



Digital labour: Workers, authors, citizens*

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The papers in this issue of *ephemera* have their origins in a conference, ‘Digital Labour: Workers, Authors, Citizens’, held at the University of Western Ontario on October 16-18, 2009. The conference was organized by the Digital Labour Group, an assembly of scholars from within the Faculty of Information and Media Studies (FIMS), a non-departmentalized unit that houses programs in Library and Information Science, Journalism, and Media Studies. While the Faculty has always, since its origins more than a decade ago in the heady times of the dot.com boom, identified itself as ‘inter-disciplinary’, the practical meaning of this claim has often been vague and sometimes contentious. In 2008, however, in the very different climate of global economic crisis, an exploratory meeting of faculty who saw their work as related to digital technologies and labour revealed a surprising degree of convergence. Some studied the material working conditions and cultural products of places like newsrooms, recording studios, libraries or video game companies. Others analyzed more abstract processes, such as neo-liberal regulatory regimes or struggles around intellectual property rights and access to information. Still others examined the ways in which more intimate aspects of human sociality were being rendered profitable for capital in the wake of digital media. But what emerged from the first encounters of the Digital Labour Group was a common commitment to understanding the complex political, social and cultural implications of new forms of digital labour around the globe.

Of course, and in a fashion characteristic of much scholarly undertaking, once decided upon our foundational orienting terms quickly unraveled, albeit in creative directions. While no one would dispute that digital media technologies have profoundly altered every aspect of our lives, their effects are far too vast to ever be fully measured or assessed. The digitization of the cultural industries, for example, has changed every aspect of popular culture: from the moment of production, which increasingly shuns actors and writers in favour either of ‘real’ people or of computer generated animation, to the aesthetics of the final product with the rise of 3D and High Definition formats; from the heightened power of audiences in the processes of distribution as a result of the Internet and social networks, to the ways digitization alters the terrain of authorship and thereby challenges the regulatory parameters within which these processes take

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place. Given these thoroughgoing changes, how is it possible to state categorically what ‘digitization’ denotes? And, more importantly, how might we analyze the economic and power relations that run alongside, in, and through the digital technologies themselves? To be sure the term ‘digital’ does not simply refer to digital machines and processes but to the entire political, social and economic context and infrastructure within which they have emerged. This is how we now live in a ‘digital age’.

The same conundrum emerges with respect to the term ‘labour’, which is increasingly under pressure as an analytical category in a world where the boundaries between work and life are breaking down. Labour can no longer only be seen as a factor in industrial relations, or as a subject of interest exclusive to political economists; it must also be understood as a larger category with which to analyze many different facets of daily life. People still labour in the traditional sense, to be sure – in factories and on farms, in call centres, in the newsroom and on the sound stage. But contemporary life likewise compels us, for instance, as audiences for ever more recombinant forms of entertainment and news programming, to labour on ever-multiplying numbers of texts (as readers, facebook fans, mashup artists). When such labour is subsequently re-purposed by traditional producers of information and entertainment products, the producing/consuming ‘prosumer’ (or ‘produser’) is born. Additionally, as individuals are subject to precarious, unstable forms of employment that demand they put their personalities, communicative capacities and emotions into their jobs, they are encouraged to see their intimate lives as resources to be exploited for profit and, as a consequence, new forms of labour on the self are brought into being. What are the implications of these changes in the very definitions of what constitutes ‘work’ and in the parameters of the workplace? What are the implications for our senses of selfhood, our political agency as citizens, and our creative freedom as artists and innovators? Finally, how might we see these changes wrought by digital technology as potentially politically productive or liberatory? It became immediately apparent that the goal of the Digital Labour Group was not so much to propose a stable object of inquiry with the phrase ‘digital labour’ or to police its meanings, but, rather, to interrogate the ways in which the changing conditions of digital capitalism, and all of us who live and work in the contemporary moment, comprise its very reality.

It would be disingenuous to state that our interests in digital labour are purely academic. We are all digital labourers to some extent, especially those of us who work in the contemporary knowledge factory – the university. The figure of the purely digital professor – or, more likely, part-time instructor – looms large, as for-profit models of university education collide with the ease of the Internet, and accreditation processes move away from educational, scholarly outcomes toward vocational ones. We have all experienced the increased workload and speed up produced by the increasing technologization of our jobs. We must constantly mind our email accounts, use webpages and facebook and ‘service’ students on an ever-increasing number of digital platforms; meanwhile, due to the assumed ease of research in the digital era, pressure mounts to produce and publish ever-increasing amounts of ‘knowledge’. At the same time, digital technologies abet the reconfiguration of the university as a corporatized player in the knowledge economy, reducing education to a set of measurable deliverables and professors to content and service providers. Students play the part of a paying audience as they are encouraged to measure the efficacy of their ‘learning

