

2023

## From Spiritual Communication to Digital Communication: Rethinking Marx's Communication Theory in the Information Age

Zhao Di

*Communication University of China, zhaodi2000@cuc.edu.cn*

Yang Qian

*Communication University of China*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://css.researchcommons.org/journal>

---

### Recommended Citation

Di, Zhao and Qian, Yang (2023) "From Spiritual Communication to Digital Communication: Rethinking Marx's Communication Theory in the Information Age," *Contemporary Social Sciences*: No. 4, Article 3.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.19873/j.cnki.2096-0212.2023.04.003>

Available at: <https://css.researchcommons.org/journal/vol2023/iss4/3>

This Research Article is brought to you for free and open access by Contemporary Social Sciences. It has been accepted for inclusion in Contemporary Social Sciences by an authorized editor of Contemporary Social Sciences.



# *From Spiritual Communication to Digital Communication: Rethinking Marx's Communication Theory in the Information Age*

Zhao Di and Yang Qian\*

Communication University of China

**Abstract:** Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels introduced the theory of spiritual communication in their influential work, *The German Ideology*, thereby establishing the Marxist perspective on communication. This theory has a distinct historical context, meaning, and significance. As society advances, driven by the proliferation of commodity-based economies and advancements in science and technology, humanity has entered the digital information age. The prevailing mode of communication in this era, centered around the Internet and big data, brings great convenience to society but also raises concerns about the potential alienation of both subjective and objective aspects of communication, as well as social relationships. Against this backdrop, the rethinking of Marx's communication theory in the 21st century provides a logical framework and theoretical basis for critiquing the contemporary form of spiritual communication through the digital communication of the information age.

**Keywords:** spiritual communication, digital communication, alienation

**DOI:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.19873/j.cnki.2096-0212.2023.04.003>

---

\* Zhao Di, School of Marxism, Communication University of China;  
Yang Qian, School of Marxism, Communication University of China.

This paper is a phased research result of "Academic Project Fund of Beijing Key Marxist College of Communication University of China" (012010040201) and "Political Science Thesis Workshop for Graduate Students of Communication University of China" (JG229071).

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Zhao Di, School of Marxism, Communication University of China, Beijing, 100024, China. Email: zhaodi2000@cuc.edu.cn

**W**ith the advancement of science and technology, humanity has entered the era of information, where “everything can be a medium.” Information has assumed an unprecedented significance and role for human beings, leading to a transformative impact on our way of life and communication. Even as early as the mid-19th century, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels undertook a systematic investigation into the phenomena and activities of human communication in their work *The German Ideology*. This investigation specifically focused on the origin, means, and developmental processes of human spiritual communication while also conducting a comprehensive study on the consciousness of both individuals and collectives. By approaching communication from the standpoint of historical materialism, they laid the foundation for analyzing the digital communication modalities that would emerge in the information age, prefiguring modern communication theory.

### **Spiritual Communication: A Marxist Theory in *The German Ideology***

During the Industrial Revolution, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (2012, p. 405) lauded telegrams, ships, and railways as significant contributions to productivity brought about by the bourgeoisie. They placed a great deal of importance on investigating technology and showed deep concern for the transformative changes in communication technology. In their subsequent works, they repeatedly praised the application of the telegraph, recognizing and valuing the advancements in communication technology at both the social and historical levels. They also utilized it to examine human communication activities. In *The German Ideology*, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels thoroughly examined and discussed the practical characteristics of material technology and its dialectical relationship with social development.

In the 19th century, human society transcended a state of mutual isolation and came to realize the interconnections between countries. The observations of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels highlighted the emergence of global communication in light of the changes in the communication field. Building upon this historical backdrop, they analyzed and predicted the developmental trajectory of world history, leading to the formulation of historical materialism. In *The German Ideology*, their exploration of human communication activities was also rooted in the perspective of historical materialism. They unveiled the role of communication in social development and human liberation, shedding light on the direction and trends of communication as essential human activities.

According to statistics, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels founded, edited, and contributed to 12 newspapers and periodicals throughout their lifetimes. They also wrote articles for over 200 newspapers and periodicals and referenced, quoted, and evaluated more than 1500 newspapers in their works and manuscripts (Li, 2018, p.197). Their efforts extended to major media outlets in Europe and the United States at the time. The press served as a crucial ideological weapon and political front in the revolutionary careers of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels.

Their ideological works were consistently accompanied by news, periodicals, and propaganda campaigns. Through extensive engagement in news dissemination, the Marxist view on journalism and the Marxist communication theory gradually took shape and found expression in *The German Ideology*.

To grasp the meaning of “spiritual communication,” it is essential to first understand the concept of “communication.” In the English translation of *The German Ideology*, Karl Marx frequently referred to “interaction,” while the German term “Verkehr” denotes “association.” Karl Marx added a note to clarify the term, specifying “Verkehr” as “intercourse, communication, and contact.” This demonstrates that “communication” carries multiple implications. “Intercourse” highlights communication between genders, and later, in the context of the “form of communication,” it emphasizes communication related to material production. “Commerce” underscores communication linked to commercial trade, such as “maritime commerce,” referring to trade via sea routes. “Communication” places emphasis on communication methods and modes of transportation.

