Institution: University of Westminster		
Unit of Assessment: 34 Communication, Cultural and Media Studies		
Title of case study: Advancing the Digital Public Sphere		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 1 Aug 2013 – 31 Dec 2018		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Christian Fuchs	**Role(s) (e.g. job title):** Professor	**Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:** Feb 2013+
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 1 August 2013 – 31 December 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? ~~Y/~~N		

1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)

Prof Fuchs' research on digital media and society has had significant impact on the **Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy** and Austria's public service broadcaster ORF (**Austrian Broadcasting Corporation**):

- Fuchs' research-based knowledge informed the Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy, set up by the UK Parliament to investigate how **digital democracy** can be strengthened.
- Fuchs' contribution to the Speaker's Commission advanced policy thinking concerning the **enhancement of citizen engagement with parliament** through the use of digital media, which has influenced the **Parliamentary Digital Strategy** and has fostered **greater participation from citizens in UK democracy** and parliamentary matters.
- Fuchs' research-based consultancy work for ORF informed the latter's policy position on the question of **taxing digital giants such as Google and Facebook**, which is of particular relevance in **Austria**, where in late 2019 a **law taxing online advertising at 5%** was passed that helps public service media to compete against digital monopolies by limiting the financial power of the digital giants.
- Fuchs' research-based consultancy work for ORF informed the latter's stress on the need for the **development of public service broadcasting into digital public service platforms** that ORF advocates in its strategy.

2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)

Prof Fuchs is Director of the Communication and Media Research Institute (CAMRI) at the University of Westminster. Fuchs' research agenda has renewed CAMRI's long tradition in the political economy of communication, also known as the 'Westminster School', by developing **a distinct approach to the political economy of digital media**.

Fuchs conceptualises the digital public sphere as an online democratic space for political communication [1, 2]. As such, it consists of both a technological infrastructure (form) and social relations / interactions (content). The form of **the digital public sphere** constitutes a political economy (resources, infrastructure, aspects of production and governance) and its content constitutes a culture.

Drawing on and updating Jürgen Habermas' theory of the public sphere, Fuchs has analysed **the colonisation of the public sphere and the limitations of its democratic character in the digital age**. He has identified and conceptualised two particular problems:

1) Democracy in general, and digital democracy in particular, is threatened by online nationalism and authoritarianism [4], online tabloidisation [4], fake news [4], the acceleration of communication [4], and digital surveillance [1].

2) Digital capitalism's commercial online culture [1, 2, 3] stands as a high-risk economy that poses various challenges and dangers to society, citizens, and the broader public / common good.

Fuchs' research has shown how the two problems converge within a digital landscape that is dominated by large transnational monopoly corporations such as Alphabet/Google, Facebook, Microsoft, Apple, Tencent, and Amazon [1, 3]. The survival of **media aimed at the public good is threatened by the audience reach of these digital monopolies**, which is facilitated by their economic dominance and tax avoidance strategies [2]. These commercial interests feed into the **ideological bias exhibited by digital monopolies** and their **exploitation of user's digital labour**. A term coined by Fuchs, digital labour is the value-generating work in the digital economy. Targeted online advertising is based on the production of personal data and Big Data by users (their digital labour), which online companies then trade as a commodity [4]. Taken together, such commercial interests thus create the broader threats of a digital authoritarianism, privacy violations, and digital surveillance.

Fuchs has suggested two dimensions for advancing the digital public sphere in the face of these problems:

1) Digital authoritarianism can best be overcome by **fostering deliberative and participatory versions of digital democracy** [1, 4].

2) Digital monopolies are best challenged by the establishment of a **public service Internet** and **public service, community-based, and not-for-profit Internet platforms** and the proper taxation of digital capital [1, 2, 4].