experience' every few minutes with the use of electronic clicker devices. Professors are discouraged from exploring the issue of academic dishonesty with their students and encouraged instead to use plagiarism software. Not only does this move presume students' guilt, it appropriates students' work and adds it to the database (and by extension the coffers) of privately owned companies, thereby blurring conventional definitions of student work. These are only some examples of the effects of the digital tech push in the university setting, but there are many more. Ironically enough, within a few months of the Digital Labour conference whose results are represented here, both faculty and staff unions at the University of Western Ontario came to the very verge of a strike that was only averted in eleventh hour bargaining, with several members of the Digital Labour Group frenetically engaged in negotiations, union communications strategy and picket-line preparation. Moreover, dramatic as these local events were for us, they pale beside many episodes in the cycle of student and faculty strikes, occupations, blockades and street-battle anti-cutback demonstrations that has over the last two years pulsed through the post-crash austerity-era university systems of the United States, Greece, Spain, Italy, France and the United Kingdom. These are systems that have the compounded logics of neo-liberalism and the 'IT revolution' in accounting practices at their managerial core, and that seem poised to rely on these logics even more in years to come. All of us in the Digital Labour Group recognize that as teachers and researchers in the increasingly digitized terrain of the corporate university, we have a very personal stake in the issues we have chosen to examine.

This recognition led us to engage not only with other scholars, but also with workers outside the academy about their experiences, insights and struggles. Hosting a conference seemed the best way to initiate a sustained conversation about the ways in which the confluence of 'digital technology' and 'labour' was forcing a redefinition of work, citizenship and creativity in the 21st century. 'Digital Labour: Workers, Authors, Citizens' was funded largely by monies from the Rogers Chair in Journalism and Information Technology. Jonathan Burston was the chair in 2009-2010 and he was also the event's chief organizer. Joining academics from Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Italy and New Zealand were activists from unions in Canada and the United States representing journalists, screen actors, screenwriters, library workers and university faculty. Indeed, the decision to seek out contributions from unions and guilds representing various types of digital labour was one of the most important decisions made by the conference organizers, one which, we were later told by several participants, distinguished this event from other more purely scholarly events on similar themes. The results were gratifying indeed, not least because so much common ground between so many disparate kinds of worker, and between so many different theoretical approaches, was revealed. Yet while the papers at the conference converged around the shared problematic of digital labour, what made the event interesting was not only commonality but conflict, implicit or explicit. The readers of this collection will be able to tease out some of these tensions – between a strong showing of 'autonomist' Marxist variants, with their characteristic sanguine emphasis on worker power and resistance, and more classical Marxian political economy, with its more somber insistence on the dominating force of existing relations of production; between both of these and social democratic perspectives advocating the amelioration of digital labour conditions within a market context; and also, sometimes, between the

theoretical concerns of all these positions and the practical priorities of the union and guild speakers.

It should also be noted here that some of the presentations from the conference have found their way into publication in other venues; we call attention particularly to articles by Brett Caraway and Nina O'Brien in *Work, Organisation, Labour & Globalisation*, 4(1). Also of great importance to these debates were contributions from Vincent Mosco (a plenary speaker) and Catherine McKercher, whose combined perspectives on the topics under discussion can be found in their Editors' Introduction to that same journal issue and in their *The Laboring of Communication: Will Knowledge Workers of the World Unite?* (Mosco and McKercher, 2008).

Our own volume of selected papers and speeches from the Digital Labour conference, then, constitutes only one of its outcomes. What is more, subsequent to the conference (and a period of recovery for the organizers) the possibilities for academic-union collaboration continued to be explored. A series of meetings between the Digital Labour Group and three Toronto-based labour organizations, the Alliance of Canadian Cinema, Television and Radio Artists, the Canadian Media Guild and the Writers Guild of Canada, investigated shared research interests. The outcome was a joint grant proposal to Canada's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council for a three-year grant, 'The Future of Organized Labour in the Digital Media Workplace', to fund research into topics including the new revenue models of digital media companies, the scale of job-shedding in Canada's news industries, the emergence of new pools of non-unionized labour in digital media, the effects of national media regulatory regimes on employment in digital media, intellectual property issues and collective bargaining, and the possibilities and problems of unions using digital media to communicate with members and with the public in strike situations. At the time of writing this proposal is still under adjudication, but, regardless of whether or not this specific application is successful, the Digital Labour Group intends to follow a road of practical cooperation with organized (and organizing) workers.