It is evident that, in a broad sense, the term “communication” holds varying contexts and receives attention in the works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Although they do not offer a precise definition of “spiritual communication,” they consistently focus on this aspect. Through the analysis of a series of texts, it can be inferred that the connotation of “spiritual communication” pertains to the interactive activities through which individuals exchange information and ideas in the realm of concept and culture. This exchange occurs with the aid of language and writing, serving to meet the spiritual needs of subjects in terms of concepts, emotions, consciousness, and other aspects (Wei, 2020, p. 28).

In *The German Ideology*, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels approached communication from a macro perspective, encompassing overall social development. They addressed fundamental questions about the formation and evolution of communication phenomena while also analyzing and explaining the pivotal role of communication activities in the historical progress of human society. These discussions laid a theoretical foundation for a view of communication based on historical materialism. The dissemination of information stems from the necessity of material production. Karl Marx (2009, p. 524) once stated, “The first historical activity is the production of materials to meet these needs, that is, the production of material life itself.” Thus, it can be understood that the seamless advancement of all human production practices is inseparable from the interaction between material and spiritual aspects.

During the primitive period, humans had to engage in the production of essential resources to ensure basic survival. However, due to the limited productivity and the mysterious nature of their surroundings, effective labor for survival had to be carried out through collective organization. Within collective labor, individuals exchanged and passed on production tools, fostering communication of thoughts and consciousness through simple symbols, sounds, or body language. These communication methods, rooted in the

practicalities of material production, gave rise to initial forms of spiritual communication. The separation of spiritual and material production resulted in the independent development of communication activities. Human capacity and thinking were constrained by the level of productivity and the natural conditions of the human body. Essentially, their consciousness was characterized by animal-like intuitive reflections and simplistic perceptions of the unknown aspects of nature. As the need for collective labor to sustain survival arose, conscious thinking activities emerged among people. Although these early manifestations were rudimentary, they still influenced material labor to some extent. Material production gradually transitioned from simple labor to a more complex form that necessitated enhanced communication. The necessity of communication among people fostered the emergence of conscious spiritual production and provided the conditions for the development of human spiritual communication. As Marx and Engels (2009, p.524) stated, The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life. Conceiving, thinking, the mental intercourse of men, appear at this stage as the direct efflux of their material behaviour. During this period, spiritual production and material production intertwined and mutually complemented each other. Material activities played a crucial role in fostering and advancing spiritual communication.

Over time, human productivity has gradually increased, leading to the continuous development and refinement of the social division of labor. This progress has also brought about the emergence of private ownership and social classes, causing a separation between material production and spiritual production. People engaged in a form of spiritual activity described as it really represents something without representing something real (Marx & Engels, 2009, p. 659). This activity, no longer directly tied to material processes, broke away from its interdependent relationship and acquired an independent form and content. The state of mental production has a significant impact on the content, form, and dynamics of communication. Firstly, the outcomes generated by human intellect constitute the essence of spiritual communication. However, individuals' positions within the realm of spiritual production may impede the richness of their ideas. Additionally, the mode of possession concerning certain social materials of spiritual production can also serve as a restrictive factor in their dissemination. Karl Marx (2009, p.11) noted that the ruling class not only wielded control over the material means of production but also had authority over spiritual resources. Consequently, there existed regulations and limitations relating to social spiritual production and communication. On the other hand, "Men are the producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc. – real, active men, as they are conditioned by a definite development of their productive forces and of the intercourse corresponding to these, up to its furthest forms." Regarding the subject of communication, one's class, social environment, and personal state determine the content and behavior exhibited in individual communication.

In any historical period, interpersonal communication primarily takes the form of spiritual communication, catering to individuals' spiritual needs. The exchange of information in communication activities relies on individuals consciously expressing their views with purpose. As Chen (2008, p. 41) elucidates, "In communication, individuals not only observe and learn new things but also seek reassurance and guidance from their social connections. Additionally, they strive to establish their identity and understanding of relationships with others." During spiritual communication, participants engage in a shared topic. This topic allows them not only to acquire fresh information and ideas but also to discover a sense of identity and belonging within the communication process. As the content and scope of spiritual communication continue to expand, the communicative subjects transcend individual boundaries and gradually form a collective. This transformation has a continuous impact on the practice of social material production, with spiritual communication assuming an increasingly crucial role.

*The German Ideology* has provided a scientific framework of historical materialism for the study of communication. It offers rational insights into the emergence, development, and impact of human communication activities. The thought encompasses a comprehensive and macroscopic perspective to summarize the laws of communication and predict its future trajectory. These contributions can be primarily seen in two aspects. First, it emphasizes the examination of communication within the practice and development of human society. The discussions encompass both material and spiritual dimensions of communication. In other words, any material activity inherently involves the transmission of information, while the production and dissemination of information are influenced by material conditions and relationships. Moreover, these ideas are grounded in the notion of historical materialism, which suggests that specific spiritual production and communication activities must adapt to corresponding material relationships (Marx & Engels, 1958, p. 144). Second, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels highlighted the influence and significance of spiritual communication within the broader context of human development. They explored the concepts of communication, productivity, mode of production, social history, and social forms. Their focus extended beyond the material basis of spiritual exchanges and placed greater emphasis on spiritual communication as a form of social power. They viewed communication as a means for social progress and human liberation. By delving into the relationship between communication and society, *The German Ideology* contributes to a deeper understanding of the historical materialist perspective on communication and its broader implications for human development.

