 2.0 as a democratising force that brings emancipatory empowerment occludes how, as Stallabrass (2012) informs, peer-to-peer systems had previously allowed users control of the frame as well as the content. Therefore, Web 2.0 is an enclosure of a commons and not the other way around (see also Kleiner and Wyrick, 2007). It is in this context that capital wants to harness this communist ethos in what are in effect privatised spheres (see also Arvidsson and Peitersen, 2013; Beverungen, Murtola and Schwartz, 2013) and also why, as Gilbert (2014) argues, the management of apparently horizontally constituted democratic media is a key battleground of post-Fordist politics.

Once marketing management inserts itself into the structure of new media, it shapes the media for commercial purposes (Fuchs, 2008). We observe a larger transformation of contemporary marketing practice, from a social technology of discipline to what we call *biopolitical marketing*. Drawing on Foucault’s notion of governmentality and biopolitics, and recent autonomist reinterpretations of Marx (Arvidsson, 2006; Dyer-Witheford, 1999, 2005; Virno, 2004, Berardi, 2009), we use the term biopolitical marketing to conceptualise strategies aimed at capturing and managing consumers in intensive networks of entertainment, production, consumption and surveillance (see e.g. Moor, 2003; Lash and Lury, 2007; Wissinger, 2007).

Berardi (2009) argues that digital media reconstitutes social processes as a general intellect wherein affective labour is no longer a social function separated from labour, but a function that produces technical and linguistic interfaces that ensure the fluidity of production within those social connections. The term that Dean (2010) gives to this economic-ideological formation is *communicative capitalism*; the exploitation and management of communication, affect, and sociality that materialises ideals of inclusion and participation in information, entertainment and communication technologies in ways that capture resistance and intensify

global capitalism (see also Arvidsson, 2006; Casarino and Negri, 2008; Virno, 2004). Dean's communicative capitalism feeds upon the enthusiasm and active agency of consumers. Within communicative capitalism, therefore, biopolitical marketing is the social technology charged with the mobilisation and extraction of value from the production of consumer communication, lifestyles and subjectivities. Biopolitical marketing is the strategy for governing conduct that maximises collective productivity.

Biopolitical marketing is not about collective command and control. Rather, it encourages consumers to fashion themselves as autonomous voluntary agents (Zwick and Cayla, 2011) in the production of affective, cultural, and economic value, or, what Arvidsson and Peitersen (2013) call, ethical capital. Biopolitical marketing pursues the production of value but does so by inserting the object for sale directly into the social fabric, and, thus, renders the production of consumer subjectivity as contributive to the continuous dynamic reproduction of value (see e.g. Arvidsson, 2005, 2007). We see instances of biopolitical marketing for managing brands (see e.g., Moor, 2007; Lury, 2004; Arvidsson, 2006) and innovation (e.g., Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Cova and Dall'i, 2009), where the creative, entrepreneurial, competitive, and cooperative capacities of consumers are channeled into production (Arvidsson, 2007; Zwick et al., 2008).

We propose that biopolitical marketing, here in the guise of customer communities, responds to two characteristics of communicative capitalism. First, capital no longer monopolises modes of production, innovation and value creation and therefore must learn to capture innovative and productive energies elsewhere. Second, from a perspective of communicative efficiency, online consumer practices are problematic because they are never self-contained and are often anarchic - they actively place themselves outside marketing logic.

The tension that arises from marketers' pursuit of new modes of commodification versus the multitude's productive value that depends on remaining untouched by the institutional logic of marketing becomes acutely visible with participatory media. Social media marketers like Solis and Weinberg warn that the productive anarchy of the crowd is a statement *against* institutions and discipline. These authors announce that exciting new online activities such as prosumption, peer collaboration, co-creation and crowd sourcing all tell marketers that 'consumers can have their consumption, they can have fun, they can even innovate and collaborate as producers and consumers but they do not need marketers to do any of this. There are no marketers *in the wild*' (cf. Halberstam, 2013).

Resolving this contradiction becomes the challenge and, in their search for innovative ways of commodifying the crowd without antagonism, marketers turn towards customer communities. It is clear, however, that this contradiction cannot be resolved in real terms because as soon as the crowd ceases to be outside marketing logic, i.e. *wild*, it's radically innovative and productive

value declines. This contradiction can only be resolved symbolically, through what Jameson (1981) calls a socially symbolic act; where the object of the symbolic act - the customer community - brings into being that very situation to which it is also, simultaneously, a reaction against; namely, a fantasy of marketing *in the wild*.