In order to push forward these strategies and to strengthen the democratic character of the digital public sphere, Fuchs has consistently engaged with public institutions and civil society, as recounted below.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

[1] Monograph: Fuchs, Christian. 2014. *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*. London: Sage. 2nd updated and expanded edition published in 2017; Turkish trans. published in 2016 by Nota Bene, 2nd Turkish edition published in 2020 by Nota Bene; Chinese trans. published in 2017 by Communication University of China Press; German trans. published by UVK/utb in 2019; Google Scholar [GS]: 2020 citations (29/6/2020); positively reviewed e.g. in *Information, Communication & Society* ('an important contribution […] well-considered and convincing') and *Publizistik* ('Critical theory has never been presented in such an original way!').

[2] Journal article: Fuchs, Christian. 2014. Social Media and the Public Sphere. *tripleC* 12 (4): 57-101. DOI: https://doi.org/10.31269/triplec.v12i1.552 GS: 216 citations (29/6/2020); published in a peer-reviewed journal.

[3] Monograph: Fuchs, Christian. 2014. *Digital Labour and Karl Marx*. New York: Routledge. Turkish trans. published in 2015 by Nota Bene. GS: 814 citations (29/6/2020); positively reviewed e.g. in *Journal of Scientometric Research* ('very important and comprehensive'), *Spectator* (a 'definitive text'), *Marx & Philosophy Review of Books* ('a rigorous, passionate, and deeply humane book'), *Rethinking Marxism* ('meticulous theorizing').

[4] Monograph: Fuchs, Christian. 2018. *Digital Demagogue: Authoritarian Capitalism in the Age of Trump and Twitter*. London: Pluto. German trans. published in 2018 by VSA; submitted to REF 2021. GS: 80 citations (29/6/2020); positively reviewed e.g. in *New Political Science* ('a must read'), *tripleC* ('an exceptional work'), *Digicult,* ('an excellent study', 'indispensable'), *SPECTRA* ('masterful', 'informative').

Funding:

Prof Fuchs was Westminster's Principal Investigator in the following relevant projects:

- *PACT* – *Public Perception of Security and Privacy: Assessing Knowledge, Collecting Evidence, Translating Research into Action*; EU FP7 grant no. 285635; 02/2012-04/2015, £102,709

- *RESPECT* – *Rules, Expectations & Security through Privacy Enhanced Convenient Technologies*; EU FP7 grant no. 285582; 02/2012-02/2015, £69,626

- *netCommons* – *Network Infrastructure as Commons*; EU Horizon 2020 grant no. 688768; 01/2016-12/2018, £264,672

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Prof Fuchs' research has had a significant **impact on the digital public sphere through the strengthening of its democratic character** in respect to the two aforementioned challenges.

1) **Advancing digital democracy**: the Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy adopted Fuchs' recommendations regarding public participation within the parliamentary process in the UK and the strategy of engaging citizens in parliamentary democracy through the digital technologies they use on a regular basis (e.g. non-governmental social media platforms).

2) **Advancing a public service Internet**: Fuchs has advised Austria's public service broadcaster – the Austrian Broadcasting Corporation (ORF) – on how to tax online advertising and develop a public service Internet.

1) Impact on the UK Parliament and the Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy:

In 2014, the then Speaker of the House of Commons, the Rt Hon John Bercow MP, founded the Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy. The Commission inquired into how digital media technologies could be harnessed to strengthen digital democracy and to open up the workings of parliament to citizens.

On invitation of the Speaker, Prof Fuchs, together with Dr Anastasia Kavada (CAMRI) and in co-operation with colleagues from the University of Westminster's Centre for the Study of Democracy, contributed to the inquiry by participating in a roundtable in Parliament [A1]. Fuchs also submitted written evidence that proposed an update to Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs) that would strengthen digital democracy and further advance the digital public sphere itself. He stressed the importance of finding ways to 'strengthen citizen participation in digital democracy' and to 'engage citizens in parliamentary democracy and parliamentary communication' [A2].

The subsequent *Open Up! Report of the Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy* (2015), made 35 recommendations to the House of Commons and the UK Parliament that were grouped under five themes [A3]. The Report explicitly mentions and acknowledges the importance of Fuchs' recommendation that Parliament should connect 'with people in the digital spaces where they spend their time' [A3, p. 27] and the recommendation that the House of Commons should use digital technologies to 'experiment with new ways of enabling the public to put forward questions for ministers' [A3, p. 46].