### **The Alienation of Spiritual Communication in the Information Age**

In the present information age, the evolution of large-scale information platforms is occurring at a rapid pace. Communication carriers and terminals undergo constant updates, while new media technologies and environments enhance people's capacity for engaging

in spiritual communication activities. Individuals have emerged as active participants in communication, sharing, and self-expression. There is a growing inclination to articulate thoughts and disseminate information. Social platforms have transformed into expansive arenas of public opinion, enabling individuals to actively engage in communication and express their ideas and viewpoints. Consequently, the outcomes of spiritual communication have become more comprehensive, timely, and effective compared to any previous point in history.

The advent of the information age has considerably elevated the convenience of spiritual communication through the diversification of its forms. This diversification has continuously enriched the content of spiritual communication. Electronic media, such as mobile phones and the internet, have significantly expanded the domain of spiritual communication. These platforms make information transmission and interpersonal communication more efficient, providing material and technical support for spiritual communication between individuals. However, the rapid development of media has also introduced negative consequences and has led to a sense of detachment in interpersonal spiritual communication. This detachment is primarily manifested in the estrangement of the communication subject, communication object, and the overall communication relationship.

### **Communication Subject**

With the advent of science and technology, there is a deepening sense of alienation concerning a “human” as the subject of spiritual communication. As human beings have transitioned into the industrial civilization and the information age, the rapid advancements in science and technology have undoubtedly brought convenience to both the material and spiritual aspects of human existence. However, these advancements have also resulted in the creation of tools and technical rationality that simultaneously bind and suppress individuals. Consequently, people have become increasingly reliant on technology to the point where they gradually transform into mere “container people.”

Although science and technology were initially created by humans, they have also become shackles that dominate and control humanity. People have developed a reverential admiration for technology akin to the veneration one would show towards a deity. As Habermas (1990, p. 49) aptly stated, “The nature of science used to grasp and control reappears in the technical equipment that is both produced and destroyed. This type of technical equipment not only maintains and improves human life but also subjugates individuals to their master—the technical equipment itself.” In this digital era, one’s thoughts, emotions, and personalities are transformed into countless digital symbols and codes, causing their distinctiveness to gradually dissipate in the vast digital ocean.

While humans should theoretically possess mastery over the scientific and technological equipment they have created, they find themselves virtually enslaved by this very equipment. Science and technology have undeniably enhanced human autonomy, but such development

does not necessarily equate to an enhancement of subjectivity; in fact, it tends to erode subjectivity (Zhou & Zhong, 2021, p. 72). Digital virtual spaces, though derived from reality, fail to fully mirror its intricacies. People now express their lives and acquire knowledge of the world through the internet, with digital survival and communication becoming the normative state of human existence. Consequently, real-life experiences and the digital sphere have become two opposing yet interconnected realms.

In order to reclaim a sense of subjectivity and authentic human interaction, it is imperative for individuals to critically examine their relationship with technology and strike a balance between digital engagement and genuine, embodied experiences. By acknowledging the limitations and potential pitfalls of excessive reliance on digital spaces, humans can strive to reconnect with their unique identities and rediscover the richness of authentic interpersonal connections in the physical world.

### **Communication Object**

A human is a perceptive being. The theories of Karl Marx and Charles Horton Cooley in “Man in the Mirror” share a common understanding of human nature. They argue that humans are not inherently self-aware but rather rely on others to observe and evaluate themselves (Guo, 2004, pp. 162–163). In the information age, the development of the internet has overcome the limitations of time and space, bringing people closer in spiritual communication. Additionally, it serves as a “mirror” that reflects the lives of numerous entities involved in communication, whether real or illusory. This phenomenon significantly influences the value judgments made by individuals engaging in communication.

In the digital realm, the scope of people’s spiritual communication expands boundlessly. Faced with numerous entities for communication, two forms of alienation emerge. Firstly, emotional alienation occurs when many individuals disregard those in their real-life surroundings. While physical proximity may be close, the psychological distance feels vast, and they eagerly engage with digital entities instead. Despite the increased quantity of connections, the quality may not be improved. Many contacts remain casual acquaintances, leading to a sense of loneliness amplified by the sheer number of connections. Consequently, various social phobias and psychological anxieties arise, and individuals become reluctant to engage in genuine emotional connections in real life. Secondly, there is the alienation of consumption. Confronting a materialistic digital world, innumerable communication “objects” act as alluring mirrors. People idolize the symbols of consumption these objects present, pursuing fashion and trends without considering their own economic situation, resulting in a fixation on “money worship” and “consumerism.” Behind these communication objects, uncounted capital may be concealed, serving as driving forces. In spiritual communication, people become blinded and constrained by possessions, regarding other communication participants as mere intermediaries and tools, exploiting them to satisfy materialistic desires (Wei, 2020, p. 40). In this type of



interaction, the subject gradually loses its agency and becomes an object for others to achieve their goals.

### **Communication Relations**

The alienation of social relations formed through human communication is also a significant indication of spiritual alienation. Humans are inherently social beings, and “the essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In reality, it is the ensemble of the social relations.” (Marx & Engels, 2009, p. 501). On the one hand, people actively create social relations and find fulfillment in them. On the other hand, individuals are also subject to the rules governing social connections. The course of history has propelled humanity into a social structure centered on “the relationship between things.” The social relationships forged through communication not only facilitate personal growth but also impose constraints on individuals. Over time, the bond between individuals has gradually transformed into an “illusory form of objectified relationships” (Lukacs, 1989, p. 100). On the surface, these social ties may appear independent and external. The advent of a commodity-based economy has provided individuals with abundant material resources, seemingly promoting freedom and liberation. However, in reality, individuals become increasingly reliant on materialized social connections and more susceptible to the influence of capital. As Habermas (1999, p. 40) explains, “In the former case, it manifests as the restrictions imposed by other individuals, whereas in the latter case, it takes the form of restrictions imposed by relationships that exist independently of the individual.” This illustrates how the rise of capitalist private ownership has led individuals to be controlled and estranged by the social relationships they themselves have created.