### **The Customer Community in Marketing**

Unlike disciplines like sociology and cultural studies that scrutinise analytically the concept of community and seek nuanced understandings, professional marketers use the concept of community loosely. Social media expert Larry Weber (2009), for example, refers to any aggregation of people online as community, including company-manufactured online focus groups, Facebook, and MySpace. Weinberg (2009) defines community through communication, suggesting that any online sociality that maintains communication is a community. Such analytical carelessness is common in marketing because marketers have usually no commercial interest in disambiguating concepts.

With regard to online consumer communities, the idea is not entirely new. As McWilliam (2000: 43) stated some time ago: “The popularity of communities on the Internet has captured the attention of marketing professionals. Indeed, the word ‘community’ seems poised to overtake “relationship” as that new marketing buzz-word.” Around the same time marketing scholars Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) introduced ‘brand community’ as a set of consumers who share material and affective bonds with a brand and its users. The notion of brand communities is complex. For example, as Stratton and Northcote (2015) note, brand communities form around a brand, thus reversing the typical formation of community whereby already existing communities select symbols for identification; a matter of ‘totems beget clans’ rather than the other way around.

In response to conceptual problems with the term ‘community’ marketing scholarship turned towards Maffesoli’s (1996) notion of the tribe as the quintessential social formation of modernity. Maffesoli’s theory of the tribe as a fleeting and ephemeral sociality temporarily assembled around a specific purpose or idea and dissolved as soon as a new and better purpose arrives, seemed to capture the reality of collective brand affiliations. Thus, consumer collectivities like brand communities became re-conceptualised as consumer tribes (see Cova, Kozinets and Shankar, 2007). Popular brand consultants like Kevin Roberts (2005), Tomi Ahonen and Alan Moore (2005) saw the connection between communities and brands as generally intact, however, lending support to Stratton and Northcote’s (2015) observation that conceptual distinctions between brand communities and general brand consumers, enthusiasts or tribes are difficult to determine.

Interestingly, marketing's proposition of brand communities as significant socio-cultural and economic formation (see e.g. Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001 and Schouten and McAlexander, 2002) coincided with Putnam's influential *Bowling Alone* (2001), which analysed the collapse of America's communal fabric. Indeed as Nancy (1991) had previously argued, communities had become 'inoperative' inasmuch as they were actively dissolved, dislocated and conflagrated. We detect in this concurrence a negative dialectic where the rise of commercially inspired communal formations, like brand communities, correspond with the decline of traditional and more meaningful socialities found in, for example, organisational membership and civic engagement (sports leagues, church groups, community associations, etc.).

It wasn't until the emergence of Web 2.0 around 2005 that online communities arrived at the forefront of marketing attention. Since then we witness a massive rise in blogs, popular consulting books, business conferences and workshops about the creation and management of virtual consumer communities. Authors like Li and Bernoff (*Groundswell*), Tamar Weinberg (*The New Community Rules*), Brian Solis (*Engage!* with a foreword by comedic actor and co-founder of the social media marketing consultancy *Katalyst* Ashton Kutcher) to name but a few, address large audiences interested in generating value from the communicative work of networked, communal consumers.

Importantly, however, marketers' enthusiastic embrace of online customer communities typically overstate their actual existence. For example, whilst social media marketing scholar Kozinets (2010: 2) reports "there are at least 100 million, and perhaps as many as a billion people around the world who participate in online communities as a regular, ongoing part of their social experience", Arvidsson (2013, p.371) notes that, sociologically speaking, user aggregations like the "now defunct Geocities web space with its 'more than three million members' are not to be understood as communities, at least not in anything that resembles the significance that that term has originally held in social theory (not to speak of Facebook or YouTube that are most definitely *not* communities)." The discrepancy hinges on the definition of online community. Marketing experts typically rely on a notion of community on a formal plane, while sociologists prefer a more substantial understanding of the social reality behind the term. Indeed perusal of so-called community websites like Facebook, Youtube and Twitter, but also specific brand community sites like Saab Central or the Starbucks online community, reveal that online customer communities are rarely characterised by dense webs of interpersonal interaction and durable attachments to a shared territory, identity and sociality (as per the classic reference by Tönnies, 1973). Especially where the community serves a commercial purpose, such as brand promotion, there is little evidence of substantial, sustained and what marketers would consider 'productive' community engagement. Indeed, it is easier to find examples of engagement that subverts the strategic purpose of the community. For example, the Facebook community page of Royal Holloway was used primarily by agencies

offering essay writing services causing the College's marketing professionals to limit community access.