This special Digital Labour issue of *ephemera* is laid out along thematic lines similar to the conference that spawned it. In the first section, Brian Holmes, Cristina Morini and Andrea Fumagalli, and Emanuele Leonardi outline key historical and theoretical neighbourhoods inside our heuristic terrain. Holmes, with the help of artists Lise Autogena and Joshua Portway, provides us with a brief history of hyper-capitalism since the collapse of Bretton-Woods and charts increasingly predatory conditions within contemporary finance capital, where animal spirits and flexible personalities gorge themselves even as they lay waste to their own food supply. Casting their eyes over this same period, Cristina Morini and Andrea Fumagalli suggest that nothing short of a re-examination of the workings of the labour theory of value is required where transitions from industrial Fordism to 'bio-capitalism' are in play – a re-examination, moreover, that necessarily gives prominence to affective labour in matters of value creation. Their exegesis is followed by that of Emanuele Leonardi, who works through Gilbert Simondon, Yann Moulier Boutang and Carlo Vercellone to conclude in a similar fashion that, although Marxian notions of formal and real subsumption are still necessary to analyses of emerging formations within post-Fordism, a new concept, one

he terms impression, is also required if new post-Fordist modalities of exploitation are to be properly understood.

Founding assumptions pertaining to digital capitalism are likewise queried in the following section – this time focusing on matters of digital labour more specifically. David Hesmondhalgh wonders about the degree to which autonomist and other analyses of ‘free’ labour have unintentionally marginalized ‘the continuing political importance of the conditions of professional cultural production’. Understanding ‘creative labour’ as digital labour’s ‘latest manifestation’, Barry King suggests that the new dignity so regularly afforded such labour is shot through with dubious, class-associated assumptions about the moral worth of different kinds of labour. Jack Bratich asks us to consider the differently digital labours adhering to a revived, precapitalist form of cultural production, namely, the recent resurgence of DIY craft culture and the various pro-social ‘informational and communicative practices’ embedded therein.

The next two papers focus on the daily politics of labour by way of recent policy and contract initiatives. In providing an overview of Canadian copyright policy and recent struggles to see it modernized, Samuel Trosow delineates the key areas where different digital labour unions find themselves in regular disagreement. Even where organized creative and intellectual workers ‘generally share similar positions with respect to the rights of creators vis a vis their employers’, and even where ‘they share a basic unity of purpose on many work related and other social and policy issues’, differences concerning the rights of end users regarding their works and performances continue to obstruct the ongoing development of a digital commons in Canada. Recent initiatives on the part of the Canadian Labour Council leave Trosow encouraged, however, and his piece begins to chart ways forward for similarly promising initiatives to take root not only in Canada, but abroad as well. Matt Stahl then takes us south of the border to California to examine what has quickly become the new normal for contracts in the music industry, the 360 degree deal, which delimits musician agency even more completely than the contractual arrangements that preceded it. With the new realities of the 360 degree deal in mind, Stahl argues that instances of the Marxian concept of primitive accumulation remain alive and well inside the post-Fordist moment. Indeed, despite the ongoing ephemerization of music under digital conditions of production and distribution, ‘the impetus of cultural industry enterprise toward the intensification of long term capture and control of ‘golden-egg’ laying talent appears not to disappear’. Instead it appears merely ‘to change form and venue’.

In the following section, contributors trace both changes and continuities in the digital workplace by providing a look inside management systems for digital workplaces (Michael McNally) and web site design (Helen Kennedy). While McNally critically interrogates the ways in which Enterprise Content Management Systems monitor and deskill workers by subjecting their labour to ever-more minute processes and procedures, Kennedy examines the ways that web site designers are effectively self-managing the regulation of standards and accessibility within their profession. This self-management, Kennedy warns, should not be read as yet another symptom of neo-liberal downloading, but, rather, as processes informed by an exemplary desire to address social wrongs by doing good work. Taken together, McNally’s and Kennedy’s essays highlight what remain the ambivalent politics of digital workplaces.

Of course, these politics and the ideologies attached to them reverberate in different ways across different geographic locations. The contributions of Ajit Pyati and Sandra Smeltzer and Daniel Paré highlight and explore the implications of the ideologies of the 'knowledge economy' to national development strategies in India and Malaysia. Smeltzer and Paré revisit the carriage/content distinction as it is iterated and reiterated in Malaysian business and government discourse and reveal the extent to which it has come to function as an ideological buttress for the agendas of each set of elites. Digital labourers working to build venues for value-added work and to enhance civil engagement online are the losers. Pyati likewise cocks an ear to discourses of development and concludes that the neo-liberal tone of much Indian discussion of the 'knowledge society' must be countered with a more critical conception of the public, digital and otherwise.

The next set of contributions interrogates, through different theoretical lenses, purported shifts in the very nature of labour and the extraction of value in the digital era. Alison Hearn examines the tensions between individual practices of online ranking and feeding-back and the digital businesses that have arisen to structure these forms of expression into quantifiable information for profit in the form of 'reputation'. Vincent Manzerolle deploys Smythe's concept of the audience commodity to trace the ways mobile web-enabled devices turn human communication into work and are, therefore, deeply implicated in the accumulation practices of information capital. Edward Comor engages the contentious term 'prosumer' head on, providing a corrective to celebratory claims about the ways in which prosumption will lead to the end of alienation, and carefully parsing the differential effects and benefits of prosumption practices across the still class-stratified working world. Although these papers take different objects as their focus, all explore the ways in which individual creative input, ostensibly 'freely' given, is, at best, ambivalently positioned within capitalism; for the vast majority of people these practices remain captive to and conditioned by the perennially exploitative processes of capitalist exchange.