In a corroborating letter [A4], the former **Speaker of the House of Commons John Bercow** confirms the vital impact of Prof Fuchs' research on the Speakers' Commission for Digital Democracy: 'One of the themes of the roundtable and Prof Fuchs' written evidence was the need for Parliament to get better at 'going to where people are' to engage with them, by connecting with people in the digital spaces where they spend their time and in the way they like to connect. This was *adopted by the Commission as one of the key themes in its report*. […] Prof Fuchs' ideas for encouraging greater public involvement in the parliamentary process were also referenced in the report. […] I would like to acknowledge the important input that Prof Fuchs made to the Digital Democracy Commission, based on his research, which informed its work and its report' [A4].

Most significantly, the **Parliamentary Digital Service (PDS) was launched** in April 2015 in response to the Speaker's Commissions Report [A5a, A5b]. PDS has combined the work of the Parliamentary Information Communication Technology (PICT) and the Web and Intranet Service (WIS) teams and is mandated with the 'responsib[ility] for the strategic direction of Parliament's digital offering and the delivery and management of parliamentary digital platforms, including the website' [A5a].

Asked about the recommendations of the Speaker's Digital Democracy Commission [DDC], in January 2016, a coordinator of PDS confirmed that 'a strategy that we have [been] developing [has] a commitment to deliver a number of those actions. So we are leading that in so that **the DDC recommendations become part of our digital strategy**' [A5c, p. 233]. Asked about the ways in which this strategy could **improve democracy**, the coordinator responded: 'a big one is by transparency and opening up Parliament so it is visible and much easier to understand. And making people aware of how they can engage and giving them opportunities to do that. But doing it in a way that meets their need where they are' [A5c, p. 234]. As such one of the 8 key principles of **the strategy devised by PDS was, as recommended by Prof Fuchs, to 'Be where people are'** [A6].

In this connection, and as explained in posts grouped under that specific principle, PDS created the 'UK Parliament's first ever Facebook strategy' [A7], and a YouTube strategy that encompassed 'ways to deepen engagement with our subscribers and viewers through comments, polls, and interactive live broadcasts', which was enacted through YouTube's 'Community' function [A7]. The success of this strategy is such that **Parliamentary channels have successfully engaged social media users**. Parliament's Twitter-channel increased its number of followers from 404k on 1 January 2015 to 1.55mn on 29 June 2020 [A8], and also increased the number of 'Likes' of its Facebook channel from 116,396 on 1 January 2015 to 383,849 on 13 January 2020 [A9]. In early 2019, Parliament's YouTube channel reached 100,000 followers and more than 20m total views, of which more than 6m occurred in 2018 [A10]. In 2016, Parliament launched an Instagram channel in order to further engage with the public; this channel has more than 130,000 followers as of 29 June 2020 [A11].

As such, this key aspect of the Parliamentary Digital Strategy, which followed Fuchs' recommendations on engaging users within their preferred digital spaces, has **achieved greater participation from citizens in UK democracy** and parliamentary matters.

2) Impact on the Austrian Broadcasting Corporation (ORF):

Prof Fuchs' research has also informed the policies of the Austrian Broadcasting Corporation (ORF) in regard to their idea of **introducing a tax on online advertising** and the idea to **use this tax for funding public service Internet platforms**.

ORF is Austria's public service broadcaster and is committed to advancing the public value of public service media. In 2017, ORF commissioned Fuchs, Dr Josef Baum (University of Vienna), and Prof Clemens Thiele (University of Salzburg) to undertake a feasibility study on online advertising taxation in the context of Austria.

Fuchs' chapter of the study draws on his theory of digital labour [B1]. Given that the national location of users can be identified via their IP addresses every time they click on or view an online ad, it is possible to determine the value generated through online advertising in a specific national jurisdiction. This income can thus be taxed in the country where it was produced, and Fuchs' theory of digital labour provides a legal basis for doing so. Given that Google and Facebook control more than two-thirds of the global online ad revenue, Fuchs points out that such a tax would help to create a fairer digital public sphere by which public service online media could compete with the online dominance of such corporations.