### **Community as Ideology and Device**

Despite all the talk about brand communities, they remain difficult to locate as dense webs of interpersonal interaction and durable attachments to a shared territory or identity (as per Tönnies, 1973). This is particularly true for formations with a commercial agenda, whether user or company-managed. Dean (2010) argues that online communication conspires against meaningful community building because such communication typically occurs within massive anonymous audiences. Such engagement, while characteristic of contemporary social media platforms, are more accurately understood as *asocial* communication because they lack social attachments; e.g., comment sections, discussion forums, Facebook sites, etc.) often lack a strong bond to the speaking subject and a meaningful connection to the intended receiver. As Dean notes, typical forms of online participation are ephemeral and casual, like re-tweeting a status update or clicking 'like' on Facebook.

Such non-enduring communality reduces engagement to what Dean (2010) calls "pure participation" and resembles an energetic but short-lived flash mob, rather than a collective of engaged subjectivities. For Dean, this context of pure participation renders as irrelevant questions like who sent the message to whom, what was its content, or does it need to be responded to; all irrelevant because the primary point is not meaningful communication but circulation. Just as how the labourer disappears from the commodity during exchange, in communicative capitalism the sender becomes immaterial to the contribution and disappears in circulation value. Thus from Dean's perspective, the seductive power of communicative capitalism rests on its ability to create the appearance of intensified social relations, community and being-togetherness while also undermining the conditions of possibility for any such phenomenon.

Thus, even when inundated with reminders of the social nature of our online existence, the negative dialectics of communicative capitalism turn connecting into networking and community needs into consumer desires. Community is reconfigured as market when, as Arvidsson (2013) shows, social media actively structures social communication – especially when it pertains to brands and products – as fleeting consumer engagement: "posting once or twice on a blog, looking up an online forum on motherhood to ask a question about a product and then never coming back again, and so on" (p. 373).

If uncommitted 'hit and run' communication is what social networks promote, then the possibility of collective meaning creation and understanding becomes foreclosed. At stake, according to Žižek (1996, 1997) is a decline of 'symbolic efficiency' as our ability to 'transmit

significance' diminishes. In cyberspace, Žižek argues, the huge volume of transmissions brings us to a state of 'informational anorexia'; where we ingest but reject endless flows of information. Virtual communication, therefore, might be plentiful and enthusiastic but, as Žižek's notion of symbolic efficiency suggests, the internet does not provide a basis for collectively shared co-produced meaning. Moreover, as Dean (2010) argues, cyberspace communication reconfigures relationships between communication and the communicating subject, given the typically inconsequential nature of online utterances as well as the ease with which the subject can disavow them: '[S]ince exit is an option with nearly no costs, subjects lose the incentive for their word to be their bond' (p. 7). We should, therefore, not be surprised to find that cyberspace is a collective space only in the most formal sense.

Clearly, then, online communities – when considered sociologically – are elusive, especially brand or product-related communities, which apparently exist more in the minds of marketers than in empirical reality. Indeed, we argue that the virtual nature of communication (speed, volume, lack of bond and accountability, etc.) make communities unlikely to persist or form in the first place, and decreasingly relevant for marketing. So what, then, are we to make of the enthusiasm among marketers for the notion of the customer community in the face of mounting theoretical and empirical evidence that such communities are less real than they are made out to be? With Žižek (1989), the answer might lie in the elementary distinction in Lacanian psychoanalysis between the Real and reality. For Lacan, reality cannot exist without fantasy. This position is not the naïve subjectivist (postmodernist) stance that rejects the possibility of objective reality. For Lacan there is a real but the way the subject acts in everyday life is not by approaching things the way they really are, but always within the frame of constituted reality, and within coordinates that are ideologically mediated (see also Althusser 2008). But marketers do not haplessly succumb to their illusions and when we bring Lacan's psychoanalytic understanding of The Real into dialogue with the ontological constructivism of science and technology studies, we recognise that online customer communities cannot be reduced to simple symbolic distortions. Rather, the customer community comes into existence because it inscribes itself into marketing practice as a field of knowledge (cf. Knorr-Cetina, 1999; MacKenzie, 2009). Borrowing from Latour and Woolgar's (1979: 51) notion of the inscription device, we can say that even if online customer communities refer to a material object beyond pure ideology, science and technology studies alert us to the fact that, precisely as a material object, this community is a social construction that *also* functions ideologically (see also Callon, Millo, and Muniesa, 2007). It therefore does not matter whether customer communities are real; what matters is how the ideologically and socially constructed figure of the customer community comes to function as material reality in marketing practice.