The possibilities and implications of organized resistance to these processes of capitalist capture of human sociality and, indeed, human 'being', are taken up in the next group of contributions. Enda Brophy's examination of forms of resistance in call centers provides us with concrete ways to understand contemporary processes of labour recomposition around the world. Plenary speaker Ursula Huws explores the tensions between individual creative expression and capitalist processes of control in the fields of creative labour in Europe, noting the variable role of unions in either ameliorating or exacerbating the changing conditions of work for their members. Huws notes that, while distinct, both employer and union methods of control create significant obstacles to workers' attempts at effective strategies of resistance. In the face of these challenges, Nick Dyer-Witheford argues that a nuanced redeployment of Marx's concept of species-being, or 'species-becoming', is necessary. Outlining several central concepts, such as the global worker, bio-communism, and techno-finance, Dyer-Witheford provides an epic and sobering overview of 'the planet factory' and the ways humans' capacity to shape their own evolutionary trajectory are being conditioned and contained by 'singularity capitalism'. Recently, as Dyer-Witheford writes, 'the contending potentials of planetary labour under digital conditions have become dramatically visible in the popular revolts sweeping North Africa and the Middle East', revealing the extent

to which resistance to the planet factory must happen collectively, in and through various innovative and cooperative labours – digital and otherwise – if we are to have any hope of survival other than as wired and bioengineered instruments of capital.

Our union and guild participants are afforded the last word here. Echoing Dyer-Witthford's call for innovation and cooperation, both Lise Lareau, President of the Canadian Media Guild, and Mark Bradley, former President of the Minneapolis and St. Paul local of the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, suggest that that word is *coalition*. Lareau stresses the need for action across many guilds and unions if digital media workers of all kinds are to win battles against the layoffs, declining wages and job stress that digitization has provoked. Bradley takes 'the C word' even further, suggesting that what is really required is a concomitant *consolidation* of collective bargaining power in the face of concomitant and ongoing corporate consolidation in the entertainment sector. Until that day arrives, however, cultivating a wider solidarity – inside and outside the business – becomes a necessary daily practice as the industry continues going digital. And yet, this solidarity cannot just be called into being. Harkening back to issues raised earlier by Trosow, Mike Kraft's observations remind us that if wider collective actions are ever to be realized, Digital Labour must still reconcile abiding differences between various unions regarding the equitable end uses of intellectual property. Digital production and distribution present a whole new set of challenges for working actors, not least among them the task of convincing the wider world, including many brothers and sisters labouring in other digital precincts, that rights accruing to their performances are justifiably inalienable without their consent.

Finally and not altogether unpredictably, emphases switch from compensation to access when the librarians and the academics weigh in. Melanie Mills lists numerous ways that the lives of academic librarians are getting more complicated and demanding alongside digitalization's perpetual increase. Moreover, access to varied sources of information is becoming less flexible and open, not to mention more expensive, as librarians struggle to negotiate new terms of practice and price with digital publishers less interested in scholarship than in corporate profits and growth. Paul Jones also considers matters of scholarly communication in the digital era. He concludes in part that the efforts of intellectual workers to halt neo-liberal copyright legislation in Canada – at least to date – constitute an important victory for academic labour. The victory here is in no small part over media and entertainment capital which, we would argue (and as the last Hollywood writers' strike attests), remains to the most exceptional degree poorly suited to the job of defending the rights of those performing labourers who have historically (if altogether unreasonably) stood to lose from the academy's gains.

'Digital Labour: Workers, Authors, Citizens' was convened in part to imagine how contradictions such as these might resolve themselves in favour of progressive politics. Happily, participants hailed it as a comradely event, where differences of strategy and practice were discussed and debated in a spirit of genuine collaboration. As this special issue of *ephemera* reveals, the theoretical tent was similarly big. Just as is true inside the Digital Labour Group itself, autonomist insights germinate and grow alongside those of other traditions. Some people in this volume seek to revisit and revamp Dallas Smythe or Harry Braverman, some people are either indifferent to, or critical of, such projects. Monikers change from paper to paper: creative workers, intellectual workers,

knowledge workers – they’re all here! We haven’t tried to resolve the thorny matter of digital nomenclature, though dialogue on this topic continued at a lively pace. The prize of a better future for digital labour and, consequently, the commons was kept firmly in our sights, however, and to this end the big tent format worked very well for us indeed. We hope that our readers feel similarly.

references

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