At the same time, the advent of the information age exacerbates this sense of alienation. Whether through newspapers, radio, television, or the new media found on the internet, our lives are saturated with complex information. Although these sources are rooted in reality, they do not necessarily serve as accurate reflections of it. Instead, they can act as distorting mirrors or frosted glass, presenting biased or limited perspectives. As people’s spiritual communication becomes increasingly intertwined with the media-created environment of mimicry, they may find it harder to comprehend the real world. Instead, they may become dominated by various elements, such as entertainment, anxiety, violence, and explicit content. The information tools developed by humans ought to enhance spiritual communication between individuals. However, the prevalence of an “always-online” information lifestyle gradually transforms the “social relations” established by people into “digital relations,” thereby weakening authentic spiritual connections among individuals. While the abundance of information brings convenience, it also introduces a range of ethical dilemmas that erode people’s spiritual well-being and amplifies their spiritual burdens. The emergence of “social phobia” on the internet serves as a prominent manifestation of the alienation experienced

within social relations.

## **Digital Communication: A Contemporary Form of Spiritual Communication**

With the advent of the industrial revolution and the capitalist mode of production, human society has transitioned from an “agricultural civilization” to an “industrial civilization,” resulting in a gradual expansion of the scope of human communication. In the information age, mobile communication, internet technologies, and emerging technologies like big data, blockchain, the Internet of Things, and artificial intelligence have liberated human communication from the constraints of time and space. Information is increasingly characterized by digitalization, networking, and decentralization. The living conditions and methods of communication for human beings have undergone revolutionary changes, and spiritual communication is now being realized through digital communication methods.

Although digital lifestyle has become the norm in recent decades, and academic circles have conducted extensive research on the information society, the internet, and new media, “digital communication” remains a relatively new concept. As for its definition, a definitive consensus has yet to be reached in academic circles. However, there are some prominent viewpoints. Du Junfei (2021, p. 81) from Zhejiang University proposes that digital communication refers to communication and actions in a virtual society, specifically pertaining to the network society since the emergence of Web 2.0. It encompasses the sum of human social relations based on computer networks. On the other hand, Zhang Jianyun (2022, p. 13) from University of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences believes that digital communication refers to communication realized by people through the use of digital codes to transmit and exchange information over the internet. These definitions provide guidance for us to comprehend and explore the various forms, fundamental characteristics, as well as positive and negative implications of digital communication.

### **The Realization Forms**

With the advancement of information technology, numerous internet companies and digital platforms have emerged, leading to the integration of digital production, lifestyles, and communication methods into various aspects of people’s lives.

In the realm of social production, digital communication has significantly mitigated information asymmetry. Prior to the advent of the internet, factors of production, as well as supply and demand information, relied heavily on face-to-face oral communication, print media, and electronic means such as telephones and faxes. The emergence of the internet has revolutionized the production landscape, creating a digital space that greatly enhances connectivity among individuals involved in production. On the one hand, producers have leveraged internet-based platforms to extend the reach of their product sales. This expanded

reach has provided them with a better understanding of market demands, empowering them to optimize the allocation of production factors on the “supply side.” Adapting to changing times and circumstances, producers can develop products that fulfill the needs of the general public. On the other hand, during the production process, digital information platforms enable comprehensive storage and management of diverse employee and product data, thereby improving production efficiency. Consumers, equipped with the vast information and data available on internet platforms, can selectively and accurately purchase the products and services they require. This ability to “scour for desirable items from around the world without leaving home” encompasses a decentralized consumption model, reducing price disparities introduced by intermediaries. Additionally, this model empowers consumers to opt for higher-quality goods at lower prices, thereby reducing transaction costs. Internet information platforms, built upon technologies such as big data, artificial intelligence, blockchain, and 5G, serve as bridges between the supply and demand sides of the economy. These platforms facilitate digitization across production, sales, and service sectors, fueling the growth of industries such as e-commerce, take-away distribution, and express logistics. Consequently, they herald a transformative shift in the production landscape.

In the realm of social interactions, digital communication plays a pivotal role in enhancing people’s connectivity and enriching their interpersonal exchanges. Various internet-based social platforms provide individuals with a multitude of multimedia channels, including text, images, audio, and video, facilitating convenient avenues for socializing, entertainment, creativity, work, sharing life experiences, and forming new friendships. In the earlier stages when internet tools were not as prevalent, individuals were willing to invest more in their digital communication endeavors, such as acquiring mobile phones, computers, and internet access. The act of “surfing” through the digital realm occasionally brought a sense of novelty and excitement. As information tools have become more popular and advanced, mobile internet devices such as smartphones, tablets, and laptops have become integral to people’s daily lives and communication. Spiritual communication has transitioned from offline to online, with the ability to be “online at any time” now considered the norm for the majority of individuals.