Of greater importance for this paper is the question how marketers construct this figure to resolve contradictions within communicative capitalism. On the basis of this analysis of the

online customer community as both ideological figure *and* an inscribed material substance, our argument cannot simply be that such communities do not exist. Rather we explore the complicated question of how the figure of the online customer community operates in contemporary marketing practice as a suturing device, in the Althusserian sense, stitching together inconsistencies of marketing ideology. In short, we ask how the community is employed as a strategy of biopolitical marketing.

The idea of the ideological figure as a suturing device reproduces Jameson's notion of the symbolic act as a creative act of a marketer who undertakes to symbolically resolve a contradiction that cannot otherwise be resolved. In other words, the symbolic act produces a fantasy in which two things that do not belong together co-exist; marketing and the 'wild'. In this sense, the customer community is a marketing fairy tale, – the princess and the pauper, the beauty and the beast – grafted onto a situation for which, in reality, there is no happy ending (Fry, 2012). Thus, in a situation where a realistic approach to the world would leave marketers feeling confined and deflated about her options, the customer community acts as a romance perspective: the community as a symbolic act that magically resolves a contradiction that cannot be resolved by any other means.

Importantly, Žižek (1989) argues that this romance perspective that constitutes 'reality' cannot simply be destroyed by pointing to some pre-ideological facts of everyday experience because it is precisely the role of the symbolic act, as ideological construct, to absorb and annihilate the opposition between everyday experience (there really is no true customer community online) and 'reality' (online customer communities are a fantastic marketing tool). In short, the ideology of the customer community succeeds when it presents itself to the social media marketer as empirical fact. So, how would a marketer react to this gap between what she wants online customer communities to be (creative, productive, sharing, autonomous, and self-directed) and what the everyday experience of trying to make customer communities work actually is (failing to find members, failing to 'engage', having to invest heavily in forum moderation, etc.)? The answer provided by Solis, Li, Weinberg, and Kutcher is to turn this discrepancy into an argument *for* online customer communities: "the reason these communities are so valuable and 'powerful' for marketers is precisely because they are so difficult to build, nurture and channel." How else should we interpret passages in books like *Groundswell*, *The New Community Rules*, and *Engage!* that both exalt the (near) impossibility of creating brand communities from the Web's creative anarchy and social disorder and also exhort marketers to do exactly that (create brand communities). More succinctly; the symbolic act succeeds when a convincing formula to build online communities is forged out of facts that contradict the viability of such communities: "the less possible it is to accomplish, the more valuable the community will be to the marketer".<sup>ii</sup>

So how does this symbolic act function in biopolitical marketing where contradictions abound: there is the company's profit motive as against the customer's desire for gifting and sharing, there is the anarchy of the multitude and the marketer's desire for control, there is consumers' creative, non-commercial production and marketers' desire to capture its commercial value, etc.. These contradictions, impossible to resolve on a realistic plane, can be resolved by a symbolic act: 'You make a community. You bring together consumers and marketers and they work together in harmony to innovate, improve brand value, and simply have a great time hanging out with other consumers and the marketer' (cf. Weinberg, 2009).

To be sure, the point is not that customer communities cannot exist. *Some* customer communities *do* exist. Some brands *can* make them work. Rather, and this is an important point of ideology critique, even *if* a customer community were to happen in reality, it would not resolve marketing's underlying contradictions. That is to say, even with a reasonably functioning brand community, marketers would not achieve the scripted perfection in which everything is perfect, where consumers fall in love with the brand, align with the promotional message and make sales and market valuations soar.

### **Biopolitical Marketing and the Ideological Function of Consumer Online Communities**

Yet, the online community has become one of the most coveted and promoted instrument of what, in the business, is known as customer engagement. For prominent social media marketer Tamar Weinberg (2009), the community represents a key strategy in marketers' struggle to communicate successfully with consumers. Brian Solis (2010: xii) expands the impact of the community, almost equating building a community with building the actual business: "[S]ocial marketing revitalises and empowers every facet of our workflow and its supporting ecosystem. Seeing the bigger picture and tying our knowledge to the valuable feedback from our communities will help us guide businesses towards visibility, profitability, relevance and ultimately customer loyalty. "With so much at stake and only scant evidence for communities' influence on business success, we ask: why is the notion of online communities so attractive to marketing managers?