ORF's Public Value Competence Centre also commissioned Prof Fuchs to contribute to their 2018 Public Value Study, which focused on democracy and public service media [B2]. Fuchs' chapter in the 2018 ORF Public Value Study recommends not just the introduction of a digital services tax and a digital ad tax for funding alternative Internet platforms, but also advises that ORF is legally enabled to introduce public service Internet content platforms, for instance a public service version of YouTube and a digital version of the legendary ORF programme Club 2 [B2, B3]. The latter is a television show that ran between 1976 and 1995 and was characterised by uncensored, unlimited live-debate. After Dark was the British version of Club 2 (broadcast on Channel 4 and BBC) [B4]. Fuchs suggests it be renewed in an online participatory format in order to facilitate a healthy digital public sphere. On 16/1/2019, Fuchs' ideas were presented at a public ORF event ('Dialogue Forum'), which was broadcast on ORF television later that month [B5].

Prof Fuchs' analysis had **direct impact on ORF's policymaking**. His 2017 work informed **ORF's *Theses on Austria's Media Landscape*,** which was published at the end of that year. In this text, ORF Director General Alexander Wrabetz draws on the idea of the public service Internet, arguing that as a 'correction to the algorithm-driven filter politics on Facebook, the ORF should, as counterpoise, again be allowed to organise (advertising-free) online debates' [B6 p.11] and embrace the 'new possibilities and platforms that are used on a massive scale' [B6 p.13]. Committing to the position that public service media need to transform themselves from 'broadcasters into content-platforms' [B7], Wrabetz's *Theses* were further developed into the **ORF Strategy 2025** that, according to Wrabetz, has created the 'foundations of the ORF's successful development from a public service broadcaster to a public service platform' [B8]. Launched in December 2020, Wrabetz characterises the development of ORF towards a public service Internet platform provider as an 'important strategic direction for the ORF's digital future' [B8].

In the *Theses,* Wrabetz also argues for the 'application of the advertising tax to online-advertising' [B6 p.15]. The significant impact of Prof Fuchs' 2018 research on this policy position is confirmed in a corroborating letter from ORF's Directorate-General: 'The Austrian Broadcasting Corporation (ORF) acknowledges **the vital and extremely valuable contribution that Prof Fuchs has made and that has informed the ORF's understanding of the foundations of online advertising and helped to develop its own policy perspective** in respect to the role that online advertising, Google and Facebook play in the digital economy. The ORF has in this context recently suggested that the Austrian advertising tax is extended to online advertising so that it would also affect Google and Facebook' [B9].

While an EU-wide digital services tax failed to be agreed upon by member states, on September 20, 2019, **the Austrian parliament uniformly agreed to introduce a five percent online advertising tax** for large corporations such as Google and Facebook that came into effect on January 1, 2020 [B10a]. Operating as a foundation under public law and Austria's pre-eminent media provider, ORF's voice is heard in the policy discourse. The Austrian digital advertising tax is important because digital monopolies that are open to ideological bias due to their corporate nature, make much of their money from online advertising; their vast financial power means they are able to crowd out politically neutral / objective public service media, thus threating the democratic nature of political discourse. This tax goes some way towards **facilitating the ability**

of publicly funded media to compete for the same audiences and to thus provide balanced political discourse.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy:

[A1] Digital Democracy Commission. 2014. *Summary of University of Westminster Roundtable on 19 May 2014.*

[A2] Fuchs, Christian. 2014. Evidence submitted to the Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy: QTube – Citizen-Generated Videos for Questions to the Prime Minister.

[A3] Digital Democracy Commission. 2015. *Open Up! Report of the Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy.*

[A4] The Speaker of the House of Commons, the Rt. Hon John Bercow MP. Corroborating Letter Evidencing the Impact of Christian Fuchs' Research. London, October 2017.