### **The Characteristics**

First, virtual and reality intertwine in the contemporary landscape. The advancement of information technology has given rise to a new realm of practice known as virtual practice (Wang & Li, 2008, pp. 64–66). Technologies like VR (Virtual Reality), AR (Augmented Reality), and MR (Mixed Reality) enable individuals to immerse themselves in authentic scenarios and engage in virtual practices through digital devices. Virtual practice emerges as a derivative form of real-world practice, just as digital communication emerges as a derivative form of real-world communication (Zhang, 2022, p. 18). However, it is essential to recognize that digital practices do not manifest out of thin air; rather, they are grounded in the

processing of real-world experiences. While this digital processing stems from reality, it may not always entirely reflect it. For instance, a digital camera captures a real-life scene, which can subsequently be presented as a photograph showcasing different styles influenced by factors, such as the photographer's chosen angle, the configuration of digital equipment, and post-processing techniques. Additionally, the audience's own perspectives and value judgments may deviate from the reality presented. In the era of abundant information, people's lives are saturated with a multitude of data on a daily basis. However, this information is not immune to inaccuracies, falsehoods, and potentially harmful content. The impact of such information varies based on the varying levels of media literacy within the audience.

Second, the boundaries of time and space have been transcended. In the pre-internet era, communication activities were constrained by the limitations of time and physical location. Leisure activities, work tasks, educational pursuits, and commercial transactions had to be carried out within specific time frames and within physical spaces or mediated platforms. However, with the advent of the internet age, these types of interactions have taken on a digital format accessible through mobile devices. For instance, students have the freedom to access teachers' lectures at any time and from any location, consumers and businesses can engage in online trading without constraints, and official approvals can be obtained with the click of a button, eliminating the need to leave one's home. This transformation in communication brought about by digital technology has significantly enhanced people's efficiency in various aspects of life. The rapid dissemination of information has facilitated the emergence of a "global digital village," where individuals can access the information they need with a simple touch in the digital space. This newfound accessibility has transformed the way society connects and has bridged the gaps imposed by physical distance and time limitations. Digital transformation can be seen as an extension of capitalist modes of production, with digital communication acting as a means of maximizing efficiency and facilitating seamless economic transactions. This digital revolution also brings forth questions of ownership and control over the means of production, as well as concerns surrounding labor exploitation and surveillance within the digital realm. Marxist analysis helps shed light on the power dynamics at play in the digital global village, exposing potential struggles and inequalities that arise from the increasing reliance on digital communication technologies.

Third, decentralized universal communication. Karl Marx (2009, p. 538) highlighted the significance of universal communication as an advanced form of human interaction. He observed that "has put world-historical, empirically universal individuals in place of local ones" while communism is "Communism is for us not a state of affairs which is to be established, an ideal to which reality will have to adjust itself. We call communism the real movement which abolishes the present state of things. The conditions of this movement result from the premises now in existence" (p. 539). In the realm of digital space, humans transcend spatial and regional confines, giving rise to the formation of a digital community. Unprecedented "universal

communication” is being realized by individuals, enabling them to connect across previously existing barriers. Manufacturing, agriculture, finance, education, healthcare, government affairs, and various other domains collectively constitute an extensive data network within the digital space. Continuous cloud computing operations take place within this sphere. The advent of digital communication markedly enhances the universality and convenience of both material and spiritual exchange. When applying Marxist theory to analyze this scenario, one can draw attention to the concept of universal communication as a manifestation of the universal development of productive forces. Marx’s view of the transition from regional individuals to universal individuals in the digital space can be seen as a reflection of the breaking down of boundaries and the emergence of a global community. Additionally, the interconnection facilitated by digital communication aligns with Marx’s emphasis on the global character of a communist society. The digital space can be examined through the lens of the Marxist concept of productive forces. The seamless integration of various sectors, interconnections, and constant cloud computing activities highlight the vast network of production and knowledge exchange in the digital realm. This concentration and centralization of data and information can be analyzed in terms of the concentration of capital and power, raising concerns about potential inequalities and struggles over control and access. Utilizing Marxist theory, we can understand the phenomenon of decentralized universal communication in the digital age. It encompasses the breaking of boundaries, the formation of a global digital community, and the enhanced universality and convenience of communication. By considering concepts such as the development of productive forces and the concentration of capital, we can gain insights into the underlying dynamics and implications of digital communication within a Marxist framework.

Fourth, society is moving towards “transparency.” Byung-Chul Han is a prominent contemporary German left-wing theorist, hailed as a rising star in the field of German philosophy by the Spanish newspaper “El País.” Despite being a somewhat late bloomer, Han has diligently pursued his scholarly endeavors and has authored over twenty works to date, including *The Transparent Society* (2012), *In the Swarm* (2013), *Psychopolitics* (2014), *The Salvation of Beauty* (2015), *The Disappearance of the Other* (2016), and *The Agony of Eros* (2016), among others. It is crucial to note that *The Transparent Society* occupies a significant position in Han’s overall theoretical framework due to its profound theoretical development and conceptual depth (Guan & Lu, 2023). In *The Transparent Society*, Han delineates the characteristics of a transparent society, asserting that in the digital age, it pursues not the moral purification of the soul but the maximization of interests and attention (Han, 2019, p. 75). He astutely recognizes the entanglement between the present transparent society and digital technology, social management, and the logic of capital. Han reveals that individuals’ freedom and happiness cannot fully manifest under the domination of capital in a transparent society. On the contrary, people find themselves trapped and manipulated like marionettes controlled by capital. The book presents six manifestations of a transparent society: the affirmative