We offer an analytical approach based on the decision to depart from considering the online community as concrete marketing device and instead pursue the idea of online customer communities in practice and thought. In particular, we suggest that communities are essential to marketing practice because they fulfill an important ideological function in communicative capitalism: they symbolically resolve contradictions that arise from marketing's commodification of forms of life that wish to remain outside capitalist commodity relations. Hence, in the age of participatory media, the role of biopolitical marketing is to ensure that commodifying all communication can proceed without antagonising the communicators. Based on close readings of popular consulting literature in social media marketing, we now explore

three key contradictions of contemporary marketing – posed in new ways by communicative capitalism – and analyse how marketers mobilise the ideology of the community to resolve these contradictions.

### **Contradiction 1: The Community Reconfigures Marketing as Un-Marketing**

The marketer has long been held in suspicion and is often considered to be a professional manipulator. Notably, Packard's big selling *Hidden Persuaders* (1957) exposed concealed and salacious techniques in which consumer desire and anxiety were being actively determined: "[T]hese depth manipulators are", Packard wrote, "in their operations beneath the surface of conscious life, starting to acquire a power of persuasion that is becoming a matter of justifiable public scrutiny and concern" (p. 9-10). Correspondingly, we can chart a history of marketing as accompanied by an atmosphere of distrust. More recent popular indictments of marketing include Adam Curtis's documentaries on *The Century of the Self*, Naomi Klein's *No Logo* (2000) and the BBC series *The Men Who Makes Us Spend* (presented by Jacques Peretti). The late comedian Bill Hicks sums up the antipathy: "If anybody here is in advertising or marketing, kill yourself."

Criticism of marketers is compounded by wide-spread consumer cynicism regarding the genuineness of marketing messages (see Gabriel and Lang, 1995). Against this mistrust and rejection, marketers feel the need to develop a form of marketing that disposes of the perception of marketing as a set of objectionable practices conducted by dubious agents of persuasion. The emerging generation of online marketers – typically referred to as social media marketers – sees marketing's crisis of legitimacy directly tied to what it considers the nefarious long-standing marketing methods designed to discipline and control consumers. For these young and tech-savvy marketers, a dramatic shift has to occur in the age of participatory media. In a radical turn propagated by prominent social media marketing experts like Solis (2010) and Stratten (2010), marketing has to be 'un'-done. The term 'un-marketing' rises to prominence in the consulting literature and offers a reframing of marketing that rejects corporate-controlled top-down techniques and favours horizontal, collaborative, and participatory customer engagement (Kutcher, 2010, Stratten, 2010, 2014). In this context, the idea of customer communities gains popularity because it holds the promise of restructuring marketplace relations according to principles of co-creation, sovereignty, equality, and sharing.

However, even as social media 'un-marketers' modernise the disciplinary model of marketing with values of communitarian self-governance and collaboration, new contradictions emerge characteristic of communicative capitalism. Specifically, even a community of autonomous and 'wild' participants must be commercially exploited – this *is*, after all, still marketing's *raison d'être*. Social media consultants understand this practical challenge of commodifying social relations that do not want to be commodified. Such a task requires the 'correct marketing

mindset' that enables marketers to show empathy and respect toward the opinions, creations, and cultural idiosyncrasies of the community while still pursuing profit. Internet marketing consultant Tamar Weinberg (2009: 52-53) articulates this tension in unmistakable terms:

Later, your 'ulterior motive' can be communicated (just as long as you continue giving back to the community and its members look up to you as a respected contributor), but it's more important to establish yourself as a reputable member who wants to give back to the community first. Once you do, you can begin to take, as long as the community is receptive and wants to know more about you as a community participant, but you should always keep giving.

Beyond the whiff of a predatory strategy, there is something revealing about the frantic back and forth between the double exhortation to keep giving and making sure to 'take'. Weinberg understands that marketing must take, but that it must do so without appearing to take (by also giving back). In other words, marketers must adopt what we call a 'commun-ist sensibility' if they are to extract communicative surplus value from the community. As Kutcher (in Solis, 2010: ix) puts it: "Marketers, don't control us, support us; don't talk to us, listen!", or more directly -market without 'doing' marketing.