[A5] [a] Fluxx, 'Parliamentary Digital Service' project, Link; [b] Blog post of the Parliamentary Digital Service, 15 June 2015; [c] Interview with PDS Coordinator, 01/2016 Link p. 230-237

[A6] Parliamentary Digital Service. Strategy in Action. Link

[A7] Parliamentary Digital Service. 2018. UK Parliament's First Ever Facebook Strategy.

[A8] Parliamentary Digital Service. 2019. 100,000 YouTube Subscribers, But Where Next?

[A9] Internet Archive, UK Parliament Twitter Channel Archive: Link1 (1Jan 2015), Link2 (28 July 2019), Link3 (9 June 2020)

[A10] Internet Archive, Facebook Channel Archive. Link1 (1 Jan 2015), Link2 (27 June 2019), Link3 (13 January 2020)

[A11] Parliamentary Digital Service. 2018. Building an Instagram Strategy for UK Parliament; Instagram profile: https://www.instagram.com/ukparliament/

Austrian Broadcasting Corporation:

[B1] Josef Baum, Christian Fuchs, Clemens Thiele. 2017. *Grundlagenanalyse möglicher Massnahmen zur Herstellung von Wettbewerbsneutralität bei Onlinewerbung in Österreich* (written in German) [*Foundational Analysis of Measures for Creating Competition Neutrality in Taxing Online Advertising*]. Report commissioned by the Austrian Broadcasting Corporation (ORF) and Arbeiterkammer Wien. Available on request. Fuchs' contribution to the German report was translated and published open access: Fuchs, Christian. 2018. *The Online Advertising Tax as the Foundation of a Public Service Internet*. London: University of Westminster Press; a shorter summary was published as CAMRI Policy Brief.

[B2] Fuchs, Christian. 2018. Digitale Demokratie und Öffentlich-Rechtliche Medien [Digital Democracy and Public Service Media]. *In ORF Public Value Studie 2017/2018: Der Auftrag: Demokratie* [*ORF Public Value Study 2017/2018: The Mission: Democracy*], 94-138. Vienna: ORF (Austrian Broadcasting Corporation). Written and published in German.

[B3] Fuchs, Christian. 2017. Towards the Public Service Internet as Alternative to the Commercial Internet. In *ORF Texte No. 20 – Öffentlich-Rechtliche Qualität im Diskurs*, 43-50. Vienna: Austrian Broadcasting Corporation (ORF).

[B4] 'The Unreality of Reality TV: From After Dark towards Twitter, Big Data, and Big Brother'. Westminster Institute for Advanced Studies event at the University of Westminster, featuring Christian Fuchs and After Dark founder and producer Sebastian Cody. 3 March 2017.

[B5] DialogForum »DAS NETZ IN UNSERE HAND!« (24/1/2019)

[B6] Österreichischer Rundfunk (ORF)/Austrian Broadcasting Corporation. 2017. *Thesen zum Medienstandort Österreich* [*Theses on the Austrian Media Landscape*]. In German.

[B7] Wrabetz sieht ORF 2019 an 'Weggabelung' [Wrabetz sees ORF at a 'junction' in 2019]. *ORF Online*, 17/1/2019. In German [The article mentions that ORF General Director Wrabetz favours public service Internet content platforms. Alongside Wrabetz, it quotes Prof Fuchs' talking about the online advertising tax and the dangers of digital capitalism]

[B8] Wrabetz: 'Wichtige Weichenstellungen für digitale Zukunft des ORF!'. [Wrabetz: 'Important strategic directions for the ORF's digital future!'. APA press release, 3/12/2020.

[B9] Österreichischer Rundfunk (ORF) Generaldirektion/Austrian Broadcasting Corporation Directorate-General. Corroborating Letter Evidencing the Impact of Christian Fuchs' Research. Vienna, November 7, 2017.

[B10] [a] Bloomberg. 'Austria's Digital Advertising Tax Passes First Vote', *Bloomberg Tax News* 20/09/2019; [b] legal text and documentation of the introduction of Austria's digital services tax (Digitalsteuergesetz).