society, the intimate society, the exhibitionist society, the accelerated society, the informational society, and the surveillance society, all of which are intertwined and interdependent. Han perceives “transparency” as a systemic coercive behavior that pervades all social processes, bringing about profound transformations. This systemic coercive pursuit of transparency reduces humanity itself to a functional component within the system, making “transparency” an omnipresent form of “violence.” The somewhat forlorn state of “privacy,” which stands in opposition to “transparency,” can be attributed to the emphasis on “visibility” within the modern mechanisms of societal operation. Societal structures strive for visibility, and data become the fundamental configuration of individuals as a result of visibility. In the context of digital existence, individuals’ survival becomes problematic if they lack their own data identity within the social system. This also applies to social interactions. The advancement of information technology has led to the highly developed landscape of social media. Unlike face-to-face interactions, mediated interactions occur in a disembodied and depersonalized manner. Regardless of the mode of interaction, the establishment of trust mechanisms remains paramount. Undoubtedly, abundant information serves as a prerequisite for trust. The commonly referred-to process of “reading someone’s body language” is the social participants’ collection of information and rapid judgment. So, how can trust mechanisms be established in mediated interactions? It is evident that new channels and methods of information collection are required. The realization of technologically mediated social interactions is made possible by individuals first surrendering their information to social media platforms (Chen, 2022). The initial process of registering and logging in appears straightforward, with seemingly minimal information required. However, it opens up users’ information repositories, and subsequently, every social activity exposes oneself to social platforms.

### **The Opportunities**

In the economic sphere, the digital communication mode has revolutionized the approach to economic development. The rapid advancements in the internet, 5G, artificial intelligence, and the Internet of Things technologies have tightly intertwined economic and social progress with the digital realm. Various economic entities are now interconnected across temporal and spatial boundaries. This has led to an increasingly diversified and globalized industrial chain, facilitating more precise resource allocations. Traditional industries have undergone continuous optimization as they have embraced information technology. Agriculture and manufacturing have achieved automated, specialized, and refined production processes, while service industries have strengthened their ties with traditional sectors through digital communication. Furthermore, this transformation emphasizes the need for individuals to enhance their knowledge dissemination and communication skills, while also optimizing the allocation of knowledge resources. Analyzing the positive impact of digitized communication within the economic sphere through a Marxist lens illuminates several key

aspects. The digitization phenomenon introduces new modes of production characterized by enhanced connectivity and efficiency. Capitalist entities leverage digital technologies to expand their reach and consolidate their control over economic processes. The digital infrastructure becomes a crucial component of the capitalist mode of production, resulting in streamlined resource allocation and the globalization of production networks. This shift also has the potential to disrupt established power dynamics. As traditional industries adapt and integrate digital modes of communication, there is the possibility of heightened concentration of ownership and control, leading to the centralization of capital. Such centralization carries risks, including exacerbating inequality and class disparities within society. Additionally, the increased emphasis on knowledge dissemination and communication skills may disproportionately benefit those with greater access to educational resources, further perpetuating unequal power dynamics in the distribution of knowledge. In conclusion, the digital communication mode has brought about significant changes in the economic development paradigm, driving increased connectivity, improved resource allocation, and enhanced productivity.

In the political sphere, digital communication methods have enhanced public engagement and participation in politics. Firstly, it has expanded the public's access to information. In the digital realm, often referred to as the "information superhighway," the cost of obtaining political information has been greatly reduced, creating a more open and transparent government. While there may still be some information barriers, events and news concerning public affairs can quickly spread through the internet, surpassing traditional media channels such as newspapers, radio, and television. Additionally, digital communication platforms have facilitated democratic decision-making processes for governments. Nowadays, important policy introductions are often accompanied by soliciting public opinions through internet platforms. In the past, public demands were primarily conveyed through face-to-face conversations, written letters, or telephone calls. However, with the advent of the digital age, the norm has become sharing opinions and concerns online when noteworthy events occur. This phenomenon brings greater attention to public sentiment and strengthens the government's accountability. It fosters public oversight and ensures power operates transparently. Marxism emphasizes the importance of the public having access to accurate and comprehensive information to truly understand the political landscape and make informed decisions. The digitalization of communication channels provides the public with increased access to political information, minimizing the information asymmetry between the government and the people. As a result, individuals can better comprehend the complexities of political decisions, policies, and their potential consequences. In addition, Marxist theory highlights the significance of public participation in decision-making processes to ensure a more equitable and just society. By utilizing digital platforms, governments can effectively engage with the public, seek their opinions, and include diverse perspectives in the decision-making process. This allows for a more inclusive approach

to governance, aligning with the fundamental principles of Marxism. Furthermore, digitized communication enables the public to exert greater influence on the political agenda. Through platforms such as social media, individuals can voice their concerns, share their views, and mobilize support for the causes they believe in. This grassroots mobilization has the potential to challenge existing power structures and shape the political discourse. It empowers marginalized groups and amplifies their voices, leading to greater social equity—a key aspect of Marxist ideals.