Exuberance pervades popular marketing writings that hail social media as a revolutionary moment that ushers the marriage of marketing objectives and political and cultural activism. Kevin Kelly (2009), former editor of *Wired*, and longtime promoter of the 'natural' alliance of internet culture and marketing, proclaims that communitarian projects such as Wikipedia, Flickr, and Twitter "aren't just revolutions in online social media... They're the vanguard of a cultural movement". Perhaps most representative of the un-marketer's commun-ist sensibility is Kutcher's hyperbole (in Solis, 2010: ix): "The roles are reversing and individuals and brands have the ability to reach and rouse powerful and dedicated communities without ever having to pay for advertising. I'm just part of a bigger movement of empowering the people who care enough the change the world. Social media is socialising causes and purpose and inciting nothing short of a revolution." The marketer's role, for Kutcher, is to surf the creative energy of those who "believe in themselves and their ability to push things forward."

At the heart of this utopian conception of communal marketing is an ideal of un-marketing; a dream of marketing without the active hand of the marketer. Biopolitical marketing rejects the persuasive thrust of traditional marketing management, preferring social production and collective value creation. Biopolitical marketing, therefore, aims to negate its status as *the other* of the consumer. The consumer is no longer treated as a target for, but a resource of, marketing and it is the ideological function of the customer community to make marketing out of, and through, the other.

## **Contradiction 2: The Community Controls Consumers by Empowering Consumers**

A neo-libertarian impulse defines the enthusiasm of Kutcher, Solis and others (see e.g. Rubel in Miller, 2008; Downes and Mui, 2000). Consumer community marketing is imagined as the logical extension of the cyber-utopian project in which horizontality, anti-authority, and bottom-up power facilitate entrepreneurialism, value creation, and innovation. We encounter a discourse of empowerment, sharing and networked collaboration that champions technological capitalism and individual self-reliance as the basis for a collective ethic. Representative of the neo-libertarian narrative that harmoniously fosters individual freedom, digital collectivism, and decentralised self-organisation is Kevin Kelly's (2009) enthusiastic announcement of the arrival of a "global collectivist society" which, he argued, amounts to a "New Socialism." This is socialism is "not class warfare. It is not anti-American; indeed digital socialism may be the newest American innovation." The revolutionary socialism envisioned by Kelly rejects state control and emerges from the successful commercialisation of self-organising, collectivised entrepreneurialism and experimentation.

From a perspective that sees marketing's undesirability as stemming from bureaucratic top-down control, the appeal of Kelly's digital capitalist socialism is obvious. Marketing is now recast as providing conditions for self-determined collaboration, personal autonomy, and unrestricted sharing. Within the communal ethos of digital socialism, marketing transforms into the enactment of consensual partnership with consumers who are no longer controlled but *invited* by the corporation as equals in the joint-task of co-creation. Hence, practices that control consumers, or absorb them into centralised, technocratic, and rationalised structures appear crude, abusive, and anachronistic. Instead, under conditions of communicative capitalism, social media marketing experts recognise that marketing must commit to deterritorialising itself and symbolically freeing consumers from its will to control them. This is not the same as actually freeing consumers of marketing control. Rather, the idea of the community functions as a way of ensuring control over consumers through a regime of government that affords consumers a sense of autonomy.

The idea of the community in the wild, outside conventional methods of control and socialisation yet somehow governed, is an oddity. Kutcher's advice for marketers to 'be there' but not *run the show* presents itself as the practical principle of this marketing contradiction. The tension that results from community marketing's 'in-between' status comes all the more focused when we remember that the invocation of community often arises as an antidote to the alienation generated by marketing. In this regard governing the wild becomes a technical problem and so, what began as a language of resistance and critique of traditional marketing, turns into an expert discourse and profession. Accordingly, we witness how community is programmed by chief community officers, developed by community development officers, policed by community monitors, and rendered knowable by so-called netnographers pursuing

'consumer community studies'. Even as consumer communities are touted as essentially unmanageable (see Gabriel and Lang, 1995), biopolitical marketing experts render them as zones to be investigated, mapped, classified, documented, interpreted, their vectors explained, to enlightened marketing managers-to-be (Miller and Rose, 2008).

It is this very subtlety and extraordinary sensitivity of practice that tends towards what Foucault (1991) termed government. As distinct from top-down methods of disciplinary power, like rules and threats of discipline, government emanates from the bottom up and “acts through practices that ‘make up subjects’ as free persons” (Rose 1999: 95). In marketing terms, we see such governance through “the provision of particular ambiances that frame and partially anticipates the agency of consumers” (Arvidsson, 2006: 74). Biopolitical marketing, therefore, may be understood as the corporate quest to exercise control over consumers and markets by providing dynamic platforms for consumer practice (cf. Lury, 2004), which activate the creativity of consumers yet re-orientate these activities in accordance with the profit motive. Centrally important for biopolitical marketing is that consumers are allowed, and actively encouraged, to run wild; to break rules and disobey explicit disciplinary norms. To control consumer wildness means stifling conditions of possibility for truly innovative consumer creativity and ideation. Therefore, the delicate technical challenge is one of withdrawing marketing control whilst designing the conditions of possibility in such a way that wild and creative consumer behavior will function productively and in a format ready for surplus value extraction.

### **Contradiction 3: The Community Creates Marketing Value while Marketing does not**

Marketing is a social technology and a mode of valorisation to ensure that consumers perceive market offers as valuable. The technical challenge of extracting surplus value from the affective, physical, cognitive, and social labor of communities is, perhaps, the greatest test of biopolitical marketing because such value production is not the express purpose of these communities (and would go against the general ethos of many). Encouraging communities to labour with and for the capitalist organisation, is now called value co-creation and is increasingly considered to be at the centre of a firm’s value creation (Ritzer, 2009; Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010). While the co-creation of value is not specific to 21<sup>st</sup> century communicative capitalism (see Ritzer, 2009), recent business discourses draw on Web 2.0 to reconfigure production as increasingly dependent upon the active participation of formerly passive(ied) consumers (see e.g. Donaton, 2006; Lagace, 2004).

Influential management scholars Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2000, 2002, 2004a, 2004b) fundamentally challenge traditional conceptions of marketing by claiming that the locus of economic value creation is moving from research and development towards interactions consumers. Accordingly, value production becomes an outcome of marketers and consumers

collaborating in the manufacturing of products, services and, increasingly, communication. Prahalad and Ramaswamy's essays had significant influence on marketing and gave birth to the study of value co-creation. As anthropologist Robert Foster (2007: 715) notes, "this engagement has been identified as a trend, dubbed 'Customer-Made' and is defined as 'the phenomenon of corporations creating goods, services and experiences in close cooperation with experienced and creative consumers, tapping into their intellectual capital, and in exchange giving them a direct say (and rewarding them for) what actually gets produced, manufactured, developed, designed, serviced, or processed.'"

The reported rise of co-creation has led commentators to wonder whether we are amidst a paradigm shift. The heralded paradigm may be thought as a 'co-creative capitalism' in which the commercial challenge is to enable consumers to run wild and create economic value (Arvidsson, 2006; Lusch and Vargo, 2006). In this context, as previously mentioned, the polar opposition of the terms 'consumer' and 'producer' disintegrates, and so we observe a host of alternative terms: prosumer, produser, protagonist, post-consumer, consum-actor, etc. – to designate the conundrum of productive consumption (Ritzer, 2015). Underpinning such insights is a belief (perhaps best exemplified in business scholarship by Prahalad and Ramaswamy [2000], Thomke and von Hippel [2002], von Hippel [2005]) that consumers ought to be regarded as a stock of unimaginable creative and innovative talent that awaits development and exploitation by smart managers.

Such a notion of consumers as a wild and creative, self-determined productive reservoir of radically innovative and affective energy echoes Hardt and Negri's (2000) concept of the multitude. This is no accident because, in the age of communicative capitalism, the multitude can be simultaneously conceptualised as in resistance to, and in the furtherance of, capital. With biopolitical marketing's translation of the multitude into co-creation, capital attempts to ensure that consumers' potentially anarcho-affective energies enter the strategic imperative of ongoing value creation (Zwick et al., 2008). Yet, mobilising the multitude for value production is not simple and success depends on how marketers manage consumers in the wild. In the case of Miramax's Star Trek franchise, for example, the production of bootleg episodes by fans helped generate affective value for the brand exactly when Miramax struggled to produce compelling new content (Kozinets, 2007). The decision by Miramax not to fight these copyright infringements but instead allow bootleg programming actually bolstered, according to Kozinets (2007), the Star Trek brand. For marketing scholars Cova, Kozinets and Shankar (2007), Miramax's willingness reveals what happens when "corporate pull yields to citizen push: the vaunted and vaulted media property opens like a budding flower, becoming wikimedia. The tribe becomes like a hive of active bees, collecting, organising, creating, reproducing, distributing, making networks, closing deals, being entrepreneurial" (Cova, Kozinets and Shankar, 2007: 15).