In the cultural sphere, digital communication has fostered unprecedented growth in culture. On a micro scale, new cultural products and social media platforms continue to emerge, disrupting the traditional paradigms of production and survival within the cultural industries. Digital content, virtual reality, mobile internet, intelligent devices, We Media, big data, and more, have seamlessly integrated into people's daily lives in an unprecedented and convenient manner. On a macro scale, the fusion of culture and science and technology has become a fundamental approach for countries to enhance their cultural soft power and competitiveness (Li & Zong, 2016, pp. 34–42). The advancements and evolution of information technology have given rise to innovative teaching methods such as the flipped classroom and massive open online courses (MOOCs). These approaches provide students with unparalleled learning experiences, enabling them to become active participants in their own education and engage in targeted learning based on their individual interests, hobbies, time availability, and space constraints. Network-based teaching has transformed the traditional “classroom” from a physical setting with fixed schedules into a digital realm accessible anytime from anywhere, significantly enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of learning. Students can now gain knowledge from around the globe without leaving their homes. In the realm of culture, the means of production have fundamentally changed due to digitalization. The emergence of new cultural products and the integration of digital technologies have disrupted the traditional hierarchical structure of cultural industries. The proliferation of social media platforms and digital content creation has provided previously marginalized groups with avenues for self-expression and participation in cultural production, challenging dominant cultural narratives. Furthermore, digital communication has facilitated the dissemination of ideas and knowledge, enabling individuals to access diverse perspectives and information sources. Additionally, the integration of digital technologies in cultural production has enlarged the scope and reach of artistic expression, allowing artists to explore innovative and boundary-pushing forms of creativity. In conclusion, the digitization of communication has revolutionized the cultural landscape, empowering individuals with unprecedented access to cultural products, knowledge, and opportunities for creative expression. Through the lens of Marxist theory, it is evident that digitalization has disrupted traditional production structures and facilitated the democratization of culture, ultimately enriching the cultural sphere and fostering greater inclusivity and diversity.



## The Critiques

First, be wary of the deepening of the “gap” in digital communication. The term “digital divide” refers to the disparity between those who have access to and are proficient in information technology and those who lack these resources (Attewell, 2001, pp. 252–259). Early research indicated that the ownership and utilization of information technology could lead to wealth disparities, resulting in what is known as the “access” gap and the “use” gap. Digital communication is closely tied to the use of information equipment, and discrepancies in wealth lead to differences in equipment ownership, thereby creating a digital divide. In today’s society, information tools are increasingly prevalent, with large and small screens permeating people’s daily lives. As more individuals gain the ability to access the internet using information equipment, the digital divide now manifests primarily as a knowledge gap. Disparities in communication skills among users, differences in existing knowledge reservoirs, varying social contexts, selective exposure to information, cognitive factors such as comprehension and memory, and the nature of mass media all contribute to the widening of the “knowledge gap” (Cao, 2003, p. 12). If young people possess diverse knowledge structures and strong learning abilities, they can effectively utilize the internet to access information resources. However, older individuals may struggle due to limited knowledge structures and a weaker grasp of information technology and platforms. Consequently, as information technology advances and evolves, the disparity between the younger and older generations will continue to widen.

Second, be wary of the ambiguity of “relationship” in digital communication. The concept of relational power was initially introduced by Mark Granovetter in his 1973 paper titled *The Power of Weak Connections*. Granovetter distinguishes interpersonal relationships as either “strong” or “weak,” with the boundaries primarily assessed based on factors such as interaction frequency, emotional intensity, intimacy, and reciprocal exchange (Granovetter, 1973, pp. 1360–1380). According to Granovetter, individuals who frequently share physical spaces, such as family members, relatives, and classmates, tend to have stronger connections, resulting in a network of “strong relationships.” Conversely, people often have numerous casual acquaintances in life, characterized by limited communication time and physical distance, lack of deep understanding of each other’s identity and social information, and diverse cognitive perceptions of information. These casual connections form a network of “weak relationships.” Drawing from Galvanometer’s theory, it becomes evident that modern digital communication is blurring the boundaries between “strong” and “weak” relationships. On the one hand, the strength of close relationships appears to be diminishing. This becomes apparent in family settings, where parents and children find themselves engrossed in their individual digital spaces with mobile devices. While they may seemingly engage with entertainment programs, social media platforms, and video

games, there are fewer opportunities for meaningful dialogue, genuine communication, and interpersonal connections in real life. Despite their physical proximity, there exists an emotional distance that separates hearts and inhibits true connection. It is worth exploring the impact of this changing dynamic on personal relationships and societal interactions as the pervasiveness of digital communication continues to redefine the nature of human connections and intimacy. On the other hand, the influence of digital communication extends to the strengthening of weak relationships, enabling connections between strangers who have never met in person. Through various internet social platforms, individuals are drawn together based on real or fabricated images and digital representations such as age, gender, region, and interests. Despite the apparent connection, the reality remains that meeting and engaging with physical friends remains a more fulfilling experience, with fewer shared interests and topics of conversation. In the age of information, it is crucial for us to reflect upon and exercise vigilance towards these unusual acquaintances and conflicting intimacies, challenging traditional notions of friendship and community.

Third, be wary of the disappearance of “Aura” in digital communication. Renowned literary critic and philosopher Walter Benjamin (2002) argued that Aura, a significant attribute of tangible art, eroded during the era of mechanical reproduction. There are two interpretations of this concept. First, the notion of “a unique appearance appreciated from a certain distance, regardless of proximity”; and second, representations such as age, gender, region, and interests, the Aura of artworks diminishes. The Aura of artworks encompasses elements such as authenticity, reverence, and a sense of temporal and spatial distance. It should embody the distinctive value of the artwork and evoke a feeling of separation from ordinary experiences. However, as modern industrial technology advances, digital media allows for easy and inexpensive replication and distribution of artworks, propelling them into the “era of technological reproduction.” This progression gradually eradicates the enigmatic connection between artists and reality, thus diluting the presence of Aura. For instance, when individuals admire a painting within an art exhibition hall, the experience feels tangible and authentic. When they observed the intricate brushstrokes of the artwork itself, alongside immersing themselves in the exhibition hall’s ambiance, the audiences are inevitably moved and captivated by the profound Aura emanating from the piece. The physical distance between “the place where the works are created” and “the exhibition hall” instills within the audience a sense of reverence. However, in today’s world, with the emergence of new media platforms like newspapers, radio, television, and the internet, art replication has become effortless. Although digital presentations can convey information about artworks, the sense of distance, sacredness, and reverence between the artwork and the audience gradually diminishes, causing the spiritual essence of Aura to fade away. When artworks, originally intended for display in museums, exhibition halls, memorial sites, or authentic settings to engage with the audience, undergo infinite copying and digital manipulation and are subsequently presented through various media

forms, including entertainment-focused approaches, we must ponder whether this ethereal quality of Aura can also be replicated and digitized.

## Conclusion

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels undertook systematic investigations into social communication in diverse societies, including primitive, ancient Greek-Roman, medieval European, and Asian societies. They conducted macro-level examinations of the historical and future dimensions of human communication and proposed social structures closely linked to both material and spiritual forms of communication. While communication varies across different times and regions, certain common characteristics emerged. People's communication consistently manifests within limited parameters, and individuals do not possess independent personalities in their interactions; rather, they rely on their communities and engage in spiritual communication with a collective mindset. Despite the passage of two centuries, their theory remains a source of profound wisdom in the modern era.

In the information age, the world is progressively transforming into a global community. Digital technology has shattered the barriers of time, space, region, race, and language, enabling more convenient and intimate material and spiritual communication within human societies than ever before. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that when spiritual production and communication are commodified, spiritual products and the associated communication behaviors themselves become objects of consumption. The interconnection of material goods dictates the interconnection of individuals, and capital paves the way for the socialization of both material and spiritual communication. Nevertheless, this also brings about a new challenge—communication alienation. Digital communication has emerged as the primary medium for spiritual interaction in many human societies, entwining people, information, media, and society in a complex, integrated, and symbiotic relationship. While presenting and transmitting the intricate information, knowledge, experiences, and emotions of life in a digital format, we must also remain cautious of the knowledge gap, the erosion of personal connections, and the fading of the “Aura” phenomenon.

As “24-hour online” becomes the prevailing norm in the digital space within human societies, it is essential for us to contemplate whether we retain the capacity to disconnect and be offline on occasion.



---

## REFERENCES

---

- Attewell, P. (2001). The first and second digital divides. *Society of Education*, (3), 252–259.
- Benjamin, W. (2002). *Works of art in the age of mechanical reproduction*. (C.Y. Wang, Trans.). China Urban Publishing House.
- Cao, R. X. (2003). *Interpretation of digital divide, technological colonization and social differentiation*. Shanghai Sanlian Press.
- Chen, L. D. (2018). *Encyclopedia of Marxist journalism*. Renmin University of China Press.
- Chen, S. (2022). “Transparency” and “Fatigue.” *New Observation of Media Integration*, (02), 15–18.
- Chen, L. D. (2008). *The theory of spiritual communication—The communication of Karl Marx Friedrich Engels*. Renmin University of China Press.
- Du, J. F. (2021). Digital communication theory: A future-oriented communication science. *Journalism*, (12), 81.
- Guan, W., & Lu, J. W. (2023). Analysis of Byung-Chul Han’s “Transparent Society” and the predicament of survival in the capital digital age. *Journal of Shaanxi University of Technology (Social Sciences Edition)*, (01), 45–53+92.
- Guo, J. P. (2004). Cooley: Emotion research from the perspective of symbolic interaction theory. *Search*, (04), 162–163.
- Habermas, J. (1990). *Technology and science as ideology*. (L. Li & G.Y. Guo, Trans.). Xuelin Publishing House.
- Han, B. C. (2019). *The transparent society*. (Q. Wu, Trans.). CITIC Publishing House.
- Li, F. L., & Zong, Z. P. (2016). Integration and innovation of culture and technology: Models and types. *Journal of Shandong University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*, (01), 34–42.
- Lukac, G. (1989). *History and class consciousness*. (X.P. Zhang, Trans.). Chongqing Publishing House.
- Mark, G. (1973). The strength of weak ties. *The American Journal of Society*, 78(6), 1360–1380.
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (2009a). *Anthology of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (Volume 1)*. People’s Publishing House.
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (2009b). *Anthology of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (Vol. 10)*. People’s Publishing House.
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1958). *Complete works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (Volume 4)*. People’s Publishing House.
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (2012). *Selected works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (Vol. 1)*. People’s Publishing House.
- Wang, Q., & Li, Y. R. (2008). Analysis of types and characteristics of virtual practice. *Journal of Xinzhou Normal University*, (04), 64–66.
- Wei, B. B. (2020). *Research on Marx’s spiritual communication thought*. (Master’s Dissertation). Henan University.
- Zhang, J. Y. (2022). Analysis of digital communication from the perspective of Marxism. *Academia*, (9), 13–18.
- Zhou, Y. J., & Zhong, K. (2021). Information alienation of modern people by internet from the perspective of spiritual communication theory. *New Media Research*, 7(24), 72.

(Editor: Xiong Xianwei)