The role of biopolitical marketers, then, is to find ways to valorise communities and align their productive potentialities with the profit motive. Marketers' challenge, then, is on the one hand to understand that they are no longer controlling the production of value and on the other learn to appropriate the value produced from the cultural, technological, social, and affective labor of consumers.

### **Conclusion**

For a new generation of marketing professionals the idea of the online customer community represents a compelling proposition - a social technology charged with the transformation of how marketing govern consumers. In our analysis, the online community functions as an ideological figure for 'new marketers' (Moor, 2003) hoping to resolve key contradictions of marketing specific to the age of communicative capitalism: marketing as 'un-marketing', controlling the market by not controlling the market, and marketing as creating value by not creating value. Though substantial communities are rare, especially commercial ones, the field of professional marketing management developed a whole new category of practitioners - social media marketers - for transforming marketing from a social technology of domination, persuasion, and control into a social 'platform' of collaboration, engagement, and empowerment. For its proponents, customer communities hold the promise of a different rapport between marketers and consumers; but more importantly, the community is touted as where consumers' wild imagination, anarchic energy and self-determined creativity will achieve new forms of innovation.

The reality of communities in marketing, as the case studies in the books of Solis, Weinberger, Stratten and others confirm, is more sobering. Conversations among consumers are more likely to be purpose-driven and pragmatic (e.g., getting advice on how to fix a software problem or how to get a discount for a specific product), customer participation is often transitory, and relationships between community members are weak. Many so-called communities are best described as narcissist islands where comments are posted with little evidence to suggest that anybody is reading, or responding to, previous messages. Dean (2010) refers to this communication as pure participation, devoid of social substance and communicative purpose.

Yet, virtual customer communities represent a fantasy for marketers in the context of communicative capitalism, not least because of a veritable avalanche of practitioner-oriented consulting texts proclaiming the strategic importance and benefits. Our analysis reveals that communities represents a way for contemporary marketing to resolve symbolically fundamental contradictions of marketing that are becoming more acute and visible in the age of participatory media. Attempting to make a broader claim about the transformation of

marketing in communicative capitalism, we suggest that communities plays an ideological role in the transition to, and legitimisation of, a new form of marketing that we call biopolitical marketing. Biopolitical marketing refers to strategies aimed at extracting surplus value from consumer activities, affects and feelings produced in the autonomous and wild, collective and self-governed spaces of the virtual. Biopolitical marketing, best exemplified in social media marketing, must persuade and control consumers, push messages and products, and create economic surplus without appearing to do any of these things. Correspondingly, we refer to online customer communities as ideological figures because the question is not whether these communities actually exist, or even whether they can produce the benefits that marketers seek; rather the question is how customer communities become invested with marketers' desires and how marketers constructs this figure to escape contradictions.

Ultimately, we argue that consumer communities represent a, as Jameson (1981) put it, a romance aesthetic, in which contradictory states co-exist. It is a fantasy of biopolitical marketing where customer communities offer magical ways of managing without managing, producing without producing, and governing without governing a consumer population that must be wild and anarchic to be valuable and productive. For 'radical' social media marketers like Stratten, Kutcher and Solis, a vision of marketer-consumer 'commun-ism' prevails that escapes conventional corporate, top-down bureaucratic marketing management. The claim of biopolitical marketing is that through promoting online customer communities, marketing escapes its foundational antagonisms that counterpoise marketers with consumers. But even as biopolitical marketers conjure the community as the vehicle to resolve contradictions of communicative capitalism, the primary purpose of marketing persists. Even in the age of participatory media, marketers must market to consumers, control demand, and generate value. Thus, for all its symbolic acts, biopolitical marketing never changes its objectives, nor resolves its contradictions. Yet, to continue as a technology of persuasion, behaviour modification, and exploitation, marketing must re-create its symbolic structure and find new ways of doing so in the age of participatory media and communicative capitalism.

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- <sup>i</sup> For detailed accounts of how marketers accomplish this process of conversion from cultural production to economic value for the firm see, e.g., Arvidsson (2007), Frank (1999), and Holt (2004).
- <sup>ii</sup> For a version of this ideological move by a leading marketing academic see Fournier (2009).